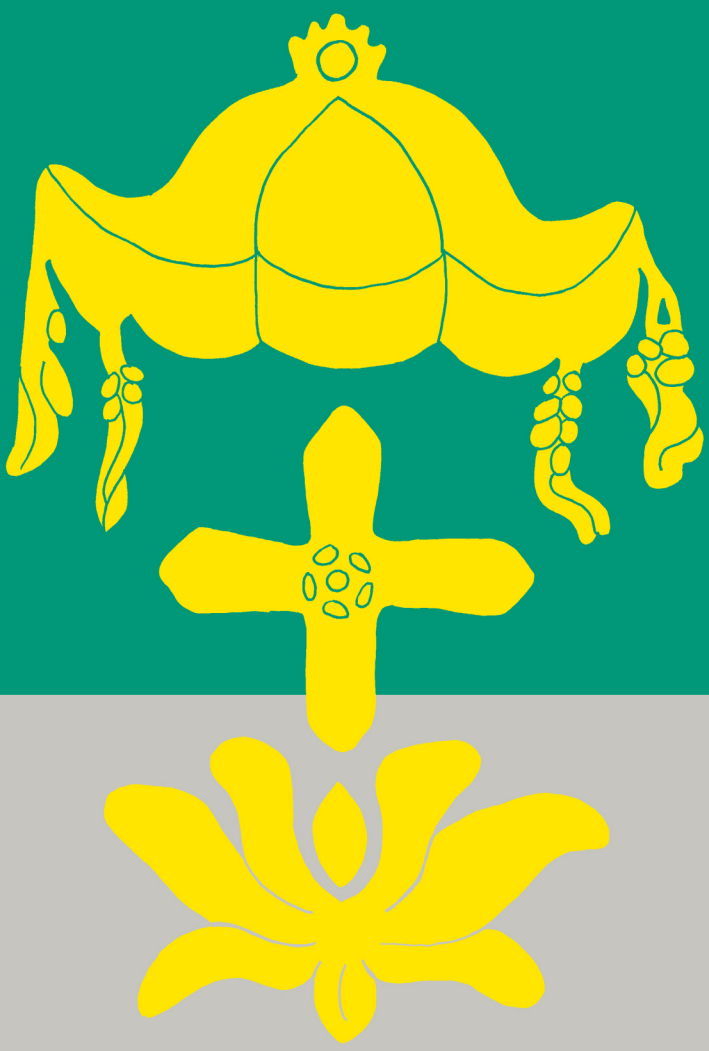
Emma Loosley Leeming

# Architecture and Asceticism: Cultural Interaction between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity



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Architecture and Asceticism: Cultural Interaction between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity

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*By*

Emma Loosley Leeming


BRILL

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# Contents

# Preface

In 2005 I was approached by John Wilkinson, the former director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem and the founder of FaRiG (Friends of Academic Research in Georgia), and asked if I would consider spending a week lecturing at Tbilisi State University. At that point I was only a year into my first academic appointment and John explained that, given the upheavals of the civil war of the 1990s and the Rose Revolution of November 2003, the Georgian education system was facing a variety of problems. He felt a pressing issue was the fact that young women in particular were turning away from the idea of an academic career and he wanted a young female with a position at an established university to offer career advice to talented Georgian undergraduates and research students. In addition he had identified that the syllabus was rather narrow and suggested that my research into Late Antique Syria would offer useful comparative material for Georgian Art Historians who were in many cases focussed exclusively on Georgian case studies.

During my university 'reading week' in November 2005 I flew to Tbilisi and met with great hospitality. In between the daily lectures I delivered over the course of a week, I was taken to see the exceptional collection of medieval art and artefacts in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts and was amazed at the world-leading collection of enamels, liturgical objects and icons in the museum treasury. A trip was also arranged to take me, along with a group of students, to the ancient Georgian capital of Mtskheta at the conjunction of the Mktvari (Kura) and Aragvi Rivers. Here I was introduced to Jvari, the hill upon which St. Nino the evangelist of Georgia first raised the cross and now the site of an early seventh century church, and Svetiskhoveli, the national cathedral. The trip ended with an exceptionally good lunch over which I was intrigued to learn that as well as St. Nino bringing Christianity to Georgia in the fourth century, Georgians believed that a second wave of 'Thirteen Syrian Fathers' had consolidated the faith and introduced monasticism to the country in the sixth century.

Back in the UK I endeavoured to find out more, but just over a decade ago the internet was not as all pervasive as it is now and relatively few library catalogues or periodical indexes were available online. As I have since discovered, my failure to find literature on this subject was not due to a less than diligent search; there was simply very little material available on the subject. I was also puzzled that during my time in Syria I had found no references to the Georgians. If nothing else, the geographical location of the country meant that any overland pilgrims to the Holy Land had to pass through Syrian territory so that the coun-

try had evidence of artefacts and graffiti left by a variety of different peoples over the centuries. There was plentiful information regarding the relationship between Syrian Christians and the Georgians' neighbours, the Armenians, but the sole reference to the Georgians that I could find was a passage in Theodoret of Cyrrhus where he listed the 'Iberians' as amongst the different nationalities who visited Symeon Stylites the Elder at Qal'at Sem'an.[1]

In 2006 I returned to spend three weeks in Tbilisi as a break from an extended period of fieldwork in Iran. During this time people I had met the previous year generously accepted me into their homes and others took me further afield so that on one particularly memorable occasion I spent a weekend in the remote mountain villages of Tusheti. However what was to make the most lasting impression on me with regards to my future research was the trip I took with Zaza Skhirtladze and his student Anna Shanshiashvili to the church in the village of Tsilkani, a few miles north of Mtskheta. Zaza explained that the site was linked to Ise Tsilkneli, one of the 'Thirteen Fathers' and pointed out that the earliest phase of architecture at the site seemed to offer stylistic links with that of the Syrian Limestone Massif. He was absolutely right in this opinion and I began to wonder if the material culture of Georgia might offer some way of supporting the local belief in these somewhat shadowy figures of the past.

The 2008 Georgian-Russian war over South Ossetia/Tskhinvali meant that I delayed my return to the country and at the end of 2009 I accepted an offer from the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus to direct my second archaeological expedition in Syria, meaning that my curiosity regarding the 'Syrian Fathers' of Georgia was set aside once more. However as the civil unrest in Syria prevented me returning to that country to continue my work there in 2011 and it became increasingly clear that the country was heading for a vicious civil war, I returned to my notebook of half-planned projects and decided that the time was now right to try to get to grips with the 'Thirteen Syrian Fathers.'

In November 2011 I submitted an application to the European Research Council for a project entitled *Architecture and Asceticism: Cultural Interaction between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity* and, after an interview in Brussels in June 2012, in August 2012 I was informed that my application had been successful. This has freed me from the constraints of ordinary academic life for a substantial period of time and made this research possible. Therefore the

1 XXVI, 11,13, p. 165 & p. 167, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Trans. Price, R.M., *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Cistercian Publications; Kalamazoo, 1985.

last five years of my life have been devoted to immersing myself into Georgian culture and history, including studying the language and spending prolonged periods of time living and working in Tbilisi.

I have been exceptionally fortunate in finding Natalia Bukia-Peters as a tutor. Finding a native Georgian speaker in Devon is a difficult task in itself, but to locate somebody who is a trained language teacher and a translator of Georgian literature into English, as well as being (like myself) married to an Archaeologist so that she has some familarity with historical and archaeological terminology, was nothing short of miraculous! Nata has become a great friend and it is no exaggeration to say that much of this project would not have been possible without her support and guidance—although naturally any mistakes in Georgian comprehension or controversial readings of material are all my own …

Which leads me to my next point. As a young, and no doubt naïve, student in Syria I was initially confused by the multiplicity of Christian denominations and it took me some time to work out how the doctrinal controversies of the fifth century had shaped the ecclesiastical landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean region. Despite these differences and without romanticising the situation, ecumenical relationships were relatively well developed, perhaps as a consequence of living as a minority within a Muslim majority society. As is often the case, in Aleppo I found that the more educated members of Christian society were more open to interaction with those of different confessional identities and those with the least access to education were often the most hostile to relationships across denominational boundaries. Out in the villages and rural towns where Christians were less numerous than they were in Aleppo, there was a more pragmatic and, for the most part, cordial interaction between those of different churches. One phenomenon that went against this general attitude, and was especially the case in Lebanon where the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war was manifested in fractious inter-denominational relations, was the practice of amateur scholars publishing 'histories' through small, often ecclesiastical, regional presses. These volumes were often partial and flawed accounts that would view the subject of the research through a mono-denominational viewpoint. It was recognised by a number of Syrian academics that this situation would persist as long as subjects such as art history and ecclesiastical history were not taught as academic disciplines in Syrian Higher Education and whilst related fields, such as history and archaeology, were not highly regarded in wider society. It was widely acknowledged that until there was more of a movement towards a stronger civil society in Syria and a retreat from over-privileging disciplines such as Medicine and Engineering, which were prized for the material advantages afforded by careers in these areas as much as for

their contribution to wider Syrian society, then research in the Humanities would fail to attract the brightest and best students, which in turn meant that it was evolving quite slowly.

Having said that, at the time that the Syrian civil war began, the fact that these problems had been identified and that Syrian scholars agreed that there needed to be a change in attitude if their disciplines were to keep pace with international developments, was in itself an encouraging sign of progress.

In Georgia there have been a different set of problems. Until the break up of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 the country was firmly part of the Soviet academic network, which despite its obvious ideological restrictions, was nevertheless a rigorous and world-respected system that trained and developed the careers of world-class academics. The demise of the Soviet system meant that Georgia had to re-write and re-formulate syllabi and even to reconsider the language of academia. Georgia had fought fiercely for the right to have a bilingual pubic life, most recently in 1978 when they had protested the proposed imposition of Russian as the state language, and free from the constraints of Moscow, the education system swiftly privileged a Georgian language only programme. Such a decision is natural, especially in a case where national identity has previously been so emperilled, but in this instance there was no corresponding move to encourage students to pursue the study of other languages. In a country of less than four million people[2] this has a significant impact on the amount of material that is available for research. If scholars are unable to read other languages than their own, it is inevitable that eventually the resources available for study will become more insular and miss many of the debates being conducted in other tongues; in short this entirely understandable reluctance by many younger people to engage with Russian language and literature left the Georgian academic *milieu* increasingly isolated and introspective.

Twenty-five years on from the fall of the Soviet Union a number of Georgian academics have expressed their fears for the future of research in the Humanities in the country. They point out that the last Soviet-educated scholars have now reached the age of 60 and that the most talented scholars in their 50s, 40s and 30s have largely gone overseas on scholarships and failed to return meaning that there is a shortage of qualified younger people in a wide range of fields allied to archaeology, art history, history and linguistic studies. One senior academic stopped me when I referred to fears in Syria of a 'generational skills gap' after five years of war in that country by pointing out that nothing was done in

2 http://census.ge/files/results/Census_release_ENG.pdf (accessed 07.10.2016).

the aftermath of the Georgian Civil War and that he felt he was dealing with a gap of more than twenty years, rather than merely the five I was concerned about.

Along with this linguistic isolation there have been other signs of Georgian society turning inward as well, most notably the rise of immensely influential nationalist movements espousing views that Georgian ethnicity and national identity are inextricably linked with the Georgian Orthodox Church; at its most extreme these views argue that being Georgian Orthodox is a prerequisite for being a 'true' Georgian. Taking this even further, an acquaintance even heard a Georgian Metropolitan refer to the Armenians in his diocese as 'not Christians.' Such is the influence of this sector of Georgian society that there is increasing timidity amongst many scholars to be seen to criticise the Church, or its authorised view of the past, in any meaningful manner. This has meant that a lot of 'revisionist' scholarship of the past decade has furnished circular arguments as much of the most recently published material on ecclesiastical history, including writing on the 'Thirteen Syrian Fathers', has referred back to assertions by like-minded writers without grounding the arguments in firmly established factual findings.

This issue needs to be addressed here at the outset of this volume because it is clear that a book written by a non-Orthodox, non-Georgian woman will be dismissed by a number of people within the country simply on the grounds that a foreign woman of a different Christian denomination will never be able to fully understand the intricacies of Georgian history—sadly a position that I have had repeated to me not infrequently over the last few years. An additional problem is that, with the notable exception of several brilliant linguistic scholars,[3] there is very little understanding of Syrian history and culture in Georgia and those who write about the 'Syrian Fathers' have not sought to examine the Syrian evidence or, if they have, are consulting outdated sources that do not reflect the current issues being discussed in the field. This is not their fault—the continued financial difficulties of the country have made securing access to foreign journals and monographs exceptionally difficult—but these writers should perhaps be prepared to acknowledge these factors rather than refuse to engage with those who have experience of more current streams of debate.

After explaining the problems of disinterest (on the Syrian side) and misunderstandings (on the Georgian side) between the two cultures and histories discussed in the work that follows, I would beg the understanding of learned

3 Thinking in particular of the excellent work of Gocha Japaridze and Mariam Nanoblishvili in the field of Arabic and related languages.

colleagues if what follows seems, at least at the beginning, to recap debates and attitudes that seem somewhat well-worn. The intention in the first few chapters is to introduce Syrian Studies to scholars of Kartvelology and vice versa as well as to offer a coherent introduction to these fields for anybody reading this book from outside these areas of research. Progressing from this intentionally broad approach at the outset, the work will highlight selected specialist arguments in the later chapters, by which time it is hoped that all readers will have gained a basic knowledge of current issues in both fields of expertise.

Naturally this is not to say that this book will provide a definitive answer to any of these issues. This work is intended to *open a conversation*, it is the first book to be written in a western European language on this subject and, it is the intention that it will raise awareness of an intriguing episode of Caucasian and Eastern Mediterranean history. The process of researching this book has provided many false starts and blind alleys and it is to be hoped that by recounting these misconceptions as well as considering the more concrete evidence, what follows may be used as the basis to continue future research in a fascinating subject in a complex and often troubled region of the world.

At this point I must thank all those without whom this project would not have been possible. Foremost is the European Research Council. The research leading to this monograph has received funding from the European Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) / ERC grant agreement nº 312602. Without the time away from my normal university duties giving me the opportunity to study Georgian and Russian and spend prolonged periods of time living and working in Tbilisi none of this would have been possible. Many individuals have helped along the way and I apologise to anyone who is overlooked in the following list, but thanks are due to Nino Simonishvili and Irina Koshoridze for their hospitality and help from my first visit to Georgia in 2005 onwards, Maia Simonishvili of the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, Zaza Skhirtladze of Tbilisi State University, Tamila Mgaloblishvili, Nodar Bakhtadze of Ilia State University and the Georgian National Museum and his team of students who were all impeccable hosts at their excavation in Kakheti, many members of staff at the Georgian National Museum but especially the 'Stone Age Fund' gang of Nino, Tata, Tengo and Anna who allowed someone with a dubious grasp of early man to share their office space for many months. Mikheil Abramishvili must also be mentioned for helping me understand the significance of odd gaps in the Georgian archaeological record. Several colleagues at the University of Exeter read sections of the manuscript whilst it was being written and offered helpful feedback and Kevin Tuite kindly spent time helping me understand Georgian vernacular religion and patiently advised me as to whether my ideas about relations with the

Georgian highlands had any validity. He corrected many errors, and it must be stated here that any mistakes that remain in the text are mine alone and not the responsibility of anybody who was generous enough to help me during this research.

Finally the greatest thanks must go to my husband Peter Leeming. We were married in the first months of the project and he was very understanding about beginning married life in a rented apartment in Tbilisi. He was a helpful assistant and tolerant companion in my church-hunting expeditions and a calm presence in times of crisis when serious ill health struck. This book is dedicated to him with love and in the hope of many more adventures in the future.

*Emma Loosley Leeming*
Tbilisi and Exeter 2017

# Note on Transliteration

For the citing of references in Russian the transliteration system adopted by the Library of Congress has been used. When quoting Georgian sources the author has used the Georgian National transliteration system but has elected to omit the use of ‘ after some letters as she believed that this would appear unnecessarily complicated to non-Georgian speakers. The only other case of deviation from the Georgian National system is in some place names, where the author has chosen to select the most familiar Latin spelling of names in cases where more than one variant is present.

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## Maps



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INTRODUCTION

# Defining the Geographical and Historical Parameters of This Study

> … The problem becomes acute when considering the architectural traditions of Georgia. Lying just north of Armenia and bordered on the west by the Black Sea, the architecture of this region offers striking similarities with that of Armenia. The small, centrally-planned structures, with their conical roofs and sculptural decoration, bear close resemblance to those found in Armenia. These visual similarities reflect the continuous contact and interrelations between the two lands, most visible in the marchland areas of Tayk' and Tao, which have defied a precise identification of an Armeno-Georgian border, and where churches often feature bilingual inscriptions. The closeness of the two traditions, both in ecclesiastical architecture and in almost all other architectural genres, encourages the formulation of a Transcaucasian, rather than strictly Armenian study. The abundance of commonalities discourages drawing an overly rigid line between them, as is common in much of the scholarship on the Transcaucasus.
>
> The problem of defining "Armenian" and "Georgian" architecture thus remains, as well as how, when, and why to distinguish between them. In some cases, it seems that the term Transcaucasian is more appropriate.[1]

⁂

In an area of research so fraught with Nationalist (with a capital "N") agendas, it seems wise to begin by mentioning the elephant in the room from the outset. In the quotation above Christina Maranci addresses the question of whether or not the way forward is to develop an architectural history of the Transcaucasus rather than insisting on exploring the Georgian and Armenian traditions separately. This is an approach that has since been adopted by Annegret Plontke-

1 pp. 248–249, Maranci, Christina, *Medieval Armenian Architecture: Constructions of Race and Nation*, Peeters; Leuven, 2001.

Lüning[2] and is undeniably a sensible direction in which to proceed. Naturally this is an issue that does not affect simply architectural historians, but all who seek to study the history and material culture of the Caucasus, whatever their discipline; although the quotation above is referring to architectural history, we can apply the same arguments for a more inclusive approach to the study of the region across all the humanities and social sciences.

The fact that so few people have taken up the challenge to approach the region with a comprehensively pan-Caucasian attitude can be most clearly explained by considering the political and linguistic complexities not only of the Transcaucasian countries themselves but also the wider Eurasian milieu in which they are embedded. The official date for the end of the Soviet Union is assigned to December 1991, but of course history is rarely that neat and it was some years before the full implications of this dissolution became clear. However, during most of the twentieth century, Transcaucasia was not always easy for academics to access and this is reflected in the scant academic literature, on Georgia in particular, available in languages other than Russian and Georgian. It must be noted at this point that despite the fact that Soviet Armenia was just as difficult for foreign scholars to access as Soviet Georgia, there was more work being undertaken on Armenian subjects throughout the Soviet period in European and North American institutions because of the long-established Armenian diaspora communities who not only celebrated their culture, but also supported their commitment to their ancestral homeland with programmes of philanthropic endeavour endowing museums, cultural centres and academic chairs amongst other activities.[3] This situation was not (and is not) the case with the corresponding Georgian situation. Unlike their Armenian neighbours the Georgians do not have a large diaspora community. Contemporary Georgians often cheerfully admit that as a people they remain largely within the confines of their homeland and, although Georgia established a significant expatriate community in Paris after the fall of the short-lived Georgian Democratic Republic to the Bolsheviks in February 1921, they do not have an established international network of academics, cultural centres and museums in the same way as their Armenian neighbours.

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2 Plontke-Lüning, Annegret, *Frühchristliche Architektur In Kaukasien. Die Entwicklung des christlichen Sakralbaus in Lazika, Iberien, Armenien, Albanien und den Grenzregionen vom 4. bis zum 7. Jh.*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften; Wien, 2007.

3 Both Oxford and Harvard (for example) have named chairs in Armenian Studies—the Mashtots Chair at Harvard and the Calouste Gulbenkian Chair at Oxford—meaning that there are high-profile appointments and an established tradition of Armenian Studies outside the former Soviet region.

Naturally the study of Georgian language and history has always been pursued by a small number of scholars and even through the uncertainties of the post-Soviet years academics continued to visit and write on Georgian subjects—with David Braund, Antony Eastmond and Stephen Rapp Jr being three English-language scholars prominent in this regard—but the fact remains that Georgian language and culture still remains relatively understudied outside the boundaries of the country itself. This situation is often linked to the fact that the Georgian language is a member of the Kartvelian group and is not closely related to other linguistic families making it perhaps more difficult to study than other regional languages that fit within the Indo-European or Turkic linguistic families.

It is necessary to highlight these issues here because within this study the regions being examined are limited to those that formed the Roman provinces of Syria, Osrhoene and Mesopotamia, which now equate to modern Syria, Lebanon and parts of southeastern Turkey and western Iraq, and the areas that are approximately analogous to the ancient kingdoms of Lazica (Egrisi) and Iberia (Kartli) which is roughly comparable to contemporary Georgia (including the currently contested regions of Abkhazia/Apkhazeti and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali) (See Map 1). The principal reason for this is, as Maranci so clearly demonstrates in her book, that it is an absolute necessity to have some knowledge of the native languages of the regions under discussion and, having embarked on this project with a grounding in Syriac but needing to acquire a working knowledge of both Georgian and Russian along the way, learning Armenian was just too great a task within the five year span of this research.

Modern western academic life demands regular "outputs" from its researchers and this unfortunately does not grant today's scholars as much time as their forebears to immerse themselves in the process of learning new languages, therefore it is because of my personal limitations that the Armenian material is not comprehensively explored in this volume, although it will be referred to in passing. When faced with the desire to explore the inter-relationships of the different cultures in this complex region I took the perhaps perverse choice to work not from the 'known to the unknown' but rather the 'road less travelled' and elected to begin with the Georgian relationship with Syria precisely because, outside the boundaries of Georgia itself, this subject has received very little attention.[4] This seemed a gap that it seemed necessary to explore

4 There have naturally been some articles on this subject in European languages—see for example works by Haas and Martin-Hisard on the Syrian Fathers in the bibliography—but


MAP 1 *Map of the Levant, Mesopotamia and the Caucasus in the sixth century* CE

further, in the hopes that such a study could at the very least, clear up some of the gaps in our knowledge about inter-cultural relationships in late antiquity.

It also needs to be strongly underlined that this volume is intended to be a *first step* on a path to formulate a clearer understanding of the relationship between Syro-Mesopotamia and the Kingdom of Kartli in late antiquity. There are undoubtedly errors and omissions in the pages that follow, but the aim of the work is to stimulate debate and further research in an undeveloped area of study rather than to provide a definitive account of the subject. Caucasian Studies is a notoriously vicious field rife with nationalist agendas and particu-

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outside Georgia itself there have been no book-length studies of Syrian-Georgian interaction and, within Georgia itself as with the few outsiders who have explored this, the subject has been dominated by material devoted to the *vitae* of the Thirteen (As) Syrian Fathers rather than taking a wider look at the interaction between the two cultures.

larly vitrolic reactions to opposing points of view. As Rapp pointed out recently "The hyper-politicisation of Caucasian history is the stuff of Promethean legend."[5]

In this charged atmosphere any new or alternative theories are often attacked and dismissed without sufficient considerations of *what evidence* someone offers for a new interpretation. In the current case the rationale for this study is a simple one; whilst the study of "The Syrian Fathers" has long been an accepted sub-branch of Georgian historical research, there has never been an investigation of the subject by someone coming from a background of Syrian Studies. On the Syrian side there is no awareness at all that the Georgians revere a group of purported Syrian monks in this manner and that disjunction seemed a mystery too interesting to ignore. Nevertheless, during the research for this monograph it became increasingly apparent that in some quarters the conclusions made by any non-Georgian scholar will face particularly extensive scrutiny.[6] Therefore it must be underlined at the very beginning that as a *first step* my intention is as much to highlight the lacunae in the historical and archaeological record, as it is to provide any definitive conclusions. In many cases there is a gap in our data that may or may not be filled in the future through archaeological excavation or the discovery of a hitherto unknown literary source. Until that time, this is intended as an attempt to weave together the extant information in a logical manner. It is also intended that future avenues of research will be highlighted as an invitation to open a series of academic conversations—this is very much the opening gambit rather than the final word on the discussions that will follow.

This qualification is necessary not least because of the events that have transpired during the preparation of this work. Whilst this research was conceived and a proposal to the European Research Council was being developed,[7] a sudden series of events in North Africa and the Middle East precipitated the Syrian civil war meaning that the portions of this work relating to Syria have had to rely on fieldwork undertaken before the outbreak of hostilities.[8] In addition the

5 Rapp Jr, Stephen H., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature*, Ashgate; Farnham, 2014, xv.

6 See the comments relating to this issue in the preface to this volume.

7 This monograph has been made possible thanks to a five year ERC-funded "Starting Grant" within the seventh programme framework.

8 For the purpose of clarity readers should assume that all Syrian fieldwork has effectively been in abeyance since late 2010/early 2011 and therefore, subject to a few notable exceptions such as the Hungarian project at Marqab on the Syrian coast, all publications since that time are reliant on notes from pre-war research.

fast-moving geo-politics of the former Soviet Union mean that Georgian society is constantly reacting to a series of events that are often beyond their control and this impacts significantly on Georgian identity politics and, by extension, the way that contemporary Georgians interpret their past.[9] In a more tangible manner it placed a physical limitation on fieldwork in Georgia by preventing travel to the South Ossetia (Tskhinvali) region and Abkhazia (Georgian Abkhazeti) thereby preventing access to approximately 20% of Georgian territory.[10]

As the observant reader will have noticed, in the paragraph above I talk of exploring the relationship between Iberia/Kartli and Syro-Mesopotamia, but not that of Lazica/Egrisi with Syria. This is because Lazica will be considered in places, but the focus of this monograph will be primarily Kartli, or in modern terms, Georgia east of the Surami Pass and the Likhi mountain range. The reason for this is that Lazica was controlled largely by the Byzantine Empire during the period covered by this study. The second, and more important, reason for this omission is that the narratives concerning the Syrian Fathers all concern Kartli and it is in Kartli that we have a partial archaeological record of some Syrian occupation from the last centuries BCE onwards into the earliest centuries of the Common Era. Add to these factors the current impossibility of conducting fieldwork in Abkhazia alluded to above, and it becomes clear why it was most sensible to concentrate this research on Kartli.

The one exception to this decision is the inclusion of a substantial amount of information relating to Svaneti; this is because despite the fact that the earliest churches in the region only date back to the ninth century, Svaneti's role as the treasury of the Georgian Kingdoms over the centuries has meant that an extraordinary array of early liturgical objects has been gathered there and a number of these items are believed to have had direct, or at least hypothetical, links to Syria. Similar items have also been discovered elsewhere in western Georgia, notably around Kutaisi and, more recently, in Adjara[11] making it

9 See the various articles by Philip Kohl on this subject listed in the bibliography for further information on this subject.

10 The figure of 20% of Georgia being occupied by Russia is often bandied about in the media and popular literature relating to the Georgian-Russian war of 2008. For a legal consideration of why this figure is accurate see Natia Kalandarishvili-Mueller's article on the blog of the *European Journal of International Law* http://www.ejiltalk.org/on-the-occasion-of-the-five-year-anniversary-of-the-russian-georgian-war-is-georgia-occupied/ (Accessed 26.01.2017).

11 Pers.comm. Elene Kavlelashvili, Senior Curator of the Treasury of the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Art, Tbilisi.

seem prudent to include portable objects of possible Syrian origin from western Georgia in this study. The central and eastern mountain regions peopled by the Khevsurs and the Tush are considered in this work as peripheral cultures that may or may not have had influence on lowland society, as they were pagan until the middle ages and indeed in many respects are not believed to ever have been completely Christianised; certainly there are few churches in their mountains and they do not boast the strong Christian heritage of the Svans.

As the geo-political situation of the Middle East and the Caucasus seems unlikely to change radically towards peace in the near future, scholars must accommodate these shifting boundaries, but be honest about the impact that the current political situation has on their research; this will inevitably cause gaps in our knowledge and facilitate oversights. It is better to acknowledge this at the outset than to be accused of knowingly presenting a partial view of the situation by seeking to appear knowledgeable about regions and monuments that are currently inaccessible. Therefore it must be understood that this monograph relies on extensive fieldwork carried out in Syria between 1997 and 2010, after which the Syrian civil war made further visits impossible. After fleeting visits to Georgia in 2005 and 2006, the fieldwork for the Georgian section of the research was undertaken from 2013 onwards. Last but not least, save for a brief visit in 1997, the fieldwork on Eastern Asia Minor dates from 2012.

Bearing this in mind, the reader will no doubt have surmised by this point that the writer is coming at this project from a background specialising in the evolution of the early Syrian Church, in terms of both material culture and ecclesiastical and liturgical history. Therefore the Caucasian material marks a significant new direction of research and the debates surrounding the Post-Soviet states of the region proved to be astonishingly vicious and partial, even for somebody used to negotiating the contested Judaeo-Christian heritage of the Levant. This fact is noted here in the full recognition that there will be many who disagree with the conclusions reached in this volume, some no doubt for valid academic reasons, but others due to a strongly partial nationalistic and doctrinal ideal.[12] Whilst fully cognisant of the debates of the Council of Chalcedon and the brutal repercussions of that meeting in 451 for the unity of the

12 In May 2013 I was a participant in the Fifth International Symposium of the Georgian Orthodox Church on the "Tradition of Theotokos' Adoration in the Orthodox Church". Shortly before I left for Tbilisi I was told that, despite being an invited delegate, they were not allowing me to deliver the paper that I had submitted. I later discovered that I was prevented from speaking because my paper referred to both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian visual images of the Theotokos in Syria and this discussion of 'heretical' imagery was deemed unacceptable.

Church ever since, the writer does not view either side of this schism as essentially 'right' or 'wrong' and as such does not pursue a doctrinal agenda in the work that follows.

Complex as it was to define the geographical parameters of this monograph, a similar question arose with regards to the question of the chronological span of this work. Late antiquity is a notoriously nebulous term that has been used for dates as early as the second century CE up until as late as the ninth century according to the varying geographical locations or disciplines under discussion. What *is* clear is that late antiquity is the correct term in this instance; the milieu that we shall be exploring was emphatically on the fringes of, and often beyond the reach of, the Byzantine Empire. At the same time it was influenced by, and often subject to, the Persian Empire of the Parthians and their successors the Sassanian dynasty. Despite this Kartli and Syro-Mesopotamia maintained their own languages, literary and material cultures and were never assimilated fully into either of the world empires that sought to subjugate them. Bearing these factors in mind it seems, to this writer at least, that late antiquity in this context began in the first half of the fourth century CE with the Peace of Constantine and ended at some point in the first two or three decades of the seventh century, when Georgia entered the Chalcedonian fold and the great Arab expansion began to redraw the world's maps.

Therefore, although there will be some contextualisation of the events that led to the spread of Christianity in the fourth century and the architecture discussed will include some monuments that were constructed as late as the mid to late seventh century, this book will define late antiquity in this instance as running from the fourth to seventh centuries. This is by no means intended to suggest that everything changes dramatically at this point; the narrative that argued for a cataclysmic social collapse in the seventh century has long been discredited,[13] but at the same time the rise of Islam and the crystallization of the battlelines between the Chalcedonians and their non-Chalcedonian opponents suggest a suitable point at which to end this work.

13 See for example Geyer, Bernard, 'Expansion and Decline of Syria's Arid Margin', *The Arab World Geographer*, 5/2 (2002), pp. 73–84 for an argument of continuity of culture and population expansion within a changing settlement pattern in seventh century Syria. This will also be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 1

# Syrians, Assyrians, Orthodox, Chalcedonians and Monophysites or Non-Chalcedonians: The Problems of Identifying the Thirteen Fathers

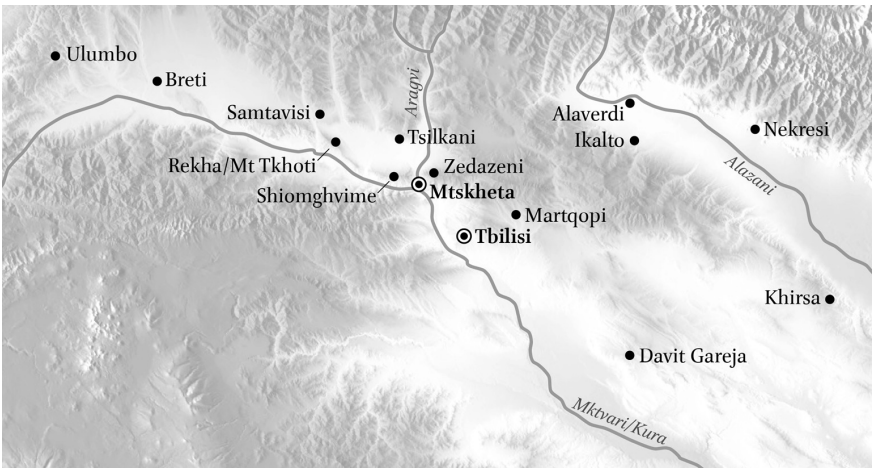
## Syrian or Assyrian? The Difficulty of Precise Definition

In May 2013 at Bodbe, at the convent that houses the tomb of St. Nino, the legendary evangelist of Georgia, I bought a modern icon of the Thirteen Fathers that is labelled in Georgian characters *Asureli Mamebi*, which in English is translated as the Assyrian Fathers rather than the Syrian Fathers. Throughout Georgia there are references to these somewhat enigmatic figures in churches, historical and literary sources and in popular culture. The Thirteen Fathers who came to the country in the sixth century are credited with bringing Christian monasticism and consolidating the process of Christianization begun by St. Nino in the fourth century. Each of these figures is associated with a particular location (Map 2), and in some cases more than one place, in the ancient kingdom of Kartli.[1] Known in antiquity as Iberia by the Romans, Kartli was the name chosen by its inhabitants for the region that now makes up central and eastern Georgia. It is notable that none of these Fathers has been linked with a site in Colchis, Egrisi or Lazica, the ancient names for contemporary Western Georgia, which also includes Abkhazia, and which was more firmly under Byzantine influence than the eastern regions of the country that is now known as Georgia by foreigners.[2]

Despite their pivotal role in Georgian national consciousness, concrete facts about these figures are extremely difficult to establish and they remain for the most part shadowy characters shrouded in legend rather than clearly demonstrable historical figures. To begin with perhaps the most obvious point, we have the question of their origins; they are referred to almost interchangeably

1 For further information and visual illustration of the spread of these sites please refer to the website that accompanies this research http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk Choose the 'map' tag and then in the drop-down menu apply the filter that highlights the sites associated with these figures.

2 'Georgia' is derived from 'Gurji' which was the appellation for the people of the region in various languages including Persian, Arabic and Turkish. Georgians refer to their country as 'Sakartvelo' or 'Land of the Karts'.




MAP 2 *The Locations associated with the Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers in Georgia today*

as the 'Syrian' or 'Assyrian Fathers' but there has been little systematic attempt to discuss what either of these nationalities meant to the people of late antique Kartli or indeed how these ethnicities are defined by contemporary Georgian scholars.

### Doctrinal Identity and Contemporary Usage of the Terms 'Syrian' and 'Assyrian'

If there is little consensus as to the ethnic origin of these figures, then there is even more confusion as to which doctrinal beliefs they may have held. Whereas most scholarship has traditionally taken the break between the Armenian and Georgian Catholicoi in the first decade of the seventh century as an indication that the Georgians followed the anti-Chalcedonian doctrine favoured by the Armenians until this point, this assumption has now been questioned by the work of scholars such as Tamila Mgaloblishvili. Mgaloblishvili has convincingly demonstrated that a significant proportion of the Georgian clergy accepted the *Henoticon* of the Emperor Zeno (r. 474–475, 476–491) thereby incurring the wrath of both sides of the Chalcedonian debate.[3] In fact her suggestion

3 p. 20, Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, 'Georgia in the Times of St. Maximus the Confessor', in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Khoperia, Lela (eds.), *Maximus the Confessor and Georgia*, Bennett and Bloom; London, 2009, pp. 17–24.

that there were people of both sides of the Chalcedonian divide present in Kartli in the fifth and sixth centuries and that this division was obscured by Vakhtang Gorgasali's willingness to uphold the *Henoticon*[4] mirrors the work done by Volker Menze on the emergence of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the sixth century. Menze claims that Zeno's compromise was in effect the sticking plaster that delayed the decisive final split between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian clergy throughout the Patriarchate of Antioch.[5]

Returning to the situation in Georgia,[6] if Georgian ecclesiastical society was prepared, at least in some quarters, to accept the *Henoticon* then this suggests that there was a measure of disunity amongst the doctrinal beliefs held by Georgian Christians of this period and they were neither as staunchly miaphysite as many historians have previously inferred from their closeness to the Armenian Church, but nor were they as (Chalcedonian) Orthodox as many Eastern Orthodox historians have sought to assert. This suggestion that Georgia had a patchwork of confessional identities across the country is, in retrospect, a far more feasible suggestion than that Georgian Christianity took a single, mono-confessional and culturally cohesive form from its very inception. However this is a view that is strongly disputed by Georgian Orthodox historians within the country today, who maintain that the country has had an unbroken line of Eastern Orthodox obedience to the Patriarchs of Antioch and Constantinople and who fiercely refute the more nuanced statements of scholars like Mgaloblishvili.[7]

Exploring the question of the origins of these Thirteen Fathers may elucidate some answers, or at least allow the development of a series of plausible hypotheses, relating to this posited diversity. The obvious place to start is with the stories that have grown up around these figures and this brings us back, once again, to the question of their collective name. The terms 'Syrian' and 'Assyrian' are fraught with loaded meanings in Oriental Christian society today[8]

4 Mgaloblishvili, pers. comm.

5 p. 57, Menze, Volker L., *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2008.

6 When referring to 'Georgia' in a late antique context this means *both* Lazica and Kartli. When referring to a movement that only affected the east or west of the country I shall use the names Lazica (West) and Kartli (East) to reflect the fact that these regions were two separate political entities throughout the period referred to in this monograph.

7 See for example Matitashvili, Shota, 'Kartuli bermonazvnoba VI–VIII saukuneebshi: Sirieli Mamebi', *Sami Saunje* 2 (2012), pp. 216–230 for a recent survey article considering the arguments as to the origins and doctrinal beliefs of these figures and why, on balance, they appear to have been diophysites.

8 Oriental Christian in this context refers to the Oriental Orthodox Church family. This includes

and have become divorced from their older, simpler significance as words simply denoting a group of people from a particular region. Whilst the Assyrian Empire covered the majority of the Middle East at its height and lasted for around 1,500 years, by the Roman period 'Syrian' and 'Assyrian' had come to mean the inhabitants of two clearly delineated regions; Syrians were people from the Roman province of Syria that encompassed a region including modern Syria, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine, as well as land that is now part of contemporary Jordan and Turkey. Assyrians were associated with Mesopotamia, meaning both the Roman province of this name and a wider section of parts of Turkey, Syria and Iraq as well.

In late antiquity the people of Osrhoene, the Roman province of that name having become a kingdom centred on Edessa (now Şanliurfa in south eastern Turkey), fell between the 'Syrians' and 'Assyrians' as their province/kingdom was to the north of the Roman provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia. Osrhoene encompassed the upper reaches of the River Euphrates and was the epicentre of a notable indigenous cultural and literary heritage. It is unclear when Old Syriac became the dominant language of the region, and there are only around 100 inscriptions in this language yet discovered.[9] The earliest of these to be clearly dated was written in 6 CE and was discovered at Birecik on the Turkish Euphrates.[10] Old Syriac is the name applied to the Aramaic dialect in use around Edessa and which reached maturity as the literary language of Aramaic-speaking Christians from the second century CE onwards.[11] Whereas initially the language covered a narrow area and was found only east of the Euphrates, by the fourth century it had spread further west than the river and by the sixth century it was extremely well established in northern Syria.[12]

As Syriac evolved and spread, as with other languages, variations occurred. In this case the issue that most concerns the current discussion is the fact that

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the miaphysite, non-Chalcedonian Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. They are called the Oriental Orthodox Church family to distinguish them from the Eastern Orthodox Churches who follow a Chalcedonian doctrine. Therefore the word Oriental is used in a specific technical sense and is in no way intended to be a pejorative term.

9 p. 289, Brock, Sebastian, 'Edessene Syriac inscriptions in late antique Syria', in Cotton, Hannah M., Hoyland, Robert G., Price, Jonathan J. & Wasserstein, David J. (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 2009, pp. 289–303.

10 Ibid.

11 p. 290, op. cit.

12 p. 291, op. cit.

after the Council of Ephesus in 431 those who maintained that the Virgin was the *Christotokos* rather than the *Theotokos* had been so roundly condemned and persecuted that many fled eastwards towards the Sassanian Empire. Here they were largely tolerated because, although Christian, they were no lovers of the Imperial court in Constantinople. It was this group who became derogatively known by their enemies as the Nestorian Church and who are today the Church of the East (who self-identify as Assyrian Christians).

From 410 onwards the leader of the church in Sassanian lands had been seated in the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and in the aftermath of the Council of Ephesus this became the centre for what eventually became the Church of the East. As time passed geographical and political distance between the Syriac-speakers in the Sassanian Empire and those who lived to the west in the Byzantine Empire meant that the language evolved along slightly differing paths and Syriac split into Eastern and Western dialects that, although not mutually unintelligible developed differing schools of script and diacritical notations as well as variant words and accents.

## Georgian Understanding of the Word 'Arameuli' (Aramaic)

Naturally this is all basic information to scholars of Syriac and Oriental Christianity and the literature in the field is clear in explaining the differences between the different Syriac-speaking theological positions, but when trying to explore these doctrinal schisms through the lens of Georgian theological and historical writings the task becomes considerably more difficult. In writing about Georgian attitudes to the Sassanian Empire, Rapp points out that:

> The geographical scope of late antique and early medieval Georgian texts tends to be heavily restricted, even within the Caucasian arena. Not surprisingly, early Georgian hagiographical literature offers limited and vague toponymical data for Iran. The *vitae* … make indistinct references to the Iranian seat of government, though neither specifies its name or location.[13]

If the ancient Georgian sources are this indistinct when writing of an empire that ruled their territories for long periods of time it should come as no sur-

13 Rapp Jr, Stephen H., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature*, Ashgate; Farnham, 2014, pp. 94–95.

prise to us that they are even vaguer when making reference to peoples who are even further away and who had even less direct impact on their culture. However if this lack of knowledge about the geography, history and religious movements of Syria is understandable with regard to the chroniclers of early medieval Georgia, what is puzzling (and in many ways deeply disturbing) is the fact that this ignorance presists in much of the historical discourse of Georgian scholars even to the present day. The following excerpt is typical of contemporary Georgian terminology when discussing the (As)Syrian Fathers:

> Against this sort of historiographical "harmony", Iv. Javakhishvili introduced a note of dissension. Although he distrusts the descriptions of the Assyrian Fathers' *lives*, he accepts the Georgian ecclesiastical tradition concerning the first desert Assyrian monks living in the wilderness in Georgia as well as Armenia and sees Assyria as the source for these hermitages (the Armenian evidence for monasticism is the word "Abegha/Abela" which the scientist explained "was an Assyrian word that initially meant "sorrow" but later was used for monks or nuns").[14]

Whilst the Syriac word *abilā* meaning 'mourner' was used in the Syrian tradition to denote monks and nuns, the terminology 'Assyrian' is incorrect when discussing the language used. Assyrian refers to the ancient Akkadian language or the contemporary Neo-Aramaic language used by Christians in Iraq and Iran and their communities in the worldwide diaspora. This term is not used for a language that existed in the sixth century. Unfortunately Georgians often use the term 'Assyrian' to describe the language of these legendary visitors or employs the term *Arameuli* meaning Aramaic. Whilst technically correct as Syriac is an Aramaic dialect, in this case it is not the correct name for the language presumably spoken by these holy figures. The Christians of Syria and

14 საკითხის მიმართ თავისებური ისტორიოგრაფიული „ჰარმონიაწი„ ერთგვარი დისონანსი თავის დროზე ივ. ჯავახიშვილმა შემოიტანა. იმისდა მიუხედავად, რომ იგი უნდობლად ეკიდება ასურელ მამათა ცხოვრებათა აღწერილობებს, თითქოსდა ეთანხმება საეკლესიო გადმოცემას საქართველოში პირველ მეუდაბნოებად ასურელი ბერების წარმოჩენის შესახებ და საქართველოში, ისევე როგორც სომხეთში, მეუდაბნოეობის გარცელების წყაროდ ასურეთს ვარაუდობს (ამის დასტურად ესახება მონაზონის სომხური მნიშვნელობა „აბელა„/„აბელა„, რაც, მეცნიერისავე განმარტებით, „ასურული სიტყვაა და თავდაპირველად აღნიშნავდა „მწუხარეს„, ხოლო შემდეგ მონაზონს ეძახდნენ„). Merkviladze, Davit, 'Asureli mamebi da samonastro organizatsia sakartveloshi', *Amirani* XVI (2006), pp. 55–75, p. 59 (translation by the author).

Mesopotamia spoke Syriac, which as explained above, was a distinct Aramaic dialect that evolved in Christian Edessa before spreading with the influence of the Christian school based in that city both to the south into northern and central Syria and the east into Mesopotamia. Whilst this insistance on correct linguistic terminology has been greeted in some quarters with protestations that it is mere pedantry[15] it is symptomatic of a more serious problem; namely the failure to clearly conceive of 'Syria' and 'Assyria' as two distinct territorial entities and as subtly different cultures in the period under discussion.

On exploring the Georgian language sources on the subject it was disconcerting for a reader coming from a background of Syriac Studies to encounter the 'Syrian Fathers' (*Sirieli Mamebi*) and the 'Assyrian Fathers' (*Asirieli Mamebi*) being invoked in an arbitrarily interchangeable manner even in the work of highly regarded Soviet-era scholars such as Korneli Kekelidze.[16] It is common for articles on the subject to change from one term to the other without any rhyme or reason and, when this fact was pointed out to a variety of academic friends,[17] there was general bewilderment that this presented any sort of problem. In fact more than once the response was 'Syria, Assyria—what does it matter? It is the same place!' Attempts to clarify that this was not in fact the case were floundering until this argument was countered with a Caucasian comparative;[18] if those who do not know the Caucasus well used the words 'Georgian' and 'Armenian' without a clear distinction how would Georgians and Armenians feel about this? Obviously this encounters a strong response and it is only necessary to say that eliding Syria and Assyria is like suggesting today that Syria and Iraq are all one country.

15 The author attended public lectures at both Tbilisi State University and the Chubinashvili Institute of Art in 2013 where overseas scholars gave presentations that referred to the Syriac language. In both cases there were complications when 'Syriac' was translated as *Aramaeuli* and there was a widespread perception that the two meant the same thing. On both occasions the only scholars who clearly understood the confusion were lecturers in Semitic languages but their attempts to clarify the relationship of Syriac to Aramaic largely fell on deaf ears after being dismissed as philological pedantry.

16 See for example Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi moslvis shesakheb', *Tplisis universitetis moambe* 6 (1925), pp. 82–107.

17 These scholars included Art Historians, Ecclesiastical Historians and curatorial staff at the National Museum.

18 For which the author must thank her husband—when she overheard him explaining to a librarian friend just why his wife was getting so frustrated and saw how indignant the reaction was to his analogy, she stole it and has used it to clarify her point ever since …

## An Argument from Silence? The Evidence (or Not) for Iberians in Syriac Sources

Nevertheless, the situation remains that this imprecise terminology leaves scholars with a mountain to climb if they wish to parse Georgian scholarship for information on the (As)Syrian Fathers. It is of course clear that any research into this area must seriously engage with the Georgian literature, not least because there is practically no mention of Georgians, identified in the late antique sources as Iberians, in the Syriac literature at all. There is also absolutely no Syriac or Arabic literary tradition relating to a group of (As)Syrian monks travelling northwards, which is perhaps in some ways to be expected if they headed north and never returned to their native land(s), but it is still surprising that there is no mention of such figures in any other linguistic tradition as echoes of stories from Kartli have appeared in a number of other ancient texts. For example Rufinus' *Ecclesiastical History* makes reference to the conversion of Iberia by an unnamed 'captive woman'[19] well before the *Life of Nino* was written about the illuminatrice of Georgia. This offers us an earlier reference from outside the Georgian literary world to support the claim that the country was evangelised by a woman in the fourth century. Given that these events in Iberia were written by Rufinus at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries, and the fact that there is a substantial amount of near contemporary literary evidence on the life and mission of Peter the Iberian (c. 417–491 CE) from his early life as an Iberian noble via his experiences as a hostage at the court of Constantinople, through to his Christian ministry in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine, we do have early testimonies of Iberian holy men extant in Syriac and Greek sources.[20] In addition Procopius mentions a number of events in the Caucasus in his accounts of the sixth century Persian Wars and the cumulative effect of these sources makes it clear that Kartli was not viewed entirely as *terra incognita* by outsiders and this makes the literary silence on the subject of a group of outstanding ascetics arriving in the country to found monasteries even more puzzling. One might expect to find some echoes of their arrival

19 pp. 20–22, Rufinus of Aquileia, Trans. Amidon, Philip R., S.J., *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia, Books 10 and 11*, Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1997.

20 For more on Peter the Iberian see John Rufus, Trans. & Ed. Horn, Cornelia B. & Phenix Jr, Robert R., *The* Lives *of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem and the Monk Romanus*, Society of Biblical Literature; Atlanta, 2008 and Cornelia B. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian*, Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2006.

reflected in the literary traditions of neighbouring Christian cultures, but on this they are silent.

Without collaborative sources available in other traditions the researcher is faced with the sole literary evidence referring to these monks originating in Georgian hagiographical literature. These texts were written down several centuries after the events they purport to record and mystifyingly, a number of the names of these figures are clearly of non-(As)Syrian origin—in fact nobody has yet studied the etymology of some of the more unusual names at all.[21] In this case it seems prudent to widen the means of enquiry to an interdisciplinary exploration of the issue in order to ascertain whether or not there is evidence in the archaeological and architectural record of substantial (As)Syrian influence not only on the locations associated directly with these 'Thirteen Fathers' but also at the various early churches that have been described by Georgian art historians as being influenced by the art and architecture of northern Syria.

### Practical Factors That Have Hindered the Comparative Study of Late Antique Syria and Georgia

Whilst there have been discussions of this in the past, for much of the twentieth century Georgian scholars working on ecclesiastical architecture were prevented from travelling to Syria and the surrounding countries by the Soviet Iron Curtain. Since the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991 no Georgian scholar has undertaken fieldwork in the region probably largely as a result of the financial hardships and funding shortages caused first by the civil war of the early 1990s and since then by a chronic under-investment by successive governments in the Georgian University and Museum network—perhaps understandable in light of the severe economic pressures on the state, but nevertheless a severe impediment to Georgian scholarship. This means that contemporary art historians largely rely on the judgements of Giorgi Chubinashvili (1885–1973) who is regarded as the founding father of Georgian art history. Although his work on Georgian art and architecture remains in many ways unsurpassed, living as he did in the Soviet Union, he never visited Syria and so had to rely on floorplans and photographs of well-known monuments as the basis for his argument and this has led to a number of mistakes in his interpretations.[22]

21 For more on this see chapter 7.

22 For more on this see chapters 2 and 6.

Conversely on the other side, similar issues have affected the study of the past in Syria. As was alluded to earlier in this volume[23] there has also been an institutional weakness in the study of the past in Syria—in this case caused by a privileging of applied and practical sciences over those disciplines seen not to yield immediate tangible societal benefits. In addition a general lack of funding has hampered the ability of scholars to access expensive foreign-published monographs and journals and opportunities for travel have been limited by the relative political isolation Syria experienced through most of the reign of Hafez al-Assad.[24] However, unlike in Georgia, where academic interaction was limited to relationships with other Soviet countries, during the second half of the twentieth century Syria stood at an anomalous point in which lines of communication remained open with the country's former colonial ruler, France, as well as having a tradition of sending some students to Russia to further their studies. As the country began to open up towards the end of Hafez al-Assad's reign and this process accelerated after Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000, more scholarships were offered to a wider range of countries so that Syrian students could travel to the west as well as to Russia and Iran and other traditional ally states.[25] This meant that Syrian scholars were exposed to a wider spectrum of academic approaches and also that there was more linguistic diversity amongst the languages employed by institutions such as the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) who officially function in Arabic and French but who also have staff fluent in English, Italian, Spanish and German having worked alongside a wide variety of international colleagues over a period of many years.

One problem for anyone engaged with the historical aspects of Syrian studies is related to the situation discussed above; where are the boundaries of Syria? Are we talking about the modern country that bears that name or are we referring to some greater historical entity? If we are referring to a past conception of Syria do we mean the Roman Province mentioned above, the great medieval entity known as the *Bilad al-Sham* or are we thinking about the area known as Syria under Ottoman overlords? The answer of course depends on the period of time being examined, but these shifting territorial boundaries can appear complex and opaque to non-specialists and perhaps this is particu-

23 See the preface to this volume.

24 See Philips, Christopher, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press; New Haven & London, 2016 for a discussion of Syria's interactions with the rest of the world both before and during the civil war.

25 Based on personal communications with a variety of colleagues and friends.

larly the case if this situation is alien to the culture of someone seeking to make sense of these boundaries.

Georgia has a clearly defined sense of geographical territory both past and present with the current borders of the country (if we accept for the moment that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are Georgian) roughly encompassing all Georgian historical territories with the notable exceptions of the ancient provinces of Tao and Klarjeti, that are now in eastern Turkey. Whilst it is relatively easy to understand the territorial boundaries of Georgia as both an historical and as a contemporary sovereign state, with Syria we are dealing with a situation where the current state is the rump of a series of larger historical entities. Perhaps for this reason, there has been a more outward-facing attitude of Syrian scholars and a widespread acknowledgement that their work has needed to address the wider contextual issues that have shaped the Levant as a region. Particularly among prehistorians, there has been an understanding that the cultures of the Fertile Crescent best make sense when looked at in their entirety, an approach that takes little note of the false distinctions imposed by modern territorial boundaries. On the other hand it is perhaps because of the relatively unchanging nature of the territories making up the modern country of Georgia that makes it difficult for some scholars there to comprehend the fluidity of labels such as 'Syrian' or 'Assyrian' one and a half thousand years ago when Georgia, *Sakartvelo*, has not changed its territorial integrity in such a dramatic way in the intervening period.

Ethnicity is another point of departure between the two societies. The Syrian civil war has thrown into sharp relief the mosaic of minority religions and ethnicities across the modern state of Syria with Kurds, Turkmen, Armenians and Syrian Orthodox Christians who have migrated south from territories today in Turkey over the course of the twentieth century all co-existing alongside the majority Arab population which is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, but also includes various Shi'a groups and Arab Christians. In Syria these various groups, with the possible exception of the Kurds, had until the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 almost unanimously self-identified first and foremost as Syrians, with issues of faith and ethnicity coming second to this sense of Syrian identity.[26]

26 One apparently spontaneous manifestation of this Syrian nationalism witnessed by the author was the shouting of nationalist and pro-government slogans in *al-Abbasiyyin* stadium, Damascus, on May 7th 2001 ahead of a Pontifical Mass conducted by Pope John Paul II. The mixing of pro-Syrian and pro-Papal chants ahead of the appearance of the Pontiff appeared unplanned and was participated in enthusiastically. Asked why this was happening, many present replied that they were grateful to live in Syria where Christians could worship so freely and have their religious leaders treated with such respect—unlike

However whereas Syrian society is made up of different groups and its modern history has to some extent been shaped by the fact that the *Ba'ath* party under the Assad family (from 1971 onwards) has depended on concentrating power in minority hands to control a Sunni Muslim majority, in Georgia the situation is sharply different.

## Language and National Identity: The Literary Languages of Sakartvelo before the Advent of a Georgian Alphabet

The Georgian name for their country *Sakartvelo* means 'Land of the Karts' and the territory of the modern state coincides, with the exception of Laz speakers in eastern Turkey, with the area where Kartvelian (sometimes called South Caucasian) languages are spoken.[27] The linguistic isolation of the Kartvelians and the fact that their languages do not appear to closely relate to other linguistic family trees is a factor that has helped foster a strong sense of national identity, in a way that an Arabic-speaking or English-speaking society would find difficult to understand.[28] However the linguistic picture becomes clearer in the period under discussion with the advent of the Georgian alphabet at some point in the fifth century CE.[29] The new script was closely identified with

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many other countries in the wider Middle East. Because of the apparent deference shown to Christian leaders by the regime, many Syrian Christians invested more heavily in the concept of a strong Syrian national identity of a secular state with all religions (with the notable exception of Judaism) protected by the *Ba'ath* party. See Christopher Philips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 51ff. on the concept of 'buy ins' and how they can be used to create a situation where groups are encouraged to invest heavily in society and create a strong nationalist, political identity that binds disparate groups to a regime.

27 The Kartvelian language family includes Georgian, Laz, Mingrelian and Svan.

28 The complexities of linguistic theory concerning proto-Kartvelian are extremely difficult for a non-linguist such as the author to understand, but perhaps unsurprisingly there is much speculation as to how Proto-Kartvelian and Indo-European languages relate to each other (if indeed there is a relationship). Of particular interest for this work is the fact that so far there has been no widely accepted agreement between archaeologists and linguists as to how the early linguistic and archaeological cultures in the South Caucasus and the territories south of it related to each other. This disparity between archaeology and linguistics is touched upon by Hayward in her review of the work of Gamkrelidze and Ivanov. See p. 76, Hayward, K.M., 'The Indo-European Language and the History of its Speakers: The Theories of Gamkrelidze and Ivanov', *Lingua* 78 (1989), pp. 37–86.

29 The first securely dated inscriptions in Georgian were discovered at Bir el Qutt between

the relatively recent adoption of the Christian faith in Kartli and it appears to have spread rapidly within Kartvelian territory. The first literary text in this new written form of the language is widely accepted as the *Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik*[30] that was composed at some point in the fifth century.

Naturally this raises the question as to what scripts were utilised in Kartvelian-speaking lands before the fifth century and the answer lies to a large extent with the dominant neighbouring cultures that bordered the South Caucasus region. In the west it is perhaps unsurprising that Greek inscriptions dominated, given the presence of Greek colonies along the coast of the Black Sea. This interaction occurred over many centuries and the growth of studies exploring the concept of the 'other' in antiquity[31] have also begun to explore the wider implications of two-way cultural transmissions in the last few years. The study of networks has become more widespread and network theory has been increasingly employed by scholars in various fields of the humanities rather than being seen solely the preserve of information scientists and related fields.[32] An understanding that an increased knowledge of neighbouring societies may help inform our interpretation of Classical culture has encouraged scholars to re-examine familiar material with new eyes—a case in point being the work of Mayor, Colarruso and Saunders who persuasively argue that the 'gibberish' painted on Athenian vases can, in a number of cases, be associated with a variety of Caucasian languages crudely transliterated into Greek by artisans seeking to add an 'exotic' element to their work.[33]

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Bethlehem and Jerusalem in 1952. Two inscriptions excavated there are dated 430 CE and a third is dated 432 CE. These remain the earliest securely dated texts in the Georgian alphabet. Within the territory of Georgia itself the earliest securely dated inscription is from the church of Bolnisi Sioni, in Kvemo Kartli in the south of the country. The Bolnisi inscription dates to 494 CE.

30 p. 42, Rayfield, Donald, *The Literature of Georgia. A History*, Curzon Caucasus World, Curzon Press (2nd Ed.); Richmond, 2000.

31 See for example Gruen, Erich S., *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*, Princeton University Press; Princeton N.J., 2011.

32 A relatively recent example in late antique studies is the work of Adam Schor. See Schor, Adam M., 'Theodoret on the "School of Antioch": A Network Approach', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15:4 (2007), pp. 517–562 and his book *Theodoret's People. Social Networks and Religious Conflicts in Late Roman Syria*, University of California Press; Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 2011.

33 Mayor, Adrienne, Colarusso, John & Saunders, David, 'Making Sense of Nonsense Inscriptions Associated with Amazons and Scythians on Athenian Vases', *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 83:3 (2014), pp. 447–493.

If the primacy of Greek was well established in Lazica/Egrisi then the same cannot be said to have been the case further east in Kartli.[34] Some Greek inscriptions have been found in Kartli, but they are often recorded in a bilingual context alongside Aramaic or Armazian texts. Early literary culture in east Georgia (Kartli) is believed by linguists to have been conducted in "Official or State Aramaic"[35] but this supposition rests only on two third—to second-century BCE fragmentary inscriptions discovered at Uplistsikhe on the basis that the Aramaic orthography is seen to differ from the later 'Armazian' script.[36] 'Armazian' is named for the district of Mskheta, the ancient Georgian capital, in which this script was first discovered and is taken as being the written language of Kartli from the first century BCE until the fourth century CE, after which it was supplanted by the new alphabet formulated especially to express the Georgian language in a written form.

As will be clear from the preceding paragraph, before the development of the Georgian alphabet, in Kartli official documents appear to have been recorded in a form of Aramaic often on its own, but sometimes in conjunction with a parallel or paraphrased Greek version of the text. However given the relative paucity of material discovered thus far, it is unclear how far this written form of

34 The discussion that follows will adhere to widely accepted archaeological and linguistic interpretations of the development of different scripts in Georgia as a whole, and Kartli in particular. Therefore this work will not be considering the ongoing claims by Vakhtang Licheli that he has discovered a 'paleo-Kartvelian' script dating from the seventh century BCE at Grakliani in Shida Kartli. See https://www.academia.edu/20216774/Paleo-Georgian_Kartli_script_of_7th_c_BC (accessed 01.02.2017) for Licheli's account of his findings. Licheli's claims are not, at the time of writing, accepted by the wider Georgian archaeological community and are instead viewed as part of a wider nationalist movement to use language to argue for the antiquity of "Georgian Statehood." See http://www.georgianjournal.ge/discover-georgia/30010-discoveries-at-grakliani-hill-will-change-history.html (accessed 01.02.2017) for an interview with Licheli where he advances his hypothesis. This is also tied to a debate concerning the antiquity of Georgian language inscriptions excavated at Nekresi in Kakheti. Despite the publications of Levan Chilashvili arguing that the the Nekresi evidence suggests that the Georgian alphabet was formulated as early as the first century CE, the majority of Georgian archaeologists and linguists (including the excavator of Nekresi, Professor Nodar Bakhtadze) believe these inscriptions to date from within the accepted horizon known for the Georgian script, i.e. they are artefacts of the fifth century CE or later.

35 p. 253, Giorgadze, Grigol, 'The Armazian Script' in Furtwängler, A., Gagoshidze, I., Löhr, H. & Ludwig, N. (eds.), *Iberia and Rome: The Excavations of the Palace at Dedoplis Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*, Beier & Beran; Langenweißbach, 2008, pp. 253–255.

36 Ibid.

Aramaic had been permeated by the native Kartvelian language. One small clue to this evolution may come from a series of bone gaming plates discovered at Dedopolis Gora in Shida Kartli. These plates are believed to come from five different sets probably dating from the first century CE[37] and Giorgadze observes that in the longest of the Armazian texts inscribed on these objects (also the only one yet deciphered) the sentence begins with a predicate and then proceeds to use the verb 'to be' in the infinitive which are both common elements of Georgian, rather than Aramaic, usage.[38] Needless to say in the absence of a substantial body of evidence, given the small number of these inscriptions yet discovered and the even smaller proportion that have been deciphered so far, such conclusions can only be tentative but so far the epigraphical data does overwhelmingly point to a predominantly Aramaic literary culture in Kartli before the fifth century CE.

Whereas "State Aramaic" and Armazi scripts are believed by archaeologists and linguists to have been used as the tools of a literate culture in a Kartvelian-speaking society, there is also a certain amount of evidence to suggest that from the first century BCE onwards there were Jewish communities present at Urbnisi and Mtskheta[39] who were also writing in Aramaic as well as in Hebrew. Their presence is recorded in the hagiographical literature with both the *Conversion of Kartli* and *Life of St. Nino* making reference to the Jewish residents of these towns and the archaeological record also indicates that their presence continued into the Christian era in both these settlements.[40]

Given the fact that at least some sectors of east Georgian society were familiar with written forms of Aramaic and would also have been aware of Hebrew usage amongst their Jewish neighbours, we cannot argue that Semitic languages and people were unknown in Kartli prior to the advent of Christianity in the country. On the contrary all the evidence gathered so far points to a vibrant Jewish or Judaeo-Christian community who appear to have played at least a supporting role in the evangelisation of Kartli. Bearing this in mind one has to ask why there appears to be such a sudden break in continuity and why this well-documented Semitic strand of Kartvelian society appears to disappear

37 p. 93, Gagoshidze, Iulon, 'Bone Objects' in Furtwängler, A. et al, *Iberia and Rome*, pp. 87–115.

38 p. 255, Giorgadze, Grigol, op. cit.

39 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Gagoshidze, Iulon, 'The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia', in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Curzon; Richmond, 1998, pp. 39–58.

40 Nikolaishvili, Vakhtang, 'The Archaeological Context of the Hebrew Inscriptions Discovered in Eastern Georgia', *Iberia-Colchis* 5 (2009), pp. 153–158.

from view at some point towards the end of the late antique period. In order to answer this question we must turn to the east and address the third point of the triangle of cultural, linguistic and political influences entering Kartli.

The geographical location of Georgia in the south Caucasus means that it is relatively easily approached from the west, with a coastline that has many places suitable for landing anything from small fishing craft to large ships. This had led to the founding of a series of Greek colonies along the coast in the Classical era and this colonial presence was retained, as far as they were able, by the Byzantine heirs of the Graeco-Roman Empire.[41] To the north the Greater Caucasus Mountains although not impermeable, did impede larger-scale movements of people. It is clear from the archaeological record and from ethnographic studies that there has always been interaction between the mountains on both sides of the range leading eventually to the Christianisation of some of these northern neighbours,[42] but north of Georgia there was a variety of different tribal peoples rather than one unified empire acting in concert. To the south was Asia Minor and Armenia and beyond them were the territories of Syria and Mesopotamia, the focus of this study, but the key to the Semitic linguistic heritage of Kartli lies to the east with the other great empire of the time; a world power that was constantly engaged in a struggle for supremacy with the Graeco-Roman, later Byzantine, Empire to the west—the Persian Empire.

In 247 BCE the Parthians took power from the heirs of Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, and in taking charge of this vast territory they also inherited an enormous bureaucratic apparatus. Whilst Iran was not home to a native Aramaic-speaking population, the Persian Empire encompassed regions that did speak the language and it was adopted by the Achaemenids as the official administrative language throughout their territories, a situation that appears to have remained unchanged in the succeeding Seleucid era.[43] Therefore the Parthians in turn utilised these existing structures to consolidate their control of the empire when they in turn took power. Their rule endured until 224 CE and therefore the overwhelming majority of texts discovered in Kartli in Aramaic fall within their epoch. This epigraphic evidence from archaeological sources accords with the numismatic evidence for a strong Parthian presence in Kartli

41 The story of the Byzantine struggle to retain Lazica is documented by Procopius in his *Wars*, Book 1, X onwards.

42 See for example Arzhantseva, Irina, 'The Christianization of North Caucasus (Religious Dualism among the Alans)', *Die Christianisierung Des Kaukasus*, Verlag Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften; Wien, 2002, pp. 17–36.

43 p. 276, Gzella, Holger, *A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam*, Brill; Leiden and Boston, 2015.

at this time[44] as well as with the echoes of Iranian influence that have been discerned in medieval Georgian literature. When this evidence is taken in its entirety Rapp argues that:

> Numerous independent lines of evidence are witnesses to eastern Georgia's enduring encounter with and inclusion within the Iranian Commonwealth since Achaemenid times. Because Georgian became a written language only in the late fourth/early fifth century AD, the earliest specimen of original Georgian literature being composed towards the end of the fifth century, ancient Georgian narrative evidence for the Achaemenid, Parthian and much of the Sasanid periods is lacking. However, Iranian inscriptions, Graeco-Roman sources, and the invaluable (medieval) geographical treatise by the Armenian scholar Anania Shirakac'i associate eastern Georgia and the whole of Caucasia with the Iranian Commonwealth.[45]

This Iranian influence in eastern Georgia continued into the Sassanian epoch after the Parthian Dynasty was defeated in 224 CE. Therefore in this formative period of Georgian history that saw the evangelisation of the country and the formulation of a national alphabet, the territory was a constituent part of the Iranian Commonwealth.

## Towards an Understanding of the Georgian Concept of 'Arameuli'

Considering this it perhaps becomes both more and less understandable that there is currently such confusion amongst many contemporary Georgian scholars concerning the differences between Syria and Assyria and a certain vagueness concerning the relationship between different variants of Aramaic. The fact that Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire over a period of centuries and remained so despite a series of changes of dynasty, demonstrates that it was a linguistic sign of stability to the late antique inhabitants of Kartli. It is interesting to consider how those who employed this official Aramaic for bureaucratic purposes or used it because they were part of a rul-

44 Sherozia, Medea, 'Monetary Circulation in Iberia in the 1st Century B.C.–1st Century A.D.', in Furtwängler, A. et al, *Iberia and Rome*, pp. 235–251.

45 p. 657, Rapp, Jr., Stephen H., 'The Iranian Heritage of Georgia: Breathing New Life into the Pre-Bagratid Historiographical Tradition', *Iranica Antiqua* 44 (2009), pp. 645–692.

ing elite, would have viewed the incoming Jewish population who settled in Urbnisi and Mtskheta speaking a language closely affiliated to the one they associated with privilege and their Iranian overlords. On the other side of the equation it is equally possible that these towns were an attractive destination for Jewish settlers precisely because they were aware of the fact that they could conduct trade and develop relationships with the local population in a language related to their own tongue.

By tracing the use of Aramaic back to the Persian Empire from the Achaemenids onwards, the association of the language with the Assyrians becomes more comprehensible—it was indeed initially the language of the Assyrian Empire, which in its turn was swallowed by its Persian neighbour. The clear Iranian influences Rapp has discerned in medieval Georgian literature[46] would indicate that there was likely to have been some awareness of the interplay of Assyria and Persia in the minds of Kartvelian nobles in the pre-Christian history of Kartli. This historical memory may well have continued through into the Christian era with the weaving together of a mythical historical past that forms the section of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (*Life of Kartli*) known as *The Life of the Kings* and which Rapp places amongst the earliest contributions to the corpus making up the chronicle suggesting that it was written down c. 800,[47] even if it is believed that the original tales existed in an oral form at an earlier period.

What of course this linguistic and historical evidence tells us is that the most significant influences on pre-Christian Kartli came from the east—from the territory of the Iranian Commonwealth and, just as the area that ultimately became western Georgia took its lead culturally and in literary terms from the Greeks, the eastern Georgians looked east for ideas of literature, culture and governance. It is clear that southerners do make an appearance—there were the clearly documented Jewish colonies at Urbnisi and Mtskheta and, of course the enduring issue of Caucasian studies, there was constant rivalry, broken by periods of rapprochement with their Armenian neighbours to the south—but their influence was not all pervasive in Kartvelian society on the eve of conver-

46 See for example Rapp Jr, Stephen H., 'The Iranian Heritage of Georgia: Breathing New Life into the Pre-Bagratid Historiographical Tradition', *Iranica Antiqua* 44 (2009), pp. 645–692, 'New Perspectives on "The Land of Heroes and Giants": The Georgian Sources for Sasanian History', *e-Sasanika* 13 (2014) http://www.sasanika.org/esasanika/new-perspectives-land-heroes-giants-georgian-sources-sasanian-history/ (accessed 02.02.2017) and Rapp Jr, Stephen H., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature*, Ashgate; Farnham, 2014.

47 p. 651, Rapp Jr, Stephen H., 'The Iranian Heritage of Georgia'.

sion. If there *was* a significant Syrian influence on Kartvelian society then this must have occurred in late antiquity during the process of the Christianisation of east Georgia.

Given the paucity of epigraphical evidence in both Aramaic/Armazian up until the fourth century CE and the fact that the Bolnisi inscription of 494 CE is the first securely dated Georgian inscription found in Georgia, it is clear that the question of Syrian or Mesopotamian influence on early Christian Kartli cannot be answered by contemporary epigraphic or literary data. It is at this point that we must turn our attention elsewhere and interrogate the archaeological and art historical data so see if any concrete link between these two societies existed at this formative period for the spread of Christianity.

CHAPTER 2

# A Parallel Evolution? Issues in Vernacular Architecture and the Development of Church Building in Syria and Georgia

## A Brief Overview of the Origins of Christian Architecture in Syria and Georgia

Having briefly introduced the regions under discussion in this work and begun to explore some of the linguistic and geographical confusion surrounding the relationship of Kartli and its neighbouring territories in late antiquity, we must now turn to the extant material culture and see if archaeology and art history can cast any light on whether there were trading links or other modes of contact clearly demonstrable between Syria and Mesopotamia and the Caucasus during this period. One logical place to start would seem to be to examine the evolution of Christian architecture in these different regions, given that a Syrian influence is often claimed for a variety of early churches in Georgia. However, before we move on to the specifics it is necessary to provide a brief overview of what we know about the evolution of ecclesiastical architecture both immediately before, and in the generations immediately after, the Peace of Constantine in the first half of the fourth century CE.

Whilst it is widely accepted that the first securely dated Christian place of worship anywhere in the world is the house-church at Dura Europos beside the River Euphrates in Syria, it is not until the second half of the fourth century that we find the 'Church' as a specific building constructed for Christian meetings and rituals becoming relatively commonplace. After the edict of Milan was promulgated in 313 there was no reason why Christians could not worship openly, but naturally it took time for early adherents of the faith to adapt to their new circumstances. It is therefore in the second half of the fourth century that we begin to find clear archaeological evidence for Christian places of worship in early centres of the faith such as Syria, Asia Minor, Rome and North Africa.

Although the traditional conversion narrative places the evangelisation of Iberia/Kartli in the 330s there has long been a belief in Georgian academia that the first churches were extremely small and therefore it was not until the later fifth century or early sixth century that substantial stone-built churches

evolved.[1] A lot of this is an argument from silence because, aside from the tiny cruciform chapel at Samtavro believed to have been built beside the bush where St. Nino took up residence and the odd 'basilica' at Nekresi,[2] until recently no churches in Georgia had been ascribed to the fourth century. In the west of the country there have been archaeological reports asserting that there are churches in Bichvinta/Pitsunda, the ancient Pityus, that are even earlier than the fourth century[3] but extremely early dates must be treated with caution due to the swirling claims and counter-claims made over the history and sovereignty of Abkhazia.[4] This is complicated by the fact that a number of these assertions concerning early churches are made by Russian scholars, whose conclusions are then rejected by Georgians as a matter of principle.

The argument that early churches were tiny structures that could hold only as few as two or three people at one time has been strengthened by the fact that most research carried out into the material culture of this period has been undertaken by architectural historians and there is a great unwillingness to challenge the typology of early church architecture established in the first half of the twentieth century by the acknowledged founder of Georgian art history, Giorgi Chubinashvili. With the death of Chubinashvili in 1973 and then the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991 there began a period of stagnation in Georgian art historical scholarship, exacerbated by the civil war in the early 1990s, meaning that studies of ecclesiastical architecture have in general progressed little since Chubinashvili's time. There is an unwillingness to chal-

1 Chubinashvili returned to this question a number of times over his career and so his ideas on the evolution of (small) early churches can be found in *Kartuli khelovnebis istoria*, vol. 1, Sakhelgami; Tbilisi, 1936, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii. Issledovanie razvitiia arkhitektury v vostochnoĭ provintsii Gruzii v IV–XVIII vv.*, Academy of Sciences of Georgia; USSR, 1959 and (in an English translation of a 1970 article in Russian) in 'On the initial forms of Christian Churches' in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Curzon; Richmond, 1998, pp. 185–195.

2 For more on Nekresi see below.

3 Khrushkova, L.G., 'The Spread of Christianity in the Eastern Black Sea Littoral (Written and Archaeological Sources)', *Ancient West and East* 6 (2007), pp. 177–219.

4 For example see Gamakharia, Jemal, Beradze, Tamaz & Gvantseladze, Teimuraz (eds.), *Assays* (sic.) *from the History of Georgia. Abkhazia from ancient times till the present days*, Ministry of Education and Culture of Abkhazia, Institute and Ethnology of Iv. Javakhishvili; Tbilisi, 2011. This is an officially published document that has been prominently displayed in a display cabinet in the entrance to the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia and which follows the officially sanctioned state interpretation of the history of Abkhazia. The partial and flawed nature of the essays in the book attest to the fact that Soviet tactics of controlling historical narratives are still acceptable in post-communist Georgian society.

lenge a long-established status quo that places the known monuments in a firm chronological and typological framework.

Separately from the discipline of art history there have been a series of archaeological excavations concentating on Classical period sites in Kartli. As with many other countries in the Near East and Caucasus there has long been an archaeological bias towards the earliest periods of human evolution through to the perceived grandeur of the Graeco-Roman era, but late antiquity which is referred to as being 'early medieval' in contemporary Georgia, has thus far received little attention from archaeologists. This means that assumptions are being made about the society and material culture of this era based upon written sources that were generally written down several centuries after the events they purport to recount and art historical analysis of the extant standing architecture of the period—which is dominated by ecclesiastical sites and the substantial body of carved stone stelae and reliefs that have come down to the present day.

Obviously, without archaeological excavation we are limited in what conclusions we can draw as to the earliest evolution of church ritual and Christian practice in Kartli. If we are primarily preoccupied with how far the interior disposition of these early churches may have changed since their construction it is perhaps easy to accept the official interpretation that monumental church construction only commenced in fifth to sixth century Kartli and that earlier ritual practice was confined to extremely small and simple chapels.[5] However if we accept the premise that Christianity took root as early as the first half of the fourth century in Kartli, and archaeological evidence appears to support this assertion, then where did people worship when they came together to participate in rituals as large congregations? At what period does the 'church' in the sense of a clearly designated Christian ritual space become established as a recognisable place of Christian worship? Does this process happen later in Kartli, or do church buildings develop independently at the same time as they are beginning to appear in other christianised territories such as Syria or Asia Minor?

5 Thanks are due to Professor Nodar Bakhtadze of the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia and Ilia State University for posing the question that led to this line of thought. He argued that by accepting the assertions of Chubinashvili in an unquestioning manner, various Georgian scholars have ignored or skewed their interpretation of data to fit the accepted chronology rather than allowing the data to be interpreted in the most logical, and probable, manner.

## The Availability of Construction Materials and the Evolution of the 'Church' as a Building Type

Surprisingly for a country that is so fiercely proud of its national traditions and often presents a strongly partisan view of its past, there has been little consideration of the possibility that a native ecclesiastical tradition was entrenched as early as the fourth century. Yet when this possibility is considered there is no logical reason why this should not have been the case. Georgia is wealthy in terms of natural resources and high-quality stone is easily available in the centre and south of the country, with Bolnisi tuff being especially prized for its aesthetic qualities. In the High Caucasus schist and slate are used to construct the traditional towers of the mountain peoples. However towards the east of Georgia in the region of Kakheti there is a lack of high-grade building materials. Here all but the most prestigious buildings are constructed of stones largely salvaged from the pebbles and boulders of various dimensions that are carried along as part of the seasonal mudflow that dominates the main watercourses.[6] This lends itself to a more rustic style with irregular stone courses that may vary in hue and lack the grandeur of the well-dressed masonry found in southern and central Kartli.

With the exception of the high plateau bordering Armenia to the south west and the arid steppe bordering Azerbaijan to the south east, Georgia has a plentiful supply of forests that are capable of providing timber for construction purposes, and historically most Georgian regions outside the high mountain cultures have favoured a traditional architecture that combines a wooden superstructure on a stone foundation. This can vary from the stone buildings with elaborate wooden balconies native to Tbilisi through to the Mingrelian *Oda* house where a single storey wooden house is balanced on stone supports to allow ventilation in summer and protect against marshy ground in winter, but it is clear that stone and wood have always been plentiful in Georgia, thus allowing for experimentation in architecture and allowing for the growth of a diverse range of vernacular traditions.

These options were not available to the early Christians of Syria. With the exception of Lebanon, all the territories of Greater Syria[7] lacked forests and the

6 See Tsereteli, Emil, Gongadze, Merab, Bolashvili, Nana, Lominadze, Giorgi, Gaprindashvili, George & Gaprindashvili, Merab, 'Mudflow Phenomena in Eastern Georgia (Kakheti Region) and Their Development Trends Related to Climate Change', *International Journal of Scientific Research* 3:2 (2014), pp. 193–197 for images of the varying sizes of stone carried by these flows coming down from the high Caucasus.

7 Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and the Hatay region of Turkey in today's terms.

kind of timber necessary for large building programmes. Wood was a precious resource and particularly necessary for the upper floors of buildings or for providing the framework to support tiled roofs. In the western regions there were plentiful sources of good quality stone but to the east options were more limited. Along the course of the Euphrates there was a supply of gypsum, but this was friable and liable to dissolve on prolonged contact with water. Elsewhere in the steppe and desert options were even more limited and mud brick architecture was employed for the overwhelming majority of buildings, with only the most well endowed projects being able to afford the cost of transporting stone to more remote eastern territories.

## The Problem of Dating and Changing Interpretations of Late Antique Society

When it comes to considering the date of the first churches in both regions it is widely acknowledged how complex the issue can be. The house-church at Dura Europos is securely dated to the mid-third century as it was active in the years immediately before the town was destroyed by the Sassanians in 256 CE. Naturally there are few situations where we can be so precise about when a building ceased to be active—it is for this reason, rather than for any major cultural similarities, that Dura Europos is often linked with Pompeii in popular imagination.[8] Elsewhere we have to rely on the often scant epigraphical data or solely on typological studies of architectural types. The shortcomings of the typological method are being increasingly highlighted by modern technological advances in archaeology, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, show earlier methods to have significant shortcomings as they often had to rely on only a partial view of the evidence. In western Syria this has been illustrated by rapidly changing interpretations of how society changed during the early Islamic era.

Whilst the old assumption that the disruption of Levantine society in the seventh century was largely a result of the expansion of Arab tribes out of the Arabian Peninsula has long been discredited, it was not until the end of the twentieth century that archaeology began to suggest plausible alternative narratives to explain why the majority of meaningful building campaigns on the Syrian Limestone Massif appeared to come to an end after the first decade of the seventh century.[9] The old paradigm was examined by Kennedy in his

8 See for example https://www.le.ac.uk/ar/stj/dura.htm where the epithet is used on the University of Leicester website discussing their excavations at the site.

9 See the magisterial three volume work by Georges Tchalenko *Villages antiques de la Syrie du*

influential 1985 article 'From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria'.[10] Here he convincingly argued against a binary narrative that posited a sudden break or dislocation in late antique Syria but instead demonstrated a gradual decline and societal change that saw Romano-Byzantine culture slowly evolve and adapt into an early Islamic society; in urban terms this was the change from the Roman *Polis* to an Islamic *Madina* referenced in the title of his article. This position was further expanded in the following decade with Foss' 'Syria in Transition, A.D. 550–750'[11] and research into how centres of population not only contracted but also, in some cases, expanded and moved location into marginal zones on the edge of the fertile crescent, continued into the current century with research conducted by Geyer.[12]

Together these studies have convincingly demonstrated that survey methods alone have given us only a partial story as to how Syrian society functioned in late antiquity and that it was only when survey was used in conjunction with other archaeological data that a more nuanced and accurate picture of late antique and early Islamic Syria was able to emerge. However, to add a note of caution to the proceedings, it must be noted that despite the exceptional volume of late antique architecture still extant in Syria relatively few excavations concentrating on late antiquity had been undertaken in Syria before the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. This picture was changing and more archaeologists, in particular in Syria itself, were choosing to specialise in this period around the time the war began but the progress made in the early part of the twenty-first century has been placed in limbo by the hostilities.

That the survey work occurred at all was due to the fact that Georges Tchalenko, a fully-trained architect, was engaged by the French Mandatory Authorities in Syria to restore Qal'at Sem'an in the 1930s and for a variety of personal

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*Nord. Le Massif du Bélus à l'époque romaine*. Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 50, Paul Geuthner; Paris, 1953. This work has never been surpassed, but as Tchalenko himself would have been the first to acknowledge, the work is based on survey rather than extensive excavation and forming conclusions from extant remains alone can significantly skew our understanding of the historical picture.

10 Kennedy, Hugh, 'From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria', *Past and Present* 106 (1985), pp. 3–27.

11 Foss, Clive, 'Syria in Transition, A.D. 550–750: An Archaeolological Approach', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997), pp. 189–269.

12 Geyer, Bernard, 'Expansion and Decline of Syria's Arid Margin', *The Arab World Geographer* 5/2 (2002), pp. 73–84.

reasons stayed on to devote his working life to the region.[13] This brings us to another methodological anomaly when comparing data from Syria with that of comparable information from Georgia. In Syria art history and architectural history do not appear as academic disciplines in institutes of tertiary education, or indeed as subjects at any educational level. Therefore these questions are looked at in terms of archaeological data, whilst historians consider the texts and epigraphic evidence and architects are called in solely to consider issues relating to conservation and consolidation of ancient structures; art history and its related skills are not usually tools in the study of the Syrian past. On the other hand art history and architectural history are two highly regarded disciplines in Georgian society and this recognition formally began with practitioners such as Giorgi Chubinashvili being accorded the full rank of Academician in the Georgian Academy of Sciences—a highly sought after privilege in Soviet society.

## Disciplinary Boundaries within the Humanities and Methodological Problems

In Georgia the lacunae we encounter in late antique studies appear to relate more to issues of ancient chronology and matters of religious belief than they do to a gap in the academic landscape of the country. Above all it could be argued that the issue is a methodological crisis provoked by a rigid philosophical stance on the role and significance of various academic disciplines. As in Syria, Georgia is a poor country with an overabundance of exceptional archaeological resources. Both have sites reaching back to the earliest periods of human activity, with Dmanisi in Kvemo Kartli (Southern Georgia) providing archaeological evidence for the first human remains yet found outside of Africa. With this embarassment of riches, scarce resources are targeted towards these early sites of international significance. Later periods receive less attention unless they possess another outstanding feature—in most cases this means sites that are aesthetically pleasing and have to potential to generate a significant income from tourism with Palmyra in Syria and Uplistsikhe in Georgia both notable sites to fall into this latter category. Therefore in practical terms archaeological research tends to end with the waning of the Roman Empire and later periods are neglected by comparison.

13 See Tchalenko, John in Tchalenko, Georges, with additional material by Tchalenko, John & Loosley, Emma, *Notes on the Sanctuary of St. Symeon Stylites at Qal'at Sim'ān*, Brill, forthcoming.

There is also a religious element to this chronology in both countries; with the official recognition afforded to Christianity in the early fourth century, late antique archaeology is often viewed solely through the prism of religion—namely how the spread of Christianity impacted on the wider culture of the Roman Empire as it fell to 'barbarian' peoples in the west and morphed into what was later called the Byzantine Empire in the east. How this spread of Christianity is interpreted is, naturally, impacted by the circumstances of contemporary societies and in this case the divergence of attitude is made even more extreme by the present circumstances of these two countries.

Syria was one of the first countries to embrace Islam, so much so that the first Islamic dynasty—the Umayyads—chose Damascus as their capital. Therefore from the seventh or eighth century Syria can be described as a Muslim country. However, whilst the wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have accelerated the exodus of Christians from the Middle East, a significant Christian minority remained, and indeed thrived, even after Islam became the dominant faith of the region. The impact of this on archaeological practice manifests itself as a privileging of Islamic, particularly early Islamic, archaeology with a concentration on sites linked to the Umayyads and then an emphasis on sites linked with particularly significant moments of Arab history; this has meant that monuments linked to personages such as Nur al-Din who unified much of the *Bilad al-Sham* and Salah al-Din who triumphed against the invading western Crusaders have received a great deal of attention. As an extension of this, and again working on the rationale that certain sites have potential to generate income from tourism, Crusader sites have also often been explored. Obviously from a methodological point of view this emphasis on Islamic identity is problematic as it essentially means that there are two schools of archaeological practice in Syria; those who work on the earlier periods and look at society in its entirety and those who work on the Islamic era, and as is implied by that term, interpret the data first and foremost through an Islamic perspective. However, despite the obvious shortcomings of this practice it does mean that more modern periods, even up to the twentieth century in some rare cases such as at the Citadel of Damascus,[14] have been explored by archaeologists in Syria.

14 In the Citadel of Damascus a Franco-Syrian team recorded data from the 1920s when the French Mandatory Authorities adapted the site for use as a prison—a situation that remained the same until the gaol was finally closed in 1986, see Berthier, Sophie, 'La Citadelle de Damas: les apports d'une étude archéologique', in Kennedy, Hugh, *Muslim Military Architecture in Greater Syria: From the Coming of Islam to the Ottoman Period*, Brill; Leiden, 2006, pp. 151–164.

In Georgia religion or specifically Christianity, both its absence and its presence, have had a disproportionate impact on the study of material culture. Under Soviet rule the archaeology of Christianity was not a permissible area of study and this is a strong contributory factor in why there is, with only one or two exceptions, no current tradition of post-Classical archaeology in the country. Instead the academic literature clearly delineates a break whereby the discipline of archaeology dominates until the first centuries of the Common Era and then, in the fifth century, the story is picked up by art historians. Confusingly for outsiders the fifth century onwards is designated as the 'medieval period' by Georgian scholars,[15] whilst this is technically correct with the (somewhat arbitrary) date for the beginning of the Middle Ages accepted as being 476 and the abdication of Romulus Augustus, the last Roman Emperor in the west, most specialists working on late antiquity would categorise the fifth century as being firmly in that period. Whatever your perspective, a span of a thousand years seems excessive for any one historical period and for this reason alone it would seem to make sense to encourage a more sophisticated division of period than merely early, middle and late medieval. Given that Christianity is widely accepted as arriving in Georgia in the first half of the fourth century, this creates an extra difficulty as we have around a hundred years unaccounted for before the Georgian medieval era is deemed to begin, something that happens almost in parallel with the institution of the Georgian alphabet.

In fact it is the pivotal role of the creation of the Georgian alphabet that appears to have created the dislocation between how the fourth and fifth centuries are studied in Georgia; in the fourth century Georgian inscriptions and record-keeping of all forms relied on non-native scripts to record information[16] and it was not until the fifth century that the creation of a new script specifically to record the Georgian language encouraged the evolution of an indigenous literary culture. Therefore Kartvelology[17] entered a new era at this time and, perhaps as a philosophical or psychological reaction to this defining moment, in the twentieth century a pattern emerged whereby archaeologists concentrated on the periods up until the fourth century CE but thereafter the past was explored primarily through the disciplines of history and art history with

15 See http://museum.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=69&info_id=13955 (Accessed 26.01.2017) to see a summary of the "Medieval Treasury" exhibition opened at the Simon Janashia National Museum of Georgia in June 2016. The text summarises the highlights of the display and includes artefacts dating back to the fifth or sixth centuries in this description demonstrating that this era is viewed as 'Medieval' in Georgia.

16 See chapter 1.

17 The study of Kartvelian history, languages, religions and culture.

written texts taking centre stage and monuments being used to support the hypotheses formulated on reading the oldest Georgian literary works.

It is only recently that the archaeology of early Christian sites and other locations linked to events relating such as the Arab and Persian invasions of the country have come to be regarded as profitable areas of study. First of all, as mentioned above, post-Classical monuments have been primarily the objects of art historical research and the clear boundaries as to which periods needed archaeological study and which were 'historical' periods needing to be studied by the different branches of historical research largely prevented archaeological methodologies being applied to post fifth-century CE sites. Monuments or archaeological sites have particularly received attention if there has been a perceived link with a formative figure of the Georgian past—for what Western Europeans would designate the 'High Middle Ages' there has been particular focus on the reigns of King Davit Aghmashenebeli (King David the Builder) from 1089 until 1125 and Queen Tamar (known in Georgian as King Tamar) whose rule from 1184 to 1213 is often referred to as the 'Golden Age' of the country due to the fact that it was at this time that the national epic, *The Man in the Panther's Skin* was written by Shota Rustaveli and there was a flowering of architecture and painting during this long and prosperous interlude in a region often trampled in the ongoing battles between neighbouring empires.

## Peter Brown and the Rise of Late Antique Studies

This shaping of a national narrative by concentrating on certain events, reigns or individuals who are perceived to have played a pivotal role in the formation of the nation state is, of course, a common phemomenon. However in societies with less of a tradition of advanced studies across the Humanities then the privileging of certain events can cause severe distortion in the historical record. Whilst in Syria we are facing a problem of omission—late antiquity has, until recently, not received as much attention as some other historical epochs, we can compare this lacuna to what has happened to the study of late antiquity elsewhere. The same era was largely overlooked in the west until the work of Peter Brown led the way in a wider revival of interest sparked after the publication of *The World of Late Antiquity AD 150–750*.[18] From the 1990s onwards there has been an explosion in the study of late antiquity as European and American

18 Brown, Peter, *The World of Late Antiquity AD 150–750*, Thames & Hudson; London, 1989 (First edition 1971).

scholars have sought to explore a period written off by Gibbon and his followers as a time of terminal decline.

Where this rediscovery of late antiquity has in Syria had the virtue of joining the gaps and providing a linking narrative between the Classical and early Islamic eras, both already the subjects of serious study in the country, in Georgia the study of this period has progressed in a different manner. Lacking a suffciently established archaeological framework for this time, the events of the fourth century CE onwards have largely been viewed through the lens of later medieval texts and the period is almost totally absent from museum displays. So, taking this back to basics and starting at the beginning, what do we know about late antique Kartli in material terms? More specifically, can the information we have tell us anything about how the Georgians of the time were interacting with the rest of the world?

As mentioned above, there has been very little archaeological exploration of this period but there has been some well-documented research into the Classical era occupation of a number of sites in Kartli and, in some cases, these settlements have remained active as late as the third or early fourth centuries CE. In addition there has been continuity of usage in several important burial grounds, which has provided copious evidence of burial traditions over a long period of time. Therefore, although these have not been projects targeting the late antique period, a certain amount of data can be gleaned from work concentrating on the Classical era.

The most famous of these sites are those in the vicinity of Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Kartli, and for our purposes the most significant source of information is the huge burial ground at Samtavro.[19] This site saw one of its

19 Samtavro cemetary covers almost 20 hectares and was used from the third millennium BCE with peaks in usage in the late Bronze Age and the Iron Age and then again in the late Roman through to late antique period. See p. 1, Sagona, A., Nikolaishvili, V., Sagona, C., Ogleby, C., Pilbrow, V., Briggs, C., Giunashvili, G., Manegaladze, G., 'Excavations at Samtavro, 2008–2009: An Interim Report', *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 47 (2010), pp. 1–136. The National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia puts the chronological span of interrments at the site as dating from the mid third millennium BCE until the tenth century CE at http://www.heritagesites.ge/eng/archeology/archeology/58 (accessed 06.02.2017). Excavation at Samtavro began in the nineteenth century and has continued sporadically ever since. There is currently a project at the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia to conserve and study the early records of the excavations in order to make the findings of the first expeditions available to contemporary scholars who continue to work on the site, pers. comm. Dr Darejan Kacharava and see Sagona, A., Nikolaishvili, V., Sagona, C., Ogleby, C., Pilbrow, V., Briggs, C., Giunashvili, G., Manegaladze, G., 'Bridging two conti-

peaks in activity in the fourth and fifth centuries CE—the very time when the process of Christianisation centred on Mtskheta is recorded as occurring in the Georgian historical sources. In actual fact there is a small amount of evidence to suggest that there were some early Christians resident in Mtskheta and its environs as early as the second or third centuries CE with the discovery of two silver rings inset with carnelian intaglios. The two bear almost identical images of two fish flanking a central cross. One intaglio appears to be truncated at the top, which may have led to the two being catalogued as "images of two fish and an anchor"[20] One of the rings was discovered in the Samtavro cemetary, but the other is recorded as being found near the national cathedral, Svetiskhoveli, in central Mtskheta and both provide possible evidence of Christians or possibly Judaeo-Christians in Mtskheta up to a century before the official evangelisation of the country.

This evidence of earlier Christian, Jewish or Judaeo-Christian presence is echoed in the town of Urbnisi, which is also mentioned in the Georgian evangelisation narrative and which has been published along with material from Mtskheta by Mgaloblishvili and Gagoshidze.[21] Naturally the picture of religious practices at this period suggests a certain plurality of practices with Christianity and Judaism co-existing to all appearences peacefully alongside the existing pagan beliefs of the region. This varied picture is represented in the Samtavro funerary evidence where the long bones in early Christian burials appear to have been rearranged in line with pagan practices,[22] although it is difficult to assign a purely religious motive for the change from tile-lined tombs to the use

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nents: Renewed investigations at Samtavro, Georgia', *Journal of Archaeology of the Turkish Academy of Sciences/Türkiye Bilimler Akademisi Arkeoloji Dergisi* 13 (2010), pp. 313–338.

20 In early 2017 both of these objects were on show in a temporary exhibition at the entrance to the Archaeological Treasury of the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia. They were displayed with the treasury of the Archaeological Museum of Mtskheta whilst that institution was being renovated. The ring with the truncated cross was catalogued as "Ring with images of two fish and anchor intaglio, Silver, Cornelian, Samtavro Burial 71 2nd to 3rd century AD." The ring with a complete cross was described as "Intaglio with the images of two fish and an anchor, Cornelian, Silver, Svetiskhoveli, Burial 17, 3rd century AD." The intaglios are published in Surguladze, T., Bibiluri, T. & Dzneladze, M., 'Adreuli kristianobis simbolo mtskhetidan', *Bulletin of the Academy of Sciences of the Georgian SSR* 101:3 (1981), pp. 741–744.

21 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Gagoshidze, Iulon, 'The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia', in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Curzon; Richmond, 1998, pp. 39–58.

22 p. 323, Sagona, A., et al, 'Bridging two continents.'

of stone cists between the fourth and fifth centuries CE.[23] Naturally processes of religious conversion are gradual and a certain degree of syncretism is to be expected in the archaeological record, but the evidence of Mtskheta and Urbnisi does accord with the main points of the *vita* of St. Nino in suggesting that there was a pre-fourth century Jewish presence in both Urbnisi and Mtskheta and it demonstrates that Christianity was indeed already present in both towns by the fourth century.

## The Fourth Century Expansion of Christianity

This brings us on to our next point. We know that there were many Christians in Syria in the fourth century from the evidence of the abundant extant ecclesiastical architecture alone, without the need to explore the texts or archaeological small finds for the region. Nevertheless it is self-evident that the evidence for early Christian Syria is plentiful in all areas. With Georgia the fact that early references to the fourth century evangelisation of Georgia by a woman were circulating outside the country shortly after the period of conversion,[24] taken in tandem with the archaeological evidence cited above, strongly supports the view that Kartli was evangelised in the earlier part of the fourth century. In fact some of the archaeological data points to a Christian presence even earlier than this, which would perhaps suggest that the fourth century push for conversion was helped by the existence of some pre-existing Christian communities already established in the territory of Kartli.

Therefore it is mysterious that we do not encounter early church buildings of the same date to complete the picture as we do in Syria, especially in a context where there was already a long-established tradition of building in stone. The insistence of Chubinashvili that small churches dominated early ecclesiastical architecture was tied up with his beliefs that early Georgian churches were influenced by the design of traditional Georgian dwellings known as *darbazi* houses. These hall-houses had distinctive pyramidal roofs created by overlapping layers of wooden beams and have been posited as the direct inspiration for the centrally-planned churches common throughout the southern Caucasus.[25] It is this predominance of the (larger) centrally planned type of church

23 ibid.

24 See chapter 1.

25 See for example Chubinashvili, Giorgi N. in an essay translated into English, 'On the initial forms of Christian Churches' in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Curzon; Richmond, 1998, pp. 185–195.

building that has added to the belief that church architecture only took off in the fifth or sixth century drawing its inspiration from earlier Georgian domestic architecture. In this reading the basilica form has been perceived as a 'foreign' influence and Georgian scholars have used the floorplans of Butler and Lassus to link the origins of the basilica form and the influences of other cultures to Georgian ecclesiastical architecture. This argument is encountered for example in a consideration of the origins of Georgian martyria:

> As is well known, the native Aiadana type building of the classical period of Achaemenid Iran spread across the world in three directions: West, to Syria and Palestine where it played a role in certain so-called Syrian-Nabatean temples and later in square planned Christian basilicas; North to Iberia and Albania; to Iran itself and, later, in the Islamic world.[26]

These assumptions are often based on outdated arguments that have since been superseded recent research. For example in the argument above, a 1923 article by Butler is cited[27] and elsewhere Silagadze refers to an article published by Monneret de Villard in 1936.[28] Even though, as discussed previously, there has been more survey than excavation carried out thus far on late antique Syrian sites, it is still undeniable there has been a great deal of work completed since the interwar period and it is somewhat anachronistic to base arguments purely on the likes of Butler and company in the twenty-first century.

Another limitation encountered with this approach is the fact that many of these comparisons are made solely on the basis of comparing floorplans. This has long been a conventional mode of art historical practice, notably employed in such reference works as Krautheimer's *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*[29] but as the world shrinks and, with the notable exception of the world's war zones, more and more sites become easily accessible, then questions are

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26 Translation by the author, pp. 136–137 Silagadze, Nino, 'Kartuli "saplavs zeda" eklesiebi da mati paralelebi aklo aghmosavletshi', *Khelovnebatmtsodneoba* 5 (2003), pp. 135–142.

27 Butler, Howard Crosby, 'Nabataean Temple Plans and the Plans of Syrian Churches' in Glück, H. (ed.), *Studien zur Kunst des Ostens*, Avalun Verlag; Wien & Hellerau, 1923, pp. 9–16.

28 p. 136 footnote 4 of Silagadze, Nino, 'Kartuli "saplavs zeda" eklesiebi' mentions Resafa using a reference to Monneret de Villard, H., 'The Fire Temples', *Bulletin of the American Institute of Persian Art and Archaeology*, 4 (1936), New York, pp. 176–184.

29 Krautheimer, Richard, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Yale University Press; New Haven & London, 1965, 4th Edition revised by Krautheimer, Richard & Ćurčić, Slobodan, 1986.

raised as to the accuracy of this methodology. A superficial similarity at the level of a two dimensional floorplan may be misleading when a variety of other factors are taken into consideration. As Maranci recently commented with regard to seventh century Armenian architecture:

> Whilst it seems indisputable that the designers of Zuart'noc' were acquainted with the aisled tetraconch form, one must ask whether it appeared to them as originally built or in a state of renovation, partial collapse, or ruin.[30]

She returns to this point with particular emphasis on the relation of this issue to the Syrian material:

> Yet the clear visual similarity of plans veils a much more complex set of problems, requiring close individual consideration of each monument and its potential as a source. Whilst the Syrian and Mesopotamian churches are routinely discussed in connection with the origins of Zuart'noc', few scholars discuss their structural histories or state of preservation at the time of the latter's construction.[31]

In short what may appear to be cut-and-dried cases of similar typology may in fact prove more difficult to substantiate when the respective dates of the monuments in question are closely compared and later innovations or complicated chronological developments are stripped away. If these arguments bear some weight when we discuss a seventh century monument, as Maranci is doing, then we can argue that the search for similarities and archetypes is even more fraught with difficulty when we try to look for relationships between fourth century monuments.

Back in the 1950s Georges Tchalenko had already identified that there was more than one source of inspiration for fourth century Syrian basilicas. Whereas the link between these new ritual spaces and the Roman civic basilica was clear, they could also draw upon more humble domestic spaces for influence.[32] Tchalenko identified one of the earliest churches on the Syrian limestone massif as being adapted from the plan for neighbouring provincial villas and this

30 p. 116, Maranci, Christina, *Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia*, Brepols; Turnhout, 2015.

31 p. 127, ibid.

32 p. 151, Tchalenko, Georges, *Églises syriennes à bêma*. Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 105, Paul Geuthner; Paris, 1990.

case once again highlights the problems of relying solely on Butler's interpretation of church evolution. Taking issue with Butler's assertion that the church and the neighbouring villa in the hamlet of Qirq Bizeh were contemporary with each other, and that one villa had later been altered to function as an early church, Tchalenko instead sought to demonstrate that the church was built several decades later than the neighbouring house and was designed specifically for use as a chapel.[33] He posited that this was the first building on the limestone massif that was built specifically for use as a church, which would have made it the next logical step onwards from the use of modified domestic spaces evidenced at Dura Europos in the preceding century. His reasoning was that the earlier part of the fourth century was still an experimental period for Christian architecture and, out in the rural hinterland of Antioch, it was more logical for the patrons of country estates to adapt familiar forms of domestic architecture than to emulate the urban civic basilica; the familiarity of the rural villa would have been relatively simple for a local workforce to alter to meet ritual needs and for these reasons Tchalenko argued that Qirq Bizeh offered a variant strain feeding into the origins of the simple hall church.[34]

This argument offers an alternative to the view that single-naved hall churches evolved almost completely from the same root as the early basilica form, which derived from Roman civic basilicas[35] and it can also offer a possible explanation as to why a significant proportion of the churches of the limestone massif terminate in a flat east end rather than a semi-circular apse. The author has, in the past,[36] like many others viewed this phenomenon as linked to interactions with Mesopotamia where there was a tradition of flat walled *cellae*[37] in local temples, but Tchalenko's suggestion of a variant strand of domestic influence offers a more local, vernacular reading to explain the occurrence of small churches terminating in flat east walls in northwest Syria. The suggestion that in the fourth century the emergence of church architecture was formed

33 p. 151, ibid.

34 p. 151, ibid.

35 pp. 202–203, Krautheimer, Richard, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, Yale University Press; New Haven & London, 1965, 4th Edition revised by Krautheimer, Richard & Ćurčić, Slobodan, 1986.

36 p. 18, Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema in Fourth to Sixth-Century Syrian Churches*, USEK, Patrimoine Syriaque vol. 2; Kaslik, Lebanon, 2003 (re-issued in a second edition by Brill, 2012).

37 For a discussion of this issue see Loosley, Emma, 'Syria' in Caraher, William, Davis, Thomas and Pettegrew, David K. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Archaeology*, Oxford University Press; New York & Oxford, forthcoming.

as much by vernacular influences as it was by larger pan-imperial architectural developments could offer the key to the interpretation of the earliest Christian ritual spaces in a variety of more remote and/or rural locations that were situated a significant distance from the major cities and their more cosmopolitan cultures.

## A Kakhetian Case Study: Nekresi Monastery and Its Environs

Recently archaeological evidence has come to light in Kakheti in eastern Georgia that intriguingly mirrors the fourth-century evidence in Syria. Excavations undertaken by the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia at Chabukauri and Dolochopi, both in the territory of Nekresi, seem likely to rewrite our understanding of the earliest Christian architecture in Georgia.[38] Ironically Nekresi monastery was put forward by Chubinashvili as the earliest extant example of Georgian ecclesiastical architecture with the ungainly structure that he dubbed a 'basilica' described as being a fourth century proto-basilica (Fig. 1).[39] This interpretation has now been disproved with archaeological excavation at the site of the monastery finding no evidence of any occupation at the site earlier than the sixth century[40] and the 'fourth century basilica' is now definitively

38 The discussion that follows is possible thanks to the collegiality and generosity of Professor Nodar Bakhtadze of the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia and Ilia State University. Professor Bakhtadze was kind enough to host the author at the 2016 and 2017 excavations at Dolochopi basilica and to offer access to his research, both published and unpublished, for the author to study in addition to accompanying her on site visits to Nekresi and arranging for her to visit Chabukauri. For further information on the excavations please consult Baktadze, Nodar, 'Dolochopis bazilikaze 2012 tsels chatarebuli arkeologiuri kvlevis angarishi', *Kadmosi* 4 (2012), pp. 273–303, Baktadze, Nodar, Mamiashvili, Vazha & Gabekhadze, Bachana, 'Dolochopis bazilikis arkeologiuri kvleva nakalakar Nekresshi', *Onlain arkeologia* 8, pp. 110–133 (downloaded from https://www.heritagesites.ge/ka/files/98 17.08.2016), Baktadze, Nodar, 'Qvarelis durujispirira bazilikis arkeologiuri kvlevis shedegebi', *Sakartvelos erovnuli muzeumis moambe: Sazogadoebriv metsnierebata seria* 4 (49B) (2013), pp. 175–198 and Baktadze, Nodar, 'Archeological Research upon One of the Earliest Georgian Christian Basilica', *Temporis Signa: Archeologia della tarda antichità e del medioevo* IX (2014), pp. 65–73. For Nekresi monastery see Baktadze, Nodar, Tevdorashvili, Natela & Bagrationi, Giorgi, *Nekresi. Tsnobari momlotsvelta da mogzaurtatvis*, Nekresi, 2010.

39 Bakthtadze, Nodar, 'The Oldest Basilicas Revealed in Nekresi Former City and Hypotheses on the Architectural Design of the First Georgian Christian Churches', Jena, 2017 (forthcoming).

40 Nodar Bakhtadze, pers. comm.

FIGURE 1 *Nekresi 'basilica' looking west*

identified as a sixth century mortuary chapel that bears extensive evidence of pilgrims collecting *eulogiae* at the site in the form of oil that had passed over the bones of the saints. These early holy men were presumably monks at the monastery who were interred in the crypt beneath the main floor of the small structure that is atypically open to the elements on all four sides and therefore bears no relation at all to a conventional basilica.

This concentration on the site of the monastery itself has, in the past, overlooked the fact that the territories around Nekresi were densely populated in earlier periods. A series of archaeological excavations to the west, south and east of the monastic site have produced a picture of a vibrant and cosmopolitan society that flourished until a series of natural disasters and the depredations of the Arabs led to a terminal decline for the region in the second half of the first millennium CE.[41] The rise and fall of religions is also a factor in this process as the location of Nekresi in the far east of Georgia meant that it was always firmly under Persian hegemony. Until the excavations on the monastery site it had long been assumed that Nekresi was founded on the place of a Zoroastrian fire temple. This assumption was logical in that the monastery is linked with the

41 To the north the monastery abuts the foothills of the High Caucasus range meaning that the territory is too mountainous to be suitable for large settlements.

personage of St. Abibos Nekreseli, one of the Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers who was martyred by the Persians for pouring water on one of their holy fires in his attempt to prove the falsity of the Zoroastrian faith.[42] A belief that Nekresi was built on the place where Abibos quenched the fire seemed natural given that many fire temples are deliberately sited in high places. However this belief was anachronistic when taken in conjunction with the accepted interpretation that the monastery buildings dated from the fourth century, when according to the tradition of the (As)Syrian Fathers, Abibos is believed to have been martyred in the sixth century.

Once again, archaeological excavation appears to have offered at least a partial solution in explaining the relationship of Christianity with the earlier faiths practised in the region. At the end of the twentieth century a large complex dated to the second- to third-century CE was excavated in arable fields to the south of the hill on which Nekresi monastery stands. This has been identified as a Zoroastrian fire temple and solves part of the puzzle for us—early Christian monuments are often sited deliberately on top of earlier cult complexes, but it is not unknown for them to alternatively be placed in a manner that sets them in deliberate opposition with an earlier faith. One example from Syria would be the fact that Symeon Stylites the Elder deliberately set up his pillar on a hill to the north of the pagan holy place on the top of *Jebel Sheikh Barakat* (the Mountain of the Old Man of Blessings). In this way he was spared the possible 'contagion' of standing on soil perceived to be tainted by paganism, but his presence signalled that there was a new, more powerful, God present in the valley. On this occasion it is not unreasonable to argue that the building of a monastery on the peak overlooking the former Zoroastrian temple was intended as a strong visual statement of the supremacy of the Christian faith.

In 2004 a further season established that the temple was aligned with the summer and winter solstices suggesting that it possibly incorporated some element of solar worship into the rituals carried out at the site.[43] The late twentieth century excavation had yielded ceramics of the second, third and fourth centuries and charcoal from a threshold gave a radiocarbon date in the fifth century suggesting that the complex was destroyed at that time.[44] Naturally the interpretation of this event was that some form of religious persecution

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42 pp. 218–225, vol. 4 (1968), Abuladze, Ilia, *Dzveli kartuli agiograpiuli literaturis dzeglebi*, 6 vols., Gamomtsemloba 'Metsniereba'; Tbilisi, 1963–1989.

43 Simonia, Irakli, Ruggles, Clive & Bakhtadze, Nodar, 'An Astronomical Investigation of the Seventeen Hundred Year Old Nekresi Fire Temple in the Eastern Part of Georgia', *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage* 12:3 (2009), pp. 235–239.

44 p. 237, ibid.

occurred, possibly caused by the increasing confidence of the Christians, which ended in the destruction of the temple. An alternate reading is offered by Kipiani who argues that the spatial organisation of the complex is not compatible with that of a fire temple and, taking into account the astrological elements of the temple planning noted by the 2004 excavation team, he posits the theory that this complex was in actual fact a Manichaean monastic complex.[45] His arguments are echoed by those of Mgaloblishvili and Rapp who have also discussed the evidence for the presence of Manichaeans in eastern Georgia, suggesting that the faith may have persisted in certain regions until the sixth century.[46] Intriguingly Kipiani also argues that this 'Manichaean' architecture could have provided the inspiration for the phenomenon of the Georgian 'triple church basilica' a unique form of ecclesiastical architecture that we will discuss at length later in this work.[47]

Leaving aside for the moment the issues raised by the possibility that Nekresi was a bastion of Manichaeism rather than Zoroastrianism in late antiquity, the evidence from the temple shows clearly that by the fifth century the earlier faith was viewed as obsolete and a new religion, Christianity, had become dominant in the territory of Nekresi. However if the temple was destroyed in the fifth century and the monastery was not constructed until the sixth century, where did the faithful worship in the intervening century? In addition Nekresi is a monastic complex and would not have met the daily needs of the local laity. Where were they worshipping?

## Nekresi Continued: The Lost Cities of Chabukauri and Dolochopi

The answers to these questions are slowly being answered by excavations at sites to the east and west of Nekresi and the temple. Just over one kilometre to the northwest of the temple complex a substantial basilica was uncovered at the end of the twentieth century (Fig. 2). Far from being a small church designed to hold only a handful or worshippers as conventional Georgian interpretations of ecclesiastical architecture had argued, this basilica on the 'so-called Chabukauri plot'[48] measured over 33 metres along the longitudinal axis

45 Kipiani, Guram, 'Nekresis "didi kvadrati"', *Kadmosi* 1 (2009), pp. 214–251.

46 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Rapp Jr., Stephen H., 'Manichaeism in Late Antique Georgia?', in Van den Berg, Jacob Albert (ed.), *In Search of Truth: Manichaica, Augustiniana and Varia Gnostica*, Brill; Leiden and Boston, 2011, pp. 263–290.

47 See chapter 5.

48 p. 65, Baktadze, Nodar, 'Archeological Research upon One of the Earliest Georgian Chris-

FIGURE 2 *View looking east in the main nave of Chabukauri basilica*

and was 15 metres wide making it an exceptionally large early basilica. This size would have been deemed impressive in Syria or Asia Minor at this time, given that the small finds from the site pointed to a fourth century date for this church. Interestingly, shortly after its construction the stucture appeared to have been fatally compromised—with the destruction believed to have been caused by an earthquake—and a smaller basilica was built utilising part of the northern aisle of the original structure as the south wall of this new church.[49] Evidence from the later building put its period of usage as being the fifth and sixth centuries and the timing of this complex, along with its close proximity to the former temple across the rolling arable land at the foot of the Caucasus, suggested that at last the question of how and where people worshiped after the destruction of the temple was answered. More interestingly perhaps, the dates suggested a period of overlap where substantial places of Christian worship were built before the local temple was destroyed. This seems a much more logical chronology as it presents us with a view of a Zoroastrian (or Manichaean)

tian Basilica', *Temporis Signa: Archeologia della tarda antichità e del medioevo* IX (2014), pp. 65–73.

49 Interestingly this second church has a synthronon. Only two basilicas in Kartli, one at Chabukauri and the other at nearby Dolochopi, are known to possess this liturgical feature. See chapter 6 for a discussion of the liturgy and liturgical furniture.

FIGURE 3 *Apsed structure of unknown function north of Chabukauri basilica*

temple slowly declining over the course of a century as more and more locals chose to adopt the new (Christian) faith, until eventually it became redundant and was burned and looted of its valuable stone for new building projects.

But this discovery of a presumed fourth-century basilica marked only the beginning of the exploratory process and, in a number of ways, raised far more questions than it answered. For example an earlier apsed structure was uncovered to the northwest of the basilica and the beautifully fired terracotta tiles used to pave this structure provide an indication of the importance of this building, even if its function currently remains unknown (Fig. 3). The excavation of this terracotta-paved apse also highlighted the fact that, due to the dense scrubby undergrowth surrounding the basilica, it was very difficult to place this impressive discovery within a wider context. At the time of writing, basic questions such as how far the boundaries of this late antique/early medieval settlement reached at its furthest extent or whether there were any other churches within the town still remain. Nor have there been any answers to questions relating to just when this settlement was founded or even when it was finally abandoned, allowing the scrubby foliage at the furthest foothills of the Caucasus to envelop it once more.

The situation then became even more complex in 2012 when an excavation began to the east of Nekresi. The new excavation was just over four kilometres east of the temple complex as the crow flies, but the route is more circuitous in

FIGURE 4 *Dolochopi basilica looking east*

reality as a high, densely forested hill stands between the two sites. This place was called Dolochopi after a long abandoned village in that area and was hidden in the forest on the west bank of the Duruji River.[50] Once again a huge basilica was uncovered—in this case it was 36 metres by 18.5 metres in its central three naved section, but had further aisles added to both north and south in the style of the typical "three church basilica" that will be discussed later in this volume. This substantial building seemed to date to the fifth century and further excavation revealed that it was the second basilica on the site (Fig. 4). In this case radiocarbon dating has confirmed that the earlier church was a fourth century structure that appears to have burned down and been replaced in the early fifth century by the impressive basilica, that then appears to have suffered possible earthquake damage at the same time as the first church at Chabukauri.[51]

Once again the excavators were faced with a substantial basilica almost in a vacuum. The evidence pointed to a wealthy and thriving Christian community in Dolochopi by the fourth century and, based on data from the basilica, earth-

50 See note 38 above for more information on these excavations.

51 Results of samples submitting for tested have yielded dates of 387 CE (93.2% probability), SUERC-70629 and between 388 CE (68.2%) and 401 CE (95.4%), SUERC-76888.

quake damage and a destruction event suggested that although the complex was active for several centuries, it then declined although local people continued to use the east end of the northernmost aisle as a mortuary chapel until the twelfth or thirteenth centuries.[52] This paints a clear picture of a settlement that was expanding until natural factors such as earthquakes and the fact that the region was plundered by both the Persians and the Arabs in the first millennium CE all contributed to a terminal decline. The mortuary evidence proves that people were living in a village in the region until the peak of the Middle Ages, but then it seems that the settlement died out completely. However, once again, dense foliage—in this case not low-lying shrubs but established deciduous forest—has envelopped the site and therefore there is currently no way of establishing the parameters of the town on this site and answering such simple questions as to whether this was the only church in Dolochopi or whether there were other civic or cult buildings present in late antiquity at this place.

### Archaeological Excavation versus Survey Evidence

We will be returning to the evidence from the churches in Nekresi territory later in this book, but this brief introduction to these sites has been to highlight the fact that, as in Syria and the re-evaluation of the late antique landscape carried out in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, evidence gained from archaeological excavation has so far proved that the situation appears to have been very different from the interpretation advanced by Chubinashvili and his followers. Whilst early Christian archaeology remains in its infancy in Georgia as a distinct sub-field of archaeology we must note that initial conclusions must be viewed as provisional. On the other hand, thus far they suggest that it is time for us to completely re-think our interpretations of early Christian society in Georgia.

These findings fit with our experience of Syria where the move from survey alone, towards a methodology that employs survey and excavation data in tandem, have proved that the best results are achieved by combining a variety of research methods to fully explore a problem. With this in mind we shall now turn to the 'small finds,' the portable objects discovered in excavations or kept for generations in church treasuries, in order to see if they offer any suggestion of a Syrian-Georgian relationship in late antiquity.

52 Pers. comm. from time spent at the 2016 season of excavations at Dolochopi.

CHAPTER 3

# The Mystery of the Missing Objects: Do Archaeological Artefacts and Liturgical Objects Support the Story of (As)Syrians in Kartli?

## The Evidence for (As)Syrian Artefacts in Kartli and the Problem of Iberians in the Syrian Archaeological Record

One of the assertions anyone exploring the history of the (As)Syrian Fathers encounters in Georgia today is that there is a great deal of physical evidence to attest to the presence of Syrians in late antique Kartli. Given the fact that Syrian-made glass in particular is ubiquitous across the Roman Empire this statement comes as no surprise—it would be more of a shock if there were no evidence of Syrian artefacts in Kartli at the time of its evangelisation and in the centuries immediately following this event. However, when it comes to looking at these claims of Syrian objects in more detail the situation swiftly changes. In the first place there is very little material securely provenanced as Syrian on display in the National Museum collections. At first glance a visitor could attribute this to the fact that currently only a very small selection of the collection is on view to visitors and, in the case of the late antique and early medieval holdings, only the most intrinsically valuable objects are easily accessible to the public in the treasuries of Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia and the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts respectively.

Difficult as it is to gather information about Syrian artefacts in Georgia, that task seems simple when set against the difficulty of trying to find evidence of 'Iberians' in Syria. Since nobody had set themselves the task of quantifying Georgian material in Syrian collections before the civil war began, it is now unclear when or if such a study will be possible in the future. What we can state is that there are no Georgian inscriptions or artefacts recorded in collections in the Syrian Arab Republic today. On the other hand there is a great deal of archaeological evidence attesting to the Georgian presence in the Hatay region of Turkey, which of course was a province of Syria until 1939. Djobadze extensively surveyed the hinterland of Antioch (modern Antakya) and conducted a series of archaeological explorations that conclusively proved the presence of Georgian monks on Semandağ, at the monastery of St. Symeon Stylites the Younger and elsewhere in the vicinity, notably in the region known

as the 'Black Mountain.'[1] This work has more recently been revisted by scholars from the Center for Exploration of Georgian Antiquities at the St. Andrew the First Called Patriarchal University of Georgia, who although they have primarily concentrated on research in Israel and Palestine, have also endeavoured to retrace Djobadze's steps in an effort to update his work.[2] However thus far this archaeological evidence is mostly dated from the eighth to the eleventh centuries and is therefore several centuries later than the period under discussion. This is in keeping with the fact that these monasteries were strongly associated with Chalcedonian Orthodoxy and, after the Georgians formally joined with Constantinople in the first decade of the seventh century, it would have been natural for monks to have travelled from Kartli to study at monasteries following the same doctrine.

Therefore all that can be said with any certainty is that we have a passing reference to Iberian pilgrims in the *vita* of Symeon Stylites the Elder[3] and more extensive references to Iberians choosing to live at the monastery of Symeon Stylites the Younger in the *vitae* of both Symeon and his mother Martha.[4] This suggests some interaction between the two regions in the fifth and sixth centuries respectively but, at the time for writing, there is no archaeological evidence of Georgian presence in any region of Syria except for the hinterland of Antioch. It may also be significant that this data is predominantly dated to a slightly later period than late antiquity and comes from the century after the Georgians had officially embraced Chalcedonian Orthodoxy.

1 Djobadze, Wachtang Z. *Materials for the study of Georgian monasteries in the Western environs of Antioch on the Orontes*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 372, Subsidia 48, Louvain, 1976, Djobadze, Wachtang Z., *Archaeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch On-The-Orontes*, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden Gmbh; Stuttgart, 1986.

2 Tamila Mgaloblishvili pers. comm.

3 XXVI, 11,13, p. 165 & p. 167, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Trans. Price, R.M., *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Cistercian Publications; Kalamazoo, 1985.

4 Chapters 103, 130, 131, 136 and 253 of the *vita* of Symeon and chapters 53, 54, 56, 57 and 65 of the *vita* of St. Martha concern Iberians. See Van den Ven, Paul, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune* (*521–592*), I. *Introduction et texte grec*, II. *Traduction et Commentaire, Vie grecque de sainte Marie, mère de S. Syméon, Indices*, Subsidia Hagiographica 32, Société des Bollandistes; Brussels, 1962 & 1970.

## Syrian Material Culture in Kartli

As discussed in chapter one, there is substantial archaeological and epigraphical material linking Kartli, particularly the two urban centres of Urbnisi and Mtskheta, with a Jewish community of presumed Syrian or Palestinian origin. This evidence takes the form of several Aramaic inscriptions that Shaked has linked to a form of Palestinian Aramaic also in use at Dura Europos in Syria at this time.[5] When we move into the Christian era there is copious evidence of Georgian presence in Jerusalem and its environs from a very early date. As mentioned before,[6] the first securely dated Georgian inscriptions yet discovered were found at Bir el-Qutt between Jerusalem and Bethlehem and these discoveries have since been added to with many further excavations attesting to a network of early Georgian monasteries in the Holy Land.[7] This well-established contact between late antique Palestine and Georgia would logically suggest that pilgrims and clerics moving between the two locations would have passed through Syria, and therefore it seems reasonable to expect to find some trace of these journeys in the archaeological record. Confusingly this does not appear to be the case; there is evidence of Syrian material culture in Kartli, but it is extremely limited and appears to taper off almost entirely by the fifth or sixth century CE. What follows is an overview of Syrian archaeological artefacts iden-

5 Shaked, Shaul, 'Notes on some Jewish Aramaic inscriptions from Georgia', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (2006), pp. 503–510.

6 See chapter 1.

7 See for example: Gagoshidze, Giorgi, 'Paleographic Study of the Georgian Tombstone from Khirbat Umm Leisun, Jerusalem', *'Atiqot* 83 (2015), pp. 181–184, Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, 'An Unknown Georgian Monastery in the Holy Land', *ARAM* 18–19 (2006–2007), pp. 527–539, Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, 'The Inscription from Khirbat Umm Leisun, and the Georgian Presence in the Holy Land', *'Atiqot* 83 (2015), pp. 185–193, Peradze, Gregory, 'An Account of the Georgian Monks and Monasteries in Palestine', *Georgica* 4 & 5 (1937), pp. 181–246, Seligman, Jon, 'A Georgian Monastery from the Byzantine Period at Khirbat Umm Leisun, Jerusalem', *'Atiqot* 83 (2015), pp. 145–179, Tchekhanovets, Yana, 'Early Georgian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land', *Liber Annuus* 61 (2011), pp. 453–471, Tchekhanovets, Yana, 'Georgian inscriptions from Horvat Burgin' in Chrupcala, D., (ed.), *Christ is here! Studies in Biblical and Christian archaeology in memory of Michele Piccirillo, ofm*. Studium biblicum franciscanum; Milano, 2013, pp. 159–166, Tinatin Tseradze & David Tskhadadze, *The Four Golden Gospels. A Georgian Manuscript Preserved in the Holy Sepulchre Church in Jerusalem*, Centre for the Exploration of Georgian Antiquities; Tbilisi, 2013. This is just a brief list of some of the most recent publications in English concerning the Georgian presence in the Holy Land, particularly Jerusalem. Peradze's account was the first significant work in this field and has recently been published in Georgian for the first time.

tified in Kartli towards the end of the classical period and into the late antique period before the chapter concentrates on an in-depth discussion of several artefacts that are central to this question.

## The Ubiquity of Syrian Glass and the Case of the Missing Coins

The picture of precisely how many Syrian ceramics have been discovered in Kartli remains unclear and there is no way to currently quantify these artefacts accurately. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of ceramics catalogued from the classical and late antique periods are believed to have been produced locally in Kartli, but naturally there are some wares from further afield present.[8] Chanishvili identified a number of vessels at Dedopolis Gora that were very similar to objects discovered at Dura Europos[9] which largely dated to the turn of the first century BCE/CE. In fact this period appears to have marked a high point in Syrian-Iberian relations as many items linked to Syria excavated at Urbnisi and Mtskheta are also ascribed to this time.[10]

However this presence of Syrian material is not replicated in the numismatic record where only one Syrian coin is recorded as being held in the National Museum collection. This was discovered in Dighomi, a suburb of Tbilisi, in 1937 or 1939 and was from the reign of Demetrius I Soter (150–145 BCE).[11] This is sur-

8 See for example pp. 63–64, Chanishvili, Tinatin, 'Pottery', in Furtwängler, A., Gagoshidze, I., Löhr, H. & Ludwig, N. (eds.), *Iberia and Rome: The Excavations of the Palace at Dedoplis Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*, Beier & Beran; Langenweißbach, 2008, pp. 63–85.

9 Ibid.

10 See Saginashvili, Mariam, 'Glass Vessels' in Furtwängler, A. et al., *Iberia and Rome*, pp. 223–234 and also Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Gagoshidze, Iulon, 'The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia', in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Curzon; Richmond, 1998, pp. 39–58.

11 There are conflicting dates in the two sources that discuss this find. See: p. 242, Sherozia, Medea, 'Monetary Circulation in Iberia in the 1st Century B.C.–1st Century A.D.', in Furtwängler, A. et al, *Iberia and Rome*, pp. 235–251 and p. 145, no. 7 in Dundua, G.F., 'Opisanie i Atributstsiia Otdelykh Monetiykh Nakhodok Ėllinisticheskoĭ Ėpokhi b Iberii', *Numizmatika Antichnoĭ Gruzii*, Metsniereba; Tbilisi, 1987. This state of affairs in Kartli (Roman Iberia) should be contrasted with the situation in the west of Georgia (ancient Colchis/Egrisi/Lazica) where a significant number of Roman coins minted in Syria, namely in Antioch and Emesa (modern Homs) have been found. In his article on hoards of foreign coins found on the territory of Colchis, Dundua records 9 hoards dating from the 4th century BCE to the 4th century CE. Of this 9, he classifies 5 as being 'late Roman' which is to say

prising as, given later links with Antioch in particular, it would be a reasonable assumption to find coins minted in Syrian territory well represented in Georgian collections. In actual fact the numismatic data is dominated by coins of Persian and Hellenic origin, leaving an unexplained gap where we would expect to see currency coming from the south appearing. This lack of Syrian coins is intriguing and raises a number of questions as to why Syrian minted coins do not appear to have been circulating in Kartli in this period. What external events interrupted trade? Were the Syrian artefacts only being traded via merchants and middlemen? How does this tally with the obvious presence of Jews and Judaeo-Christians who used a language strongly suggesting that they had emigrated from Syria or Palestine? This issue of an unexpected absence in the archaeological record is one to which we will return throughout this book.

It is when we turn to the records of glass items discovered in archaeological contexts that the trade relationship between Kartli and Kakheti with Syria appears more substantial. Small vials of Syrian origin are widely documented in Urbnisi and Samtavro necropoleis but they also appear as grave goods further afield with a number of glass vials of fourth century Syrian origin being excavated as grave goods in Rustavi in Kvemo Kartli[12] and another small glass vessel ascribed the same origin and date in a burial from Cheremi in Kakheti.[13] The evidence from the graves in Urbnisi and Samtavro places most of the vials of Syrian origin to the end of the first century BCE and the first two centuries CE. However a Syrian glass flask found in burial 264 in the Samtavro cemetery has been dated to the second half of the fifth century and the same date has been ascribed to an amphoriskos buried in a grave in sector XXV of Urbnisi cemetery, which was possibly made in Sidon.[14]

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that they date to the 2nd–4th centuries CE with 2 found on the coast and 3 coming from the hinterland of Colchis. Of more than 500 coins found in the territories of Pityus/Bichvinta, 117 are securely attrbuted to Antioch and Dundua believes that the majority of the more than 200 severely degraded coins that remain unattributed are also from Antioch. In a hoard of 377 silver coins found inland at Sepieti in Abasha district, 158 coins were minted in Emesa (Homs) and 153 of these were dated 194, the reign of Septimus Severus. This data led Dundua to conclude that: "a large part of the denarii discovered on the territory of the Kingdom of Egrisi was minted in the Eastern provinces of the Empire and in Syria (Emesa)" (p. 167) See Dundua, Giorgi, 'Hoards of Foreign Coins of the Classical Period from Colchis (4th century B.C.–4th century A.D.)', *Journal of Georgian Archaeology* 1 (2004), pp. 160–169.

12 Chkhatarashvili, Meri, 'Minis churcheli rustavidan', *Dziebani* 4 (1999), pp. 70–77.

13 Saginashvili, Mariam, 'Gvianromauli minis piala cheremidan', *Dziebani* 2 (1998), pp. 68–71.

14 pp. 226–227, Saginashvili, Mariam, 'Glass Vessels' in Furtwängler, A. et al., *Iberia and Rome*, pp. 223–234.

Once again, as with the ceramics, there is currently no definitive corpus of Syrian glass vessels in Georgia and it is a largely a question of reading through the finds catalogues of different excavations to collate this information, although there have been moves towards collating a more comprehensive overview of the provenance of first- to fourth-century CE glass artefacts excavated in Georgia by Sakhvadze. She calculates that 48.5% of glass found in eastern Georgia in this period is of Syrian origin with 9.5% coming from a western location. In the west of the country the figures are 28.5% Syrian origin and 6.4% coming from the west and she puts 42% of glass attributed to this period as being of unknown origin.[15] Having said that, the picture remains relatively consistent and it seems that Syrian glass remained a common commodity in Kartli throughout the classical and late antique periods. Despite this, for an unknown reason the trade appears have tailed off towards the end of the period as less artefacts from the fifth century onwards are reported in the archaeological literature. However it would be dangerous to draw a simplistic conclusion from this state of affairs given that, as discussed in the previous chapter, there has been very little excavation concentrating on late antique contexts in Georgia. It could be simply that we do not have so much glass of this era because of this comparative lack of excavation. All that can be stated with any certainty is that, unlike the non-existent numismatic evidence, when we look at the glass finds in Georgian archaeological contexts we can see clearly that Syrian glass was a regular import into the region. Whilst the vessels found as gravegoods cited above point to a prosperous urban and mercantile class buying these objects, there is one case in particular where Syrian glass appears to have been the prized possession of a wealthy noble house and it is to that example that we shall turn next.

### The Khovle Glass Ewers

In the archaeological treasury of the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia a freestanding case holds two glass jugs that strike a note of contrast with the predominantly gold and silver objects in the cases around them (Fig. 5). These objects were discovered in 2004 in Khovle, in Shida Kartli province, when a large tomb was uncovered as the villagers conducted earthworks.[16] The assemblage of grave goods dated the tomb to the second half of the third century and

15 See the table on p. 233, Sakhvadze, Ana, 'Late Antique Form Made Imported Glass Vessel on the Territory of Georgia', *Studies in Caucasian Archaeology* 1 (2012), pp. 217–233.

16 Shatberashvili, Vakhtang, 'Two painted glass jugs from the village of Khovle (Georgia)' in

FIGURE 5
*Glass pitcher from Khovle*
COPYRIGHT JONATHAN CARDY, WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE GEORGIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

there were a number of glass objects present. However it quickly became clear that the most important objects to be recovered from the tomb were two beautifully blown opaque white glass jugs that had been gilded and cold painted with green and red enamel decoration.[17] Given the care that had been taken in the creation of these ewers and the high quality materials used for their production and decoration, it was clear that this was the tomb of a wealthy nobleman and that, as an extra mark of status, these were expensive imported luxury items.

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Janssens, K., Degryse, P., Cosyns, P., Caen, J. & Van't dack, L. (eds.), *Annales of the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Glass, 2006 Antwerp*, Aspeditions; Antwerp, 2009, pp. 217–221.

17 p. 217, ibid.

Although both objects are painted in identical colours utilising the same methods and both bear scenes from Greek mythology, they do not appear to be an exact pair in iconographical terms. The 'Dionysius ewer' shows an arched arcade with five figures, in varying states of preservation, shown standing in each arched arbour. One has been clearly identified as Dionysius and this is how the jug received its name. The other is known as the 'Bellephoron ewer' and, although it has been more damaged than the Dionysian jug, it is still possible to see that it showed Bellephoron fighting the chimaera and parts of another scene with a female figure are still visible. Shatberashvili offers evidence to link these ewers to a small group of extant artefacts that are believed to have been made in the same workshop in the late second or early third century CE. Given the sophistication of the design and execution it has been suggested that this workshop was probably in Antioch and Shatberashvili concludes:

> Notwithstanding whether the hypothesis concerning their place of production is right or wrong, it can be stated with confidence that the five vessels from Khovle, Kerch, Tanais and Dura Europos were produced at the same workshop, if not by one single master. Not only are the vessels of Bellephoron, Dionysius, Daphne, Thetis and the ewer from Tanais decorated in an identical style, their technological elaboration is similar too.[18]

Therefore the Khovle glass ewers show that there was a trade in Syrian luxury goods in Kartli in in the late classical period that connected with a wider network that saw items from the same workshop reaching the northern shores of the Black Sea. That there was widespread trade across the Middle East, Caucasus, Asia Minor and across the Black Sea has been clear in the archaeological record over many millennia. All of which makes the absence of Syrian coins in Kartli and later gaps in the record all the more confusing.

### Pilgrimage and Other Stories: Searching the Archaeological Record for *eulogiae* and Other Christian Artefacts from Syria and the Holy Land

With the clear evidence of the early acceptance of Christianity in Kartli it seems a natural assumption to expect *eulogiae* or pilgrimage souvenirs to appear in the archaeological record or, alternatively, in church treasuries. The latter are

18 p. 220, ibid.

often the source of ancient liturgical objects or unusual religious items that have been donated to the church or monastery by pious donors. Urbnisi and Mtskheta, the towns at the heart of the *vita* of St. Nino and pivotal locations in the traditional Kartvelian conversion narrative are both linked to Jerusalem, in particular Mtskheta which is, at various points, referred to as the last resting place of Christ's cloak,[19] or later is perceived as a recreation of the holy city itself.[20]

This particularly close identification with Jerusalem is one of the defining elements of Georgian Christianity. Not only were Georgians amongst the first Christians to open monasteries for their fellow-countrymen in and around the holy city, there was also an early adoption of Jerusalemite liturgical practices[21] at home in Kartli. It soon became common for the topography of Jerusalem to be replicated in Kartvelian contexts so that those who were prevented from making the real pilgrimage by financial constraints or by factors such as wars preventing travel to the Holy Sepulchre, could then recreate this journey within their own country.

The *vita* of St. David Garejeli talks of how the saint embarked on a pilgrimage from Gareja to Jerusalem, but in sight of his goal he turned back, feeling unworthy of entering the holy city. As a souvenir of this experience he took three stones from the ridge where he turned back and began his return journey. That night an angel appeared in a dream to the Patriarch of Jerusalem and told him that the grace of the holy city was being carried away, so the Patriarch despatched messengers after David to reclaim the stones and invite him to return to the city to speak with the Patriarch. The saint declined the invitation to return, but handed over two stones and kept the third, representing one third of the grace of Jerusalem. He then returned to his monastery and deposited the 'stone of grace' there, so that ever since that time three pilgrimages to Gareja have been held equal to one visit to Jerusalem.[22]

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19 See *The Conversion of Kartli* (მოქცევაჲ ქართლისაჲ). In English translation the relevant passage can be found on pp. 54–55 in Metreveli, Roin & Jones, Stephen (eds.), *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Georgian National Academy of Sciences, Commission For The Study of Georgian Historical Sources, Gamomtsemloba Artanuji; Tbilisi, 2014.

20 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, *New Jerusalems in Georgia*, Centre for the Exploration of Georgian Antiquities; Tbilisi, 2013.

21 See chapter 6 for a consideration of the liturgy.

22 See Abuladze, Ilia, *Dzveli kartuli agiograpiuli literaturis dzeglebi*, 6 vols., Gamomtsemloba 'Metsniereba'; Tbilisi, 1963–1989, vol. 1 (1963), pp. 229–240, vol. 4 (1968), pp. 242–245. Also pp. 465–469, Machitadze, Archpriest Zakaria, *Lives of the Georgian Saints*, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood; Platina, CA, 2006 for an English rendering of this episode.

This episode from the saint's *vita* is often held up not only to highlight the close relationship of Georgia with the holy places of Christ's life, but also to show that there are tangible relics from these places that were carried back by the faithful to Kartli. Indeed the original *eulogia*, the stone believed to have been carried back from Jerusalem by St. David, is now held in the storerooms of the Simon Janashia State Museum in Tbilisi.[23]

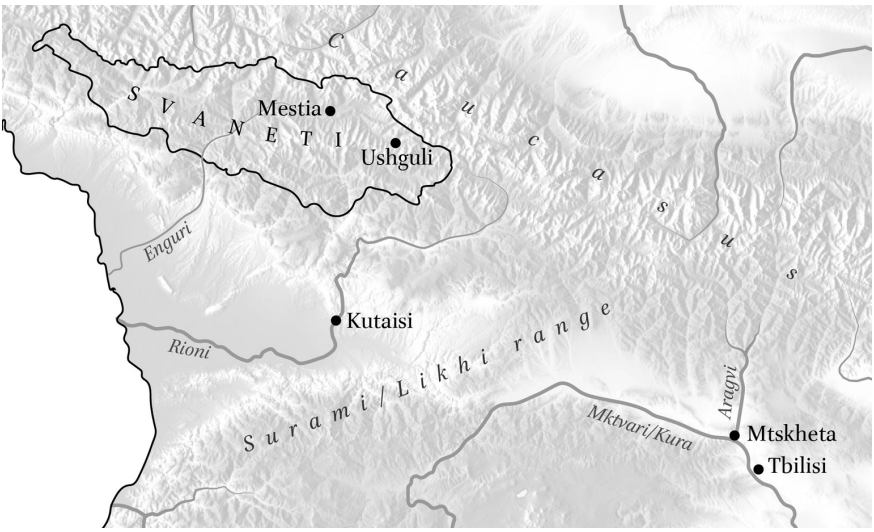
This testimony of a Jerusalem-centric faith and the evidence from Israel and Palestine of Georgian monasteries or Georgian monks present in monasteries with a mixed ethnic population, makes it appear likely that there are many artefacts of Syrian or Palestinian origin in church treasuries across Georgia or that small *eulogiae* are common finds in burials or during work at ancient churches across the country. In actual fact this area is another where we are confronted with an inexplicable gap in the record that mirrors the missing numismatic evidence outlined above. Whereas pilgrimage *eulogiae* in the form of small ceramic, glass or metal flasks or terracotta and metal tokens have been found all around the eastern Mediterranean, up into the northern reaches of the Black Sea[24] and over in western Europe, most notably in the treasuries of Monza and Bobbio in Italy, in Georgia we are faced with a perplexing blank when we attempt to gather data on artefacts with Christian iconography originating in Syria and Palestine.

Once again a note of caution must be added here and it is necessary to point out that this dearth of evidence could be simply because there has not yet been enough excavation of early Christian sites conducted in Georgia, but this lack of objects is still surprising. As the Italian cases highlight, such items were often gathered in the treasuries of significant churches but no such collection has been discovered in Georgia despite the fact that they boast many significant repositories of liturgical objects, icons and related ecclesiastical paraphernalia. Although many ecclesiastical collections were dispersed by the advent of communism in the twentieth century, there is at least one region of Georgia that jealously guarded their church treasures from the outside world and kept them intact; the mountainous province of Svaneti.

Recent work on the material from Svaneti shows that their holdings date back to late antiquity, something Georgians claim is due to the ancient tra-

23 Pers. comm. with curatorial staff at the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi.

24 See for example Zhuravlev, D.V., 'Dve Glinianye Ampuly c Izobrazheniem Sviatogo Miny iz Kryma', *Rossiĭskaia Arkheologiia* 3 (2012), pp. 91–96 for the case of two 6th–7th century clay ampullae from the shrine of Abu Menas in Egypt that were discovered in Chersonos and in the Bosphorus.




MAP 3 *Svaneti*

dition of lowland Georgians sending precious items up to the mountains for protection over the centuries and the fact that Svaneti remained relatively autonomous throughout the Soviet era, meaning that their religious practices were less disrupted than in the lowlands (Map 3). It is in the highest and most remote corner of Svaneti where one of the most famous of the Georgian 'Syrian' objects was recorded in the early twentieth century and yet, as we will see below, the picture was not quite as earlier commentators may have thought.

### The 'Syrian' Chalice in Ushguli

In 1941 Giorgi Chubinashvili published an article entitled *Siriĭskaĭa chasha v Ushgule* (The Syrian chalice from Ushguli) in *Vestnik Gosudarstvennogo muzeu Gruzii*. Although the article was later republished in a collection of Chubinashvili's articles in Tbilisi in 2002, it does not seem to have generated a significant amount of later research into the object. In 1982 the chalice was discussed by Kitty Matchabeli in her book *Svanetis sagandzuridan* (Svaneti's Treasury) but this largely involved summarising Chubinashvili's article and ended by reproducing the Georgian resumé published after the text of the original Russian article. Accordingly there has been no substantial attempt to offer an alternate interpretation of the object to Chubinashvili's hypothesis, fully endorsed by Matchabeli, that the artefact was a sixth-century Syrian chalice.

To partially explain this lack of research it is necessary to offer some context to the significance of the object being kept in Ushguli in the Svaneti region of Georgia. The geographical remoteness of Svaneti, with a location in the High Caucasus, meant that until relatively recently the region was difficult to access for many months each year. This relative isolation, along with the fearsome reputation of the local population, meant that it largely maintained a cultural, linguistic and social independence from the rest of Georgia even in the Soviet period. It is only now that the roads to the 'capital' of Svaneti, Mestia, have greatly improved and faciliated the growth of both domestic and foreign tourism that Svans have begun to become more easily assimilated into wider Georgian society.

The legendary remoteness of Svaneti and the exceptional devotion of the Svans to their Christian beliefs, albeit in a syncretistic manner, mean that the region has long been viewed by Georgians as the keeper of the religious treasures of the nation. Whilst many items of national significance elsewhere have been looted and removed to other countries up to and including Soviet era Russia, Svaneti avoided this fate by secreting its church treasuries into a network of 'treasure houses.' In practical terms this meant that icons, liturgical objects and any other items the local community believed to be of value, either in material terms or simply because people believed them to be rare or exotic, were placed in a Svan tower and guarded by local men with rifles. Estimates of the ages of the iconic Svan towers vary widely and the difficulty in confirming their ages is compounded by the fact that they have been heavily restored and rebuilt over time. However by the 1990s it had become increasingly clear that housing priceless *objets d'art* in medieval churches and towers was unsustainable in security terms and that this was insufficient in terms of protecting items from the extremities of the climate. Mestia the largest settlement in the region is at an elevation of just over 1,400 metres above sea level, and a number of the other villages are appreciably higher meaning that it was a matter of some urgency to find a solution that would protect fragile objects from theft and accidental damage and deterioration.

Complicating the picture still further are the complex social arrangements of Svan society. Whilst visitors to the region naturally assume that Mestia and Ushguli (for example) are the names of specific villages, in actual fact these are names for a 'Community' and each of these communities is made up of a collective of, on average, between five and eight different villages. This is significant because each church in each village had its own church treasury and, although the objects of all the churches in the village would be housed in one 'treasure house' that still meant that there were multiple repositories in each Community. It is necessary to underline this situation because at the

time that Chubinashvili undertook his research he would have had to have gained permission from multiple guardians in each of the twelve[25] Communities in Svaneti in order to view their icons and liturgical objects. The fieldwork would have been extremely arduous physically and have required a great deal of diplomancy and persuasion. Very little had changed by the time Matchabeli published her book in 1982 and these practical difficulties are almost certainly what has prevented scholars giving more attention to the Ushguli chalice and the other contents of the Svans' treasuries.

On 1st July 2013 the new Svaneti Museum was officially opened after many years of planning and diplomacy.[26] Local opposition to such a plan was mitigated by a commitment that no item would ever leave Svaneti on loan. It was made clear to the Svans that although the new museum became a part of the National Museum of Georgia, there was no question of any artefact, however minor, leaving to be exhibited elsewhere in the country. In order to further reassure the Svan elders the director of this new museum was herself of Svan heritage and so could be relied upon to understand local traditions and sensibilities. Although this new institution marked a great step forward in conserving Svan cultural heritage and displaying exceptionally important archaeological and artistic artefacts to a wider audience, it did not present all the cultural patrimony of Svaneti; one Community had objected to the plan and witheld their objects from the new museum, preferring to keep their treasures safe within a traditional 'treasure house.'

That community was Ushguli (უშგული), a group of 4 villages that are remote even by the standards of Svaneti. Ushguli stands at an altitude of between 2,200 and 2,400 metres above sea level depending on which point in the four villages that make up the Community the altitude is measured.[27] Their names are Zhibiani (ჟიბიანი), Chvibiani (ჩვიბიანი), Chazhashi (ჩაჟაში) and Murqmeli (მურყმელი). Today the most important objects owned by the community are all kept in a tower sign-posted 'treasure house' in the village of Chazhashi. Nominally designated an 'annexe' of Svaneti Museum it is therefore, by extension, technically part of the National Museum of Georgia.

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25 p. 97, Kenia, Rusudan & Aladashvili, Natela, *Sakartvelos megzuri II. Zemo Svaneti*, Tbilisi, 2000.

26 Pers. Comm. with staff from the National Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi.

27 Travel agencies, geographical mapping sites and popular literature variously report the height of Ushguli as 2,200 metres or 2,400 metres. Since either of these can be taken as correct depending on the point where the measurement taken, both figures are mentioned here.

For scholars this continued stance of isolationism means that whereas research on Svan objects has, in most respects, become a great deal easier, there still remains more work to be done particularly with regards to recording and researching the disparate items that remain in Chazhashi. A recent project by the Project Management Department of the Georgian National Museum has embarked on photographing and cataloguing these artefacts[28] and when this database is complete it will provide the first inventory of precisely how many artefacts are still held in Chazhashi.

This long digression into the significance of Svan 'treasure houses' and the relative inaccessibility of Ushguli has been necessary in explaining firstly why so little research has been undertaken on this object and, secondly why no scholar has taken Chubinashvili to task for his inaccurate description of the chalice; in short relatively few people have ever seen the object and, of those that have, even fewer have had any knowledge of Semitic languages. If they had then it would have been clear at first sight that there is one clear and compelling reason why the chalice cannot be from sixth century Syria; the inscription below the manger and above the Virgin and Joseph in the Nativity scene is written in an early form of Arabic that had not been invented in the sixth century (Fig. 6). In fact the inscription was recognised as Arabic by the historian and archaeologist Evtime Taqaishvili on his expedition to the region in 1910.[29] He also described the object as being 'in Syrian style' although he did not suggest a date for the chalice. Perplexingly Chubinashvili makes reference to Taqaishvili's work and so we cannot attribute his misattribution of the object

28 Many thanks are due to Ms. Salome Guruli of this department for providing the author with excellent images of the chalice and to Dr. Irina Koshoridze who made the introductions and obtained the images on behalf of the author.

29 Taqaishvili recorded the object as:

35. ბარძიმი ვერცხლისა, ოქრითთ დაფერილი, სირიულის ყაიდისა, არაბულის წარწერებით. შემკობილია სევადით და მცირედ ამობერვილი სურათებით. ამათ შორის წ–ა გიორგი ცხენით, მრომელიც ადამიანს გმირავს (No. 17332). იოსები ჰყვედრის მარიამს, შობა ქრისტესი (No. 17311), ნათლის ღება (No. 17311 და 17625), იერუსალიმში შესვლა და ჯვარცმა (No. 17625). შეადარე უვაროვისა, გვ 140, სურათი 61.

35. Silver Chalice with gold gilding, in Syrian style with Arabic inscription. Decorated with nielloed and slightly raised images. Amongst them St. George on horseback mortally wounding a man. Joseph reproaching Mary, the birth of Christ, the Baptism, the entry into Jerusalem and the Crucifixion. Compare with Uvarova, p. 140, Fig. 61.

Taqaishvili, Ekvtime, *Arkeologiuri Ekspeditsia Lechkhum-Svanetshi 1910* Tsels, Paris, 1937, p. 146. (Translated by the author.)

FIGURE 6 *Nativity scene on the Ushguli chalice*
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to ignorance of the earlier, more accurate, report and in fact his interpretation of the inscription is bizarrely incorrect, as we will see below.

On the other hand at first glance it is undertandable that the chalice has been for many years associated by art historians with the corpus of bronze thuribles that have been referred to as 'Syrian censers,' which we shall be discussing shortly. Despite the fact that the chalice is far more intrinsically valuable being made of gilded silver rather than bronze, and with the additional observation that it was made with the repoussé technique rather than being cast from a mould as is the case with the censers, on the most superficial level the chalice bears comparison with these objects because it is adorned with similar iconography; like the censers the chalice features scenes from the life of Christ, beginning with the Nativity, around its sides. However, although the number of episodes from the life of Christ included on the bronze thuribles varies, all form coherent narrative schemes with no repetition and no reference to holy personages other than those who witnessed key events in the life of the Saviour. In comparison the chalice provides several anomalies by including a military saint and repeating one event twice.

In order to explore this question in more detail it is necessary to look closely at the six scenes that adorn the sides of the chalice. Taking the Nativity as our starting point, the viewer is presented with the Christ child in the centre of the

FIGURE 7 *One of the two scenes of the Baptism of Christ on the chalice*
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vignette placed just above the halfway point of the image. Directly beneath the rectangular object, denoting the manger or a cradle, in which the haloed infant lies, is the afore-mentioned Arabic inscription to which we shall return later. Above the child a censer is suspended from the damaged rim of the chalice and a donkey and an ass stand to either side and lower their heads in obesiance to the infant. Beneath this scene the centre of the lower half of the tableau is largely blank with Joseph in a slumped position with his head supported by a hand to the left of the picture and the Virgin gesturing to Joseph with an open palm to the right.

The second image is the Baptism of Christ executed in a relatively conventional manner but with some unusual elements (Fig. 7). At the top of the chalice an arch is inscribed with foliate rosettes to either side and at the centre of the scene at the apex of the arch a hand descends, denoting the hand of the deity. Beneath this and seemingly falling from the sky rather than descending gracefully is a dove, which appears to be hurtling towards Christ's head. To the left of the picture is an angel and on the right is John the Baptist with his head inclined towards Christ and his right hand laid upon His head. What is unconventional about the scene is that Christ appears to be being baptised in a hexagonal font that reaches his waist and he seems to be wearing an odd garment denoted by

two bands at wrist and shoulder level on either arm and a cross-shaped motif across his body between pectorals and waist.

The next scene is the Entrance into Jerusalem where Christ rides right to left across the picture on a donkey, which appears to be richly caparisoned. At the bottom of the panel stylised folds denote the cloak lying before Him and on the top left hand corner are the branches of a palm tree. To the right, behind the donkey are two partial figures. One waves palms and the other points a forefinger towards Christ.

This is followed by another equestrian scene, that of the martial saint who Taqaishvili referred to as St. George. This figure rides left to right so that his back is turned to the scene of Christ entering Jerusalem and his cloak flows in the air behind him. At the top right of the pictorial field the bust of an angel points towards the head of the saint, who in turn holds his lance with an extended forefinger pointing back towards the angel. The saint is nimbed and bearded and appears to have some sort of golden hood or helmet. His mount is even more richly adorned than the donkey of the previous scene and has a splayed equal-armed cross on its hindquarters. The hooves of the horse trample a figure and the lance of the saint is pointed at the neck of this creature who, although humanoid, sports two long pointed ears, not unlike those of a pig, that give him a demonic mien.

The fifth image shows the crucifixion and it seems that it is this scene that perhaps led to both Taqaishvili and Chubinashvili associating the object with Syria as, at first glance it does seem to have parallels with the sixth century Rabbula Gospels (Fig. 8). The image is dominated by the crucified Christ, who is far larger than any of the other figures in the scene. To His right is the sun, represented by a face within a circle of rays and on the other side balancing the sun is an inverted teardrop-shaped face with a crescent moon on its head appearing almost like horns. Christ appears to be dressed in a knee-length tunic and leggings, rather than the longer *colobium* seen in the Rabbula Gospels, and to either side of him a soldier is piercing his flesh just beneath the armpit with a lance. It is the solar and lunar imagery, the larger figure of Christ and the fact that His body is modestly robed instead of only wearing a loincloth that all offer a superficial similarity with the Crucifixion scene of the Rabbula Gospels, but the rest of the image is very different. This is because it shows the cross appearing to spring from a forward-facing head. This is a reference to the belief that Golgotha, the place of the skull where Christ was crucified, was actually the place of the grave of Adam, the first man. The last element of the scene is more obscure and features four figures depicted from the waist up, with two each on either side of the head of Adam. Each of these male figures faces towards the centre of the scene and raises and arm with forefinger outstretched and

FIGURE 8 *The Crucifixion*
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pointing upwards towards the foot of the cross. These mysterious figures also wear triangular helmets with winged elements, not unduly unlike the ears of the demon of the previous scene, projecting to either side of their headgear.

The sixth and final image is another baptism that is identical to the scene described above, meaning that the Nativity scene is flanked to either side by a Baptism tableau. Therefore, unlike the censer imagery which, as we will see, follows coherent Christological cycles in a linear manner from the Nativity through to the Crucifixion or the Holy Sepulchre, here the cycle is more mysterious and needs extra analysis. The first thing that strikes the viewer is that the six scenes seem to be divided into three lots of two paired images. Obviously we have the two images of the Baptism to either side of the Nativity, but we also have the two equestrian images of the Entrance in Jerusalem and the martial saint (St. George?) next to each other, with the principal figures turning in opposing directions. Finally, we are left with a final birth/death pairing with the images of the Nativity and the Crucifixion. This is such an odd juxtaposition of scenes that it seems that some deliberate reason for these choices has been made on the part of the artisan or the patron who commissioned this object, but what that reason behind these choices represents is more difficult to understand.

In fact it is the consideration of who that patron may have been that leads us back to a significant element of this object that has not yet been fully discussed; that of the early Arabic inscription below the manger/cradle of the Nativity scene. At first glance it is clear that the inscription is executed in an early form of Arabic script. The letters are elegantly executed in the Kufic script without any diacritical marks. The word itself reads simply *al-ram*(*mal*)*lî*, which can be taken as referring to the Palestinian city of Ramallah or, more probably, to a person who was from Ramallah.[30] Such an inscription offers us a likely place of origin for the object as it fits well with the Christian iconography originating in Palestine in the eighth or ninth centuries, which is the date of the object suggested by the palaeography of the inscription.[31]

Whilst it has been traditional for art historians to try and relate early Crucifixion imagery to the sixth century illustration of that scene in the famous Rabbula Gospels housed today in the Bibliotheca Laurenziana in Florence, there are in fact a number of examples of this iconography known to us with a secure provenance from the Holy Land itself or from the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai that perhaps offer a closer comparison to the scene on the Ushguli chalice. The widely known painted box from the Sancta Sanctorum of St. John Lateran in Rome, now displayed in the collections of the Vatican Museum, is believed to date from the late sixth or early seventh century and offers a fascinating glimpse into the itinerary of a late antique pilgrim.[32] The labelled fragments within the box show us where this unknown pilgrim travelled on their journey and supports the belief that early pilgrims believed natural objects, like the stone of St. David Gareja mentioned above, to have been imbued with intrinsic holiness absorbed from the sanctity of their surroundings. We can also see how the tendency to depict a fully-clothed Christ seems to have been the normal manner of representation at this time and that therefore painting Christ in a *colobium* or tunic and leggings conforms to the norms of late antique Crucifixion scenes. This manner of dress can be seen in two icons from the collection at Mount

30 The author would like to thank Professor Adel Sidarus, Emeritus Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Evora University, Portugal for translating the inscription and for his comments on the antiquity of the script utilised. Professor Sidarus is a specialist in Early Christian Arabic Studies. Professor Siam Bhayro at the University of Exeter helpfully suggested that the inscription was referring to the owner of the object as being *from* Ramallah. Thanks to owed to both colleagues for their assistance. Any errors of interpretation are, of course, solely those of the author.

31 See previous footnote.

32 O'Connor, Lucy, 'The Late Antique Wooden Reliquaries from the Chapel of the Sancta Sanctorum', *Bolletino dei Monumenti Musei e Gallerie Pontificie* 31 (2013), pp. 202–229.

Sinai dated from the seventh to eighth[33] and eighth centuries[34] respectively. The earlier of the two icons includes the solar and lunar imagery that appears in both the Rabbula Gospels and in the Ushguli chalice scene and the later of the two has several small figures sat at the base of the cross in a manner that is also reminiscent of the chalice iconography. Taken together these elements support the epigraphic evidence to place this object in the eighth or ninth century.

It is more difficult to find parallels for the other scenes, not least because of variant elements such as the unusual depiction of Christ being baptised in a font-like basin, rather than in the flowing waters of the River Jordan or the nativity scene being presented almost in two tiers, with a censer suspended above the manger suggesting a liturgical dimension to the image. These deviations from conventional patterns, and the unconventional iconographical scheme employed on the chalice, which chose to replicate the baptismal event, all strengthen the impression that this was a private commission where scenes were chosen by the patron's personal preference. What is clear is that, leaving aside the more unusual elements, both the inscription and the iconography of the object clearly support the argument that the origins of this artefact lie in eighth or ninth century Palestine.

Now we turn to Chubninashvili's interpretation of the chalice where he places his argument for its attribution as a sixth century Syrian object by a comparison with the Rabbula Gospels, but also by comparing the chalice with a series of artefacts, including the censers we will be discussing shortly, in collections across Europe. Yet the central part of his argument hinges on the linguistic analysis of the inscription, so that it is worth quoting the relevant passage at length:[35]

> Wenn der erste Anblick des Uschguli-Kelches eine verblüffende Verwandtschaft mit dem Tassili-Kelche (in der Nielloart) wachrufte, so zeigt der nähere Vergleich der enzelnen Szenen und der stilistischen Art der Ausführung eine offenbare Affinität mit der bekannte Gruppe von syrisch angesprochener Kleinkunst, vornehmlich des VI. Jhs. Dasselbe könnte auch die kurze Beischrift der Darstellung der Geburt Christi bestätigen; leider lässt sie sich nach dem Photo nicht entziffern: «Das letzte Wort

33 "Crucifixion," *The Sinai Icon Collection*, accessed March 6, 2017, http://vrc.princeton.edu/sinai/items/show/6369.

34 "Crucifixion with Two Thieves," *The Sinai Icon Collection*, accessed March 6, 2017, http://vrc.princeton.edu/sinai/items/show/6366.

35 Here I am quoting from the German summary of the Russian article to make the relevant passage more accessible to the reader.

> (von rechts aus) könnte man unter gewissem Zwang, d. h. unter Annahme von Abweichungen von der gewohnten Graphik, als Ieschu (in nestorianischer Aussprache Ischu) = Jesus lesen, aber das rechts stehende Wort zu entziffern gelingt es gar nicht» (briefliche Mitteilung von Prof. Dr. Paul Kokowtzow, Leningrad). Die Beschriftung kann also nur bedingungsweise als syrisch angesprochen werden.[36]

How Chubinashvili and his correspondent came to the conclusion that they were dealing with a Syriac inscription saying 'Jesus' is mystifying—doubly so since Taqaishvili had correctly identified the inscription as being in Arabic, even if he had not attempted to transcribe or translate what it said. This insistence of the writing being in Syriac rather than Arabic also enabled Chubinashvili to argue for a significantly earlier date and posit that the chalice was a direct contemporary with the Rabbula Gospels rather than comparing it with the later icons painted on wooden panels held in the collection in Sinai or the painted box from the Sancta Sanctorum, all of which are linked to the seventh or eighth centuries and are therefore closer in date to the eighth to ninth century paleography of the early Arabic inscription.

In short, the Ushguli chalice can be demonstrated to have been created several centuries later than originally thought and there is strong evidence to suggest that it originated in early medieval Palestine; hardly surprising given the strong Georgian presence in the region at the time. What it does not demonstrate is evidence of a link with sixth century Syria. Here we must turn to the case of the 'Syrian' censers in order to see if they can shed any light on the matter.

### The 'Syrian' Bronze Censers and Another Question of Mysterious Origins

Since the late nineteenth century a series of scholarly articles have been devoted to a small group of cast bronze thuribles that are decorated with scenes from the life of Christ. These articles have ranged from studying these objects individually through to attempts to try and establish a typology and chronological evolution for artefacts of this type.[37] The attempts to classify these objects

36 p. 18, Chubinashvili, Giorgi N., 'Siriĭskaĭa chasha v Ushgule', *Vestnik Gosudarstvennogo muzeu Gruzii* 11-5 (1941), pp. 1–19.

37 Articles on individual censers include Burton, Richard Francis, exhibit presented on Thursday, March 14th, 1872, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries*, (Second Series) 5

and identify their place of origin have been complicated by the fact that they appear to have been produced in a number of locations in a wide variety of

(1873), pp. 289–291 and an entry in Dalton, O.M., *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum*, London & Oxford, 1901, both of which discuss the only bronze thurible securely provenanced to Syria. This is the object that was taken by Sir Richard Francis Burton from the Monastery of Mar Musa al-Habashi (St. Moses the Ethiopian or Abyssinian) near Nabk in Syria and later sold to the British Museum in London, where it remains today. Other censers have been discussed by: Elvira Barba, Miguel Angel, 'Un Nuevo Incensario Palestino', *Erytheia: Revista de estudios bizantinos y neogriegos* 7:2 (1986), pp. 253–269, Hollis, Howard C., 'An Arabic Censer', *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 25:7 (1938), pp. 137–138, Pétridès, S., 'Un encensoir syro-byzantin', *Échos d'Orient* 7 (1904), pp. 148–151, Weitzmann, Kurt, 'An East Christian Censer', *Record of the Museum of Historic Art, Princeton University* 3:2 (1944), pp. 2–4 and this list is not intended to be exhaustive. In addition there have been attempts to quantify these objects and to develop a typology based on their iconography and decorative motifs, notably by Hamilton, R.W., 'Thuribles: Ancient or Modern?', *Iraq* 36:1/2 (1974), pp. 53–65 and Richter-Siebels, Ilse, *Die palästinensischen Weihrauchgefäße mit Reliefszenen aus dem Leben Christi*, Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung des Grades eies Doktors der Philosophie des Fachbereichs Geschichtswissenschaften der Freien Universität Berlin; Berlin, 1996.

These objects have also been a source of fascination in the Caucasus, where they occur in both Georgia and Armenia and there is also a series of articles on the subject in Russian and Georgian (no doubt also in Armenian as well, but for the moment that language remains beyond the linguistic capabilities of the author). See for example: Arkhipova, E.I., 'Bronzovoe Kadilo iz Sudaka v Odesskom Arkheologicheskom Muzee', *Bizantiĭskiĭ Bremennik* 67 (92), 2008, pp. 207–216, Chichileishvili, Maia, 'Brinjaos satsetskhluri kedis mkharetmtsodneobis muzeumidan', *Kheloznebatmtsodneobiti etiudebi* VI (2015), pp. 70–82, Khrushkova, L.G., 'Neskol'ko pledmetov bizantiĭskoĭ ėpokhi iz Istoricheskogo muzeia g. Sochi Krasnodarskogo kraia', *Plichernomor'e v Srednie Veka* VIII (2011), pp. 169–197, Kiknadze, Gulnara, '"Siriuli" satsetskhuri balaanidan (ksnis kheoba)', *Religia* 10–11–12 (1995), pp. 82–90, Machabeli, Kiti, 'Brinjaos satsetskhlurebi sakartveloshi', *Khelovneba* 6 (1991), pp. 43–58, Machabeli, Kiti, 'Udzvelesi liturgikuli nivtebi sakartveloshi—brinjaos satsetskhlurebi', *Saertashoriso konperentsia. Religia da sazogadoeba—rtsmena chvens tskhovrebashi*, 2004, pp. 44–45. There is also an article concerning a slightly later (9th or 10th century) Georgian censer now in Moscow, but this artefact is very different from the cast bronze censers mentioned above. It is mentioned here only because of its similar Christological iconography. For more information see Gagoshidze, Giorgi, 'Evsuki katolikosis satsetskhluri moskovis kremlis muzeumidan', *Dzveli khelovneba dhges* 6 (2015), pp. 46–51. Many thanks are due to Professor Zaza Skhirtladze, Head of the Department of Art History, Tbilisi State University for providing me with Georgian and Russian language sources on this subject and for offering his thoughts on the issues surrounding these objects. Naturally the discussion above represents the thoughts of the author and any errors of interpretation are hers alone.

inter-related forms for over a thousand years. Certainly they were still being made by Armenian artisans as late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries[38] and, because of the continuity of the motifs used, it is often only subtle alterations in the shape and finish of the object as well as the fact that they grew larger with time, that enables us to tell the earlier and later censers apart from each other.

This collection of artefacts has long been referred to as being Syrian or Syro-Palestinian in origin, partially on the grounds of inscriptions on the objects, however much of this argument seems to have rested on assumption rather than empirical data. In his survey of the corpus of bronze censers in 1974, which he acknowledged was not exhaustive, Hamilton recorded an inscription dated 1646 in Armenian on a censer in New Julfa, Isfahan,[39] one in Cairo with a Coptic inscription dated on paleographic grounds to the fourteenth century or later,[40] a relatively modern Arabic inscription executed in or near Mardin in southeast Turkey,[41] and two Syriac inscriptions of unknown date on two censers in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, both of which appear to have originated in the region of what is now southeast Turkey.[42] Needless to say it is not possible to argue for the origin of these objects on such limited epigraphic evidence and we must therefore turn to other information in order to try and discern the origins of this group of objects. Like many writers on the subject, Siebels[43] has concentrated on the formulation of an iconographic typology rather than comprehensively addressing the geographical distribution or dating of the censers and therefore, although now quite dated, Hamilton's article remains the only source that has tried to quantify these artefacts. Although he acknowledges that at the time he wrote his article there were known to be 30 or 40 of these bronze censers extant, and obviously the corpus has grown in size further since the 1970s, he attempts to place twenty five of them into distinct geographical groupings:

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38 There is a sixteenth century Armenian censer of this type in the Caucasian section of the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg and a collection of these objects, the latest of them being attributed to the seventeenth century in the museum of Vank Kilise (St. Saviour's Cathedral) in New Julfa, Isfahan. Doubtless many others are still extant from this later period, but the artefacts above are mentioned to highlight the fact that, in Armenia at least, there seems to be a continuity of production that may have made these objects for as long as a thousand years.

39 p. 62, Hamilton, R.W., 'Thuribles: Ancient or Modern?'

40 p. 63, ibid.

41 p. 63, ibid.

42 pp. 64–65, ibid.

43 Richter-Siebels, Ilse, *Die palästinensischen Weihrauchgefäße*.

> … five came from Egypt; and eight lack all record of provenance. From these figures it seems likely that the centre of distribution lay far to the north of Jerusalem, perhaps in northern-most Syria or Mesopotamia. We cannot say that all the censers came from one region; but their broad resemblance suggests it. The reliefs, like the minor ornaments, are Near Eastern or Byzantine in character, as it seems to me, not perceptibly affected by western art.[44]

Of course the obvious flaw with Hamilton's analysis is that, with the exceptions of one censer in Tbilisi and one from Odessa, he does not include in his article the data from the former Soviet Union. In Georgia there are six bronze censers in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Art in Tbilisi alone. Both Kutaisi and Mestia museums hold a number of variant forms of bronze censers, one is in Adjara Museum and another unrestored example is in the stores of the Simon Janashia State Museum. In addition to the Georgian material a similar example is known from Sochi where it is stated that:

> The bronze censer is decorated with five scenes of "the pilgrimage cycle": Annunciation, Nativity, Baptism, Crucifixion and Holy Women at the Holy Sepulchre. It is part of an extensive series (over a hundred) of similar products that follow the Palestinian iconography of the 6th–7th centuries. Many of them were made at a later time, after the earlier models. I date the Sochi censer to not earlier than the 9th–10th centuries.[45]

Attempting to quantify these censers is made even more complex by the fact that a number have been sold on the open market[46] and disappeared into private collections, but what we can see is that Hamilton was broadly correct in positing northern and southern concentrations of the objects. There are several censers of this type in the Biblelands Museum in Israel and at least one has been sold in Jerusalem in recent memory.[47] These can be added to those known from Egypt to be added to a possible 'southern group'. On the other hand the 'north-

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44 p. 65, Hamilton, R.W., 'Thuribles: Ancient or Modern?'

45 p. 170, Khrushkova, L.G., 'Neskol'ko pledmetov bizantiĭskoĭ ėpokhi iz Istoricheskogo muzeia g. Sochi Krasnodarskogo kraia', *Plichernomor'e v Srednie Veka* VIII (2011), pp. 169–197.

46 See for example the object sold at Sotheby's in London in October 2015 at http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/arts-islamic-world-l15223/lot.316.html (Accessed 08.03.2017).

47 See http://www.sassonancientart.com/artwork_show_73.html (Accessed 07.03.2017).

ern group' has arguably been dragged further north by the fact that so many of these objects have been discovered in the Caucasus[48] and around the Black Sea perimeter. So are we dealing with two distinct centres of production or is this a case of objects being imported from one location to another? Perhaps most importantly *where* are these objects being produced?

Perhaps the first thing to note is that, leaving aside the concentration of these censers found in the Caucasus for the moment, a significant number are clustered in the Tur 'Abdin region of southeast Turkey and are particularly well represented in and around the town of Mardin. This is highlighted by both the written inscriptions collected by Hamilton[49] and also supported by evidence from a variety of sources including Bell[50] and Pétridès[51] who report discovering and/or purchasing objects of this type in the area. The region is the historic heartland of the Syrian Orthodox Church and the name Tur 'Abdin itself derives from the Syriac for the 'mountains of the servants of God'. The inhabitants call themselves *Suryoye* in their own language and are called *Syriani* by the Arabs, which with minor variations is the name by which they have been known since late antiquity.[52] This is perhaps the key to understanding how and why these bronze censers have been referred to as 'Syrian' censers for so long. If we suggest that 'Syrian' in this context is taken to denote objects made by Syrian (Orthodox) Christians rather than being interpreted to mean that the objects were

48 In addition to the group of (later) bronze censers in New Julfa, Isfahan, others have been recorded in museum collections in Armenia. See p. 123, Nersessian, Vrej, *Treasures from the Ark. 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Art*, The J. Paul Getty Museum; Los Angeles, 2001 for details on three of these objects now in the State History Museum of Armenia, Erevan. Two of the censers were discovered in Ani and one in Artsakh and all are dated to the 13th century. Nersessian writes that these objects 'recall the Byzantine and Coptic censers of the sixth and seventh centuries, and this suggests that such censers and lanps were known in Armenia from a very early period.' However thus far there appears to have been little work undertaken on bronze censers in Armenian collections, and certainly there is nothing currently available for non-Armenian speakers on this subject.

49 pp. 63–65, Hamilton, R.W., 'Thuribles: Ancient or Modern?'

50 p. 317, Bell, Gertrude Lowthian, *Amurath to Amurath*, William Heinemann; London, 1911.

51 Pétridès, S., 'Un encensoir syro-byzantin', *Échos d'Orient* 7 (1904), pp. 148–151.

52 'Suryoyo' rather than 'Suryaye' is the vocalisation used by those who speak and write Turoyo, the western dialect of Syriac. However the two terms mean the same thing and for a recent discussion on the terms used by Syrian and Assyrian Christians to identify themselves see Butts, Aaron Michael, 'Assyrian Christians' in Frahm, Eckhart (ed.), *A Companion to Assyria*, Wiley-Blackwell online, 2017, DOI: 10.1002/9781118325216.ch32.

This offers an additional perspective on the issues discussed in chapter 1 relating to the complexities of the terms 'Syrian' and 'Assyrian'.

manufactured in the country of that name, then the geographical distribution of these artefacts begins to make more sense.

We can clearly see that their distribution in areas across the region suggests a place of manufacture to the north and east of Damascus or Aleppo and, although we have a gap in our knowledge of the origins of these objects, it seems possible answers can be found by comparing what we know of these censers with what is known about the thirteenth century Mosul School of Metalwork. Although quite obviously we are dealing with objects made some four- to six-hundred years later than the earliest censers, there are a number of similarities between these two groups of objects that bear closer examination.

A map showing the dispersal of these later objects[53] in the thirteenth century is striking in how closely it mirrors the known findspots of bronze censers, with these later objects reaching as far south as Cairo and Yemen but having a denser concentration of them around Mardin and other towns and cities in what is now southeast Turkey. What is not shown on the map is whether any of these later objects ended up in the Caucasus, but given the exceptional collection of Islamic metalwork of all eras in the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia[54] we can at least hazard an answer based on the items known to us from the contemporary collection. In actual fact Tbilisi holds what is arguably the largest collection of Islamic metalwork in the world and a recent exhibition displaying only those items that had once been in the collection of the photographer Alexandre Roinashvili included four brass and silver ewers attributed

53 Thanks are due to Dr. Sebastian Brock, Reader Emeritus in Syriac Studies at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford for suggesting that perhaps I should play closer attention to Mesopotamia if that appeared to be a centre for objects of this type. His comment reminded me that Mosul had been a notable centre of medieval metalwork and it was striking that the map on p. 21 of Raby's article in many respects replicated the dispersal of the bronze censers. See Raby, Julian, 'The Principle of Parsimony and the Problem of the 'Mosul School of Metalwork'', in Porter, Venetia & Rosser-Owen, Mariam, *Metalwork and Material Culture in the Islamic World. Art, Craft and Text. Essays presented to James W. Allan*, I.B. Tauris; London & New York, 2012, pp. 11–85.

54 At the time of writing this corpus, which numbers many hundreds of objects dating from the early Islamic era until the nineteenth century, is still in the process of being catalogued. However in the 'Alexandre Roinashvili and His Museum' exhibition held at the Simon Janashia State Museum in 2015–2016, four brass and silver ewers attributed 13th–14th century Mosul were displayed from Roinashvili's collection. Since this makes up a very small proportion of the entirety of the metalwork held by the museum it is logical to expect more objects originating in medieval Mosul to be identified in the future. See Mamatsashvili, Lika, Koshoridze, Irina & Dgebuadze, Marina, *The First Georgian Photographer. Alexandre Roinashvili and His Museum*, Damani; Tbilisi, 2015, pp. 123–124.

to the Mosul School of the thirteenth or fourteenth century.[55] Therefore we can suggest that the dissemination of both groups of objects was following the same networks.

Other factors that support this argument include the fact that the thirteenth century Mosul School is known for the inclusion of Christian iconography in many of the artefacts associated with it[56] and also the argument espoused by Raby that many artisans spread out from Mosul and worked in different cities—evidenced by the number of inscriptions where the maker of an object was identified as *al-Mawsili*[57]—so that in effect, as time went on, 'Mosul School' objects were being produced in a number of locations. This hypothesis again resonates with the earlier material, where it has been argued in Georgia that whilst the first 'Syrian' censers in the country were originally imported, several centuries later local artisans appear to have been making their own versions of these objects.[58] In this case this early example of franchising—where a type of object associated with one centre spreads as artisans travel and introduce that type of object and iconography into other regions—seems to have been at the heart of the dissemination of both the censers and the 'Mosul School' metalwork. Given the similarities of distribution patterns there is a strong body of circumstantial evidence to support the argument that these objects originated somewhere in Mesopotamia, most likely in Mosul or its vicinity, or alternatively in Mardin or a nearby city such as Amida (modern Diyarbakir).

If that is the case then we also have an answer to the question of why these objects have always been referred to as 'Syrian censers' when only one[59] of them has ever been securely provenanced to Syria itself. Rather than being a topographical reference as widely assumed, we should take the word to be used in an ethnographic sense as referring to the people known as *Syriani*; in other words the label is used to denote the Syrian Orthodox Christians of Mosul or the Tur 'Abdin as the makers of these items. When viewed in this light we have a tangible link to Mesopotamia which could suggest that we should be looking in that region for our (As)Syrian Fathers.

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55 See note 54 above.

56 Katzenstein, Ranee A. & Lowry, Glenn D., 'Christian Themes in Thirteenth-Century Islamic Metalwork', *Muqarnas* 1 (1983), pp. 53–68.

57 p. 13, Raby, Julian, 'The Principle of Parsimony.'

58 Pers. Comm. with staff at the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Art and with members of the Center for Exploration of Georgian Antiquities at the St. Andrew the First Called Patriarchal University of Georgia.

59 This is the censer from Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi referred to in note 34 above.

## A *eulogia* from Syria: The Symeon Stylites Medallion from Gareja

Earlier in this chapter we remarked on the surprising lack of *eulogiae*, or 'blessings', found in Georgian archaeological contexts or church treasuries. These small pilgrimage tokens were, as their name suggests, believed to confer blessings or divine protection on their owners and were popular souvenirs throughout late antiquity and beyond. Items of this nature secured at sites associated with the life of Christ were particularly sought after, but there was also great demand for objects that were linked to the most venerated and powerful Christian saints.

Two saints who were highly influential due to the extreme asceticism they practiced during their lifetimes and also because of their reputations as arbiters of community disputes,[60] were Symeon Stylites the Elder (d. 459) and Symeon the Younger (d. 592). We know a great deal about both of them as *vitae* are extant not only for both men, but also for St. Martha, who was the mother of Symeon the Younger. In addition the places where they stood on their columns are still known to us and have been studied by a variety of scholars. The Georgian relationship with the stylite cult will be the subject of the next chapter but is mentioned here in passing because, aside from *eulogiae* from the main sites linked directly to Christ in the Holy Land, souvenirs from Qalʿat Semʿan and Semandağ, the sites linked respectively to Symeon the Elder and Symeon the Younger, are more plentiful than from any other pilgrimage centre with the possible exception of the shrine of St. Menas in Egypt.

The discovery of a glass bowl filled with terracotta pilgrimage tokens of varying scenes at Deir Semʿan, the village beneath the hill of Qalʿat Semʿan, also suggested that shrines disseminated tokens or ampullae with a wide variety of images on them—not simply iconography associated with the shrine itself—and that therefore not all tokens of stylites necessarily came from Qalʿat Semʿan and Semandağ.[61] This hypothesis is supported by the case of a stylite ampulla excavated in Sardis in western Asia Minor that, despite bearing stylite imagery, has a shape and manufacture more typical of western Asia Minor than it is of

60 See Brown, Peter, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), pp. 80–101 and Brown, Peter, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6:3 (1998), pp. 353–376.

61 see http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?place=33725&plaA=33725-3-2 for the British Museum inventory of tokens discovered at Deir Semʿan. The 81 tokens in this collection display a variety of different subjects and, if they all originate in this location, suggest that pilgrims did not always buy their souvenirs at the site of the scene depicted on the memento.

northern Syria.[62] Therefore we cannot say that all stylite imagery certainly originated in northern Syria or that scenes bearing the life of Christ all came from the Holy Land. Having said that it seems likely that the majority of stylite tokens were manufactured in the vicinity of Qal'at Sem'an and Semandağ or perhaps in Antioch due to the relative uniformity of the iconography and production methods relating to the stylite tokens. On the other hand some of the ampullae and bottles bearing stylite imagery appear to have been manufactured further afield and so the origins of each of these objects should be individually examined. This would suggest that the cheapest, most easily available items—the terracotta tokens—were probably products acquired from near the shrine, but more specialised or expensive memorabilia was made elsewhere and distributed more widely across the near east.

This overview of stylite iconography will continue in the following chapter, but in the context of the discussion that follows it is important to remember that the provenance of tokens with stylite imagery has been overwhelmingly linked to the two sites where the Symeons stood on their respective pillars. This point is underlined because of a silver medallion that was discovered in a grave at Berebis Seri ('the hill of monks') at Gareja in Kakheti, eastern Georgia during the 1974–1976 excavations undertaken there by the State Museum of Georgia.[63] This medallion is now in the stores of the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia and was published by Zaza Skhirtladze in 1995.[64] The medallion appears to have been cast in silver from a mould and shows a scene of a stylite between two angels in the top half of the scene, with two figures with their hands raised in prayer or supplication facing towards the pillar in the lower sector on one side of the object (Fig. 9). The other side shows an equal-armed cross with triangular motifs in three of the four splayed arms and an indistinct circular motif in the fourth and lowest arm of the cross (Fig. 10). A small loop at the top of the medal shows that it was intended for use as a pendant and its modest diameter of 2 cm mean that it could easily have been suspended on a cord and worn as a discreet protective amulet.

Despite the majority of the material in the graves excavated being dated to the ninth or tenth centuries, Skhirtladze argues that the medallion is in fact later and was manufactured in the tenth or eleventh century:

62 Rautman, Marcus, 'A Stylite Ampulla at Sardis', *Travaux et Mémoires* 15 (2005), pp. 713–721.

63 p. 278, Skhirtladze, Zaza, 'Silver Medallion from Gareji', *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 45 (1995), pp. 277–282.

64 See note 63 above.

FIGURE 9 *Symeon Stylites medallion obverse*
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> The iconographic scheme of the composition represented on the medallion is typical of pilgrim tokens bearing the image of St. Symeon Stylite. Although this standard iconography had existed since the sixth century, and continued through to the Crusades, it is clear that the date of execution of the medallion from Gareji should be the tenth or eleventh century. This was the period when life in the monastery of St. Symeon experienced a revival, after the liberation of Antioch from Arab domination and its rejoining of the Byzantine empire. It was also in this period that metal, leaden and silver medallions began widely to take the place of terracotta and glass pilgrim tokens, which had been in use in the early period.[65]

Whilst Skhirtladze is correct in arguing that metal medallions bearing stylite imagery are generally attributed to the Middle Byzantine period, rather than being contemporary or slightly later than the lives of the saints themselves, in

65 p. 279, Skhirtladze, Zaza, 'Silver Medallion from Gareji.'

FIGURE 10 *Symeon Stylites medallion reverse*
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this case the question is more complex. The extant medals with which he compares the Gareja medallion are in many respects significantly different enough to raise questions as to whether or not it is possible to view this object as being within the same category.

The first, and most obvious, difference is in size. The Gareja pendant is only 2 cm in diameter[66] whereas the later medals are significantly larger being between 5.5 cm[67] and 8.4 cm[68] in diameter. In addition all the known later pendants are definitively linked to the shrine of Symeon the Younger at Semandağ outside Antioch and have more a sophisticated iconographical composition as well as inscriptions in Greek around the outer edge of the stylite scene. One similarity with the Gareja find is the fact that a token in the Staatliche Museen

66 p. 278, Skhirtladze, Zaza, 'Silver Medallion from Gareji.'

67 p. 97, Evans, Helen C. & Ratliffe, Brandi (eds.), *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition 7th to 9th Century*, Metropolitan Museum of Art & Yale University Press; New York & New Haven, 2012.

68 http://art.thewalters.org/detail/10400/pilgrim-token-with-saint-symeon-stylite-the-younger/ (Accessed 27.03.2017).

zu Berlin has a cross on the reverse[69] but again, this cross is significantly more detailed and refined than that on the smaller object. In addition these later medallions are usually cast in lead or, in the case of the example in the Walters Art Museum, a composite metal[70] rather than in the intrinsically more valuable medium of silver.

In fact there is only one other stylite artefact recorded in silver—the well-known silver votive plaque now in the Louvre dated to the 6th or 7th century and discovered as part of a church treasure in Ma'arrat an Numan in Syria.[71] As with many of these stylite artefacts it is unclear whether to attribute the panel to the intervention of Symeon the Elder or to Symeon the Younger, but the inscription on the panel makes it clear that the donor credited one of them for answering his/her prayer. Given the personal nature of this *ex voto* it does perhaps suggest that items made in more precious metals were more likely to have been individual commissions undertaken on a small scale for private patrons and the scarcity of comparable items in this case would appear to strengthen this supposition. Certainly in the case of the Gareja medallion, the cruder casting and less detailed scene would suggest that this object was fabricated closer in time to the 6th or 7th century clay pilgrimage tokens than it was to the later and more complex Middle Byzantine lead medallions. This hypothesis is based upon the theory that the silver medallion was a copy of the more common clay tokens of the earlier period, executed for a private individual who wished to place themselves under the personal protection of Symeon Stylites by wearing the medal as an amulet.

Given the dearth of exact comparative material outlined above this discussion must remain to some extent speculative, but to this writer at least, the balance of probabilities suggests that this object was manufactured in north-west Syria at some point in the 6th or 7th centuries before ending up in a 9th or 10th century monastic burial at Davit Gareja in Kakheti. As such, at the time of writing, it represents the sole late antique Christian artefact yet discovered in Georgia that comes from a securely provenanced archaeological context.

Taking this object as our one tangible piece of material culture supporting a direct interaction between Syrian and Georgian Christianity in late antiquity,

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69 pp. 97–98, Evans, Helen C. & Ratliffe, Brandi (eds.), *Byzantium and Islam*.

70 Walters online catalogue, details as above in note 67.

71 p. 114, Aghion, Irène, Durand, Jannic, Gaborit-Chopin, Danielle & Germain, Marie-Odile (eds.), *Byzanze. L'art byzantin dans les collections publiques françaises, Exposition au Musée du Louvre du 3 novembre 1992 au 1er février 1993*, Réunion des Musées Nationaux; Paris, 1992 and the online catalogue entry for this object at http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/plaque-saint-simeon (Accessed 27.03.2017).

it is time to explore the Georgian attachment to the stylite cult, in particular that of Symeon the Younger, in order to find out if this devotional tradition can furnish any evidence to illuminate cultural interactions between these regions in the fifth and sixth centuries.

CHAPTER 4

# Symeon and His Followers: Stylitism as a Cultural Trend between Syria and Georgia

## The Evidence for Stylites in Georgia: A Summary of the Visual Material

One key piece of evidence a number of Georgian Historians and Art Historians contend proves a tangible link between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity is the popularity of the cult of Symeon Stylites in the country. It is not always entirely clear whether this devotion is directed towards Symeon the Elder of Qalʿat Semʿan or his successor Symeon the Younger of the so-called 'Miraculous Mountain' in the environs of Antioch, but there is clearly a deeply rooted veneration of these saints across Georgia. However, as highlighted in the previous chapter, this issue requires further exploration and cannot be accepted simply on the basis of contemporary beliefs about the past. Therefore there are a series of questions that we must consider in order to examine the veracity of these beliefs: When did the cult of Symeon Stylites enter Georgia? What evidence is there for the veneration of the saint(s)? Is there any archaeological or architectural evidence still extant to support Georgian assertions that stylitism became an accepted ascetic practice amongst Georgian monks in late antiquity through to the Middle Ages?

With the notable exception of the medallion discussed in chapter three, the first figural representations of Symeon Stylites in Georgian art still extant date from the eleventh century and originate in very different regions of the country. Perhaps the most famous Georgian depiction of Symeon is the metal icon currently on display in the Treasury of the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts in Tbilisi. It was originally part of the liturgical treasure of a church in Laghami village, part of the Mestia Community in Svaneti, and comprises a silver-gilt image mounted on a wooden board measuring 35.5 cm × 23 cm.[1] Symeon[2] is shown in half-bust format nimbed and wearing a monastic hood

1 p. 105, Burchuladze, Nana (ed.), *Medieval Georgian Ecclesiastical Art in The Georgian National Museum*, Tbilisi, 2012.

2 Lafontaine-Dosogne, following Chubinashvili, reports that the inscription refers to Symeon of the 'Miraculous Mountain', meaning that it is Symeon the Younger and that the inscription dates the icon to 1015, p. 194, Lafontaine-Dosogne, J., 'L'influence du culte de Saint Syméon

with the palms of both hands facing outwards towards the viewer, implying benediction. To the left of the image is the nimbed figure of Anton, Bishop of Tsageri[3] who stands with an uncovered head to a height of about three-quarters of the way up the pillar shaft. The column is elaborate and stands on a base with three steps, with a large foliate motif half way up the shaft and a stylized capital atop it that again incorporates foliate motifs rather than following one of the classical orders. The border of the icon has leaf-shaped vine-scrolls interspersed with ten busts within circular roundels. At the top centre of the border is a bust of Christ, whilst the others represent saints. The empty background around the pillar and Anton is half covered by an inscription and there are also characters inscribed on the three steps of the pillar. The icon dates to the early eleventh century and from the identity of the donor and the fact that it remained in Svaneti until its removal to the museum in Tbilisi, as well as a well-attested tradition of metal icons in Svaneti, would perhaps argue for its manufacture somewhere in that region.

The second notable representation of Symeon the Younger is believed to date to the eleventh or twelfth century, with Lafontaine-Dosogne placing it like the Laghami icon in the early eleventh century,[4] and is located far more centrally although the site has traditionally been classified as being in 'the wilderness'. This is the image of Symeon carved on the chancel screen in the main church at the lavra of Shiomghvime. The lavra's Church of St. John the Baptist is believed to date back to the sixth century, but has been extensively altered over the intervening centuries. The origins of the church are believed to date back to the early days of the monastery and this is where the significance of the image of Symeon Stylites is explained. Shiomghvime is a contraction of Shio, the name of one of the (As)Syrian Fathers and *mghvime*, a Georgian word for a cave. Shio is believed to have been one of the group who accompanied Ioane Zedazneli from Syria to Georgia and who then trekked approximately ten kilometres into the mountains west of Mtskheta to take up residence in an inaccessible cave high on a sheer rock face where, legend claims, he was fed by an dove. A lavra grew up around Shio's grotto and evolved by the Middle Ages into the monastic complex still present at Shiomghvime. The presence of Symeon is explained by reference to the tenth century *vita* of St. Shio, which

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Stylite le Jeune sur les monuments et les representations figurées de Géorgie', *Byzantion* 41 (1971), pp. 183–196.

3 Tsageri is in lower Svaneti, rather than in the more remote and mountainous region of higher Svaneti where Laghami is located.

4 p. 188, Lafontaine-Dosogne.

says that Ioane Zedazneli and his disciples visited Symeon Stylites before setting off on their journey to Georgia and it could be a reference to this episode which is depicted on the chancel screen, which also includes a panel showing a scene from the life of St. Shio.

The panel is one of four that were on the bottom section of the iconostasis. The originals are now housed in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts in Tbilisi. Three were still *in situ* in the 1930s when Taqaishvili documented them, with the fourth, more damaged, panel being displayed in another part of the church.[5] They comprise the Crucifixion, the Symeon Stylites scene, Evagre being led by the dove to discover Shio and a damaged image of the Hospitality of Abraham. Set within a stone framework of a double pomegranate flower-scroll on both sides, with the rounded pattern elongated to form leaf or teardrop shaped scrolls above and below, the inner frame of the panel has a foliate design above and below but the side borders are made up of a basket-weave pattern reminiscent of that seen on Byzantine capitals, including several still extant at Semandağ, the monastery of Symeon the Younger near Antioch.[6] The central image has Symeon atop his pillar in half bust form. As is common for this iconographical type, the bust is proportionately far larger than the column so that he appears to be bursting out of the pillar from the capital at waist level with no realistic place for his lower torso to be accommodated. He is nimbed and wearing the monastic hood with arms outspread in the posture of an orant. In the lower left of the panel, as with the Laghami icon, is another nimbed figure but in this case it is a female who Taqaishvili identified as the Theotokos.[7] Lafontaine-Dosogne associates the majority of stylite imagery in Georgia with Symeon Stylites the Younger and so her interpretation of the scene identifies the female figure as Martha, the mother of Symeon the Younger.[8] The pillar stands on a rocky base, rather than the three steps associated with Calvary, and the drum of the column is inscribed with three crosses as well as other decorative motifs. Behind the column and the figures stands a representation of a large church of the type that Chubinashvili dubbed a *Kreuzkuppelkirche*, having rejected the term 'domed basilica' when describing this kind of architecture. The typology of the church fits that of the building in which the iconostasis was constructed and so would at first glance seem to represent the lavra

5 pp. 101–103, Taqaishvili, E., 'Antiquities of Georgia', *Georgica*, 4 & 5 (1937), pp. 96–116.

6 See the entry for Semandağ on http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk At least two capitals with basketwork carving are were still extant when the author visited the site in 1997, as well as stone carved panels with similar interlace motifs.

7 p. 102, Taqaishvili.

8 p. 189, Lafontaine-Dosogne.

church rather than Qal'at Sem'an or that of Semandağ, however Lafontaine-Dosogne makes reference to the presence of the church in the scene to confirm her hypothesis that the saint in question is definitely Symeon the Younger by asserting that:

> La représentation de Syméon est d'un intérêt tout particulier pour notre propos. La colonne n'est plus isolée, mais se dresse devant l'ensemble des trois églises que comptait le monastère du Mont Admirable, et sainte Marthe, mere du saint, se tient à gauche sur le pilier à degrés qui existe encore actuellement au pied de la colonne. Ceci constitute la prevue irréfutable qu'il s'agit bien de Syméon le Jeune.[9]

Despite this the church in the background of the panel *does* fit schematically with the main church at Shiomghvime and it could be that, if we accept Lafontaine-Dosogne's assertion that the building is meant to represent the church on the 'Miraculous Mountain', the image is meant to serve a dual purpose and stand for both Symeon's church and that of Shiomghvime at the same time. We must not discount the fact that the lavra sits with the main monastic buildings set into the side of a steep hillside with a sheer rock face honeycombed with caves towering above it, meaning that the complex is accessed by a flight of steps to the west, which is also how the steps on which Martha stands could be construed rather than as a platform from which to communicate with the saint.

Further complication is added by the fact that although the *vita* of St. Shio that highlights the meeting of Ioane Zedazneli and his followers with Symeon Stylites purports to recount events of the early sixth century, it was written much later and so cannot be taken as an accurate portrayal of late antique events. Haas maintains that the timeline of the *vita* is somewhat anachronistic because he interprets the visit as being made to Symeon Stylites the Elder who died in 459[10] and therefore if his argument is correct then it is clear that the writer of the *vita* had a confused grasp of the chronology of late antiquity. Lafontaine-Dosogne associates the visit with Symeon the Younger, as do a num-

9 Ibid.

10 p. 95, Haas, Christopher, 'Ioane Zedazneli: A Georgian Saint in the Syrian Ascetical Tradition', in Skinner, Peter, Tumanishvili, Dimitri & Shanshiashvili, Anna (eds.), *Georgian Art in the Context of European and Asian Cultures: Proceedings of the Vakhtang Beridze 1st International Symposium of Georgian Culture, June 21–29, Georgia*, Georgian Arts and Culture Centre; Tbilisi, 2009, pp. 95–100.

ber of Georgian scholars[11] and it is clear that this fits the early sixth century time frame historically attributed to the thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers more convincingly and logically than a visit to his forebear. At this point it should be pointed out that both the *vita* of Symeon the Elder and that of Symeon the Younger make mention of Iberians but we shall discuss that issue further elsewhere in this chapter.

In her work outlining the relationship of Georgia with the cult of Symeon Stylites the Younger, Lafontaine-Dosogne makes an inventory of Stylite imagery in Georgia and can add another chancel screen relief of Symeon Stylites to that of Shiomghvime. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the story recounted above, this relief, though now also in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Art in Tbilisi, originated in the church of Zedazeni, the place Ioane Zedazneli settled on reaching Georgia and after which he is named. The fragment of sculpture has been dated as contemporary with the two examples discussed above as being early eleventh century, but only a portion of the image remains. It shows the saint nimbed and hooded once more, but is a three quarter length view whereby the saint stands in a balcony-like structure that reaches his chest in height. Between the wooden railings of an open balustrade we can see down to the thighs of the saint and below this point his legs and feet are hidden within a large stone capital with the rest of the column below now lost. The saint has his left hand raised in the orant gesture and the right one was presumably the same, but is now missing. The fragment has no other identifying features, leading Lafontaine-Dosogne to conclude that it is impossible to know if the elder or younger Symeon is represented in this case.[12]

Finally she makes a brief inventory of Stylite imagery in frescoes and records early eleventh century frescoes of both Symeon Stylites the Elder and Symeon the Younger in the refectory of the Udabno monastery in David Gareja, a thirteenth century fresco of Symeon the Younger at Shiomghvime and a fourteenth century one of him in the church besides the 'tower-house' of Ubisi. The first two locations are connected to the (As)Syrian Fathers and the third to the Georgian native variant of stylitism, which leads us neatly on to the next point.

11 For more on this see below.

12 p. 195, Lafontaine-Dosogne.

### When is a Stylite Not a Stylite? A Comparison of Pillars and Tower Houses

Here it is useful to pause a moment and to consider exactly what the concept of stylitism meant to late antique and medieval Georgian monks. Recent research on the Syrian material suggests that this was not always as clearly defined as later academics have assumed, indeed the sources suggest that even in Syriac the situation was often ambiguous as the Syriac term *esṭunā* could mean both 'pillar' and 'tower'[13] and was often used in an interchangeable sense. Added to this, one commentator has observed that:

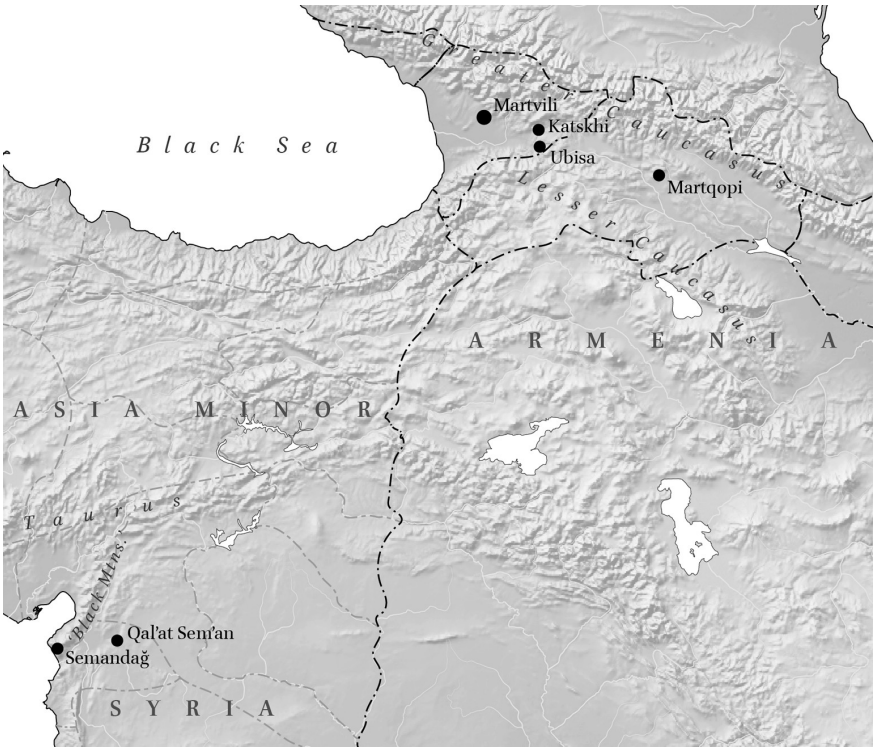
> Several centuries later in Asia Minor, the term stylite could be used for ascetics who did not live on pillars at all. On the contrary, these ascetics lived on top of rock formations that resembled pillars, and yet are referred to in our sources as 'Stylite recluses'.[14]

Schachner goes on to remark that even though they did not live on a pillar in the same manner as Symeon Stylites, the monks who adopted the lifestyle outlined above often believed themselves to be 'Stylites', as they felt their lifestyle choices to be inspired by Symeon's legacy. This argument is crucial to understanding the Georgian relationship with stylitism because, despite many claims to have a history of 'pillar' saints, there is no conclusive archaeological evidence still extant in Georgia today to support the argument that pillar-dwelling stylites in the manner of Symeon ever lived in the region. On the other hand there is a rich tradition of 'stylites' inhabiting pinnacles of rock or tower-houses and it is this tradition that appears to explain the numerous Georgian references to stylites across both eastern and western Georgia encompassing both Kartli and Egrisi (Map 4).

The most famous site associated with stylites in Georgia today is *Katskhis sveti* (Katskhi's pillar) in the village of Katskhi, in the district of Chiatura on the River Katskhura. This district lies in Imereti in western Georgia and although physically located to the west, is a region that has historically been closely linked in political and cultural terms with Kartli rather than Egrisi. The 'pillar' is a forty-metre high limestone pinnacle known by local people as 'Katskhi pillar' or 'The Life-giving pillar' and the ruins on the top of it are associated with

13 p. 333, Schachner, Lukas Amadeus, 'The Archaeology of the Stylite', *Late Antique Archaeology*, 6 (2010), pp. 329–397.

14 p. 334, Schachner.




MAP 4 *Locations in Syria and Georgia associated with Stylites*

St. Symeon Stylites.[15] This site was long attributed to the fifth or sixth century,[16] making it approximately contemporary with Symeon Stylites and his immediate followers. However recent archaeological survey and excavation at the site has radically altered the chronology of the buildings on top of the pinnacle and now brings the establishment of a small monastery at the site forward to the tenth century:

> A small monastery has been identified on Katskhi's "pillar", with the monastery having an economy completely unlike that of 5th–6th century Syrian Stylites, and probably Katskhi's pillar hermit monks followed a different rule to the Syrian Stylites, who followed an extremely ascetic life and a rule on a small pillar that provided only a small platform under the open skies (St. Symeon Stylites the Elder lived like this) as "Spiritual Ath-

15 p. 55, Gagoshidze, Giorgi, 'Katskhis Sveti', *Akademia*, 1 (2010), pp. 55–68.

16 See for example Lafontaine-Dosogne, p. 186.

> letes". Katskhi's "pillar" has a small monastery where two or three monks from a larger monastery were probably dedicated to serve in small single cells, which were strongly similar to those in Thessaly (Greece) where the Meteora Monastery (12th–16th centuries) was built on an impregnable cliff.[17]

Here Gagoshidze reinforces the point made above by linking this form of 'stylitism' to a disciplined monastic asceticism whereby practitioners isolate themselves from the world by taking up residence on an isolated and difficult to access rocky pinnacle. In this case it could be argued that the hermits are adhering to the *spirit* of stylitism, without following it to the letter. If we accept this argument, then there is relatively plentiful evidence for 'stylites' in Georgia.

Whilst the dramatic setting of the Katskhi monastery makes this the most famous 'stylite' dwelling in the country, a number of 'tower-houses' are known across the western and central regions of the country. The most famous 'stylite' in Georgian ecclesiastical history is St. Anton Martqopeli, one of the thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers who is believed to have ultimately settled at Martqopi, a site approximately eighteen kilometres north east of central Tbilisi. In the nineteenth century Platon Ioseliani argued that Anton lived at Koshki-Sveti one kilometre east of the monastery at Martqopi in a tower that he built himself and where he dwelt until the end of his life, and Gagoshidze identifies this as being the oldest 'tower' dwelling in Georgia (Fig. 11).[18] In the last decade researchers restoring the structure have reached the conclusion that the four storey tower probably dates to the eighth or ninth century, rather than to the sixth century as popular belief and earlier scholars had suggested.

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17 p. 58, Gagoshidze, translated by the author. კაცხის „სვეტზე" გამოვლენილი ეს მცირე მონასტერი, თავისი სამონასტრო მეურნეობით სრულიად არ ჰგავს V–VI საუკუნეების სირიული ყაიდის მესვეტეობას, და სავარაუდოდ, კაცხის სვეტზე დაყუდებული ბერების ცხოვრების წესი განსხვავდებოდა კიდეც სირიელი მესვეტეების მკაცრი და უკიდურესად ასკეტური ცხოვრების წესისგან, რომელიც ითვალისწინებდა სვეტის მცირე ბაქანზე, ღია ცის ქვეშ (წმ. სვიმეონ მესვეტე უფროსი ასე ცხოვრობდა) „სჯულიერ მოსაგრეობას". კაცხის „სვეტის" მცირე მონასტერი, სადაც სავარაუდოდ, ორი ან სამი ბერი მოღვაწეობდა დიდი მონასტრიდან გამოყოფილი მცირე მარტოდსამყოფელია და იერით ძლიერ ჰგავს თესალიაში (საბერძნეთი) არსებულ მეტეორას მონასტრებს (XII–XVI სს.), რომლებიც ამდაგვარ მიუდგომელ კლდეებზეა აშენებული.

18 p. 58, Gagoshidze.

FIGURE 11 *The 'Stylite tower' at Martqopi seen from the main monastery*

Although its origins are not as early as has been traditionally believed, the tower-house at Martqopi nevertheless remains the earliest example of this kind of monastic dwelling still exant in Georgia. Leaving aside Katskhi for the moment, the next instance of stylitism in Georgia we can trace was at Martvili in Samegrelo in the west, which was located in Egrisi/Lazica. Martvili monastery dates back to the seventh century, but Gagoshidze accepts Tsintsadze's evidence to assign the tower house at the site to the late tenth or early eleventh century[19] Ubisi monastery in Imereti also possesses a four storey

19 p. 59, Gagoshidze.

FIGURE 12 *'Stylite' tower house at Ubisi*

tower-dwelling directly to the east of the church and in this case we can pinpoint its age exactly as an inscription says that the tower was built in the year 1141 in the reign of King Demetre I (1125–1156) by Symeon Chqondideli (Fig. 12).[20] Finally Gagoshidze adds to this list a tower known as 'The one who is alone' (*martod-mqopeli*) in the vicinity of Rkoni monastery in Shida Kartli. He places the building in the later Middle Ages because of its interior construction technique and this accords with Suramelashvili who has assigned it a fifteenth century date.[21] Having reached the end of the confirmed list of tower-

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

dwellings Gagoshidze does concede that many similar buildings could have existed across Georgia as annexes to monasteries and as an example he points out that there is a strong possibility that a number of buildings at Mravalta at David Gareja were used in this manner.[22]

## The First Georgian 'Stylite'? The Case of St. Anton Martqopeli

Of all the Georgian 'stylite' locations, Martqopi is the one most closely linked in Georgian imagination with the Syrian stylites. Merkviladze asserts that the (As)Syrian Fathers went to be blessed by Symeon Stylites the Younger before setting out on their mission to Kartli[23] and places this event before he climbed the Miraculous Mountain, thereby saying that as the blessing must have taken place between Symeon becoming a monk in 528 and his ascending the pillar in 540/541, then the (As)Syrian Fathers must have arrived in Kartli between 528 and 540. This is all highly speculative, but is nevertheless an interesting way of seeking to reconcile the faith-based hagiographical literature with the historical chronology as by fixing the events in the lifetime of Symeon the Younger rather than linking them to that of Symeon the Elder, then the *vitae* of St. Anton and St. Shio can be made to fit a plausible historical timeline.

The Syrian relationship with Martqopi has also been emphasised by the belief that St. Anton carried with him the *acheiropoieton* of the Saviour from Edessa, in this case the *keramidion* rather than the *mandylion*.[24] The *keramidion*

22 To this list Lafontaine-Dosogne adds another site that she says dates to the eighth to ninth century and is contemporary with the tower at Martqopi at a place called Otlisi. She refers to the work of Tsintsadze as bringing the site to her attention, but despite referencing Tsintsadze throughout his article, Gagoshidze does not include Otlisi on his list of confirmed Georgian 'stylite' dwellings.

23 Cited p. 223 in Matitashvili, Shota, 'Kartuli bermonazvnoba VI–VIII saukuneebshi: Sirieli Mamebi', *Sami Saunje* 2 (2012), pp. 216–230.

24 See pp. 393ff. in Abuladze, Ilia, *Dzveli kartuli agiograpiuli literaturis dzeglebi*, 6 vols., Gamomtsemloba 'Metsniereba'; Tbilisi, vol. 4, 1968. It should also be explained that the *mandylion* was believed to be the sacred relic created when Christ wiped his face on a towel and it left a miraculous imprint of his features. This artefact was sent with a messenger to King Abgar of Edessa and resulted in him being cured of an unknown ailment. Therefore, as an object that was transformed by the power of Christ, the *mandylion* was the *primary* relic. When it was later hidden and the image of the *mandylion* was transferred to a tile, the *keramidion* became the *secondary* relic as it had not made contact with the body of Christ but was in fact the product of a secondary miracle.

was a miraculous image made by a tile resting against the *acheiropoieton* rather than the original *mandylion* itself.[25] This tradition is in direct contradiction to the beliefs regarding the Anchiskhati image now in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts in Tbilisi, which was also believed to be the *keramidion* in ancient sources, but in more recent history has been associated with the primary relic, the *mandylion* itself.

The tradition relayed in the *vita* of the saint says that it is Anton who carried the holy *keramidion* of Edessa to Martqopi so that it arrived on Georgian soil some centuries before the Anchiskhati image, which was translated to Tbilisi only in the seventeenth century from Ancha in Klarjeti, which had fallen under Turkish control. However the Martqopi icon is no longer extant as it was reputedly hidden by Bishop Giorgi Martqopeli at the time of Tamerlane's invasion and, as he later died without revealing its location, it has never been recovered.[26] Haas remarks that since the story of the *acheiropoieton* of Edessa gained currency in the early sixth century then this could be a factor seen to reinforce the supposed arrival of the thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers in Kartli at that time.[27]

However, as with the other *vitae* of the Fathers, the life of Anton was written much later than the events that the manuscript affects to recount and the story becomes much more complicated if we refer to the earliest extant text to discuss the (As)Syrian Fathers. In his work on the Sinai recension (N Sin 50), the earliest manuscript to record the *vitae* of these figures, Aleksidze comments that there is no mention at all of Anton Martqopeli[28] rather there were two traditions associated with two other (As)Syrian Fathers; Ezderios Nabukeli, later Samtavneli (also referred to as Isidore) was the 'censer and servant' of the Hierapolis *keramidion*[29] and Theodosius of Urhai (Edessa) later came with the Edessa icon (*mandylion*) to Rekha near Samtavisi, and was thereafter known as Theodosius Rekhali.[30] In Aleksidze's opinion this means that Anton Martqopeli had nothing to do with the translation of either the *mandylion* or the *keramidion* to Kartli and, as such, should be viewed as a disciple of the (As)Syrian

25 For more on the debate as to whether the image of Ancha is the *mandylion* or the *keramidion* see Karaulashvili, Irma, 'Anchiskhati: keramidioni hierapolisdan tu mandilioni edesidan?', *Mravaltavi* 20 (2003), pp. 170–178.

26 p. 230, Matitashvili, Shota, 'Kartuli bermonazvnoba VI–VIII saukuneebshi: Sirieli Mamebi', *Sami Saunje*, 2 (2012), pp. 216–230.

27 p. 97, Haas.

28 p. 13, Aleksidze, Zaza, 'Mandilioni da keramioni dzvel kartul mtserlobashi', *Academia* 1 (2001), pp. 9–15.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

Fathers such as Dodo Garejeli, whose ascetic zeal led eventually to his name being conflated with those of the original foreign visitors.

In fact given the convincing arguments of Aleksidze that Anton Martqopeli falls into a secondary category of (As)Syrian Fathers and in his view was most probably a native Kartvelian anyway, one is tempted to see an almost circular argument in place whereby a holy man (Anton) decided to move into the *koshki* (tower) at Martqopi and this unusual form of asceticism was believed to be 'foreign' or 'Syrian'. In light of this the associations with Edessa, the *keramidion* and the (As)Syrian Fathers could be interpreted as later accretions emphasising the 'Syrianness' of the story of Martqopi. A more recent layer to this narrative has seen, as with the Anchiskhati icon,[31] a situation where the identification of the holy object has shifted from an association with the secondary artefact (the *keramidion*) to the primary seat of holiness (the *mandylion*). Visitors to Martqopi are now told that St. Anton Martqopeli was responsible for bringing the *mandylion* to Georgia and imagery of this relic is prominent in the contemporary decoration of the monastery at the site.[32] Monks inform visitors that the relic is still within the environs of the monastic complex waiting until a sufficiently 'pure' person is judged worthy of the honour of recovering this sacred artefact. It is from the observation of the process of contemporary, post-Soviet myth-making in the Georgian Orthodox Church that one can perhaps best understand how the strata overlaying earlier foundation narratives came into existence.

## The Origins of Stylitism: A Return to Syria

As Schachner observes in 'The Archaeology of the Stylite', despite the widespread interest in Symeon Stylites and his continued presence as a motif in elements of contemporary culture, surprisingly little archaeological research has been undertaken with the aim of quantifying how many sites are linked to stylites. The best known material is, without question, those monuments linked to the founder of the movement Symeon Stylites the Elder and his successor Symeon the Younger. In both cases the evidence has survived because of

31 *Anchiskhati* means 'the image of Ancha' in Georgian. However, to make this work more understandable for those unfamiliar with the Georgian language, I use the (technically incorrect) designation of the 'Anchiskhati icon' in this work to maintain clarity.

32 For pictures of the monastery today, including the tower and frescoes and icons in the monastic church depicting Anton Martqopeli as the bearer of the *mandylion* see http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/show/736.

the relatively remote location on which they elected to set up their columns. It is also clear that in cases such as Symeon the Elder's famous disciple, Daniel the Stylite, we are almost certain never to find physical evidence of his pillar and the surrounding monastic foundation as it was built on the outskirts of fifth century Constantinople and was lost under the expansion of the conurbation some centuries ago. Despite this it is interesting that, until Schachner's 2010 article, there does not appear to have been a concerted effort to compile a list of known stylites and their *martyria*. In the gazetteer appended to his article stylites are recorded in: Egypt, Arabia, Palestine, Phoenicia, Syria, Cilicia, Osrhoene, Mesopotamia, Adiabene, Paphlagonia, Asia (Minor), Constantinople and Gaul.[33] Unsurprisingly there are far more stylites recorded in Syria than in any other region and Syria is followed by, again perhaps predictably, Osrhoene and Mesopotamia as the provinces possessing the next largest number of recorded stylites. Schachner's list claims to be definitive until c. 800 and it is perhaps for this reason that we do not find any Iberian stylites on the list as our earliest archaeological evidence of tower-house or pinnacle dwellers in Georgia seems to begin around the eighth to ninth centuries. Alternatively the omission could be because as their lifestyle was more *inspired* by the stylite movement rather than being true stylitism in its purest sense, they have not been recorded as stylites. Finally the silence relating to Iberia could simply be due to the impenetrability of the Georgian language and the fact that the Georgian saints' *vitae* have not been as easily accessible to foreign scholars as the Latin, Greek, Syriac and Coptic sources.

One element that has raised questions in the Syrian archaeological record is the prevalence of non-figural stylite imagery, which became increasingly stylised as the motif spread across the Syrian Limestone Massif.[34] Frankfurter has suggested that this imagery can be linked to the earlier baetyl cults of the region[35] and this could be one reason why there was an increasing emphasis on the pillar rather than the saint himself as the imagery of stylitism evolved in the wider region of northwestern Syria.[36] In Georgia where, for the reasons

33 pp. 382–386, Schachner, 'The Archaeology of the Stylite'.

34 For the most comprehensive survey of Syrian stylite imagery see: Peña, Ignace, Castellana, Pascal & Fernandez, Romuald, *Les stylites syriens*, *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum*, 16, Milan, 1987.

35 p. 180, Frankfurter, D.T.M., 'Stylites and Phallobates: Pillar Religions in Late Antique Syria', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 44:2 (1990), pp. 168–198.

36 See the entry for Sheikh Sulaiman on http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk where the symbol on the northern side of the western façade of the sixth-century church is a stylised representation of a stylite's column.

discussed elsewhere in this chapter the 'stylite' tradition is a more fluid concept, nobody has yet attempted an analysis of what, if any, aniconic stylite imagery may be present in the country. Interestingly Gagoshidze noted an equal-armed cross within a roundel carved into the side of the Katskhi rock pinnacle[37] and more crudely scratched beneath the cross is a pillar that stands on a three-stepped base. The fact that the cross is often shown in Oriental Christian iconography on a three-stepped base that signifies Calvary, we can interpret this image in one of two ways. It is either a schematic reference to the Crucifixion or alternatively is making a reference to the 'stylites' that inhabited the top of the pinnacle. If this carving is interpreted as the latter and viewed as a sign of the 'stylite' atop the pinnacle then we do have one piece of evidence suggesting at least a passing familiarity with the stylite imagery of northwest Syria. However, as mentioned above, it is perhaps unlikely that this imagery would have found the same resonance outside the environs of Syria and Mesopotamia, where the evidence suggests that the practice may have been heavily influenced by pre-Christian fertility cults, most memorably described by Lucian in his satirical work *De Dea Syria*[38] where he refers to 'phallobates' sitting atop giant phalli for forty days and nights to ensure the continued fertility of the wider community. If this is the case, then we are more likely to be looking at a stylised Crucifixion scene such as that found at Tell Tuneinir on the banks of the River Khabur in the Mesopotamian region of Syria.[39]

### Two Layers of Georgian Stylite Cult?

At this stage we need to stop and untangle the various strands of this interaction backwards. In the first instance it is indisputable that medieval Georgia saw the establishment of a devotional tradition that venerated Symeon Stylites. All evidence thus far overwhelmingly links this cult with Symeon the Younger rather than Symeon the Elder. This is logical given that Symeon the Younger lived in the sixth century and was strongly associated with Chalcedonian Orthodoxy, which as will be discussed later in this volume, was an image that the Georgian Church was keen to promote after joining the Chalcedonian fold in the early seventh century. On the other hand by dying in 459, a mere

37 Fig. 8., p. 67, Gagoshidze.

38 Lucian, Trans. Harmon, A.M., 'De Dea Syria', *Lucian*, vol. 4, Loeb Classical Library 162, Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA & London, 1925.

39 See http://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/Area9ArtifactsArt.html (Accessed 28.03.2017) and pers. comm. with Michael and Neathery Fuller.

eight years after the Council of Chalcedon in 451, nobody could really claim to know which side the first stylite, Symeon the Elder, may have favoured in this increasingly vicious disagreement. Therefore to venerate him too closely may have been a risk for a group who had been viewed by Constantinople as in theological error until their change of heart. With this in mind we need to separate the evidence and consider first the extent of the contact in the fifth and sixth centuries, before moving on to draw a conclusion as to what may have caused the later medieval flourishing of this cult.

One thing that *is* certain is that both stylites were known in 'Iberia' (Kartli) within their own lifetimes as Theodoret refers to men coming from this nation to speak with the Symeon the Elder in the fifth century[40] and there are references to Iberians interacting with both Symeon the Younger and with his mother St. Martha in the sixth century.[41] This contact with the younger stylite and his mother has long been one of the central planks in the argument for the existence of the (As)Syrian Fathers and is often pointed to as definitive proof that monasticism entered sixth century Georgia from Syria. However this concentration on the *vitae* of the stylites is misleading; rather than being indicative of the content of a wide number of texts, these references to Iberians are actually extremely rare in late antique Syriac sources. Syrian and Mesopotamian Christians would have known of the conversion of Iberia as Theodoret included the narrative of a 'captive woman' who cured an Iberian queen causing her unnamed husband to see the truth of her faith and thereby adopt Christianity, in his *Ecclesiastical History*.[42] Despite this there is no other Syrian or Mesopotamian literary evidence still extant to cast light on the wider extent of dealings between the two regions and, as the previous chapter demonstrated, the archaeological record is equally mute on this account. Therefore if we are looking for any contemporary evidence that the Iberian visitors to Qal'at Sem'an and Semandağ carried anything back with them to Kartli we are left only with the silver medallion from Davit Gareja discussed in the previous chapter.

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40 xxvi, 11,13, p. 165 & p. 167, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Trans. Price, R.M., *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Cistercian Publications; Kalamazoo, 1985.

41 Chapters 103, 130, 131, 136 and 253 of the *vita* of Symeon and chapters 53, 54, 56, 57 and 65 of the *vita* of St. Martha concern Iberians. See Van den Ven, Paul, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune (521–592)*, I. *Introduction et texte grec*, II. *Traduction et Commentaire, Vie grecque de sainte Marie, mère de S. Syméon, Indices*, Subsidia Hagiographica 32, Société des Bollandistes; Brussels, 1962 & 1970.

42 pp. 73–75, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Trans. Walford, Edward, *Ecclesiastical History*, Samuel Bagster & Sons; London, 1844.

On the other hand the Crucifixion/aniconic stylite scene recorded at Katskhi by Gagoshidze finds a close parallel in the panel mentioned above discovered at Tell Tuneinir on the River Khabur in today's Mesopotamian Syria. In addition to the marble Crucifixion panel another similar carved limestone tablet was found in a grave. Missing its upper section, this panel has only one central cross within an elaborate arched doorway that Michael Fuller interpreted as Christ and the gateway to heaven, as in the imagery of Rev. 3:20. Finally a third, heavily weathered, stone plaque found at the same location also recalled the Crucifixion with a cross on a column displayed between two pillars on stepped bases that terminate in lollipop-like circular heads. All three of these artefacts were discovered in the excavation of a monastery at the southwestern edge of the settlement next to the river. However the fragments of a plaque with similar iconography were also recovered in a church at the eastern extremity of the site showing that this was a popular and widespread motif. The eastern church at Tell Tuneinir was active between late antiquity and the Ayyubid period,[43] whilst the monastery church appears to have remained in use until the final destruction of the settlement by Tamerlane in 1401 CE.[44] Overall the evidence appears to suggest that these decorative panels belong to the eighth to ninth centuries, or perhaps a little earlier[45] and this fits neatly with the Katskhi carving if we accept that it was made near the time of the first occupation of the site, which Gagoshidze places at the tenth century but that could also possibly be viewed as contemporary with Martqopi, and therefore seen as an eighth or ninth century foundation. In this way there is a suggestion that there was a link between Mesopotamia and Kartli in this era and, as discussed above, Schachner has remarked on the prevalence of stylite practices in Syria and Mesopotamia up until 800 CE.

If we then turn our attention to the later renaissance of stylite imagery in Georgian sculpture, fresco painting and metalwork, we see that the unifying factor here seems to be that the image of Symeon the Younger experienced remarkable popularity from the early eleventh century onwards. Whilst this later period lies outside the purview of this study it is worth commenting that Djobadze's survey of the Georgian monasteries in the region of Antioch[46]

43 https://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/tuneinir/area3.html (Accessed 28.03.2017).

44 https://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/tuneinir/area9.html (Accessed 20.03.2017).

45 This is based on fieldwork studying similar motifs reproduced on stucco decoration at a monastery on Sir Bani Yas island in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, see Elders and Loosley forthcoming in a volume by Gorgias Press on the excavations at Sir Bani Yas, Abu Dhabi.

46 Djobadze, Wachtang Z., *Materials for the study of Georgian monasteries in the Western envi-*

seems to point to a decline in the Georgian presence in and around Semandağ from the end of the tenth century onwards. With this in mind it is tempting to suggest that a number of Kartvelian monks returned to their motherland during the early eleventh century and thereby initiated a second wave of stylite devotion within their native land. Naturally this is something that needs further exploration, but the coincidence of the flourishing of the stylite cult in Georgia at a time when it appears that Kartvelian monks were abandoning the Antioch region is certainly striking.

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*rons of Antioch on the Orontes*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 372, Subsidia 48, Louvain, 1976 and Djobadze, Wachtang, *Archaeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch On-The-Orontes*, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden Gmbh; Stuttgart, 1986.

CHAPTER 5

# The Evidence Written in Stone: An Evaluation of the Relationship (or Not) of Syrian and Georgian Ecclesiastical Architecture

## Giorgi Chubinashvili and the Cult of Georgian Exceptionalism

> C'est précisément au début de la période de féodalité que la culture et l'art géorgiens acquirent définitivement leur propre caractère national nettement prononcé.[1]

Anyone seeking to become acquainted with the history of Georgian Architecture will soon become aware of the fact that the field is fraught with methodological problems and has been largely static since the death of Giorgi Chubinashvili in 1973. Chubinashvili was the dominant figure in the field throughout the Soviet era and the subject is still controlled by his students, who have failed to significantly move the discipline forward in the forty-five years since his death. Whilst Chubinashvili may be credited as the founding father of the modern disciplines of art and architectural history in Georgia and is notable for his extensive publications, in common with a number of Soviet scholars his output is now widely viewed as being of variable quality. Particular instances where recent research has proved Chubinashvili's suppositions to be wrong will be discussed later in this chapter but here it is important to highlight from the outset the fact that his limitations are rooted in three particular issues.

The first is that he was handicapped by working on a largely ecclesiastical architectural tradition in a time and place where theological knowledge was unavailable and actively forbidden as an area of research, meaning that he could only study the monuments in a schematic manner that divorced form from function; this facilitated the development of a typology of ecclesiastical architecture that did not question the developing ritual needs of the

1 p. 3, Beridze, Vaktang, 'L'architecture religieuse georgienne des IVe–VIIe siecles', *Kartuli khelovnebisadmi misdzghnili II saertashoriso simpoziumi*, Institut Tschubinaschvili d'histoire de l'art georgien, Metsniereba; Tbilisi, 1977.

faithful and relied entirely on a few dated inscriptions along with a visual evaluation of decorative elements as the mechanism by which a fixed chronology was established. The second impediment was the prevailing narrative of Georgian exceptionalism—succinctly summarised in the quotation by Beridze above. Even in the Soviet era Georgian historical sources abound in examples of work where the national identity of Georgia and the Georgian 'national character' is given a disproportionate emphasis and there is a failure to contextualise material into a wider Transcaucasian framework. In this instance this attitude is most clearly expressed in a tendency to mention Armenian monuments in passing or not at all, meaning that as observed in the introduction to this volume, very little work has yet been undertaken in order to understand events in Georgia in tandem with what was happening in Armenia, Caucasian Albania and further afield. The final difficulty was entirely beyond the physical or ideological control of Chubinashvili and his contemporaries. This limitation was that aside from areas such as Armenia and Azerbaijan that were also within the Soviet Union, it was impossible for Georgian scholars to travel to other countries. Therefore they could only write about monuments in places such as Asia Minor and Syria based on the literature on these sites they were able to access. In the era of the internet it is very easy to forget how academic research has been revolutionised in less than two decades by the advent of the world wide web. Not only are we able to locate scholarly materials more easily, but we can also access photographs and maps that enable us to travel virtually across the globe in a manner that simply wasn't possible until the advent of the digital age. Knowing where to begin to search for information is half the battle for scholars and unable to visit the sites in question, working from a few floorplans and largely outdated texts, it is unsurprising that Chubinashvili often failed to interpret monuments in Syria and Asia Minor correctly. On the other hand, this practice of using limited and outdated sources is still widespread and considered acceptable academic practice in many areas of contemporary Georgian academia today where there is a general lack of robustly peer-reviewed journals and a significant portion of the current 'academic' output is self-funded without any effective quality control. In part this situation is a symptom of the post-Soviet collapse of academia discussed in chapter one, but it is also indicative of a small society that has become more inward-looking as education in foreign languages has declined since 1991.

Despite this there are naturally a number of exceptions to prevailing trends and, in archaeological research at least, Chubinashvili's typology is being successfully challenged by the results of recent excavations in the Kakheti region of eastern Georgia. Here the arguments are supported by scientific data such

as C14 dating, stratified numismatic finds and a clear ceramic typology[2] that is now being cross-referenced with C14 results. A recent paper sums up the state of Georgian research in the field in the following terms:

> The mentioned above rather strange versions hastily elaborated by the representatives of the Georgian art history school in relation to the given problem in the 20-s of the last century, have not experienced substantial evolution for decades. For example, even today in the works of these researchers we can find the propositions supposing that allegedly, unlike the whole early Byzantine world and countries within its cultural circle, the Iberian authorities, during more than a century after recognition Christianity as the state religion, have been building exceptionally miniature churches of almost any design, based on the oral descriptions of the missionaries about the temples of leading Christian countries (due to inadequate perception of liturgical processes performed there) …
>
> … Even recently, the mentioned above part of the Georgian art historians have named the impeding reason for revising this almost dogmatic, not documentarily confirmed opinion, stating that in order to revise the described proposition, they practically have not had tangible materials at hand—i.e., could not find above-ground remaining samples of large churches, built in the IV or even last quarter of the V centuries in East Georgia with objective dating signs, constructed in accordance with the accepted canonical planning, recognized by the early Christian foreign world; such monuments were not revealed even 15 years ago through archeological methods.[3]

So if we accept that the comparisons of Syrian and Georgian architecture made by Georgian scholars are often based on flawed assumptions and understand that on the other side of the equation only passing references are made to Transcaucasian monuments in works examining Syrian ecclesiastical architecture, where should we begin in formulating a comparative study of Syrian and Georgian ecclesiastical architecture in late antiquity?

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2 Bakhtadze, Nodar, *Ceramics in Medieval Georgia*, Georgian National Museum; Tbilisi, 2013.

3 Bakthtadze, Nodar, 'The Oldest Basilicas Revealed in Nekresi Former City and Hypotheses on the Architectural Design of the First Georgian Christian Churches', Jena, 2017 (forthcoming).

## Syria and Mesopotamia: A Story of Two Distinct Architectural Traditions

As discussed above in chapter one, the country that we call Syria today actually straddles the two older territories of Syria and Mesopotamia. It also encompasses very different geographical and geological features meaning that building styles and techniques vary significantly between the east and west of the country. In particular, as discussed in chapter two, the plentiful supply of stone (in particular limestone and basalt) in the west of the country is not replicated in the east where rough fieldstone and rubble construction or adobe buildings are the norm. This is highlighted here because although there has been a concentration on studying the elegant, well-preserved stone edifices in the west, in particular the dense concentration of villages on the Syrian limestone massif between Aleppo and Antakya, straddling the Syrian-Turkish border[4] there has been less work undertaken in the east of the country where there is less extant archaeology above the surface of the landscape given the more fragile nature of the building technique and the fact that the sandy soil has been more likely to cover abandoned buildings than in the west, where the soil is denser and has largely remained under cultivation as olive and fruit orchards or used for pasturing animals.

As the eastern part of Syria is largely a desert landscape, the only significant occupied zone has been the fertile strip along the line of the River Euphrates and its tributaries, particularly the River Khabur that joins the Euphrates just south of the modern town of Al Busayrah. Although the archaeological significance of this region has long been recognised with the spectacular Bronze Age city of Mari and the exceptional preservation of the Roman era town of Dura Europos[5] located on the west bank of the Euphrates in the far east of the country, as with other parts of the country, archaeological exploration of the region was only expanding to other, less exceptional sites in the decades before the outbreak of war in 2011.

Both this relative lack of archaeological research as well as the later influx of foreign researchers, were due to a variety of complex socio-political and economic problems specific to the northeastern part of the country. In the first

4 And here the author must also plead guilty to a concentration on this region in the past, for example in her doctoral research published as Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema in Fourth to Sixth-Century Syrian Churches*, USEK, Patrimoine Syriaque vol. 2; Kaslik, Lebanon, 2003 (re-issued in a second edition by Brill, 2012).

5 For more on Dura Europos see chapter two.

instance the far northeast region in and around the city of Hassakeh was inhabited largely by Kurds and Christians, the majority of whom were members of the Syrian Orthodox Church or of the Church of the East. Some of these groups had been resident in the region for many generations, but a large number had moved there fleeing twentieth century persecutions and this movement continued throughout the twentieth century as Christians fled discrimination in Turkey and Kurds fled violence in both Turkey and Iraq. The ongoing conflict in Iraq had also led to the creation of refugee camps in the area and the region was viewed by distrust by the government due to the presence of a number of Christian and Kurdish political movements being active in the province.[6] Further south, towards the city of Deir ez Zor the local population was dominated by powerful Sunni Arab tribes, who also chafed under Ba'athist rule and were viewed with suspicion by Damascus.

Given that Deir ez Zor was the centre of the Syrian oil industry, the government sought to keep a tight lid on any possible disruption in the area and part of this process involved limiting the access of foreigners to the wider region, unless they were in the employ of an oil company or part of an organised tour visiting the most famous archaeological sites along the Euphrates. An exception to this was made from the 1980s onwards as a series of dam construction projects led to teams of archaeologists being invited to undertake salvage expeditions ahead of construction work in anticipation of the rising water levels. However, perhaps unsurprisingly given the wealth of prehistoric remains in the region, the salvage effort overwhelmingly concentrated on the earliest periods of occupation represented by the string of tells stretching across the landscape. The sole project to prioritise a later period, specifically the late antique and medieval evolution of a settlement, was the American Mission to Tell Tuneinir led by Michael and Neathery Fuller of the St. Louis Community College, Missouri. Unfortunately the campaign has never been fully published, but a summary of the findings of the expedition including maps, pictures and C14 dating results have been made available online.[7]

Several years before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 a new dam was planned for the Khanuqa Gap on the Euphrates in order to create a second large reservoir east of the Assad Lake, which was formed by the building of the Euphrates Dam at Tabqa, west of Raqqa. The Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) fought this development on the grounds that it

6 Pers. comm. with various informants who shall remain unnamed for safety considerations given the conflict situation in both Syria and Iraq at the time of writing.

7 For the project archive see https://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/tuneinir/ (Accessed 31.03.2017).

risked irrevocable harm to an area of outstanding archaeological significance, but eventually were overruled by a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court of Syria and left with no options but to mobilise archaeologists to the region to salvage as much information as possible before it was destroyed by the rising water levels.[8]

This mobilisation of archaeologists into the area immediately upstream of Deir ez Zor complimented the long-running French Misson to Halabiyeh/Zenobia that had worked on the Classical and Late Antique city, by facilitating a Syrian exploration of the Byzantine era site at Kasra[9] and a British-Syrian project at the Byzantine/early Islamic fortress at Zalabiyeh[10] however, this was only the beginning of the exploration of this period in this particular province in Syria and the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 has meant that only a small proportion of the potential data was retrieved from the region before excavations were curtailed by the hostilities. Despite these significant limitations, what can be discerned from the Tell Tuneinir material is that stylistically the ecclesiastical material of Syrian Mesopotamia (the part of contemporary Syria that lies on the east bank of the Euphrates) is far closer to Sassanian forms of artistic expression than it is to the clearly Romano-Byzantine idioms familiar in the west of the country. The curving foliate and arabesque motifs that are found in conjunction with the imagery of the cross in Tell Tuneinir find their parallel in forms found across the wider region to the east of the Euphrates and appear as far afield as Kerala in southern India. The sinuous foliate reliefs and capitals known from Sassanian decoration were a formative influence on the art of the Church of the East[11] and also found favour with the Syrian Orthodox who settled within the region.

Neither tradition of decoration in Syria particularly favoured the use of figural, or even animal, motifs with the notable exception of mosaic pavements where a variety of non-religious scenes have been discovered.[12] There was also a

8 Pers. comm. Dr. Michel al Maqdissi of the DGAM in negotiations to begin excavations at Zalabiyeh, December 2009.

9 Abdullah, Yaarob, 'The Works of the Syrian Mission in the Byzantine City (Tell Al Kasra) in Five Seasons (2006–2010)', *Res Antiquitatis* 2 (2011), pp. 269–285.

10 Loosley, E., 'The Citadel of Zalabiyeh on the Euphrates: Placing the site in its historical context and a summary of the first archaeological field season (2010),' *Res Antiquitatis* 2 (2011), pp. 259–268, Loosley, E. & Bryant, J., 'Zalabiyeh on the Euphrates: The Historical Evidence and the 2010 Archaeological Discoveries', *Res Antiquitatis* 5 (2014).

11 As mentioned above, this is the correct term today for the group formerly pejoratively referred to as the Nestorian Church.

12 In a now outdated article, Nasrallah highlighted this dearth of figural evidence by asserting

relative lack of epigraphic data included in the decoration of these early ecclesiastical monuments in the west, where Syriac inscriptions in stone were quite rare and any data was more likely to have been recorded in Greek, or in the earlier monuments of the first and sceond centuries CE even in Latin. The evidence from Tell Tuneinir provided a great deal more epigraphic data than was generally present in western sites and all of it was in the Syriac *estrangelo* script, again suggesting a very different tradition of adorning churches and monasteries in the Mesopotamian region. Therefore when people refer to the 'Syrian Style' of ecclesiastical architecture and the related language of architectonic ornament[13] they are overwhelmingly referring to the style associated with the stone-built monuments of the west of the country—in particular those of the northwest limestone massif, although a certain amount of attention has also been paid to the buildings still extant from the same period in the south of the country. This style is an elegant Romano-Byzantine adaptation of the Classical repertoire of architectural ornament in which typical elements such as dentillated window mouldings, acanthus capitals and Greek key motifs are found alongside Christian imagery such as the Chi Rho and, overwhelmingly, the equal-armed cross.

With so little known about the traditions further to the east there has been a tendency to suggest one uniform 'Syrian Style' and yet the evidence does not support this—instead it points us towards the existence of a second parallel tradition in Syrian Mesopotamia that was part of the Sassanian world in artis-

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that such imagery barely reached double figures. He said that Lassus argued that around 20 such representations had been found on the Syrian limestone massif, another 5 in and around Antioch, 12 from the northeast of Syria and 5 of uncertain provenance. To this Nasrallah added 3 more examples from the Qalamoun region of central Syria and 1 more from Salamiyeh in the northeast. See Nasrallah, Joseph, 'Bas-reliefs chrétiens inconnus de Syrie', *Syria* 38:1 (1961), pp. 35–53. Although this article is now clearly rather old, it is difficult to evaluate how many more such artefacts were discovered after this article. Certainly there were no newer reliefs on show in national museums (or kept in storage) and, as mentioned in the article, many finds disappeared into private collections—suffice it to say the overall picture has not changed substantially since 1961 and there is no reason to believe that we will find a great deal of figurative art from this period in the future. The sole exception being in the field of floor mosaics, where it is not uncommon to find pastoral or classical scenes in the most well-funded ecclesiastical endowments.

13 See in particular Strube, Christine, *Baudekoration im Nordsyrischen Kalksteinmassiv. Band 1. Kapitell-, Tür- und Gesimsformen der Kirchen des 4. und 5. Jahrhunderts n. Chr*, Philipp von Zabern; Mainz, 1993, Strube, Christine, *Baudekoration im Nordsyrischen Kalksteinmassiv. Band 11. Kapitell-, Tür- und Gesimsformen des 6. und frühen 7. Jahrhunderts n. Chr*. Philipp von Zabern; Mainz, 2002.

tic terms and which called upon Persian artistic idioms to forge a new and different Christian language. This east Syrian tradition does not draw primarily from the Classical vocabulary that is the foundation of the western Syrian style, but is instead a tradition that mixes Sassanian artistic traditions with the native Semitic style most famously apparent at Palmyra. Once this situation is made clear and these two distinct architectural and artistic currents are separated from each other the relationship with Georgia begins to make more sense. Naturally there was some overlap between the two neighbouring Syrian and Syro-Mesopotamian traditions, notably in places like Palmyra that took elements from both cultures, but in Kartli we see a clear preference for a Sassanian and east Syrian idiom that bears little relation to the Christian architecture of western Syria in late antiquity.

## Bolnisi Sioni and the Beginnings of Georgian Christian Architecture

The first securely dated church still extant in Georgia today is the large basilica at Bolnisi in Kvemo Kartli. The early Georgian inscription on the exterior of the central apse[14] dates the completion of the construction of the church to the year 493. It states that the project was begun in 478 by Bishop David and that Shah Peroz was ruler at the time that building commenced.[15] However the inscription fails to refer to the ruler of Persia at the time of the completion of the project or to name the ruler of Kartli, who at the time was the semi-legendary Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali. Bolnisi Sioni is by no means the first church to have been built in Georgia (although it is the first to bear a foundation inscription) and we will turn to some of the earlier monuments later in this chapter, but is highlighted here because the inscription makes it abundantly clear that in this region at least the Persian Shah was of more significance to the local populace than the Kartvelian monarch in the new capital of Tbilisi.

With this being the case it should then come as no surprise that the decorative scheme of the church is typically Sassanian utilising the same foliate motifs found throughout the Persianate world at this time (Fig. 13). This similarity extends beyond vegetal and geometric patterns into the realm of three dimensional statuary with the inclusion of a bull's head sculpted in an exterior

14 The inscription in place today is a replica—the original is now housed in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Art in Tbilisi.

15 p. 61, Chubinashvili, Giorgi N., 'Bolnisskiĭ sion (k voprosu ėvoliutsii bazilichnoĭ formy)', *Iz Istorii Srednevekovogo Iskusstva Gruzii*, Sovetskiĭ Khudozhnik; Moscow, 1990, pp. 60–71.

FIGURE 13 *Example of Sassanian influenced decoration at Bolnisi Sioni*

aisle of the church that is very close in execution to an example from Hajiabad in Fars, Iran, dated to the fourth century.[16] This conjunction of Persian influenced architectonic decoration and the emphasis on the Shah over the local ruler make it clear that in this region of Kvemo Kartli, which was an area in the marchlands that fell between Armenia and the heart of of Kartvelian territory, the overriding cultural influence came not from Syria, but from the Persian east. However, if we take into account the evidence from Syrian Mesopotamia discussed briefly above, we can see that this style was a constant and unifying element amongst all peoples under Persian suzerainty and its idiom was adapted by people following a variety of religious practices, from the native Persian Zoroastrians to Christians and, later, to the first Muslims who expanded into Persian territory.

This adaptation of Sassanian architectonic idioms should come as no surprise in Kartli, given the widespread influence of Sassanian art, architecture and literary culture throughout the classical era and beyond into the early

16 This head was labelled as a Zebu, but actually looks closer to a bull and was seen by the author in a temporary exhibition at the National Museum of Tehran, Iran in 2006. Ayazi, Souri & Miri, Sima, *Decorative Architectural Stucco from the Parthian and Sassanid eras*, National Museum of Iran; Tehran, undated.

FIGURE 14 *South façade of Tsilkani with decorative bands over windows*

Christian period. The curling vine scrolls, arabesques and lavishly stylised foliate motifs are most apparent in southern and central regions where the soft rock, in particular the beautiful Bolnisi tuff, was easily dressed as large uniform masonry blocks and was also eminently suitable for carving into capitals, decorated pilasters and lintels and other ornamental elements. Therefore the visual legacy of a Sassanian heritage is prominent throughout the southern marchlands and northwards into Shida Kartli wherever elements of the earliest decorative schema of churches remain extant.

For example at Tsilkani in Shida Kartli a first glance at the church reveals the remnants of the original late antique structure on the south façade of the building. The initial impression is suggestive of a link with Syrian ecclesiastical decoration. The swooping curve of the decorative band that follows the top line of the window arches as a curvilinear motif along the edge of Syrian monuments was a common exterior feature on the limestone massif and here at Tsilkani we seem to be encountering the same form of decoration (Fig. 14). In Syria we can observe this feature particularly at high status fifth century sites such as Qal'at Sem'an (Fig. 15) and Qalb Lozeh, where a decorative band of linear decoration snakes across the building exteriors demonstrating a commitment to the high quality execution of work both inside and out. However, closer examination of these superficial parallels reveals that at Tsilkani there is a T-shaped panel disrupting the flow of the decorative band between the

FIGURE 15 *Exterior view of the apse at Qal'at Sem'an showing the linking band of decoration around the windows*

FIGURE 16 *Possible spolia inside Tsilkani church*

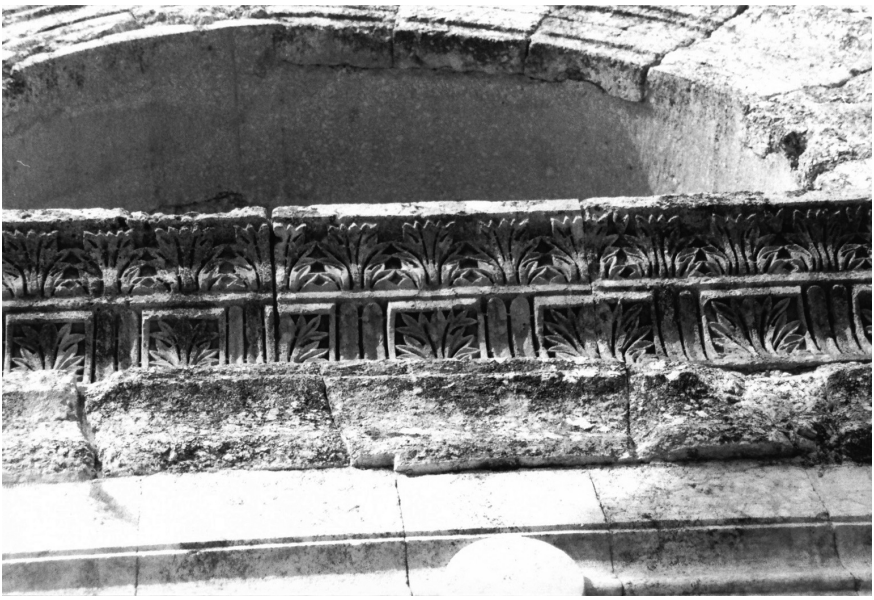

FIGURE 17 *Decorative detail from Qal'at Sem'an*

two windows that remain of the earliest building phase—an element unknown in Syrian buildings of the same period. In addition the two windows have different motifs above them; that to the west has a vinescroll pattern, while that further east has a far simpler design of perpendicular lines. On closer analysis it becomes clear that in reality this fragment of the original façade bears little similarity to the horizontal linearity familiar from the Syrian limestone massif. This dissonance between the Syrian and Kartvelian traditions is further apparent in the church interior where spolia from the earlier structure have been incorporated in the fabric of the medieval renovation of the church (Fig. 16). Here again the stylised foliate motifs are more rounded and fluid than the schematized horizontal bands utilised in northwestern Syria. In Syria the geometric decoration is interspersed with some foliate elements, but this is largely in the form of acanthus leaves that, even when carved in curving rolls, are formal and lack the movement found in the comparative Sassanian leaf scrolls (Fig. 17). Taking these factors into consideration, once again it seems that the decorative inspiration at Tsilkani is likely to have been Sassanian in origin as close reading of the monument reveals any perceived Syrian influence to be superficial and unable to withstand close scrutiny.

However, as mentioned above, in Kartli where there is a plentiful supply of stone that can be easily dressed and carved, it is relatively simple to look for a relationship with neighbouring artistic traditions on the level of similarities in

decorative scheme. In Kakheti to the east, where a relative lack of high-quality building materials means that a number of monuments there have been built with fieldstone and boulders salavaged from watercourses, then we are dealing with a vernacular that eschews decorative flourishes for practical reasons. When searching for relationships with other traditions in these circumstances it is necessary to leave questions of aesthetics behind and move on to the crucial relationship of the form and function of these monuments.

## Kakheti and the Enduring Question of the Triple Church Basilica

One of the anomalies of early Georgian ecclesiastical architecture is the early appearance of 'Triple Church Basilicas'. For the uninitiated it is easy to assume that this term refers simply to a conventional basilica terminating in an apsed (or flat walled) sanctuary at the east end of the church and possessing north and south aisles that usually terminated in the small chambers that were commonly used for a variety of liturgical functions. This is a standard form of early Christian architecture and so does not appear particularly revolutionary at first sight; however if the reader takes a closer look at floorplans it soon becomes clear that something rather odd is happening. These 'Triple Basilicas' are designed so that there is either no communication between the central nave and the side aisles except via a narthex at the west end or, alternatively, they are only accessed via one door from the central nave into the auxiliary space created by the aisles, which almost appear to have been appended to the main structure as later appendages—even though it is clear that the entire monument was constructed at the same time. Another common element for this type of building, although this is not universal, is that the north and south aisles are semi-open to the elements due to the central sections of the north and south exterior walls being replaced by an arched arcade.

What is certain is that this is a peculiarly Georgian phenomenon and yet this fact seems not to have been recognised by specialists within the country. Time and again these monuments are referred to as being as of 'Syrian' origin and, when attempts are made to pin down this assertion there is frustratingly little indication as to where this belief originated.[17] That this subgroup

17 The author has attempted to trace the origins of this assertion in conversation with a variety of art historians and archaeologists, in particular in discussion with art historian Dr. Nino Simonishvili and archaeologist Dr. Nodar Bakhtadze. Both confirmed that these basilicas were traditionally thought of as 'Syrian' and believed the assertion began with Chubinashvili although were unable to pinpoint a specific reference. Both were surprised

of churches represented something unusual seems to have been recognised in the first half of the twentieth century when it was the subject of a monograph by Baltrušaitis,[18] but his work does little more than document where and when examples of 'cloisonné' churches (to use his terminology) have been discovered. He devoted the largest chapter of his slim volume on the phenomenon to Georgia, but whereas he raised a variety of pertinent questions, the work ultimately failed to offer any convincing explanations for why churches were constructed in this manner.

Another factor in the discussion is that of the dating of these churches. Until recently this architectural disposition has been largely associated with basilicas from the late fifth century onwards, with the latest examples appearing to have been built at the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries. This view was based upon the ages of the monuments still extant and did not take into account the possibility of earlier monuments being discovered in future archaeological excavations. However more recent information based on excavation suggests that some of the earliest churches built on Georgian territory followed this design and that therefore the evidence suggests that we are dealing with a vernacular ecclesiastical variant that predates the standardisation of church building and the liturgy in Kartli.

Recent discoveries have led to a re-evaluation of older excavation reports and the data from older campaigns can now be seen to support newer findings demonstrating that these 'triple' basilicas were being built as early as the second half of the fourth century. For example two churches built in this way were excavated in Areshi, east of Kvareli in Kakheti in the late 1970s and early 1980s under the direction of Levan Chilashvili[19] but were not recorded as being 'triple' basilicas because their dating did not accord with the widely received interpretation published by Chubinashvili that such basilicas did not appear until a later period.[20] However the more recent discoveries of much larger triple basil-

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to learn that no such monument is known from Syria—in either Syria or the part of contemporary Syria that lies east of the Euphrates in antique Assyria/Mesopotamia.

18 Baltrušaitis, Jurgis, *L'Église Cloisonné en Orient et en Occident*, Les Éditions D'Art et D'Histoire; Paris, 1941.

19 See Chilashvili, L., Kiknadze, G., Apkhazava, N. & Bakhtadze, N., 'Areshis nakalakaris gatkhrebi (1978–1979 tsts.)', *Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo muzeumis arkeologiuri ekspeditsiebi* 7 (1980), pp. 64–78, Chilashvili, L., Kiknadze, G., Apkhazava, N., Bakhtadze, N. & Gotsadze, K., 'Areshis ekspeditsiis shedegebi', *Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo muzeumis arkeologiuri ekspeditsiebi* 8 (1986), pp. 92–105.

20 Prof. Nodar Bakhtadze, pers. comm.

icas at Chabukauri and Dolochopi in the territory of Nekresi and their dating to the late fourth and early fifth centuries suggest that the Areshi discoveries were in fact typical for the Kakhetian vernacular church architecture of the earliest Christian era rather than being an anomaly.

This issue is particularly sensitive because Nekresi *has* traditionally been regarded as the site of the earliest church in Georgia still extant. The problem is that the monument in question is not one of the basilicas being discussed. Rather it is a curious, misshapen monument that has openings in all of the cardinal directions and no obvious space set aside for the processes of religious ritual (Fig. 1). It is immediately clear that this small and irregular building is in fact a prototype mortuary chapel—a fact that has been confirmed by archaeological exploration in the chamber beneath the main floor of this 'basilica.' The excavations have revealed the cavities in which the faithful would pour oil, in order for it to pass over the bones of the 'martyrs' and be sanctified for use by the faithful, as well as a common grave with bones believed to have belonged to a number of the earliest monks at the site.[21] Because this monument was declared a prototype basilica by Chubinashvili there has been a certain reluctance to move on from the former fourth century date attributed to the building and to process the more recent research that has demonstrated its role as a sixth century shrine visited by pilgrims who wished to share in the blessings of the holy men buried at the site.[22]

Unlike in other regions where dating has been based purely on an architectural typology, the basilicas of Chabukauri and Dolochopi (both the upper and lower churches on the two sites) have been dated from an analysis of the stratified ceramic and numismatic deposits found during the excavation. In the case of Dolochopi the dating of the lower church as fourth century has been confirmed by C14 testing of carbon deposits found at the site.[23] These results demonstrate on the one hand that Christianity had spread throughout Kartli and Kakheti remarkably swiftly and that large, sophisticated places of Christian

21 As above in note 21.

22 In fact the picture appears to be even more complex as the mortuary remains appear to have been of both clerics and wealthy lay people of both sexes, but the limitations imposed on the excavators by the monastic custodians of the site mean that the implications of this information have yet to be fully explored. At the time of writing future permission to continue archaeological exploration at this site seems unlikely.

23 The tests have been calibrated at 387 CE with 93.2 % probability (Laboratory Code SUERC-70629) and between 388 CE with 68.2 % and 401 CE with 95.4 % probability, but this second sample appears mixed with earlier material (Laboratory Code SUERC-76888).

worship were already being constructed before the end of the fourth century. On the other hand the unusual construction of these buildings suggests that there was a vernacular current of regional architecture that was adapting the conventional basilica form found across the Romano-Byzantine empire into a distinctly local idiom and that this idiom spread across from Kakheti into Kvemo Kartli, where we find later examples of this form at Kvemo Bolnisi and Bolnisi Sioni. If we can for the moment leave aside the possible liturgical reasons for this design, which is an area requiring a wholly new study, then what we can draw from the monuments in the vicinity of Nekresi and in Areshi is that where there has been archaeological exploration of early Christian sites in Kakheti thus far they have yielded surprisingly early evidence of constructions following the 'triple' basilica form. At Areshi these were relatively modest in size but at both Chabukauri and Dolochopi, where there is evidence that the churches were built at the heart of substantial contemporary settlements, these finished monuments were exceptionally large reaching 34×15 metres and 36×18.5 metres respectively.

By choosing to build early churches in the form of basilicas the people of Kartli and Kakheti were following a practice that was widespread across the early Christian world and it is not possible to argue for a distinct Syrian (or otherwise) influence on these monuments as the basilica form was so ubiquitious a feature of early Christian architecture. Having said that, this Kakhetian form did possess a key variation on the normal design by cutting off the north and south aisles from the central nave or, in some cases becoming a five nave basilica by having a conventional central nave with arcades and north and south aisles, and then having additional apsed aisles outside the main body of the church that replicated the 'triple' basilica form—this 'five naved' variant is best seen today at Bolnisi Sioni. A lack of comprehensive excavation in Kvemo Kartli means that we cannot yet know whether this form of architecture sprang up in the region at the same time that we find it in Kakheti, with buildings being constructed to this pattern in the second half of the fourth century, or whether the form spread to the region from the east as travellers or artisans transplanted the form of Kakhetian churches to the southwest. What is becoming increasingly clear is that we can trace a line of progression from the fourth and fifth century early monuments of this type at Areshi, Chabukauri and Dolochopi through to the sixth to seventh century refined forms of these churches in the slightly smaller basilicas conforming to the same pattern at places such as Nekresi (Fig. 18) and south across the Alazani valley at Zegaani (Fig. 19) and Dzveli Shuamta. The factor to be reconciled remains the two fifth century monuments fitting this pattern at Bolnisi and Kvemo Bolnisi.

FIGURE 18 *West façade of the sixth-seventh century basilica at Nekresi*

FIGURE 19 *West façade of Zegaani basilica*

If we cannot entirely reconstruct the entire evolution of the basilica in Kakheti and Kartli, we can at least acknowledge that none of these monuments has yielded any evidence of contact with Syria unless we place a strong significance in the ubiquitious presence of Syrian glass. The Kakhetian sites discovered an overwhelming preponderance of Persian-minted numismatic evidence and any small finds that were not Persian or produced locally fall into the category of generically produced Byzantine wares. Nothing found at any of these locations has pointed us in the direction of a close link with Syria, but all have provided copious evidence suggesting a relationship with the south and east with the evidence from Kvemo Kartli providing architectonic and epigraphic evidence of links with Persia and those in Kakheti showing the relationship in the number of Persian objects, and in particular Persian coins, being excavated in the vicinity of these churches.

It has been argued that the form of the 'triple basilica' itself can be linked to this Persian influence with Kipiani positing that the temple complex found on the plain beneath Nekresi in a location that fell between the two sites of Chabukauri and Dolochopi was a forerunner of this form of Christian architecture.[24] His argument hinges on the identification of the temple complex as being a Manichaean monastery that acted as an inspiration for a new Christian form of architecture. Although this issue lies outside the parameters of the present study, it is interesting to note that the question of Manichaean influences on eastern Georgia is increasingly gaining the attention of scholars with Mgaloblishvili and Rapp also arguing that the faith gained popularity in late antique Kartli.[25] How far early Christian monuments in Kartli and Kakheti were or were not influenced by other faith traditions, in the simplest terms the first places of Christian worship in Georgia appear to have followed a widespread pattern found across the early Christian world in initially adopting the basilica form. Therefore it seems that the changes undertaken by Georgian ecclesiastical architecture towards the type of building we associate with Georgian churches today, occurred in the later fifth century onwards as there was a move towards smaller, centrally planned monuments and here the picture becomes more complex as we search for the origins of this change.

24 Kipiani, Guram, 'Nekresis "didi kvadrati"', *Kadmosi* 1 (2009), pp. 214–251.

25 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Rapp, Stephen H. Jr, 'Manichaeism in Late Antique Georgia?', in Van den Berg, Jacob Albert (ed.), *In Search of Truth: Manichaica, Augustiniana and Varia Gnostica*, Brill; Leiden and Boston, 2011, pp. 263–290.

## Rome, Constantinople, Syria, Armenia and Georgia: The Spread and Function of Centrally Planned Churches

Much has been written on the evolution of centrally planned churches and the question of their form and function, given that they do not so obviously lend themselves to the practice of the Eucharistic liturgy that soon became an important function of most Christian places of worship in such a straightforward manner as the simpler basilica form. From the start centrally planned monuments in Christian contexts appear to have been associated with funerary or memorial functions, as with Santa Constanza in Rome, the Martyrium of St. Babylas on the outskirts of Antioch at Qausiyeh and, the most famous of them all, the Anastasis Rotunda at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. However it is clear that the boundaries between different forms of ecclesiastical design were permeable and by the fifth and sixth centuries it was increasingly common to find centrally planned churches that were not being constructed purely for commemorative purposes. Aside from the church of SS. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, that has been linked to monophysite communities in the city,[26] this is a form of architecture that in Syria at least came to be associated with those who upheld the rulings of the Council of Chalcedon and therefore it remains something of an anomaly that this centralised plan should find such favour with the resolutely anti-Chalcedonian Armenians and in Georgia at a period when, in the east at least, the Church was not believed to be in union with Constantinople.

The argument that links doctrinal identity with the usage of centrally-planned monuments in Syria follows the fact that thus far all such monuments have been found in the western and central regions of the country in places such as Bosra, where they are linked to the local Chalcedonian hierarchy. In the heartlands of the Syrian Orthodox Church, which rejected the Council of Chalcedon, centrally planned churches were more commonly used as baptisteries or mortuary chapels as with the Church of St. Jacob in Nisibis (modern Nusaybin) or the dome of the Egyptians and the dome of the departed at Dayr Mar Gabriel in the Tur ʿAbdin region of southeastern Turkey.[27] However the Syrian Orthodox did not adopt centrally planned churches for other types of

26 See Bardill, Jonathan, 'The Church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople and the Monophysite Refugees', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), pp. 1–11 and Croke, Brian, 'Justinian, Theodora, and the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 60 (2006), pp. 25–63.

27 Keser-Kayaalp, Elif, 'The *Beth Qadishe* in the Late Antique Monasteries of Northern Mesopotamia (South-Eastern Turkey)', *Parole de l'Orient* 35 (2010), pp. 325–348.

ecclesiastical usage—their monastic, cathedral and ordinary parish churches all conformed to the basilica form even if in certain regions they used transverse naves rather than the usual orientation of a longitudinal east-west axis.[28] With this borne in mind we must question how and why there was a movement towards centrally planned monuments in the Transcaucasus when we know that Armenia has always been overwhelmingly anti-Chalcedonian and, until the early seventh century, the majority of Kartli and Kakheti was also believed to have rejected the doctrinal position of Constantinople.

This association of building types with doctrinal identity and the fact that Armenia appeared to have broken with these conventions was highlighted by Kleinbauer in 1972 when he tried to reconcile the centrally planned church at Zvart'nots with the anti-Chalcedonian stance of the Armenian Church:

> Sebeos … and John the *katholikos* … report that Nerses III harbored secret Chalcedonian sympathies. Why then did he select a prototype from Syria which was Monophysite? First of all, it seems that all the Syrian tetraconchs were founded by members of the Orthodox faith, and some of them remained in Orthodox hands until the 7th century.[29]

In other words, centrally planned churches in Syria were inextricably linked with 'Orthodox' (i.e. Chalcedonian) clergy and so a choice of this kind of building was a sign of Chalcedonian sympathies. Some years later Maranci argued that it was in fact precisely because of the Chalcedonian doctrinal resonance that Nerses selected this form of architecture:

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28 This is a phenomenon recorded by Gertrude Bell at Dayr Mar Gabriel and the the nearby church of Mar Yakub at Salah, see Bell, Gertrude Lowthian (with intoduction and notes by Mango, Marlia Mundell), *The Churches and Monasteries of the Ṭur 'Abdin*, The Pindar Press; London, 1982, pp. 6–13 but is also encountered in Syria, notably at the church of the Entrance of the Theotokos in the Temple in Hama. It must be noted here that the original denominational identity of the church in Hama is unknown, whereas the Tur 'Abdin monuments mentioned above are overwhelmingly identified with the Syrian Orthodox tradition. This relationship between the two regions is explored in Fourdrin, Jean-Pascal, 'Les églises à nef transversal d'Apamène et du Ṭûr 'Abdîn', *Syria* 62:3/4 (1985), pp. 319–335. Fourdrin takes the view that transversal naves in the Tur 'Abdin are a factor that enables us to tell Syrian Orthodox monasteries in Byzantine territory from Assyrian (Church of the East) monasteries in Persian territory but his argument is, to this reader at least, too speculative to be given serious consideration.

29 p. 262, note 71, Kleinbauer, W. Eugene, 'Zvart'nots and the Origins of Christian Architecture in Armenia', *The Art Bulletin* 54:3 (1972), pp. 245–262.

> Kleinbauer suggested that the adoption of the aisled tetraconch reflects a desire to foster relations with Syrian Monophysites. The opposite, I believe, may be argued. As Kleinbauer himself observed, all the Syrian aisled tetraconchs were Orthodox foundations, and they remained in Orthodox hands, it seems, through the seventh century …
>
> … It is significant that the structures most like Zuart'noc' stand in important centers of Orthodoxy. Given Nersēs' Chalcedonian inclinations, it seems likely that he adopted the architectural form for its associations with Byzantine Christianity rather than because of its Syrian and Mesopotamian connections.[30]

One problem raised by Kleinbauer's work is that despite mentioning Syrian and Mesopotamian exemplars of this form of church that he called 'aisled tetraconchs' only one of his examples was actually in Mesopotamia, that of the Church of the Virgin in Amida (modern Diyarbakir in Turkey)[31] and therefore the overwhelming majority of his examples fall in Syria. It is not a form of ecclesiastical architecture that features widely in Mesopotamian churches and therefore can be viewed as being more a product of the Romano-Byzantine than the Sassanian world, despite the fact that centrally planned buildings were not unknown to the Sassanians.

So if we take all these factors into account we are left with two clear patterns; centrally planned *churches* entered from the west and south. They appeared in Syria and Asia Minor as early as the fifth century, but do not appear to have become widespread in Armenia and in Georgia as the so-called 'Jvari-type' until the end of the sixth or the beginning of the seventh century. What we also know is that a second current of domed architecture was also entering from the east,

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30 p. 116, Maranci, Christina, 'Byzantium through Armenian Eyes: Cultural Appropriation and the Church of Zuart' Noc'', *Gesta* 40:2 (2001), pp. 105–124.

31 It should also be noted that of his 'Armenian' examples of this form, only Zvart'nots falls firmly within Armenian territory. Ishkani and Bana are in the region of contemporary Turkey that was known to the Armenians as Tayk and the Georgians as Tao-Klarjeti. Both monuments are today claimed as Georgian cultural patrimony, with Georgian agencies working on the monuments with the agreement of the Turkish state. This is not the place to enter into the complex debate as to what constitutes an Armenian monument and what constitutes a Georgian one, but suffice it to say that the situation is more complex than simply attributing the monuments to an Armenian origin. With the church at Lekit, whilst it lies in contemporary Azerbaijan and is not subject to a current claim in the same way as the Georgians argue that the monuments of Tao-Klarjeti are theirs, nevertheless it was built by the Caucasian Albanians of whom relatively little is now known and therefore once again we must be wary of attributing to it a wholly Armenian origin.

specifically from Persia, where it was not associated with Christian architecture but nevertheless does seem to have played some part in the evolution of domed churches.

Within Georgian art historical discourse there has been only limited discussion of these issues due to the fact that Chubinashvili was clear that he felt that the origins of ecclesiastical domed architecture were firmly rooted in vernacular Georgian domestic architecture. Specifically he viewed the dome as a natural progression of the traditional *darbazi* house where a pyramidal roof with a central aperture was constructed by layers of overlapping wooden beams to build up a conical structure that terminated with a circular opening to allow smoke to exit from the hearth located directly beneath it.[32] Given the presence of this traditional form of architecture still in use at the time of his writing,[33] Chubinashvili argued that this native domestic form was the natural origin of the centrally planned church. Even accepting the limitations placed on Soviet era scholars, this was an extraordinarily nationalistic argument that, perhaps deliberately, failed to engage with the phenomenon even in neighbouring Armenia let alone with the wider picture across Asia Minor and the Levant. What this view also disregarded was the fact that in the fifth century domed churches were emerging across Asia Minor and Syria in the west and south and, returning for a moment to the issue of non-Christian influences on Georgian Christian architecture, in the east the Sassanians used domes for a variety of structures including in a religious setting by employing them on the central chambers of Zoroastrian temples.[34] We can be sure that this phenomenon was familiar in Kartli as a fire temple (*ateshgah*) believed to date from the fifth century is still extant in the old city of Tbilisi in the vicinity of the Zemo Betlemi (Upper Bethlehem) church, which is ascribed similarly ancient origins although the church has been rebuilt so many times that the picture of its original foundation is now difficult to recreate with any certainty.

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32 p. 192, Chubinashvili, Giorgi N., 'On the initial forms of Christian Churches' in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Curzon; Richmond, 1998, pp. 185–195.

33 Today very few *darbazi* structures are still extant. In Tbilisi one survives as part of an hotel in the Metekhi quarter of the city but the easiest way to see a *darbazi* houses is to visit the examples that have been reconstructed on the territory of the Georgian National Museum Giorgi Chitaia Open Air Museum of Ethnography which stands on a mountainside above the Vake district of Tbilisi.

34 pp. 99 ff., Ashkan, Maryam & Ahmad, Yahaya, 'Persian Domes: History, Morphology and Typology', *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research* 3:3 (2009), pp. 98–115.

FIGURE 20 *East façade of centrally-planned church at Nekresi*

This Persian form of domed architecture relied on the use of squinches rather than the more sophisticated, though similar looking, pendentives to support a circular dome on a square base and the Persian influence is visible in the two seventh century centrally planned churches at Dzveli Shuamta in Kakheti, as well as the eighth to ninth century example at the monastic complex of Nekresi (Fig. 20). Therefore it seems clear that Kartli and Kakheti stood at the confluence of two distinct traditions of domed architecture and, perhaps unsurprisingly, absorbed elements of both into the local ecclesiastical tradition. In reality this meant that, obviously, the domed monuments of the Jvari type and the domed basilicas found in Kartli at Tsromi (Fig. 21) and in Armenia at Mren, Bagavan (both sites now in Turkey) and the church of Gayane at Echmiadzin (Fig. 22) took inspiration from movements in Syria, where centrally planned churches evolved in the fifth century. Later the dome reached its apogee with Justinian's great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and it is clear that all of these movements fed into the spread of domed architecture that flourished at the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries in both Kartli and Armenia.

On the other hand there are other domed buildings that look decidedly experimental by comparison and in these cases it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that artisans who had seen the less developed Sassanian form of dome were attempting to utilise this innovation in a more Christian idiom. It is into

FIGURE 21 *Tsromi*

FIGURE 22 *St. Gayane, Echmiadzin*

FIGURE 23 *Idleti, southern façade showing extended narthex*

this category that one may place the small church at Idleti in Shida Kartli, where the central dome is encased within a square exterior suggesting that the builders of this church were unfamilar with sophisticated geometrical planning and therefore the elegant polygonal drum that became widespread from the end of the sixth century proved to be beyond their capabilities (Fig. 23). In short, when it comes to domed architecture it seems apparent that whereas one current came into Kartli and Kakheti from the Sassanian empire in the east, the influence that proved most longlasting was that coming from the south where Syrian centrally planned and domed monuments appear to have been a formative influence on the Christian architecture of the Transcaucasus as a whole.

This raises questions as to the movements of artisans and whether or not itinerant craftspeople from elsewhere moved across Syria, Asia Minor and the Transcaucasus in search of work. At the time of writing little consideration has yet been given to this issue, not least because addressing the question of the Armenian artisans who obviously worked on the seventh century Jvari type church of Ateni Sioni in Shida Kartli is politically contentious in contemporary Georgia. The Ateni Sioni Armenian inscriptions are believed to refer to the tenth century restoration of the monument rather than the seventh century construction of the church which Rapp takes as an indication of Armenian Chalcedonian presence in medieval Kartli. He suggests that:

> In any event, it is evident that at least in ninth- and tenth-century K'art'li, Chalcedonian Armenians were accepted as *de facto* members of the Orthodox, Chalcedonian K'art'velian Church. This is absolutely possible, for this was not a nationalistic period. Religious affiliation was regarded as the key to community in this instance.[35]

Whether or not this argument is correct in the later period being discussed by Rapp in the period under discussion, which is the fifth to the early seventh century, it is unclear how far artisans would have been directly affected by the aftermath of the doctrinal upheavals of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon and whether pronouncements of kings and bishops had a significant effect on the attitude of common workmen. Certainly the evidence suggests that it was not until the mid sixth century onwards that positions began to crystallise outside the monastic world[36] and the similarity between groups of monuments constructed in the early seventh century on both sides of the contemporary frontier between Georgia and Armenia would suggest that the doctrinal barrier was no impediment to talented craftsmen. Certainly the similarities between the domed basilica of Tsromi in Shida Kartli built between 626 and 634[37] and the churches of Mren, Bagavan and Gayane which are mentioned above and all belonged to the Armenian Orthodox tradition, would argue for the movement of artisans backwards and forwards across the fluid territorial boundaries of the time in search of work. Few patrons were wealthy enough to keep master builders and masons in work for an entire lifetime and therefore such workers would have been accustomed to travel in search of new commissions. It is perhaps projecting hindsight onto the situation to suggest that the people of the time would all have held fixed doctrinal viewpoints that could have affected their choice of work—as is the case today, no doubt such questions would have been significant to some artisans whereas others were likely to have been primarily motivated by the need to secure regular payment.

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35 p. 648, Rapp, Stephen Harold, Jr. "Imagining History at the Crossroads: Persia, Byzantium, and the Architects of the Written Georgian Past." Order No. 9722070, University of Michigan, 1997, https://search.proquest.com/docview/304378571?accountid=10792 (accessed April 12, 2017).

36 See for example Menze, Volker L., *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2008 for the argument that even a century after Chalcedon there was still a hope that the rift could be healed through mediation—although the attempt ended in failure and a permanent division resulted.

37 Chubinashvili, Giorgi, *Georgische Baukunst Band II: Die Kirche In Zromi und Ihr Mosaik*, Verlag Des Museums Der Bildenden Künste «Metechi»; Tbilisi, 1934.

This recurring question of doctrinal identity and how it could have shaped the physical form of church buildings is perhaps an opportune moment to move away from this discussion of the forms of ecclesiastical monuments and to consider the question of their function. For this we must examine the ritual usage of churches in both Syria and Kartli and it is to that we shall turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

# The Syrian *bema* and the Georgian Pre-altar Cross: A Comparison of the Liturgical Furnishings of the Nave in the Two Traditions

## Nave Furniture and the Possible Liturgical Relationship of Syria and Kartli

In his article 'Les ambons syriens et la function liturgique de la nef dans les églises antiques'[1] André Grabar makes reference to the fact that nave-platforms of the Syrian type are, although rare, present in some churches outside northwest Syria and one of the examples he highlights is that of 'Mzchet.' In actual fact what Grabar was referring to was the large polygonal platform that dominates the church of Jvari, perched on its mountain outcrop to the east of Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Kartli (Fig. 24). Jvari dates to the first decade of the seventh century and the site upon which the church stands is pivotal in the Christian history of Georgia, as it is believed to be the place where St. Nino, the illuminator of Kartli, raised her cross for the first time.

This platform dominates the nave of the centrally planned church where it appears at first glance to be in the centre of the construction. A closer look reveals that it is actually subtly out of alignment with the building; a fact that is surely not coincidental, and the height of this stone structure is further emphasised by the large wooden cross standing at the centre of the platform. This cross is not ancient, but is in fact a replica of an earlier artefact that did not survive the Communist period of Georgia's history and is one of a presumed line of such pre-altar crosses that have adorned the site. This phenomenon is echoed by the smaller platform that stands to the north side of the sixth century Anchiskhati basilica in Tbilisi. Here the structure is noticably smaller and less dominant, but here too the platform supports a (smaller) cross in a disposition echoing Calvary. So what is the link, if any, between Syria and Georgia if both regions appear to have an unusual disposition of liturgical furniture in their naves? Are these traditions linked or, as Grabar hinted, is this due a com-

1 Grabar, André, 'Les ambons syriens et la function liturgique de la nef dans les églises antiques', *Cahiers archéologiques* 1 (1945), pp. 129–133.

FIGURE 24 *Jvari*

mon strain of liturgical development between the two? What is the significance of the cross in these liturgical furnishings and are the two phenomena directly comparable?

While at first glance the parallels would seem to suggest a close relationship between the two traditions, further unravelling of these questions appears to lead us to a conclusion that whilst these similar nave dispositions seem to have sprung from a common root, in Georgia the use of a pre-altar cross could additionally be an echo of an alternative or possibly a parallel tradition that flourished in the mountain cultures of the High Caucasus. Therefore can we use the presence of variant nave-platforms and a particular devotion to the cross as evidence of Syrian-Kartvelian interaction in the field of liturgy or is there something else occurring? What, if any, parallels can we discern between the Syrian and Kartvelian liturgical traditions?

## The Origins of the Liturgy in Syria and Kartli

When comparing the origins of the liturgy in these two locations we are faced with very different circumstances; Syria is the source of some of our earliest extant texts relating to the evolution of communal prayer and liturgical rites with fragments such as the *Didache* offering the first written evidence of early

liturgical practices.[2] Therefore the region as a whole, and Antioch in particular, is exceptionally important for scholars seeking to understand the earliest origins of Christian ritual practice. However the picture becomes more complex in the fifth century as, prior to this date, there was perceived to be one Universal Church and although there were variations in practice all were technically doctrinally in agreement—even if this inclusive attitude was not applied to those who had been declared heretics. This situation was subject to radical change in the fifth century as a result of the momentous upheavals caused by the Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451) that resulted in permanent schisms with groups in the eastern Mediterranean breaking away from the majority and ultimately precipitated the formation of rival Churches complete with their own hierarchies, ritual practices and, naturally, their own claims to apostolic validity.

In the light of this seismic shifting of the Christian landscape there was, accordingly, a variation in ritual practices between these opposing groups although these differences often appear superficial to those unfamiliar with the finer points of ritual practice. This fifth century parting of the ways has been most clearly explained by Taft who elucidates the resulting Syrian traditions as follows:

> Three principal liturgical centers had a major influence in the origins of these rites: Antioch, Jerusalem and Edessa. Of these only Edessa was a center of Syriac language and culture; the other two were Greek cities, though not without Syriac-speaking minorities.
>
> The rite of Mesopotamia that developed into the Chaldean tradition is of Syriac origin and so its roots can probably be traced back to Edessa.
>
> The West-Syrian Rite is a synthesis of native Syriac elements, especially hymns and other choral pieces, with material translated from Greek liturgical texts of Antiochene and hagiopolite provenance. This synthesis was the work of Syriac, non-Chalcedonian monastic communities in the Syriac-speaking hinterlands of Syria, Palestine, and parts of Mesopotamia, beyond the Greek cities of the Mediterranean littoral.[3]

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2 For an introduction to the origins of the liturgy see Jones, Cheslyn, Wainwright, Geoffrey, Yarnold, Edward & Bradshaw, Paul, *The Study of Liturgy*, SPCK & Oxford University Press; London & New York, 1978, Revised Edition 1992.

3 p. 239, Taft, Robert F., *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, The Liturgical Press; Collegeville, Minnesota, 2nd revised edition 1993.

Therefore this liturgical information can be applied to the architectural data from the previous chapter by equating the West-Syrian rite as being more closely associated with Syria and the East-Syrian tradition—referred to above as Chaldean—being the dominant liturgical tradition in Mesopotamia. Although there were some exceptions to this basic delineation of territory, notably the medieval Syrian Orthodox Maphrianate of Takrit in what is now modern Iraq, as a rule those Christians living under Sassanian rule were largely followers of the Church of the East and therefore East-Syrian by liturgical practice. The West-Syrian tradition straddled the Syriac and Greek-speaking worlds by being a hybrid liturgical tradition that took some elements from Syriac-speaking Edessa and melded them with the Hellenophone practices of Antioch and Jerusalem, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the location of the country meant that it absorbed both the Semitic and Gentilic currents of early Apostolic Christianity. However, whereas Syrian Christianity evolved and changed in reaction to the development of the faith and its evolving hierarchical and ritual practices, in Kartli there was an amazingly stable and static relationship with the liturgy that endured for many centuries.

From the outset the situation was different in Kartli; in the first place Christianity arrived in the country in the fourth century CE when, although an early date in the history of Christian expansion, was nevertheless a period which had achieved a degree of stability with regard to liturgical practice. It was in the late fourth century that we have the oft-quoted testimony of the pilgrim Egeria attesting to a very specific liturgy in Jerusalem with readings appropriate not only to the sacred locations but also to the Church seasons.[4] The evidence of Egeria is particularly relevant as she is believed to have undertaken her pilgrimage only approximately fifty years before the earliest known Georgian language inscriptions were created at the monastery of Bir el Qutt, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.[5] The fact that the first dated Georgian inscriptions have been found in the Holy Land is no coincidence, as from the outset there has been a strong relationship between that region and Kartvelian Christianity, which has an exceptionally close emotional attachment to the lands where Christ lived, died and rose again.

As discussed in chapter one there is a long and peaceful record of a Jewish community in Kartli and the archaeological evidence from Urbnisi and Mtskheta in Shida Kartli points to a significant Jewish presence in both of these towns at the turn of the millennium and throughout the late antique era. There-

4 Egeria, Trans. Wilkinson, J., *Egeria's Travels*, Aris & Phillips; Warminster, 1999.

5 See note 29, chapter 1.

fore it is unsurprising that the medieval chronicles which purport to recount the evangelisation of Kartli should feature Jewish characters prominently in the *Vita* of St. Nino and that in marked contrast to much of the literature of medieval Christianity, Jews resident in Kartli are portrayed in a positive manner as upright, honourable members of Kartvelian society. These later sources not only speak of the links of these Jewish Kartvelians with their original homeland in Roman Palestine, but they also create a backstory where St. Nino herself is purported to have grown up in Jerusalem as the niece of the Patriarch.

To underscore this hagiopolite relationship all the liturgical evidence demonstrates that from at least as early as the fifth century onwards the Kartvelians followed the Jerusalem liturgy.[6] This situation continued until the medieval period and much of the earliest information extant about the early Jerusalem rite has been gleaned from the witness of the Armenian and Georgian texts:

> Indeed, it might seem that the essential part of all pre-Islamic (before 638) liturgical books of Jerusalem have been preserved, although very little in Greek, their original language. Taft's 'Law of the paradox of the conservative periphery' applies here. Notably the Caucasian periphery, that is, the Armenian and Georgian churches, has contributed the most to preserving the late Antique liturgy of Jerusalem. Of these two, the Georgian witness is by far the most important, since while the Armenian witness is more or less limited to an archaic version of the Lectionary, the Georgian one appears to cover all the liturgical books of Jerusalem.[7]

Therefore in terms of the liturgy we can see that Kartli followed the practices of the Holy Land, specifically the Jerusalem rite, and despite the fact that this was a Syro-Palestinian liturgical tradition there is no written evidence that suggests that variant east or west Syrian rites were used in Kartli. However, although this suggests a continuity of liturgical practice from the fifth century onwards

6 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, *Klarjuli mravalt'avi*, Dzveli k'art'uli mcerlobis dzeglebi 12; Tbilisi, 1991 With English summary, 'The Klardjeti Polycephalon', pp. 466–490, Frøyshov, Stig Simeon R., 'The Georgian Witness to the Jerusalem Liturgy: New Sources and Studies', in Groen, Bert, Hawkes-Teeples, Steven & Alexopoulos, Stefanos (eds.), *Inquiries into Eastern Christian Worship. Selected Papers of the Second International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, Rome, 17–21 September 2008*, Peeters; Leuven, 2012, pp. 227–268, Jeffery, Peter, 'The Sunday Office of Seventh-Century Jerusalem in the Georgian Chantbook (Iadgari): A Preliminary Report', *Studia Liturgica* 21 (1991), pp. 52–75, Renoux, Charles, 'Hymnographie géorgienne ancienne et hymnaire de Saint-Sabas (ve–viiie siècle)', *Irénikon* 80 (2007), pp. 36–69.

7 pp. 227–228, Frøyshov, Stig Simeon R., 'The Georgian Witness to the Jerusalem Liturgy.'

we cannot speak with any certainty of what was happening in the first hundred years of Christianity in Kartli. The archaeological evidence discussed in the earlier chapters has demonstrated that large fourth-centry basilicas were constructed at this time and their complex architectural disposition suggests that these structures were built for a relatively evolved ritual purpose; therefore is it possible to argue that an east or west Syrian rite was in place until the evolution of the Georgian script and the dominance of the hagiopolite rite standardised the Kartvelian liturgical landscape at some point in the fifth century?

### *Khati, Drosha* and *Jvari*

In his 1968 monumental study of pagan practices in Khevsureti in the Georgian Caucasus[8] Georges Charachidzé discusses the symbiotic relationship between paganism and Christianity in a number of cult practices. Whilst his research has now been challenged and re-evaluated, notably by the research of Zurab Kiknadze,[9] his work is still regarded as offering a solid, largely reliable, introduction to the complex Khevsur belief system that appears to mix variants of Christian belief with an underlying pagan world-view.[10] The reason that this pagan society is relevant to a study of Christian liturgical practice is partially due to the fact that Georgian can at times seem an infuriatingly imprecise language, especially to somebody coming from a language like English where we have such a great love of synonyms. In this case the relationship between pagan and Christian practices in Khevsureti has been obscured by the use of the words *khati* (ხატი) and *jvari* (ჯვარი). In the lowlands these are taken to mean an image, most commonly a Christian icon, and a cross respectively. Up in the mountains they are used in a far looser sense to refer to a variety of holy items and the term 'cross' is often applied to the local sacred enclosures.[11]

8 Charachidzé, Georges, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne. Analyse structurale d'une civilisation*, Librairie François Maspero; Paris, 1968.

9 Kiknadze, Zurab, *Kartuli mitologia, I. Jvari da saqmo*, Gelati Academy of Sciences; Kutaisi, 1996 also refer to the review of this work by Tuite, Kevin, 'Highland Georgian Paganism: Archaism or Innovation?', *Annual of the Society for the Study of the Caucasus* 6/7 (1996), pp. 79–91.

10 Or as Kiknadze would have it, the pagan worldview is a corruption of the underlying Christian substratum, having evolved after years of isolation from lowland society. See the article by Tuite above for a summary of this argument in English.

11 p. 71, Mühlfried, Florian, *Being a State and States of Being in Highland Georgia*, Berghahn; New York, 2014.

Aside from the fluidity of these terms, the real reason that the practices in Khevsureti are of possible relevance is due to Charachidzé's references to the *drosha*.[12] This large T-shaped sacred banner is described as being one of the central elements of Khevsur religious practice and in appearance was not unlike the Tau Cross, now associated most closely in the western imagination with the Franciscan Order. Charachidzé recounts how informants referred to the *drosha* being set up near the entrance to the sacred enclosure[13] in a prominent position and this offers an intriguing suggestion; with such a well-documented pagan tradition of setting up a large cross-shaped banner at the entrance to a sacred precinct it suggests the possibility that there is some echo of this act in the Georgian Christian tradition of large pre-altar crosses. These are often traced back to the account of St. Nino, the evangeliser of Georgia, raising her cross on the hill that became known as *Jvari* (Cross) to the east of the ancient capital of Mtskheta in the fourth century CE and, indeed there is, as mentioned above, a large polygonal platform at the heart of that early seventh century centrally-planned church to this day. Overall relatively few of these large bases that are presumed to have been used to display a pre-altar cross have survived; there is a (much smaller) platform that is placed in the northern aisle, rather than the central nave, of the originally sixth-century Anchiskhati Basilica in Tbilisi and until recently a similar hexagonal platform accessed by steps to the east and west stood before the sanctuary of the (now ruined) eighth to ninth-century church of Zhaleti in the district of Tianeti, north of Tbilisi—and, perhaps significantly, in the hinterland between the Georgian lowlands and its mountain cultures.[14]

None of these three locations still possesses the original cross that would have been displayed on these platforms, but a number of these large wooden crosses with metal decorative plaques are still extant in the collections of the Georgian National Museum and they are particularly linked with Upper Svaneti where we have visual evidence showing that they were still *in situ* until the

12 A recent publication on ethnographical terminology defines *drosha* (დროშა) as meaning 'flag' and the ritual banner of the mountain people as a *drosha khatisa* (დროშა ხატისა), see pp. 45–46, Nadiradze, Eldar, *Concise Ethnographical Vocabulary of Georgian Material Culture*, Meridiani; Tbilisi, 2016. Here the writer will use the word in the sense employed by Charachidzé and take it to mean the ceremonial tau-shaped banner used in Khevsur ritual practice.

13 Charachidzé, Georges, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne*, vol. 1, pp. 212 ff.

14 This stone platform was removed to the safe keeping of the National Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi several years ago. Pers. Comm. with museum staff.

1990s.[15] Intriguingly Charachidzé's research pointed to underlying congruencies between the Svan and Khevsur belief systems that suggested that these two traditions had many shared practices before the two mountain cultures began to develop along different paths—a factor highlighted by their different linguistic development, where their respective languages may have divided as early as the third millennium BCE.[16] Of course any hypothesis seeking to link these cross cults remains extremely speculative, but as the Svans remain the most active protectors of this tradition of the pre-altar cross, a tradition for which we have extant evidence in only a very few locations in the lowlands of Kartli, then it does add more circumstantial evidence to the supposition that the use of this kind of large cross could owe something to pre-Christian cultic practices instead of simply being a variation of the Christian tradition of veneration for the instrument of Christ's passion. On the other hand the tau-shaped *drosha* could be a projection of the *dedabodzi* or central pillar, again tau-shaped, that held up traditional *darbazi* houses.[17] If this was the case then we could be seeing two parallel belief systems that became intertwined and difficult to differentiate at some point between late antiquity and the mid twentieth century when ethnographers first recorded them in detail.

This symbiotic relationship between Christianity and Georgian mountain paganism could be reflective of evidence of much earlier Christian beliefs that still find an echo in the rituals enacted in mountain shrines.[18] The question is, assuming that the above suppositions have any validity, is it possible to find any liturgical links between Syria and Georgia during this early period?

## The Case of Nave Platforms and Other Liturgical Fitments: The Syrian Bema and the Imitation of Jerusalem

The nave-platform known as the *bema* in the Syrian tradition has been problematic for scholars because there is a distinct mismatch between the age and

15 Pers. comm. with Kevin Tuite and Mikheil Abramishvili.

16 Tuite, Kevin, 'Highland Georgian Paganism.'

17 See Nadiradze, Eldar, *Concise Ethnographical Vocabulary*, p. 33 for a discussion of *dedabodzi* (დედაბოძი) which intriguingly he links to the cult of the tree of life.

18 The author is indebted here to Kevin Tuite for commenting on her thoughts about the relationships between Christian and pagan cross imagery. She is thankful to him for pointing out that such survivals are more likely to have moved from early Christian practice into later mountain belief systems rather than vice versa and she must make it clear that any errors of interpretation that follow are hers and hers alone.

location of the *bemata* still extant and the respective ages and locations of the texts that elucidate the liturgy of the *bema*.[19] The physical evidence of these nave-platforms is largely located in the hinterland of Antioch, modern day Antakya, where they survive in approximately fifty churches with most of these being located on the northwest Syrian limestone massif. This is of especial interest in this context because this region is the only region in Syria that has been definitively proved to have a tangible link with Georgian Christians in late antiquity. First of all there is the celebrated reference to 'Iberians' visiting Symeon Stylites the Elder in Theodoret's *History of the Monks of Syria*[20] and secondly there are the accounts of interaction with Georgian monks in the sixth-century *vitae* of Symeon the Younger and his mother, Saint Martha.[21]

In earlier research this author has offered evidence to suggest that the 'liturgy of the *bema*' was influenced by liturgical reforms and teachings centred on Antioch in late antiquity, before the tradition appeared to die out when there was a retreat to the monasteries in the aftermath of a series of environmental and political changes that caused a fundamental change in the Christian landscape of the region from the seventh century onwards.[22] This chronology is important because although we have the brief references to Iberians in the *vitae* of the two Symeons in the fifth and sixth centuries respectively, it is from the eighth to the tenth century that the Iberians seem to have been most active in the monasteries around Semandağ and the Black Mountain in the hinterland of Antioch.[23] What is clear from all the evidence, the earlier hagiographical sources as well as the later archaeological and epigraphic data, is that the Iberian presence in this region was closely related to monastic practices and given that the Syrian *bema* was a phenomenon found exclusively

19 See Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema in Fourth to Sixth-Century Syrian Churches*, USEK, Patrimoine Syriaque vol. 2; Kaslik, Lebanon, 2003 (re-issued in a second edition by TSEC, Brill, 2012), pp. 94 ff.

20 XXVI, 11,13, p. 165 & p. 167, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Trans. Price, R.M., *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Cistercian Publications; Kalamazoo, 1985.

21 Chapters 103, 130, 131, 136 and 253 of the *vita* of Symeon and chapters 53, 54, 56, 57 and 65 of the *vita* of St. Martha concern Iberians. See Van den Ven, Paul, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune (521–592)*, I. *Introduction et texte grec*, II. *Traduction et Commentaire, Vie grecque de sainte Marie, mère de S. Syméon, Indices*, Subsidia Hagiographica 32, Société des Bollandistes; Brussels, 1962 & 1970.

22 Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema*.

23 Djobadze, Wachtang Z., *Materials for the study of Georgian monasteries in the Western environs of Antioch on the Orontes*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 372, Subsidia 48, Louvain, 1976, Djobadze, Wachtang, *Archaeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch On-The-Orontes*, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden Gmbh; Stuttgart, 1986.

in non-monastic contexts it therefore seems highly unlikely that the use of a Syrian-style nave-platform was transmitted to the Caucasus in this manner.

Instead we should perhaps turn our attention to another centrally located structure that may have caught the attention of Georgian church builders; that of the Anastasis Rotunda in Jerusalem and, at its heart, the Aedicula housing the empty tomb of Christ. Jerusalem has always occupied a particular place at the heart of Georgian Christianity with the links between the Jewish Community of that city and Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Kartli, being a pivotal part of the conversion narrative of the country; the Mtskheta Jewish Community are reported to have been amongst the first to accept the Gospel preached by St. Nino in the fourth century. The *Conversion of Kartli* (მოქცევაჲ ქართლისაჲ) also discusses the belief that the cloak of Christ was brought to Kartli by this community, and this forms the basis for the belief that the holy relic lies beneath the *svetiskhoveli* (the life-giving column) at the heart of the national cathedral—and which is indeed named Svetiskhoveli after the fabled column. It should also be noted that a medieval replica of the Holy Sepulchre has been built not far from the *svetiskhoveli* on the south side of the nave of the cathedral. So if we acknowledge this exceptionally close link between Jerusalem and Kartli, is it possible to relate this relationship to the phenomenon of pre-altar crosses and, more specifically, the polygonal bases that they rest upon?

In her recent work on three seventh century churches pivotal to the evolution of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture Christina Maranci considers the question of a 'stone cylinder' previously thought to have been an *ambo* at the church of Zuart'Noc'.[24] She identifies this as an element of the programme that highlights the concept of mimesis and the desire in 'the early medieval culture of the South Caucasus'[25] to recreate elements of the Anastasis Rotunda. Reading her discussion of how an early Armenian text describing the Anastasis Rotunda can be useful in unravelling the inspiration behind the construction of Zuart'Noc' one can also see how this information can be applied to Jvari:

> Seeming to attest to the offset position of the aedicula under the dome, the gallery level above the ambulatory, the position of the Passion relics in the gallery, and the height of the structure, this text is a treasure trove of information on the state of the Rotunda after the Modestan repairs. It is also of value for exploring the relationship between the Anastasis

24 Maranci, Christina, *Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia*, Brepols; Turnhout, 2015, pp. 139 ff.

25 p. 140, Maranci, Christina, *Vigilant Powers*.

> Rotunda and Zuart'Noc'. The date of the text makes it particularly germane, as it coincides with the years immediately up to and including the foundation of Zuart'Noc'.[26]

Zuart'Noc' was built in the reign of the Armenian Patriarch Nerses III (641–661) and was therefore constructed a generation after Jvari, which dates to the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries. What is immediately striking is that both of these monuments were constructed with an off-centre platform within a centrally planned space. Parallels could also be drawn by the fact that the possible *ambo* in Zuart'Noc' has also been associated with a crypt and the platform at Jvari has been used to house a large cross. In fact all three elements can be taken as referring to the same symbolism if we refer to the liturgy as it relates to the *bema*. Here the cross and gospels descend from the 'heavenly Jerusalem' (the sanctuary) to the 'earthly Jerusalem' (the *bema*) for the liturgy of the word or the pre-anaphora. The enigmatic object referred to as the *bema* throne is in fact a form of lectern for both objects, which here represent the body and spirit of Christ.

If we take this further the east Syrian liturgical commentaries that record this rite present us with a highly developed cosmological reasoning, and this is particularly the case with the text known by western commentators as the *Expositio*[27] which was probably written somewhere in the region of contemporay Iraq in the ninth century.[28] Lassus and Tchalenko suggested that the cosmology of this text should be interpreted with the church interior understood in the following terms: apse = sky, altar = throne of God, *qestroma*[29] = paradise, nave = earth, *bema* = Jerusalem, altar on the *bema* = Golgotha, cathedra = seat of the grand priest, the son of Aaron.[30] If we bear this in mind we can see that a *bema*, *ambo* or any other structure occupying a central or slightly offset position in a church interior could be taken as a representation of (earthly) Jerusalem and that a cross or book placed or raised on this structure would be viewed as being upon Golgotha as a symbol of Christ. Therefore it could be argued that all these comparative nave furnishings are actually manifestations

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26 p. 141, Maranci, Christina, *Vigilant Powers*.

27 Connolly, R.H., 'Expositio officiorum ecclesiae, Georgio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta & Abrahae Bar Lipeh interpretatio officiorum', *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 64,71,72,76, *Scriptores Syri* 91, 92 (1911–1915).

28 pp. 73–74, Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema*.

29 The raised area in front of the sanctuary but before the nave.

30 Lassus, Jean & Tchalenko, Georges, 'Ambons Syriens', *Cahiers Archéologiques* 5 (1951), pp. 75–122.

of a similar impulse to replicate Jerusalem/the Cenacle/Golgotha in a tangible sense within the liturgical process. If this is the case then we can highlight two possible streams of this influence passing from Palestine and Syria either directly, or via Mesopotamia, into Caucasian ritual practices.

The first stream is clearly a product of hagiopolite rites and this is the current that led to the desire to replicate the Holy Sepulchre in a symbolic sense. Maranci's arguments are convincing in suggesting that this is the case relating to Zuart'Noc'. Although the disposition of the original church on the site of Svetiskhoveli in Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Kartli, is still being studied it is clear that there was an equation of the national cathedral with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the later middle ages as there is a medieval replica of the Anastasis Rotunda constructed in the south aisle of the cathedral (Fig. 25).[31] Given the early adoption of the Jerusalem rite in Kartli it seems to be a reasonable assumption that the later construction of a replica of the Anastasis Rotunda was a direct continuation of the exceptionally strong Kartvelian devotion to Jerusalem.

It is possible to further support this argument with the evidence that the topography of early Christian Mtskheta was remodelled as an alternate Holy Land with the Christian monuments of the city and its environs named after notable Biblical locations and events; Svetiskhoveli was linked with the miracles of the Lord's cloak and with a miraculous pillar raised by the power of the prayers of St. Nino[32] and later became associated with the Holy Sepulchre. Jvari on the hill above the town was where St. Nino was believed to have first raised her cross and this was linked to Golgotha and the hill of the Crucifixion. In the environs of the town, Samtavro where St. Nino took up residence in a bush was later equated with the place of the burning bush on Mount Sinai. Another church was named 'Getsamania' (Gethsemane) and finally a fifth century church, believed to have originally been dedicated to St. Stephen, became known as Antiokia (Antioch). This phenomenon of physically trying to imprint a wider Christian sacred geography on the landscape of the Caucasus has long been recognised in Georgia, but is as yet a relatively understudied area of research[33] and needs a great deal of further exploration before the origins and development of this trend are fully understood.

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31 See Bulia, Marina & Janjalia, Mzia, *Mtskheta*, Tbilisi, 2000 and also http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/show/84 for images of this replica.

32 Wardrop, Margery, Trans. 'Life of Saint Nino', *Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica* 5 (1903), pp. 3–88.

33 The one book published on this issue thus far is Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, *New Jerusalems in Georgia*, Centre for the Exploration of Georgian Antiquities; Tbilisi, 2013.

FIGURE 25 *Replica of the Holy Sepulchre inside Svetiskhoveli*

Therefore if one current of influence comes directly from the effect of Jerusalem on Kartvelian ritual practice, what can we say about the *bema* which makes symbolic reference to Jerusalem, but which is only attested to in the literature and archaeology of Syria and Mesopotamia? Here the evidence is more difficult to interpret largely because we have so many gaps in both the literature and in the archaeological record. In the first instance all the textual and physical evidence for the use of the *bema* relates to northern Syria and Mesopotamia. We also face the conundrum, alluded to above, that whereas our archaeological evidence is overwhelmingly located in the hinterland of Antioch,[34] the texts

34 Exceptions to this are Resafa in the central Syrian desert which is the most easterly example of a *bema* in Syria and, perhaps most notably, at Sulaimaniyeh, now located in Iraqi Kurdistan where we have the only surviving example of a *bet-šqaqonē* (the raised walkway that linked the sanctuary and the *bema*). This is leaving aside the question of mosaic

elucidating the symbolism of the *bema*, in particular those explaining its pivotal role in the process by which a church interior became a microcosm of the Christian universe, were all written to the east in Mesopotamia. This does not rule out that this form of liturgy entered Kartli from the east, but it is certainly a less linear route of entry than the hagiopolite influenced practices outlined above.

What we *can* say is that despite the equation with the Holy Sepulchre, the liturgical furniture found in some Kartvelian churches has very few parallels elsewhere in the evolution of the late antique and early medieval liturgy and therefore we should seriously consider whether or not these Kartvelian prealtar installations were in any way influenced by the use of the *bema* in the liturgy of the word in some Syrian and Mesopotamian rites. The prevalence of the Jerusalem liturgical tradition notwithstanding, it is clear from the architectural and art historical analysis of the previous chapter that the development of the church as a building in late antique Kakheti and Kartli was strongly influenced by the architecture and decorative traditions of the Sassanian empire, which through most of the period under discussion was the dominant power in Mesopotamia. It would therefore make sense if some rituals were also translated into the region along with this influx of Mesopotamian material culture. Certainly although it cannot be said that the Kartvelian nave structures resemble the *bema* very closely, there could be a link in the fact that the cross as the instrument of Christ's Passion and the central mystery of the Christian faith was displayed in the central nave of these churches in a manner analogous to the display of the cross and the gospel book on the *bema* throne (or 'Golgotha') in the Syro-Mespotamian liturgy of the word. Intriguingly there is also another non-Christian parallel that could have influenced this practice and that is the *bema* festival of the Manichaeans[35] where testimony suggests that the placing of an effigy of Mani on the *bema* was the most important event in their festal calendar. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kipiani, Mgaloblishvili and Rapp Jr[36] all believe that there is evidence for a significant Manichaean presence in late antique Kakheti and Kartli and this practice of a pre-altar cross standing to represent both Christ and the instrument of his martyrdom could in fact be linked to the Manichaean rite in remembrance of the death of Mani.

Whilst there is not enough textual or archaeological evidence for us to definitively prove or disprove how precisely this current of Syro-Mesopotamian ritual

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*bemata*, which have been discovered in the region around Apamea and possibly even further afield.

35 p. 63, Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema*.

36 See chapter 5.

entered Kartvelian Christian ritual, whether or not the influence of the Syrian *bema* was a formative element of early Kartvelian pre-altar platforms may be supported by examining whether there are other strata of Mesopotamian rites interwoven with the hagopolite rituals of the early Kartvelian church and it is to this question that we shall now turn.

## Before Chalcedon: The Question of The Church of the East and Its Possible Influence on Kartvelian Christianity

As the earlier chapters of this work have made clear one of the biggest impediments to the study of the Kartvelian Church is the fact that contemporary Georgian archaeology, art history and history views the period under discussion as very much 'before and after' the advent of the Georgian alphabet. This means that there are discussions of artefacts and buildings (for example) throughout the Roman era that end suddenly with the fourth century CE, before the thread is taken up in the fifth century CE with recourse to the (later) medieval texts relating to this era utlilised in conjunction with the evidence of the material culture. Naturally history is not compartmentalised into neat boxes in this way and when strict periodisation is enforced it becomes far more difficult for the researcher to trace lines of continuity in the historical record. In the case under discussion this is exceptionally problematic as, as mentioned earlier, the evangelisation narrative relating to Kartli centres on the figure of an 'unnamed captive woman', later identified as a woman of Cappadocian origin named Nino, who converted the Kartvelian monarch, Mirian, at some point in the 330s. Thus far we have a straightforward expectation of Christianity entering from the west or southwest if we take into account the *Vita* of St. Nino which reports that the holy woman travelled to Kartli via Armenia.[37]

If we take this textual information in conjunction with the architectural evidence, which dates primarily from the sixth century onwards, with some churches dated to the late fifth century, a strong Byzantine influence over Kartvelian Christianity appears relatively straightforward. However, as highlighted in the previous chapter, when recent evidence from archaeological excavations is added into the equation the picture becomes more complex. Excavations in Kakheti have revealed fourth century church buildings that

37 pp. 14ff., Wardrop, Margery, Trans. 'Life of Saint Nino', *Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica* 5 (1903), pp. 3–88.

offer a far more complex web of interaction in the fourth and fifth centuries. The liturgical dispositions and artefactual evidence associated with these sites has appeared overwhelmingly east facing in orientation, but with a significant underpinning of Byzantine influence; what there has definitively *not* been is a significant quantity of Syrian evidence.

Evidence from the sites around Kvareli in Kakheti has yielded two synthrona, one in Chabukauri and one in Dolochopi. This is the only evidence of this liturgical feature yet discovered in the territory of modern Georgia and is indisputable evidence of western influence as they are relatively common from Syria and Asia Minor westward across the Mediterranean region. In addition bronze lamps found at both sites have clear parallels in the Byzantine world. In these respects although these buildings stand far out in the east of the Kartvelian world not far from the territory of what was Caucasian Albania, it is apparent that Byzantinizing influences had permeated deep into the land the Byzantines referred to as Iberia. On the other hand this was not the only empire to leave its traces on the region and the numismatic evidence found at the sites demonstrated a clear mercantile bias towards the Persian world. In addition, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the curious design of these 'three nave basilicas' could also suggest some kind of affinity with eastern architecture. What these sites lacked was any evidence suggesting that these early ecclesiastical structures were linked in any way to the evolution of church architecture in Syria. Interestingly they are contemporary with the first purpose-built churches we know of from the environs of Antioch and the Syrian limestone massif, sites such as the martyrium of St. Babylas at Qausiyeh in the suburbs of Antioch and the small village church at Qirq Bizeh on the Jebel Barisha and we can see no direct parallels with the monuments of this region in Kakheti; the Syrian buildings of this period were modest village basilicas or, if they were larger buildings of more significance, they had more complex floorplans—as with the four-armed martyrium of St. Babylas.

What we do not have at this early period are basilicas as large as those found in eastern Georgia. Certainly we may speculate that such structures may have existed within the city of Antioch and other major metropolitan centres, but we must remember that although they were located within apparently thriving towns at the time that they were constructed, the Chabukauri and Dolochopi basilicas were located in wealthy provincial centres rather than an internationally significant metropolis. It was not until the fifth and sixth centuries that comparably large and imposing churches were constructed at sites such as Brad and Ruweiha on the Syrian limestone massif, in the kind of provincial towns that are a more accurate reflection of the presumed size and status of the Kakhetian examples.

The problem that we encounter is that whilst it seems reasonable to suspect that many elements of Kakhetian ecclesiastical architecture entered the region from the east it is difficult to access the archaeological data to definitively support this hypothesis. The wars and periods of unrest that have consumed Iraq since the late twentieth century have made fieldwork in that country impossible and there remains a great deal of research to be done before we understand the origins of the Assyrian Christian presence in the Urumiyeh region of Iran. This leaves the east bank of the Euphrates in Syria and the Tur ʿAbdin region of southeast Turkey as the only alternative sites of investigation. In both cases, especially the Tur ʿAbdin, a certain amount of survey has been carried out but this has not been followed up with programmes of excavation. In addition the outbreak of the Syrian civil war stopped excavations in the Syrian part of the region from 2011 onwards and the overspill from this war has heavily impacted on the security of neighbouring provinces of Turkey meaning that there too such research has become untenable. Therefore we must leave aside our search for a relationship by comparing liturgical furnishings and artefacts for a moment and turn to what, if anything, can be gleaned from the liturgical congruencies.

### An Eastern Calendar?

It has long been acknowledged that a significant study of regional liturgical calendars would be a useful tool in trying to understand the relationships between different denominations in the Middle East. This is because aside from biblical figures, early church martyrs and supranational saints (such as St. George) many saints have a very particular regional and confessional identity that allows the scholar to draw certain conclusions about the type of church present in a region based on the saints that are venerated. In addition variations in the liturgical calendar can also be a way of establishing the influences on a particular community. In contemporary Georgia many people in essence follow two festal calendars; these are the Georgian mountain dwellers who, particularly in Khevsureti and Tusheti, follow an ancient cycle of feast days related to their local deities in tandem with observing some or all of the Orthodox Christian feasts.[38] As mentioned above, there are ongoing discussions amongst

38 Many thanks are due to Kevin Tuite, who alerted me to this issue with his question about whether the Pentecostal division was utilised in the Eastern and Oriental Church calendars.

anthropologists as to how exactly Christianity and local vernacular beliefs are intertwined in Khevsureti, Tusheti and, to a lesser extent, Svaneti. Nobody has yet tried to map the two religious calendars on to each other, but Tuite has observed that there appears to be congruence between the Khevsur festivals of *Atengenoba* and ostensibly Christian feasts held in Armenia and the Assyrian Christian tradition.[39]

The timing of these festivals is related to an ancient system of dividing the year into seven 'pentecosts' of seven weeks and each 'pentecost' ending with an extra fiftieth day named the *atzereth* that took the year to 350 days plus a 15 or 16 day *sapattum* to equate to a full solar year.[40] Carrington points out that not only is this division employed by later Christian calendars but 'it is also in line with older *Assyrian and Babylonian and Canaanite calendars*.'[41] Given the evidence that this early Christian calendar was linked to an ancient Assyrian method of measuring time it shoud be no surprise that the Pentecostal calendar is still followed by the Church of the East today.

Intriguingly the footprint of this ancient calendar can be seen in the festal cycle of not only the Assyrian Church but also the Armenian Church as well, although interestingly the West Syrian (Syrian Orthodox) tradition does not appear to follow the same pattern and in its summer feasts appears to be in line with the Chalcedonian Churches. This presumed Assyrian influence would seem to have ultimately evolved from an Assyrian festal rite into the Khevsur *Atengenoba*, the Armenian *Vardavar* and the Assyrian feast of *Nusardel* also known as 'Assyrian Water Day'. Obviously this needs a great deal more study before these parallels are fully understood and the reasons for this relationship become clear. Suffice it to say here that the survival of an ancient calendar in the eastern Georgian highlands could well be related to the presence of Assyrian Christians in Kartli and Kakheti in late antiquity. There has been a great deal of speculation and a certain amount of academic work on how earlier Christian traditions have survived amongst the Svans in the west Georgian highlands because the Svans are a Christian society, albeit a syncretistic variant of Christianity that is strongly entwined with other pre-Christian beliefs. Because the Khevsurs and Tushes have fewer recognisably Christian traits in their belief systems they have thus far not been studied as a source of surviving early Christian influences in the same way.

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39 Pers. comm. Kevin Tuite.

40 p. 366, Carrington, Philip, *According to Mark: a Running Commentary on the Oldest Gospel*, Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1960.

41 p. 366, Carrington, Philip, *According to Mark*.

This congruence of three (Assyrian, Armenian and Khevsur) festal calendars is an issue that urgently requires more research. When we take this in conjunction with the tantalising possibilities offered by the ethnographical testimonies about the use of the *drosha* in cult enclosures and the raising of a pre-altar Cross in early Georgian churches, which appears to recall the ancient Mesopotamian *bema* liturgy, it is clear that these relationships offer a wide scope for exploration. Within the context of the current study, there was not enough time to reach a level of knowledge of Khevsur vernacular religion that was sufficient to enable a firm conclusion to be reached, but initial findings suggest that this area will prove a fruitful avenue of future research.

CHAPTER 7

# An Argument from Silence: The Differing Evidence in the Syriac and Georgian Language Sources

## The Evidence from Syria: References to Kartvelians in the Syriac Sources and in the *Vitae* of Syrian Saints

In his account of the life of his acquaintance Symeon Stylites the Elder, Theodoret of Cyrrhus lists the countries of origin of all those who came to visit the saint on his column at Qal'at Sem'an on the Syrian Limestone Massif between Antioch and Beroea (Aleppo) saying:

> Not only do the inhabitants of our part of the world flock together, but also Ishmaelites, Persians, Armenians subject to them, Iberians, Homerites, and men even more distant than these; and there came many inhabitants of the extreme west, Spaniards, Britons, and the Gauls who live between them.[1]

This passage is often used as evidence for the relationship between the Iberians and the Syrians in the fifth century, along with passages from the *vitae* of Symeon the Younger and his mother Martha that were written a century later.[2] From this it would perhaps appear that there was regular communication between the two regions that was attested to by the literary sources but, as with all the other evidence examined thus far, this promising beginning is deceiving; there are no other clear references to Iberians found in the early Syriac literature and they do not appear to have played a significant role in the development of Syrian Christianity in general or monasticism in particular.

Naturally the argument has been used that since the (As)Syrian Fathers left their homelands to travel to Kartli then there is less likely to be a reference to

1 XXVI, 11, p. 165, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Trans. Price, R.M., *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Cistercian Publications; Kalamazoo, 1985.

2 Chapters 103, 130, 131, 136 and 253 of the *vita* of Symeon and chapters 53, 54, 56, 57 and 65 of the *vita* of St. Martha concern Iberians. See Van den Ven, Paul, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune (521–592)*, I. *Introduction et texte grec*, II. *Traduction et Commentaire, Vie grecque de sainte Marie, mère de S. Syméon, Indices*, Subsidia Hagiographica 32, Société des Bollandistes; Brussels, 1962 & 1970.

them in the lands that they left behind and this view obviously has some logic. However, if there was a long established relationship between the two regions then one would expect there to be some reference to this relationship in the Syriac literature. It would be reasonable to expect references to missionaries setting out for the north, for example, or for tales of Syrians who had achieved great feats in the Caucasus, given that the evangelisation of this nation appears to have been widely circulated by Rufinus from approximately the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries onwards. Whilst not extensively known to most outsiders, Kartli was far from being *terra incognita* and yet there appears to have been no mention of Iberians apart from Theodoret's statement above.

It could also be suggested that we should consider the Greek sources from Syria as well, since the *vitae* of Symeon the Younger and Martha survive in that language, but this would be overlooking a significant doctrinal issue; the prevailing narrative amongst Georgian scholars for the past century[3] is that these Fathers were anti Chalcedonian monks fleeing persecution in their homeland. As such they would probably have exclusively used Syriac—a point recognised by both Kekelidze and Aleksidze who refer to this as being the language used by these holy men—because Greek, as the language of their doctrinal and theological opponents, would not have been their language of choice and even if they had been educated in that tongue they are likely to have shunned it for political reasons.

## Kekelidze and the Georgian Historiographical Literature on the '*Asirieli Mamebi*'

This brings us to another anomaly, which is the reference to Iberian monks gathering around Symeon the Younger in the sixth century. Symeon the Younger was a known supporter of the Council of Chalcedon and we can be surer of his opinions than those of Symeon the Elder, who died in 459, only eight years after the Council was held in 451. The presence of Iberian monks at his monastery in the sixth century is at odds with the contention that the (As)Syrian Fathers were monophysite. In fact the presence of Iberians makes most sense if we posit the hypothesis that the monks who gathered around Symeon

3 See for example Aleksidze, Zaza, 'Mandilioni da keramioni dzvel kartul mtserlobashi', *Academia* 1 (2001), pp. 9–15, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi moslvis shesakheb (kulturul-istoriuli problema)', *Tplisis universitetis moambe* 6 (1925), pp. 82–107, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi moslvis shesakheb (kulturul-istoriuli problema) II', *Etyudy* 1 (1956), pp. 19–50.

were rebel Chalcedonian monks who had fled Kartli precisely *because they were suffering persecution under the monophysites* as the Kartvelian Church was officially still in union with the (non-Chalcedonian) Armenian Church in this century.

However this explanation is complicated by the metaphrastic *vita* of Shio Mghvimeli that states that Ioane Zedazneli "ascended to the great luminary Symeon of the Admirable Mountain … who blessed Ioane and his disciples and they prayed before following the road to Kartli."[4] In fact in his discussion of the (As)Syrian Fathers Kekelidze goes so far as to posit that the *terminus ante quem* of the arrival of the group who accompanied Ioane Zedazneli must be 541. This is because Shio's *vita* explicitly states that the visit occurred in the period when Symeon was residing in an oven in the years immediately before he ascended his column and Kekelidze dates this event to 541.[5] The complications arise because Kekelidze is adamant that these figures were non-Chalcedonian[6] when the later written evidence suggests that they were more in sympathy with Chalcedonian thought—something that he himself acknowledges when he later comments that the texts were written in a Chalcedonian context and do not 'reflect reality.'[7] Therefore on the one hand he uses the sources to date the arrival of Ioane Zedazneli in Kartli and on the other he dismisses them as being at least partially falsified by a later era. This ambivalent attitude is reflected in the fact that although Kekelidze acknowledges that these figures spoke Syriac (or *Assyrian* as it is referred to in the Georgian texts) he uses references to their purported knowledge of Kartvelian to come to the somewhat startling conclusion that these men were not (As)Syrian, but actually ethnic Kartvelians who were returning to their homeland. As evidence for this Kekelidze cites the meeting of Ioane Zedazneli with Catholicos Evlavi (532–544) as being conducted in Kartvelian. He states that this was perceived as a miracle, but was in fact that this was 'no more no less than Kartvelians speaking Kartvelian to each other.'[8] He underlines this argument by commenting that the *vitae* refer to both Shio Mghvimeli and Abibos Nekreseli studying 'Assyrian', Greek and Kartvelian. However the argument that neither would have needed

4 Translation author's own from p. 103, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi'.

5 pp. 99–100, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi'.

6 For example he says that the *vita* of Davit Garejeli has him turn back from Jerusalem because he was unable to enter due to his monophysitism, p. 99, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi'.

7 p. 103, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi'.

8 pp. 103–104, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi'.

to study the 'Assyrian' language if he were already of (As)Syrian origin is weakened by the reference to fact that they both reportedly also studied Kartvelian as well and by this logic it would have been uneccessary to study Kartvelian if that was their native language.[9]

Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of this argument, it has gained a great deal of currency with post-Soviet Georgian scholars as it chimes with the new found confidence of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which claims to be the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes 'authentic' Georgian identity. The idea of the (As)Syrian Fathers being ethnic Georgians 'returning' to their homeland has been most forcefully put forward by Goiladze[10] but has been comprehensively refuted by scholars such as Matitashvili.[11] In response to the assertions by Goiladze that Georgians and 'related tribes' had settled in north Mesopotamia and along its rivers, Matitashvili argues that:

> The author [Goiladze] believes that the Assyrian Fathers, who were Georgians by their mentality, moved towards Georgia from Edessa, but we cannot agree with this. Here again we have a case of the wrong interpretation of the source. Not one work on the lives of the Assyrian Fathers, nor any other medieval narratives or epigraphical sources mention the Georgian origins of the Syrian Fathers (or that they were monophysites, however V. Goiladze believes that they were dyophysites) in the slightest reference to their origins, but the researchers frequently draw attention to the appeal of their own interpretation and how the sources prove their ideas, which are explained in a highly subjective manner. Accordingly we must conclude that the Assyrian Fathers who came to Kartli were dyophysite Syrian figures.[12]

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9 p. 104, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi'.

10 Goiladze, Vakhtang, *Asurel mamata samsshoblo da sakartvelo*, 2002. This is a self-published booklet.

11 Matitashvili, Shota, 'Kartuli bermonazvnoba VI–VIII saukuneebshi: Sirieli Mamebi', *Sami Saunje* 2 (2012), pp. 216–230.

12 pp. 226–227, Matitashvili, Shota, 'Kartuli bermonazvnoba VI–VIII saukuneebshi', translation by the author. ავტორი თვლის, რომ ასურელი მამები, რომლებიც შეგნებით ქართველები იყვნენ, სწორედ ედესიდან უნდა წამოსულიყვნენ საქართველოში, რასაც ჩვენ ვერაფრით ვერ დავეთანხმებით. აქ საქმე ისევ წყაროს არასწორ ინტერპრეტაციასთან გვაქვს. ასურელ მამათა ცხოვრების ამსახველ არც ერთ თხზულებაში, ასევე არც სხვა რომელიმე ქართულ შუასაუკუნეობრივ ნარატიულ თუ ეპიგრაფიკულ წაროებში, სირიელი მამების ქართულ წარმოავლობაზე (ან მათ მონოფიზიტობაზე, თუმცა ვ. გოილაძე მათ დიოფიზიტებად თვლის) ოდნავი მინიშნებაც კი არ არის, მაგრამ მკვლევ-

It must be noted that whilst Matitashvili makes his argument based on the evidence from the Georgian sources, his refutation of the presence of Georgian colonies in Mesopotamia is also supported by the fact that no archaeological evidence has yet been discovered to suggest a Georgian presence on Syrian or Mesopotamian territories except for the Georgian monasteries founded in the region around Antioch, largely between the eighth and tenth centuries. In addition we have a great deal of literary evidence from Edessa throughout this period, but there are no references yet studied that refer to a Georgian colony in the city in late antiquity. Bearing this in mind, Matitashvili's argument that Goiladze has interpreted information in an exceptionally subjective manner to reach his conclusions is fully justified, even if his own argument that the (As)Syrian Fathers were in fact dyophysite Syrians remains a matter for debate.

Whilst this is a question that is destined to continue in Georgian historical literature, and will be the focus of increasing research as ecclesiastical history develops further as a sub-discipline of post-Soviet Georgian historical studies, the time has come to reconcile the fact that the only literary evidence we have for these figures comes from the Georgian side and, as accepted by all participants in the debate, these accounts were all written some years after the events that they purport to recount. However, medieval literature is not to be dismissed so lightly as completely inaccurate as it often yields a great deal of valuable information. The difficulty is separating the useful information from later accretions or falsifications that have been added for political or doctrinal factors and it is to this task that we shall now turn.

### What's in a Name? Can We Use the Names of the (As)Syrian Fathers as Any Indication of Their Ethnic or Denominational Origins? Part One: Toponyms

One of the first things that anyone interested in the question of the (As)Syrian Fathers in Georgia will encounter is their seemingly exotic sounding names. At first hearing designations such as Davit Garejeli or Ioane Zedazneli would appear to offer more information than usual as most saints are known by one name alone, and it is only in the recent past that family names have become

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რები, ხშირად არ გააჩნიათ რა რაიმე ხელმოსაჭიდი ცნობა, საკუთარ ინტერპრეტაციას მიმართავენ და წყაროებს თავიანთი შეხედულების დასამტკიცებლად თავისებურად, უადრესად სუბიექტურად განმარტავენ. შესაბამისად, უნდა დავასკვნათ, რომ ქართლში მოსული ასურელი მამები სირიელი დიოფიზიტი მოღვაწეები იყვნენ.

a common occurrence. However in this case the phenomenon is explained by the fact that each of the thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers is assigned a toponym that associates them with a location in Kartli or Kakheti. Therefore we are given the name of the place in Georgia where each father settled or lived for the longest period of time during their life in Kartvelian lands, rather than being offered any information about their origins. It is worth noting that each of these figures is associated primarily with the place that they founded a monastery and that this is in many cases (but not all) synonymous with where they are believed to have been buried. However more than one location within the country may have an association with an individual (As)Syrian Father as some lived in multiple locations or were martyred away from their primary residence.

A case in point is Davit Garejeli, who although not the presumed leader of this group (that role being assigned to Ioane Zedazneli) is nevertheless arguably the most well known of these figures today. We can ascribe this continuing popularity to two factors in particular, both related to questions of geography. The first is that his name is given to the lavra that stands in the Gareja desert[13] and although this monastery is only the largest and most important of the many foundations that honeycomb the rocks in the region, it is the name by which the whole complex of monasteries and hermitages has become known. The second point is that Davit was the only one of the thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers to be linked to the capital city Tbilisi. This is interesting as the city as we know it today is believed to have been founded in the fifth century CE. Although there is archaeological evidence for a number of ancient settlements on the territory now covered by the extended modern city,[14] the legend of the foundation of Tbilisi states that the semi-legendary fifth century King Vakhtang Gorgasali was hunting when he discovered hot springs and decided to found a city on the site. 'Tbilisi' is therefore said to come from the word *tbili* (თბილი) meaning 'warm'. The moving of the capital of Kartli to Tbilisi from the ancient city of Mtskheta approximately 25 km to the north west occurred at some point in the sixth century and this is what is intriguing about Davit; his story is linked

13 Georgians refer to this semi-arid landscape as the Gareja desert, but it is more accurate to describe it as being steppe land.

14 There has been settlement of the wider region today swallowed up by metropolitan Tbilisi for millennia. For an overview and information on sites from the Chalcolithic until the Classical eras see Abramischwili, Rostom & Michael, 'Archäologische Denkmäler im Stadtgebiet von Tbilissi' in Miron, Andrei & Orthmann, Winfried (eds.), *Unterwegs zum Goldenen Vlies. Archäologische Funde aus Georgien*, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte Saarbrücken; Saarbrücken, 1995, pp. 185–205.

closely to this new city whereas Ioane Zedazneli and the core of the fathers are associated with sites in the area directly around the ancient capital; Mtskheta.

The fact that according to medieval Georgian chronicles it was in the reign of the Kartvelian King Dachi, son of Vakhtang Gorgasali, that the capital was officially moved from Mtskheta to Kartli places this event in the early sixth century. Thus the chronicles locate the advent of the new capital and the arrival of the (As)Syrian Fathers within a few years of each other. Read in this light one can posit that whilst the leader of the group Ioane Zedazneli and his closest disciples headed for the old seat of power that retained influence as the ecclesiastical centre of the country, Davit made the decision to inhabit a cave on the hillside above Tbilisi. Although the tradition is that Davit was at pains to underline his desire for solitude[15] the reader is perhaps justified in remaining sceptical of these claims given that his chosen refuge was less than an hour's walk from the city of Tbilisi. When a woman claimed that he was the father of her unborn child, he called upon God to support him by stating that she would give birth to a stone. When events transpired as he had predicted at the spot now occupied by Kashveti church on Rustaveli Avenue in Tbilisi (the church is named for this event), he left the capital for the 'desert' of Gareja.

These events are recounted here because it is perhaps because of this biography that Davit Gareja remains arguably the most famous of the thirteen Fathers today. The monastic complex at Gareja is the largest in the country and there are two sites associated with Davit in Tbilisi, Kashveti being placed directly opposite the old parliament building of the country, thus assuring him of a prominent place in the history of the country. Whereas the *vitae* of many of the other fathers are not as well known, it is interesting to note that many of them are like Davit in being associated with several locations within Kartli and Kakheti. For example Abibos Nekreseli is primarily associated with the monastery of Nekresi in Kakheti and yet his tenth century *vita* reports that he visited the grave of his fellow father, Shio, at Shiomghvime monastery near Mtskheta before finally being martyred at Rekha. Similar tales of monks moving across the landscape are associated with several of the lesser known fathers, but whilst helping us to build up a picture of the spread of monasticism across Kartli and Kakheti this data still fails to help us understand the origins of these figures.

15 The *vita* of Davit can be found in the original Georgian in Abuladze, Ilia, *Dzveli kartuli agiograpiuli literaturis dzeglebi*, 6 vols., Gamomtsemloba 'Metsniereba'; Tbilisi, 1963–1989 and in translation in Lang, David Marshall, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, Mowbrays; London & Oxford, 1976 but this does not give an account of Davit's life in the environs of Tbilisi.

Some of the fathers have references to their origins in their (always much later) *vitae*. In this way it is suggested that Ioane Zedazneli came from Syria or Mesopotamia as he travelled to Kartli via the environs of Antioch where he sought the blessings of Symeon Stylites the Younger. More specifically Ioane is referred to in the *vita* of Davit Garejeli as originating 'from the borders of Antioch in the land of Mesopotamia.'[16] If this means the city of Antioch-in-Mesopotamia then Ioane must have originated from the region of Viranşehir in southeast Turkey, which is believed to have been built within the area of the older city named Antioch. Similarly Davit Garejeli is referred to as coming from 'the Mesopotamian valley of Assyria.'[17]

However, as mentioned above, these *vitae* were written several centuries after the events that they purport to recount and the more removed they were from the sixth century, the more embroidered the accounts became. This is a question discussed by Aleksidze in his consideration of how the story of the *mandylion* of Edessa became part of the narrative of the (As)Syrian Fathers. Aleksidze discusses how the oldest (10th century) text referring to the fathers does not include Anton Martqopeli in the list of names despite the belief in contemporary Georgia that he brought the *mandylion* to Kartli.[18] In answer to a question raised by other historians including Kekelidze, Aleksidze considers why the numbers and names of these figures are not consistently the same in all the sources and why some now prominent figures such as Anton Martqopeli are not mentioned in the earliest recensions of the texts. Although traditionally they are referred to as the Thirteen Fathers, a figure with obvious New Testament resonance, some lists have fifteen or sixteen names and the variant lists do not always reconcile with each other. Aleksidze persuasively suggests that some names on the later lists could have been Kartvelian disciples of the original monks who were so devoted and ascetic in their way of life that they were ultimately added to the list of the (As)Syrian Fathers—for example Dodo Garejeli, a disciple of Davit Garejeli would be one of the most prominent figures in this category.

If we accept Aleksidze's logical argument for how the layers of later interpretation were added to the *vitae* to explain Kartvelian beliefs about the *mandylion* and its equally miraculous offspring, the *keramidion*, then it becomes clear how much later accounts are at pains to present a strong relationship between Kartli

16 p. 83, Lang, David Marshall, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, Mowbrays; London & Oxford, 1976.

17 p. 83, Lang, David Marshall, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*.

18 p. 13, Aleksidze, Zaza, 'Mandilioni da keramioni dzvel kartul mtserlobashi', *Academia* 1 (2001), pp. 9–15.

and Edessa to account for why and how these relics arrived in the country. Aleksidze identifies the *keramidion* of Hierapolis with Ezderios/Isidore Nabukeli, who was later named Samtavneli, and who bought the relic to Kartli serving as the 'censer and servant' of the *keramidion*.[19] In the same way the 'Icon of Edessa' (*mandylion*) was later translated to Kartli by Theodosius/Tadeoz/Tata of Urhai (Edessa) who became known as Theodosius Rekhali or Stepantsmindeli in later lists of the (As)Syrian Fathers. The fact that stories of Anton Martqopeli bringing the *keramidion* or *mandylion* to Kartli started circulating much later than the accounts of Ezderios and Theodosius is used by Aleksidze to underline his point that these stories shifted over time, and establishing the exact number and identity of the monks who are believed to have travelled to Kartli and Kakheti in the sixth century remains a complex and time consuming process.

### What's in a Name? Part Two: Christian Names

Often in academia it is easy to get carried away by arcane details and overlook simple points. One element of the story of the (As)Syrian Fathers that particularly bears this out is the lack of consideration of the given names of these figures. As the preceding section highlighted, there has been a certain amount of debate around the toponyms associated with these fathers and this has been helpful in allowing us to draw a monastic map of Kartli and Kakheti based upon the locations where these monks are believed to have lived, served and died. However it is an undeniable fact that the given name of a person is often an indicator of their ethnic origin or betrays the fact that their parents wanted to curry favour with a regional power or influential patron.[20]

One of the most well known examples of this phenomenon in Georgia is the case of the silver dish in the treasury of the Simon Janashia State Museum in Tbilisi. The dish is inscribed in Greek as being a gift from *Basileus* Flavius Dad to *Pitiakhsh* Bersouma and although it was discovered in a third century CE grave, Gagoshidze and Margishvili have demonstrated that the artefact was originally made in the first century CE.[21] They also highlight that this inscription perfectly encapsulates the political situation in first century Kartli. The

19 p. 13, Aleksidze, Zaza, 'Mandilioni da keramioni'.

20 This of course refers to a variety of historical contexts. It is not an argument that can be employed in the twenty first century where the interconnected world of social media means that names alone are now not a reliable measure of identifying ethnicity.

21 Gagoshidze, Iulon & Margishvili, Soso, 'Mepe Plavius Dedes Vinaobistvis', *Iberia-Colchis* 9 (2013), pp. 68–87.

grave it was found in was located in the necropolis at Armaziskhevi, Mtskheta, for *pitiakhshes*. This was a title given to the Persian viceroys who served alongside the Kartvelian rulers in the first centuries CE to underline Persian power in the region. Therefore we have an inscription where a local sovereign is using the Greek title designating a king in the Graeco-Roman world, *Basileus*, with a hybrid Romano-Persian given name as Flavius was presumably chosen due to the fact that it was the family name of Vespasian and his sons, and Dad is a well-attested Iranian name.[22] Therefore the giver of the gift was presumably of Kartvelian origin, but had adopted a Roman title and hybrid Romano-Persian name to appease the empires that were seeking to control Kartvelian territory in this period. In the case of the recipient of the gift, *Pitiakhsh* Bersouma, whilst his role as *pitiakhsh* is clearly understood, nobody has yet commented on the fact of his name. Bersouma is a popular Syrian and Assyrian Christian name to this day and therefore it is clear that the holder of the office of *pitiahksh* at this time came from a Syriac-speaking background. Given the territorial boundaries of the period and the fact that this man was serving the Persian empire this is most likely to place him as originating in the land that we today call Iraq or alternatively from part of south eastern Turkey or north western Iran. What remains clear is that Bersouma is a name that is associated entirely with Syriac-speaking people and in the first century CE their lands were divided, as were the Kartvelian lands, between the Roman and Persian Empires. In this case there was no material gain to be had by adopting a Syriac name and therefore it seems almost certain that Bersouma was an ethnic Assyrian who had been promoted for loyal service to the Persian Empire.

The above digression is necessary because when discussing the (As)Syrian Fathers one would expect to find names such as Bersouma amongst the list. However this is far from being the case as no single name can be taken as being typically Syrian (or Assyrian) in origin. On the other hand many names are relatively neutral ones that were common to many Christian cultures in late antiquity, some are typically Greek in origin and others are not recognisable as coming from any of the local cultures. If we take the thirteen names most commonly listed as comprising the (As)Syrian Fathers today[23] we can see that it is in fact extremely difficult to link these names definitively to Syrian society.

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22 See p. 241 of *Iberia-Colchis* 9 for an English summary of the above paper where the etymology of this name is discussed.

23 The inclusion of names like Anton Martqopeli means that this list is, as Aleksidze has argued, heavily altered from the earliest sources. However the list does include the most significant figures and those who are still most revered by the contemporary Georgian Orthodox Church.

TABLE 1 *List of the names of the Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers as accepted in contemporary Georgian tradition and their possible Syriac and Greek cognates*

| Name | Syriac equivalent | Greek equivalent | Unknown origin |
|---|---|---|---|
| Abibos Nekreseli[24] | | | × |
| Anton Martqopeli | Antoun | Antonios | |
| Davit Garejeli | Daoud | David | |
| Ioane Zedazneli | Yohannon | Ioannnes | |
| Ioseb Alaverdeli | Yusuf | Iosif | |
| Ise Tsilkneli | Isa, Yeshua | | |
| Isidore/Ezderios Samtavneli | Isidore[25] | Isidore | |
| Mikael Ulumboeli | Mikael | Michail | |
| Piros Breteli | | Pyrrhus | |
| Shio Mghvime | | | × |
| Stepane Khirseli | Estapanos | Stefanos | |
| Theodosius/Tadeoz/Tata Rekhali/Stepantsmindeli | Theodosius[26]/Addai | Theodosius | |
| Zenon Ikaltoeli | | Zenon | |

The table above shows that two of the most famous names linked to 'Syrian' origin in the minds of contemporary Georgians, Abibos and Shio, are in fact of unknown origin and definitely not known as Syriac names. Elsewhere the overwhelming majority of names are based upon those of well-known Biblical or other Christian figures such as the protomartyr Stephen, or generic terms such as 'god-given' (Theodosius) that were widely employed across many early Christian cultures. On balance there are slightly more names that appear in Greek-speaking culture (10 out of 13) than there are linked to Syriac names (9 out of 13). However, this difference is negligible and the fact that the majority of the names of these (As)Syrian Fathers are generic early Christian names that cannot be linked to one particular culture does not rule out these figures

24 It has been posited that Abibos could derive from the Syriac Habib, but after discussion with Dr. Sebastian Brock I am prepared to concede that this is too speculative an identification.

25 Whilst Isidore is clearly a Greek name it is one that was also used by Syriac-speaking churchmen.

26 As in note 25 above.

as being (As)Syrian in origin, but does weaken the case in so far as one would expect there to have been more regionally specific names such as Bersouma, Ephrem/Afram or Abo to have been present on the list. This is especially the case considering that the patron saint of Tbilisi, St. Abo is an eighth century martyr of Christian Arab origins with a name that clearly identifies him as originating from a Syriac or Arabic speaking *milieu*. Therefore we are forced to question why it is that none of these figures has a definitively Syriac name; is this because the later written accounts did not know the names of these monks and so chose suitable sounding appellations? Or is it because they were not actually (As)Syrian at all? Alternatively we must ask if the confusion is because they simply did not exist, or at least not in the way that later accounts portray.

### Evidence for Syriac Epigraphy on Kartvelian Territory: Myths and Rumours

As discussed in chapter three, although in conversation with Georgian archaeologists and art historians 'Syrian' objects were often referred to, when these beliefs and assumptions were examined more closely the evidence was almost entirely non-existent and amounted only to quantities of Syrian-made glass and Roman era coins, with the coins being found almost without exception in the west of the country in Lazica/Egrisi rather than in Kartli and Kakheti, the regions associated with the (As)Syrian Fathers. This lack of Syrian provenanced items also extended to a lack of *Syriac* in the sense that there have been no Syriac inscriptions discovered on Georgian territory at the time of writing. Where an item had been catalogued as being inscribed with Syriac, further investigation proved that the writing was early Arabic and an ornamental motif respectively.[27] Given the lack of Syriac evidence it is interesting to note that there is a great deal of evidence of early Arabic epigraphy across Kartli with examples as diverse as an inscription incorporated in the city walls of Tbilisi[28] and the medieval gravestones at Dmanisi. Bearing this in mind it is especially intriguing that several historians have made reference to Syriac inscriptions appearing on early frescoes in Kartli; given that these paintings are long destroyed, is it possible to draw any conclusions from these tales of Syriac epigraphy?

27 See chapter 3.

28 Giorgi Gagoshidze, National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia, pers. comm.

The specific instances under discussion relate to Samtavisi and Rekha and the stories of Ezderios/Isidore and Theodosius/Tadeoz. As Aleksidze has demonstrated in his research into the oldest recensions of the *vitae* of the (As)Syrian Fathers based upon his work with the Georgian corpus of manuscripts from St. Catherine's monastery in Sinai,[29] the earliest extant accounts of these fathers dates to the tenth century and this appears to be accepted as the period when these accounts were first written, although Kekelidze argues that some of the *vitae*, in particular that of Abibos Nekreseli, date to the ninth century.[30] However it must be noted that Aleksidze's discovery of the Sinai recensions is currently reshaping our considerations around the historiography of the (As)Syrian Fathers and a definitive view on the dating of these texts awaits the final publication of a critical edition of the Sinai texts.

Leaving these issues aside, what we are left with is what the common consensus suggests as tenth century texts referring to events that purport to have taken place in the sixth century and, most commentators agree, in the first half of that century—therefore during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. This point is crucial as we know that it was a turning point in the post-Chalcedonian Christological debate and is now widely accepted as the period when the positions of the opposing sides crystallised.[31] With these events as the backdrop it is necessary to understand that, as Kekelidze rightly pointed out, the later historiographical tradition was likely to reflect the tenth century stance of the Kartvelian writers of the *vitae*, who were avowedly dyophysite and pro-Constantinopolitan in doctrinal terms.

So what is the claim regarding Syriac inscriptions in sixth century Kartli? Once again these references to the use of Syriac are related to the Georgian traditions surrounding the *mandylion* and the *keramidion*. Karaulashvili has written extensively on the Georgian literary tradition relating to these artefacts[32] and the comparative literature relating to King Abgar and the *mandylion*

29 Aleksidzé, Z. (Introduction), Trans. Mahé, J.-P., *Le nouveau manuscript géorgien sinaïtique* N Sin 50, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, Vol. 586, Subsidia 108, Louvain, 2001.

30 p. 84, Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi'.

31 For more on this process see Menze, Volker L., *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2008.

32 Karaulashvili, Irma, 'The date of the *Epistula Abgari*', *Apocrypha* 13 (2002), pp. 85–111, 'Anchiskhati: keramidioni hierapolisdan tu mandilioni edesidan?', *Mravaltavi* 20 (2003), pp. 170–178, 'The Abgar Legend Illustrated: The Interrelationship of the Narrative Cycles and Iconography in the Byzantine, Georgian and Latin Traditions' in Hourihane, Colum (ed.), *Artistic Interchange between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period*,

in other languages and she points out that whereas the initial accounts of the 'Image of Edessa' can be dated to the sixth century, it is only later that visual representations of this relic begin to appear. Whilst technical analysis of the most famous image of the Edessene type in Georgia, the Anchiskhati Icon, has proved the original is a sixth century encaustic icon[33] it is also on record that this image only entered modern Georgian territory in the seventeenth century after Ancha, which was formerly Georgian land, fell to the Ottoman Turks. Therefore we must look elsewhere for visual evidence of when images of this type first appeared in Kartli and here we are dealing with two separate categories; those images that are still extant and those that are lost and that are only known through literary references to them.

Karaulashvili reports that the first recorded image of the *mandylion* in a Georgian manuscript is in the Alaverdi Four Gospels of 1054, now housed in the National Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi[34] and that there are two cases of early fresco paintings with the image in Kartli. The first is in the seventh century Church of the Ascension of the Saviour in Tsromi[35] which was identified as having a *mandylion* image by a variety of early and mid-twentieth century art historians but that has since been disputed by Zaza Skhirtladze, who has reattributed this scene as 'Christ in Majesty' or the Ascension of Christ. Despite this debate, Karaulashvili prefers to include this image as an early *mandylion* until definitively proved otherwise. The other fresco is at the Church of the Holy Cross in Telovani not far from Samtavisi, which is a site that we shall turn to in a moment. Karaulashvili accepts Skhirtladze's dating of the cycle in this church to two periods; an earlier phase of the eighth to ninth century and a later one of the tenth century and points out that this is the earliest example of the 'Image of Edessa' still extant in Georgian territory. Therefore, and this is maybe no coincidence, the earliest *uncontested* images of this type appear in Georgia at the same time as the texts recording the *vitae* of the (As)Syrian Fathers were being composed.

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Pennsylvania State University Press; Pennsylvania, 2007, pp. 220–243, 'A Short Overview of the Nationalised Peculiarites of the Abgar Legend in Georgian, Armenian and Slavonic traditions', *Scripta* 10–11 (2012), pp. 171–184, 'Abgar Legend: Text and Iconography', *Kadmos* 6 (2014), pp. 164–240.

33 Pers. comm. Elene Kavlelashvili, Chief Curator of the Treasury of the Shalva Amiranashvili Art Museum, Tbilisi.

34 p. 173, Karaulashvili, Irma, 'Abgar Legend: Text and Iconography', *Kadmos* 6 (2014), pp. 164–240.

35 p. 169 ff., Karaulashvili, Irma, 'Abgar Legend: Text and Iconography'. See also http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/show/118 for exterior images of this church as it looks now.

After this long, but necessary, preamble we now turn to the question of Syriac inscriptions. In his work on the *vitae* of Theodosius/Tadeoz of Urhai (later Rekhali/Stepantsmindeli) and Isidore/Ezderios Nabukeli (later Samtavneli) Aleksidze has found references to both building new churches at Rekha and Samtavisi respectively, and both also commissioning images of the Saviour to be painted in these new churches in a manner that resembled the icons not made by human hands, that is the *acheiropoietos* icons of the *mandylion* and the *keramidion*.[36] According to the hagiographical evidence the churches of Samtavisi and Rekha were built in the sixth century and were still extant at the time that the *vitae* were written in the tenth century. Today the church at Rekha has been lost but beside the thirteenth century church at Samtavisi archaeologists have excavated the remains of a fifth century basilica with walls that survive to approximately knee-height, the rest of the stone presumably having been mined for the construction of the medieval cathedral directly to the north of the earlier building. Naturally these circumstances mean that no traces of fresco survive at either site.

Aleksidze emphasises this tradition of two sixth century images of the Saviour because he is at pains to emphasise that this account is significantly earlier than the story of Anton Martqopeli and the *keramidion* or *mandylion* and therefore represents an earlier stratum of the *mandylion* story in Georgia. Aleksidze recounts that the sources refer to the 'icons' as 'miraculously showing the Saviour painted by angels.'[37] However in the case of the Rekha fresco the image deviated from the standard *mandylion* representation of Christ's face or his bust by having his entire body depicted. In addition Aleksidze reports that this fresco had an inscription 'in the Syrian language' at the feet of the Saviour saying 'Who you see here, He has sent me.'[38] He then uses this account to argue that this piece of evidence is one of the reasons why the argument that the (As)Syrian Fathers were ethnically Kartvelian is incorrect.

Karaulashvili refers to this account by Aleksidze in her work on the legends surrounding King Abgar and the *mandylion* in the Georgian tradition but the reference to Syriac inscriptions on early Georgian frescoes has not been referred to in any other sources and therefore we rely simply on this account in the *vitae* of Theodosius/Tadeoz and Isidore/Ezderios to offer any reference at all to a Syriac inscription on Kartvelian territory. Once again we are in a situation where we are relying on tenth century testimony to tell us of the events

36 p. 13, Aleksidze, Zaza, 'Mandilioni da keramioni'.

37 ibid.

38 ibid.

of four centuries earlier. All we can say is that we know that there *was* a basilica built in Samtavisi around this time and that there are ruins in the vicinty of Rekha that could be the other church if the money and time were available to excavate the area. Whether or not these buildings had frescoes is impossible to answer, although we can accept this as a plausible scenario. On the other hand what can we make of these references to inscriptions in the 'Syrian language'? Is this really any more reliable than the conflicting accounts of which languages the (As)Syrian Fathers spoke when interacting with the local populace? Was this tradition handed down faithfully over the centuries or did a scribe add it in to the *vitae* in an attempt to lend credence to the claim that these men originated in (As)Syria? Obviously it is impossible to know the answers to these questions but what is clear is that this is yet another case where the 'evidence' has not yielded concrete support for the argument that these men were Syrian or Assyrian monks.

## Timeline of a Tradition: Matching the Sources to the Monuments

Whilst it might be tempting to dismiss the *vitae* as later inventions this would be a major error. It is clear that the sites linked with these figures are largely locations that played a significant role in the development of Kartvelian Christianity and the majority of the locations have buildings or archaeological evidence that confirms a Christian presence back to the fifth or sixth century CE. If this fact is considered with the argument put forward by Kekelidze that the (As)Syrian Fathers did not all arrive at the same time, but instead appeared in 'waves' throughout the early to mid sixth century[39] then we could be looking at a scenario where groups of foreign monks travelled to Kartli and Kakheti in late antiquity looking to found ascetic institutions and these (As)Syrian Fathers are a cultural memory of that event. Tamila Mgaloblishvili[40] argues that the thesis put forward by Kekelidze has some validity, but suggests that it can be pushed further. She points out that whilst his argument that these figures arrived singly or in groups over several decades in the early sixth century is very convincing, she sees no reason as to why it must be assumed that all thirteen (or fifteen or sixteen or however many there were in all) were of the same doctrinal persuasion. Given the confused circumstances of the time and the fact that Kartli and Kakheti stood at the crossroads with dyophysite Byzantines to the west,

39 Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi'.

40 pers. comm. Tamila Mgaloblishvili.

miaphysite Armenians to the south and Assyrians who rejected the concept of the *Theotokos* to the east, then there is no reason to believe that all these men came from the same doctrinal standpoint; in actual fact it seems logical to consider the possibility that they were refugees from more than one direction who, by extension would have spoken varied languages, had different ethnic origins and espoused contradictory doctrinal arguments.

If this is taken as our starting point then the pieces of the puzzle shift and we can see a picture beginning to emerge. The places associated with these figures are, as mentioned above, largely confirmed as having initially had churches built in the fifth or sixth century. This is a period when church hierarchies and doctrine are becoming increasingly rigid and monasticism is moving away from more unregulated eremitical practices towards communal life governed by rules and regulations. Here we have new institutions being established that offer a religious experience to pious men and which lay the foundations of Kartvelian monasticism. When this pivotal age of ecclesiastical history is later recorded by medieval chroniclers it could be argued that the messy reality of a mosaic of doctrines and ethnicities is smoothed away as a more polished view of the situation is developed. Here the biblical resonance of thirteen holy men arriving to spread the good news offers a more elegant version of reality and, given that the Georgian Church had been dyophysite since the early seventh century, a gloss is given to imply the 'orthodoxy' of these holy men in order to retrospectively cleanse the Kartvelian historical narrative.

### Reconciling the Literary Texts with the Evidence from Material Culture

If the scenario above is accepted it suggests that whilst foreign ascetics did flee to the wilds of Kartli and Kakheti in the sixth century, they may have travelled there for a variety of different motives from a series of different countries; it is only later on that chroniclers decided to create the narrative of the thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers when they sought to write the ecclesiastical history of their country. This argument follows a middle way in that it does not deny the existence of a group of travelling ascetics in late antique Kartli and Kakheti, but it does not accept that there were thirteen or that they were necessarily Syrian or Assyrian.

However when we take the evidence produced by material culture into account a slightly different picture begins to emerge. Here the lack of textual sources is accompanied by the corresponding lack of artefactual and architectural evidence discussed in previous chapters to point in a slightly more

nuanced direction. In this case the evidence is solely of a relationship with territories where *Assyrian* rather than *Syrian* Christians were present. This evidence suggests a cultural and economic exchange with the Persian Empire including Mesopotamia, the homeland of people descended from the Assyrians, but as analysed previously there is a surprising lack of evidence from Syria. Therefore this narrows the possible origins of our visitors even further and suggests that they came most probably from the Persian-controlled areas of Mesopotamia. This in turn has implications for the doctrinal identity of these figures. We know that there were miaphysites in the region, with a larger Assyrian (the group pejoratively labelled 'Nestorian') community, but no Chalcedonian Christians. Therefore the ideas advanced by Mgaloblishvili regarding different groups and confessions seem entirely correct with several caveats; firstly ethnically they are likely all to have been of Assyrian origin, although whether they themselves self-identified in this way is open to debate.[41] Secondly they were probably both miaphysite and Assyrian in their confessional identity, but not Chalcedonian. This swings the evidence in favour of declaring with some degree of certainty that these missionaries were Assyrian rather than Syrian and that this was almost certainly linked to the thus far unexplained disruption in relations between the east and west of Georgia, where the west looked towards Constantinpole and Antioch for trade, religious and political affairs whilst the east looked to their overlords, the Sassanian Shahs of Persia.

With all locations associated with the (As)Syrian Fathers being located in Kartli and Kakheti this was a wholly eastern phenomenon that took place independently of events in the western-facing, more Chalcedonian orientated territory of Lazica/Egrisi. It was not until the late sixth century and the events that led to the break with the Armenians at the Third Council of Dvin in 609–610 that these western elements politically and doctrinally permeated the east. Of course the quest for material evidence for this change is somewhat complicated by the fact that the region was invaded by the Arabs shortly thereafter, but what the Arab invasion places in sharp juxtaposition with the earlier period is just how little contact there had been with Arab lands in the centuries immediately before the advent of Islam.

41 Richard E. Payne, 'Avoiding Ethnicity: Uses of the Ancient Past in Late Sasanian Northern Mesopotamia' in Pohl, Walter, Gantner, Clemens & Payne, Richard E. (eds.), *Visions of community in the post-Roman world the West, Byzantium and the Islamic world, 300–1100*, Ashgate: Farnham & Burlington, VT, 2012, pp. 205–221.

CHAPTER 8

# The Unknown Factors: Evidence from the Cave Monasteries and the Significance of Georgian Vernacular Religion as a Relic of Earlier Ritual Practices

## The Areas of Research yet to be Fully Explored: A Brief Explanation of the Purpose of This Chapter

Any research question as complex as trying to unravel the level of cultural interaction between Syria and Georgia in late antiquity is bound to have many facets to it, particularly when the problem is approached in an interdisciplinary manner. Although the previous chapters have largely revealed the same pattern of evidence, with the archaeological, art historical, liturgical and historical data seeming generally to point in the same direction, there are two outstanding issues that have not been resolved and, in both cases, it seems that future research is necessary.

The first of these issues is the question of cave monasticism. It will be remembered that the only definitively Syrian early Christian artefact excavated thus far in Kartli or Kakheti was the Symeon Stylites medallion discovered at Davit Gareja in Kakheti.[1] For this reason alone it would seem sensible to look at the relationship between this complex and Syria, but as will be outlined below, there are a number of other reasons why it is desirable to undertake a comparative study of cave monasticism across the wider region. Secondly there is the tantalising echo of the Syrian *bema* liturgy in the use of pre-altar crosses in the Georgian highlands (and previously elsewhere as well) as well as the use of the tau-shaped *drosha* offering a possibility of interplay between early Christian rituals and vernacular beliefs.[2] Accordingly this chapter will offer some context to these two outstanding questions and discuss why these topics appear fruitful areas of future research in the hope of stimulating more interest and debate.

1 See Chapter 3.

2 See Chapter 6.

### Cave Dwelling as a Sub-branch of Monasticism

One element that frequently recurs in eastern and oriental monasticism is the practice of using caves as monastic cells. We know that the link between cave-dwelling and ascetic practices pre-dates Christianity as evidence from groups such as the Essenes makes clear, but how it became an integral part of eastern monastic practices is perhaps rather opaque. We find this phenomenon wherever the physical geography accommodates it across the Levant, down into Egypt and up into Asia Minor and the Caucasus. Whilst this form of monasticism is widely known and there have been various studies of the practice, thus far this research has concentrated on regional surveys or looked within the territories of a modern nation state rather than trying to take a wider view and place these practices within a wider framework encompassing the eastern and oriental Christian world of late antiquity. These studies have also concentrated on issues of monastic practice and organisation or, where decoration remains—most notably in Cappadocia in contemporary Turkey—approached the material from an art historical standpoint rather than seeking to contextualise the monuments from a more interdisciplinary standpoint.

Because of this relative lack of research these cave monasteries have generally been characterised as eremitic or cenobitic and the evolution of the lavra model has been traced, but beyond this there has yet to be a concerted effort to ascertain whether or not this cave monasticism was broadly similar across the wider eastern Mediterranean and Caucasus or whether it existed in variant forms specific to different locations in the eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor and the Caucasus. As mentioned above what follows will not answer these questions, but is rather intended as a first step in highlighting the issues with a view to stimulating further research in this area.[3]

The primary reason for this interest in the context of the current research is because although there is relatively little evidence of Syrian influence in the architecture of conventional churches in Kartli and Kakheti, at first glance it seems that there there is the possibility of some parallels between the cave monasteries of eastern Georgia, the ancient Iberia, and the cave monasteries of Lebanon which was classified as part of greater Syria in late antiquity. In contemporary Syria we have only one true cave monastery in the sense that the monks lived in caves, even though they worshipped in a conventional stone-built church built on a promontory in the midst of their cave-hermitages

3 In fact this subject is envisaged as the subject of a future research project by the author.

rather than having a rock-cut chapel.[4] Several other monastic foundations have incorporated elements of rock-cut architecture even if they are not true cave monasteries *per se*, so there is an awareness of the relationship between ascetic monasticism and cave-dwelling even if it is not common and is only found in the region abutting the contemporary Lebanese border. Since, as mentioned above, the only religious artefact definitively linked to Syria yet found in Georgia was also discovered in a cave at Davit Gareja this gives us a small amount of circumstantial evidence for a link between the two traditions and therefore this is another reason for considering whether an exploration of cave monasticism may help us understand the exact relationship between these two cultures in late antiquity.

What follows is a speculative consideration of some of the material that points out the possible links between the two traditions and offers suggestions for future academic study. In no way is it intended to offer a definitive view of the situation, but rather it is a preliminary step in beginning to examine this possible relationship and is included in this work to offer as complete a view as currently feasible of the relationship between the two societies in late antiquity—even if this element of the question has taken second place to the archaeology and art history of conventional stone-built churches throughout the majority of this work.

## An Overview of the Location of Rock-Cut Monasteries in Greater Syria

Naturally cave monasteries or rock-cut churches of all kinds depend upon the geological conditions of any given location; therefore in the modern country of Syria (as opposed to the ancient definition of that territory) there is only one region that is suitable for this kind of monument.[5] The area in question is the Qalamoun, which encompasses the foothills of the Anti-Lebanon mountain range and comprises a number of largely Christian villages or Muslim villages

4 This is Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi near Nebek in the Qalamoun region of western Syria, see below for more information about this foundation.

5 Theoretically there could have been cave monasteries in the Limestone Massif of northwest Syria but the evidence of the Afrin valley and its environs suggests that, although some caves were inhabited in prehistory, in the Roman and early Christian eras caves, both natural and manmade, acted largely as funerary monuments or cisterns. There is, thus far, no evidence of caves used for monastic purposes in this area—unless for storage or mortuary purposes.

with a significant Christian minority up until the present day.[6] In the south west of this area are the well-known towns and Christian pilgrimage sites of Saydnaya and Maaloula, with their shrines to the Virgin and St. Thecla respectively. Both towns have monasteries and convents incorporating some element of the local rock, although neither are conventional rock-cut foundations in the same way as we encounter them elsewhere.

Here the cave above the monastery of Mar Thecla in Maaloula acts as a shrine, but is not absorbed into the day-to-day buildings of the convent below. Elsewhere in Maaloula there is an acknowledgement of the significance of the early Christian rock burials in the narrow gorge above the town, but they are not an active part of contemporary worship. Further south in Saydnaya, several churches have been adapted from earlier buildings and some are found in close proximity to caves—perhaps most notably at the Cherubim monastery high above the main town, but again the caves are not an intrinsic part of the Christian landscape except for Dayr Mar Elias in the nearby town of Ma'arat Saydnaya that was constructed over a cave and has a chapel with medieval frescoes still extant.

Therefore it is only Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi near Nebek[7] where we find a typical lavra arrangement with the original inhabitants of the monastery living in the caves around a central chapel, refectory and library complex built on an east-facing spur of the limestone mountains. A manuscript in the British Museum confirms that by the late seventh century[8] there was a monastic community at the site large enough to support an active scriptorium or at least to have had some form of monastic library. Archaeological survey suggests that the site was most probably originally a Roman fort over looking the *limes* in the valley below which was adapted for monastic usage in late antiquity. The church conforms to the norms of a standard late antique basilica although it was substantially altered, most notably by raising the height of the roof and adding rooms above the north and south aisles, in the Middle Ages. How-

6 This was the situation before the Syrian Civil War. Naturally the situation may have been altered by the population movements triggered by the war.

7 The Arabic word for monastery is usually transliterated into English as *Dayr* but in the case of this monastery the French and Italian variant *Deir* is used. This is because the foundation is now well known due to the social, interfaith and ecumenial work of the Community and many papers and books (including some by this author) have been published on its work with all adhering to the standard spelling used by members of the Community. For this reason the Francophone *Nebek* rather than the English *Nabk* is used for the nearest town to the site.

8 p. 60, Kaufhold, Hubert, 'Notizen über das Moseskloster bei Nabk und das Juliankloster bei Qaryatain in Syrien', *Oriens Christianus*, Band 79 (1995), pp. 48–119.

ever, although this monastery stands at the eastern extremity of the Qalamoun region of Syria today, we must not let the quirks of twentieth century political geography allow us to view Deir Mar Musa in isolation. To the west of the modern border over in Lebanon there is copious evidence of caves being used for Christian religious purposes. There have also been references to early Christian usage of caves along much of the contemporary Syrian-Lebanese border, but even before the war it was difficult for anybody who was not native to the region to undertake fieldwork along the border zone due to the presence of security forces.[9]

When we view Deir Mar Musa in conjunction with the Lebanese evidence, we can see that cave monasticism was just as well established in Syria (in the sense of the Romano-Byzantine definition of the region) as it was in other regions more famous for cave asceticism such as Palestine and Cappadocia in Asia Minor. In this case the centre for these forms of monastic activity was Wadi Qadisha (Holy Valley) in northern Lebanon. Wadi Qadisha possesses many monasteries, cave churches and hermitages built entirely or partially incorporated into the caves and overhangs of this deep limestone valley. Thus far most of the academic work on the region has concentrated on recording epigraphy[10] or cataloguing frescoes[11] and so there is little archaeological data available. What little excavation that has been undertaken so far has largely been carried out by amateur speleologists rather than trained archaeologists, although there has been some attempt to publish these findings in an academic format.[12]

Naturally one must consider the protracted Lebanese Civil War[13] as one element that has hindered the exploration of this region, and the brief 2006 war with Israel and the overspill of the Syrian Civil War from 2011 onwards are all factors that perhaps explain why Wadi Qadisha does not receive the interna-

9 As the author observed personally when travelling from Saydnaya to Yabroud late one night along the local roads (rather than the motorway) this area was heavily militarised even before the current war. This was largely because of the Syrian Government attempting to crack down on illicit smuggling activities in the region. Heavy taxes on imported goods made it a very lucrative trade.

10 Abousamra, Gaby, 'Syriac and Karshuni Inscriptions on Wall Paintings in the Qadisha Valley, Lebanon', *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 4:2–3 (2016), pp. 148–193.

11 Hajj, May, 'Wall Paintings in the Qadisha Valley, Lebanon: Various Styles and Dates', *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 4:2–3 (2016), pp. 194–208.

12 See for example Baroudi, Fadi (ed.), *Momies du Liban. Rapport préliminaire sur la découverte archéologique de ʿĀṣī-l-Ḥadaṭ*, Édifra; Beirut, 1994.

13 1975–1990.

tional recognition of a comparable monastic centre such as Cappadocia. Certainly the region is viewed as the spiritual heart of the nation by Lebanese Christians[14] but has received relatively limited attention from outsiders. One element of this could be that, despite the undoubted beauty of the valley and its monuments, caves are utilised as part of some of these buildings but we rarely encounter fully excavated monuments as at Cappadocia. Instead conventional stone buildings are grafted on to rocky overhangs or extend outwards from caves in hybrid constructions.[15] This pattern can also be observed to some extent in the eastern extremity of this region where Deir Mar Musa is built on a rocky outcrop with the stores, cisterns and library of the central building being fashioned from the bedrock. Elsewhere in the monastery the remnants of walls across caves, notably at the cave known as Dayr al-Hayek (the monastery of the weaver) for the loom that was discovered there, show a similar tendency to modify natural caves with conventional building techniques.[16]

In other areas of the country, as mentioned above, Syria is mostly unsuited to this type of monasticism with the east of the country dominated by steppe and desert and the other regions of the west being home to many hundreds of late antique churches and monasteries built of limestone or basalt depending on the local geological conditions. Because there has been no systematic study thus far, we cannot say with any certainty what kind of relationship the monks of sites like Deir Mar Musa had with their co-religionists in Palestine but evidence from graffiti, hagiography and archaeological finds all suggest that foundations such as Deir Mar Musa were waystations for pilgrims travelling overland to the Holy Land and therefore it is logical to assume that there were close connections between the two regions. There is also abundant evidence that the mountains of the Lebanon and anti-Lebanon ranges were criss-crossed with paths and culturally and linguistically homogenous with territories now lying on the Syrian side of the border. Therefore we can see that these links

14 Although today there are some tensions as the Maronite Church claims most of the sites as their own creating hostility with other denominations—in particular the Chalcedonian *Rum* (Roman) or Arab Orthodox Church, who also lay claim to many of the churches. Both admit to the presence of the Syrian Orthodox in the region in the past, but as their numbers are now neglible in most of Lebanon they are largely excluded from this contemporary struggle for dominance. For some of this see Chaaya, Anis, 'The Qadisha Valley, Lebanon', *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 4:2–3 (2016), pp. 127–147.

15 This is also the case in Kvemo Kartli and Imereti in Georgia as we shall see later in this chapter.

16 See http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/show/330 for images of this cave.

ran both north-south and east-west from the borderlands that stood between the Syrian Desert and the mountains as far west as the Mediterranean. This leads us on to the next consideration, namely whether foundations of a comparable type in size, age and organisation occurred in Kartli and Kakheti and whether similar lines of communication can be discerned with the Georgian monuments.

### Kakheti: The Case of Davit Gareja

As mentioned elsewhere in this book, Davit Gareja is the name given to a sprawling complex of rock-cut monasteries and hermitages in the south of Kakheti in a region that now, somewhat problematically, straddles the contemporary border between Georgia and Azerbaijan (Fig. 26). Although the lavra of Davit Gareja, the monument at the heart of this monastic network, slightly follows the model of Deir Mar Musa by being partially built in conventional manner and partially rock-hewn, it is largely closer to the Cappadocian type of monastic architecture in that apart from the defensive walls and the structures incorporated in those walls, the majority of the lavra buildings are hewn from the limestone in a manner more reminiscent of Cappadocia than the hybrid constructions of Syria. However, away from the lavra other parts of the wider complex such as the monastery known as *Udabno* (desert) are completely excavated from the rock.

In fact this troglodític architecture is a feature of the wider Georgian archaeological context with the earliest large settlement of this kind being Uplistsikhe in Shida Kartli that dates back to the second to first millennium BCE. Evidence from Kakheti, both Kvemo Kartli and Shida Kartli, and Imereti[17] suggests that all these regions experienced some expansion of cave-dwelling in late antiquity at the time Christianity was becoming established in Georgia.[18] However, returning to the specific case of Davit Gareja, we can see that here in the vast majority of cases, not only were caves modified as dwelling places but the churches themselves, in addition to service buildings such as refectories, were all excavated entirely from the rock, rather than merely using a cave as a starting point to graft on an additional structure.

Therefore it appears at first sight that rather than looking southwards to the monasteries of Palestine and Greater Syria, in architectural terms the churches,

17 Geographically west Georgia, but culturally and politically dominated by the east.

18 Pers. comm. Nodar Bakhtadze.

FIGURE 26 *The lavra at Davit Gareja*

monasteries and hermitages of Davit Gareja seem to follow the model of Cappadocia where whole complexes were constructed by hollowing out the rock rather than augmenting existing caves and overhangs with conventionally-constructed stone walls. One factor that could be considered is that the influences on the monasteries at Davit Gareja could have evolved and changed over time. It is believed that the first monastic occupation of the region dates to the sixth century, the time that the (As)Syrian Fathers are accepted as coming to Kartli. However, as with many other monuments of this size and complexity, there has been only limited excavation at a selection of test sites[19] and there are many areas that remain unexplored. In addition continuous occupation from the sixth until the nineteenth century and the rehabilitation of the complex for monastic use since 1991 has made it more difficult to reconstruct the historical chronology of the site and, thus far, typological comparisons between the church architecture and iconographic and stylistic studies of the extant frescoes have dominated the study of Davit Gareja.

19 Pers. comm. Nodar Bakhtadze and Zaza Skhirtladze. Thanks are due to both for kindly discussing their research with me and sharing their ideas about the state of research at Davit Gareja.

Naturally it would be extremely helpful if in the future studies are published comparing the frescoes of Cappadocia with those of this monument and also an architectural comparison of the corresponding churches, but bearing in mind the cost and difficulties of obtaining excavation permits, even a survey that took account of the wider disposition of the monastic accommodation and compared the location and size of the church in relation to the refectory and other communal areas; how these monastic centres were located with reference to the cells; the number, size and disposition of the cells and variant organisational buildings within one wider grouping of monasteries would all be useful studies that would help us clarify some of the questions raised above.

At the time of writing it does seem that there is strong evidence to suggest interaction between Cappadocia and Davit Gareja from around the eighth century onwards. This is perhaps not surprising given that by this period Georgia was firmly within the Chalcedonian theological fold and was sending churchmen backwards and forwards across the Byzantine Empire—by the tenth century Iviron Monastery was only the second foundation on Mount Athos when it was consecrated in 976. In addition it is from the eighth century onwards that Vakhtang Djobadze found clear evidence of a strong Georgian presence in the monasteries around Semandağ and the Black Mountain in the vicinity of Antioch.[20] Both these factors attest to a growing relationship with the Byzantine Empire and with lands accessed via Asia Minor from the eighth century onwards, but before this date the evidence of the material culture from Kartli and Kakheti suggests that ties were closer with lands to the east and south, namely the Persian Empire and Mesopotamia, than they were with the territories to the west.

However it must be acknowledged that events are much less clear in the earliest period of occupation at Davit Gareja. As mentioned in chapter three, a find from a grave at *Berebis Seri* ('the hill of monks') of a silver amulet of Symeon Stylites is, in the opinion of this author at least, likely to have been a sixth or seventh century object that ended up being buried in the grave of a ninth or tenth century monk.[21] It could be simply that a Georgian monk from the region of Symeon the Younger's monastery near Antioch wore the amulet when he returned home to his native land or it could be an object considered

20 Djobadze, Wachtang Z., *Materials for the study of Georgian monasteries in the Western environs of Antioch on the Orontes*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 372, Subsidia 48, Louvain, 1976, Djobadze, Wachtang, *Archaeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch On-The-Orontes*, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden Gmbh; Stuttgart, 1986.

21 See chapter 3.

ancient at the time it was put in the grave and point to a less linear relationship with one or both of the Stylite shrines. What remains unknown is whether or not such objects were trafficked between Syria and Davit Gareja before the well-attested link with Antioch from the eighth century onwards and, even if we are unable to find evidence of an earlier link, why is it that evidence of Antiochene-Kartvelian relations are clear from the eighth century onwards but so exceptionally sparse before that period? These questions must remain unanswered at present, but offer intriguing possibilities for future research. However Davit Gareja is only one of the many early Christian cave sites known in Georgia today. It remains the most famous and, to date, best-explored complex of this era, which means that our knowledge of other sites is even more speculative as will be seen below.

## The Caves of Kartli: Another Paradigm of Cave Monasticism?

Across the regions of Kvemo (lower) and Shida (inner) Kartli a number of caves have been surveyed and recorded in the search for evidence of human occupation. Kvemo Kartli is most famous in world archaeology for being the place where the first hominid remains yet found outside Africa were discovered at Dmanisi from 1991 onwards. It has many caves located along a number of river valleys and these have been occupied at a variety of different periods. From the 1980s onwards they were surveyed by a team led by Nodar Bakhtadze, and he published a number of sites in a preliminary volume in 1991.[22] This book has been followed by articles on individual sites[23] and a large survey volume on the evolution and architecture of Georgian rock-cut monuments[24] but has not yet been followed by the intended second book on Kvemo Kartli. However, the process of surveying, and in some instances excavating test trenches, has continued up into Shida Kartli and over to Imereti in the west. Imereti must be viewed as a liminal territory in that although it lies geographically in the west of modern Georgia and therefore should fall under the sphere of influence of Egrisi rather than Kartli, the archaeological and historical evidence suggests that culturally and politically Imereti was allied far more closely with the east

22 Bakhtadze, Nodar, *Kvemo kartlis kldis dzeglebi*, Sakartvelo; Tbilisi, 1991.

23 See for example Bakhtadze, Nodar, 'Manglisis midamoebshi akhlad gamovlenili samonastro ansambli', *Khelovnebatmtsodneoba* 5 (2003), pp. 5–15.

24 Bakhtadze, Nodar, *Kldis khurotmodzghvrebis genezisi da ganvitarebis gzebi sakartveloshi*, National Museum of Georgia; Tbilisi, 2007.

than the west and therefore in terms of material culture is more akin to Kartli and Kakheti than it is to neighbouring regions in Egrisi/Lazica.[25]

Certainly the preliminary evidence from cave surveys suggests that the ascetic practices followed in this region were more extreme than elsewhere in the Caucasus and this kind of radical mortification in late antiquity is often perceived as a symptom of Syrian monasticism. Theodoret's testimony relating to 'spiritual athletes' mortifying their flesh with endurance practices such as living in open pens like animals, extreme fasting or other forms of bodily mortification[26] mean that similar dedication to punishing the body in order to attain spiritual perfection is often linked to Syrian monasticism. The ongoing surveys in Imereti have yet to be published, but evidence so far suggests that in at least one instance a solitary monk lived in a well-like aperture in a cave from which he could not ascend without assistance and where he would have been at the mercy of his brethren for water and nourishment.[27]

This kind of practice is not referred to in early Georgian monastic literature and, as observed in chapter four, at least one current of extreme Syrian ascetic practice—that of Stylitism—was mediated by the pragmatic Kartvelians to a more manageable form of asceticism by substituting a column for a 'tower house' or, in the case of Katskhi's *sveti*, a conventional monastic cell atop a pinnacle of rock in a manner that is closer to Meteora in Greece than it is to the columns of Qal'at Sem'an and Semandağ. Bearing this apparent pragmatism in mind, the possibility of extreme ascetic practices in the caves of Imereti does require further future investigation and could well hint at links with an older current of Syrian extreme mortification that may have entered Kartvelian territory with stories of stylitism; it must be remembered that two of the Georgian sites linked to Georgian stylite practices (as opposed to the original Syrian version) are at Ubisi and Katskhi in Imereti, with other examples found further east and west at Martqopi, Kvemo Kartli and Martvili, Samegrelo. Certainly this Kartvelian 'stylitism' seems to have been more a product of central and western Georgia than a purely eastern phenomeon. Given the later dates of these Kartvelian 'stylites' and the fact that they are first recorded from approximately

25 This appears to have been a phenomenon over various different periods of Georgian history—my thanks to Nodar Bakhtadze who discussed this situation as it related to the late antique and medieval periods and Mikheil Abramishvili who alerted me to the fact that the same pattern is clear in the archaeological record of the Georgian Bronze Age.

26 Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Trans. Price, R.M., *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Cistercian Publications; Kalamazoo, 1985.

27 Pers. comm. Nodar Bakhtadze.

the eighth or ninth century onwards,[28] again it seems likely that this influence came about in the aftermath of Georgia entering the Chalcedonian doctrinal fold after the seventh century; it does not appear that this was a result of earlier contact directly with sixth century Syrian monasticism.

On the other hand the preliminary findings of extreme ascetic practices in Imereti and the fact that the rock-cut churches and cells of Kvemo Kartli and Imereti follow the Lebanese monuments by grafting conventional stone walls to overhangs and caves, does point clearly to potential traffic between the two regions. This needs to be explored carefully in the future, because if this does yield evidence of earlier interaction between Kartli and Syria it will be in intriguing opposition to the evidence found at conventionally built churches and monasteries across Kartli and Kakheti.

## Christianity and the Mountain Cultures of Georgia

At this point it is necessary to move on to the other unknown factor that has not been clearly resolved by this study; the relationship between Georgian mountain cultures and early Christian belief. Are there traces of early Christian rites still extant in the traditional festivals of Georgian mountaineers or are their antecedents wholly without a Christian element?

Anybody studying the medieval Christian culture of Georgia will be told of the belief that Svaneti in the western Greater Caucasus has long played a role as the stronghold used to guard the Georgian national treasury. This is because Georgia's pivotal geographical location at a global crossroads has had both advantages and disadvantages, with many Georgians believing the latter outweigh the former. The strategic significance of Georgia, coupled with its fertile agricultural lands, mineral resources and access to the Black Sea have made it an irresistable prize for regional powers for many millennia and most Georgians would concede that this struggle continues today as the country steers a course between their former overlords, the Russians and the blandishments offered by the likes of NATO and the EU, with the USA first among these new courtiers. In the past these territorial ambitions were most likely to be played out on the battlefield and, as Georgians are the first to admit, this means that the country has been invaded by a plethora of powers over the centuries. Nat-

28 See Gagoshidze, Giorgi, 'Katskhis Sveti', *Akademia*, 1 (2010), pp. 55–68 (English translation: Gagoshidze, Giorgi, translated from the Georgian by Loosley, Emma, 'Katskhi Pillar', *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 12 (2015), pp. 208–306).

urally to survive, and in many ways even to thrive, in such an unstable region has meant the formulation of certain strategies. Some of these appear to have involved appeasement and a certain degree of assimilation—a clear example of this is the great number of loan words from Persian, Turkish and Arabic in contemporary Georgian, as well as the presumably later linguistic stratum provided by words of Russian origin. Another factor has been contingency planning to protect certain objects and texts that were considered particularly significant and this is where Svaneti entered the equation.

Svaneti is believed to have been evangelised from around the eighth or ninth centuries CE with the earliest churches being dated to the ninth or tenth centuries. This means that it began to be part of Christian culture in the period several centuries after the country embraced Byzantine doctrine and at a time when there is clear evidence of interaction with the monasteries in the hinterland of Antioch. To this day the region possesses more frescoes, but also more icons and liturgical metalwork and other ecclesiastical accoutrements such as vestments, than any other region of Georgia; indeed it could be argued that this is possibly the most significant collection of medieval ecclesiastical artefacts gathered in one region anywhere in the world.[29] However not even the museum in Mestia holds all of the artefacts in Svaneti as those of the Ushguli Community remain in a traditional 'treasure house' in a medieval tower in the village of Chazhashi.

Because of this very visible role in the safeguarding of medieval Christian material culture, when traditional religious practices and the role of the mountain peoples are discussed in relation to the growth and spread of Christianity, Svaneti is the first place considered. Because the eastern mountaineers, the Khevsurs, the Pshavs and the Tushes, do not have overtly Christian religious belief systems[30] they have often been excluded from this discourse and yet

29 The majority of these artefacts were consolidated in one secure, climate-controlled location with the building of the Mestia Museum, part of the National Museum of Georgia, which opened in 2013. The collection is superbly displayed and is well worth the effort of travelling to Mestia, even without the added incentive of visiting the fabled towers of Svaneti.

30 With regards to the Khevsurs, Kiknadze in Kiknadze, Zurab, *Kartuli mitologia, I. Jvari da saqmo*, Gelati Academy of Sciences; Kutaisi, 1996, posits that the Khevsurs were Christians who then lost touch with the lowlands and a layer of pagan belief overlays a Christian substrata. This is discussed at length by Tuite in a review article, Tuite, Kevin, 'Highland Georgian Paganism: Archaism or Innovation?', *Annual of the Society for the Study of the Caucasus* 6/7 (1996), pp. 79–91 where he argues for a different chronology and, at the time of writing, this debate is still ongoing.

it seems that they too could greatly aid our understanding of the early evolution of Christianity in Kartvelian lands. It is clear that these communities were not as cut off from the rest of the world as has been assumed in the past; they regularly traded with other groups and had frequent contacts with each other (in the case of the Khevsurs, Pshavs and Tushes) and with other mountaineers from the northern slopes of the Caucasus. This meant that, whilst they all maintained their own distinct religious identities with variant ritual practices, these identities were not fixed and inflexible. Rather they gradually adapted and assimilated some ideas from neighbouring regions, in some cases even going so far as to share some of the most significant shrines, and changed over time in reaction to evolving historical circumstances.

Therefore the old categorisation of the lowlanders as being Christian, with the eastern Mountaineers being pagan and the Svans falling somewhere along the spectrum between the two has been superceded by an understanding of the situation whereby it is understood that folk beliefs are still alive and well in the lowlands, just as there are elements of Christianity clearly identifiable in some elements of Khevsur religious belief. Over seventy years of Communism caused a certain degree of disruption to aspects of Georgian religious life, but what is clear is that the mountainous regions often maintained a degree of autonomy that was denied the lowlanders and that therefore this is a good place to start if we want to explore more ancient currents of faith practices. Of course there are factors that have disrupted these mountain cultures as well, most significantly the wholesale deportation of the Khevsurs to the lowlands by the Soviet forces in the 1950s, but despite this many of the traditional faith-leaders and shrines survived this great setback and the faith was by no means completely eradicated. Now the challenge is to preserve these ancient beliefs in the face of an increasingly dominant and muscular Georgian Orthodox Church.

At this point it becomes necessary to go back and look at the religious picture of Kartli and Kakheti at the time that Christianity arrived in order to understand the pre-Christian currents that permeated Kartvelian Christianity and how this situation may have influenced highland beliefs.

## The Currents That Preceeded Christianity and Possible Modes of Christian Dissemination

As with so many other questions raised in this work, when we explore the pre-Christian religious landscape of Georgia we are left with certain gaps in the archaeological record that, it is to be hoped, may be clarified by future researchers as more material is excavated and if new discoveries are made from

advanced textual analysis. What we do know is that the Persian domination of the country meant that Zoroastrianism was present in the Persian élite but the Kartvelian nobles worshipped a pantheon headed by the God Armazi. It has been posited that this Armazian belief system was heavily indebted to Zoroastrianism, but there is still some debate as to how pre-Christian Kartvelian religion was enacted. Certainly the Armazian cult was dominant around the wider Mtskheta region in the first centuries CE and on into late antiquity. This *status quo* is alluded to in the text of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* where the writer describes the idol of Armazi that St. Nino showed to be powerless.[31] Whilst the Armazian and Zoroastrian faiths are widely accepted as being widespread in the centuries preceding the Christian conversion of Kartli, it is also accepted that there were other faiths present including a Jewish community in Mtskheta and Urbnisi and the pagan beliefs of villagers and mountaineers. More recently Mgaloblishvili and Rapp have added an extra element to the mix with their investigations into the presence of Manichaeism in Kartli.[32] However, one significant area that is not yet fully understood is how the process of conversion unfolded across the country as it spread outwards from Mtskheta. The texts are clear that the conversion of Kartli followed a top-down model with St. Nino evangelising King Mirian and Queen Nana, who then enjoined their court to follow and therefore Christianity permeated downwards from the upper classes to the lowest levels of society. However because of this model, as mentioned elsewhere, the archaeological study of early Christianity in Kartli has thus far privileged the region around Mtskheta and also Urbnisi—both locations linked with St. Nino's *vita* and known to have had early Jewish communities. There has not been the same attention paid to Kakheti, where St. Nino is recorded as having lived out the later years of her life before dying at Bodbe. Without excavation and relying on the evidence of standing architecture, the spread of Christianity was believed to have radiated outwards from the centre at Mtskheta with small churches being built in the further provinces as Christianity more gradually began to permeate outwards.

As with so many theories based on survey alone, this theory has been increasingly discredited in the last few years. Excavations at Armazistsikhe and Armaziskhevi near Mtskheta and at Dedoplis Gora and Dedoplis Mindori near

31 pp. 50–51, Metreveli, Roin & Jones, Stephen (eds.), *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Georgian National Academy of Sciences, Commission For The Study of Georgian Historical Sources, Gamomtsemloba Artanuji; Tbilisi, 2014.

32 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Rapp, Stephen H. Jr, 'Manichaeism in Late Antique Georgia?', in Van den Berg, Jacob Albert (ed.), *In Search of Truth: Manichaica, Augustiniana and Varia Gnostica*, Brill; Leiden and Boston, 2011, pp. 263–290.

Gori, and significantly not far from Urbnisi, suggest that Christianity was actually slow to gain a toehold in these sites associated with the ruling Kartvelian classes. They appear to have been close in cultural terms to their Persian overlords and therefore slower to relinquish their Persian-influenced religious practices. The archaeological evidence instead offers a picture where near the centre of power pre-Christian beliefs took longer to die out,[33] whilst out in the provinces regional notables appear to have adopted the new faith faster than those with closer ties to the Sassanian court. The evidence for this comes largely from the Kvareli region of Kakheti thus far,[34] but it is hoped that a clearer picture will emerge as more regional late antique sites are excavated rather than merely surveyed. However, the location of our regional information in Kakheti is significant; not only is it in the north of the region where St. Nino is reputed to have died, but it is also an area associated with five of the thirteen fathers. In addition it is geographically the closest Kartvelian territory to Persia and, naturally, this makes it the most removed from the influence of Graeco-Roman culture.

Therefore in Kakheti we have a region that has long been known for its prosperity due to the fertile soil, well-watered river valley and pleasant microclimate of the Alazani valley as well as being a notable crossroads with trade raditating in all four cardinal points. On the other hand this enviable location and the reasons that it became prosperous from trade links also often led to the region suffering punitive raids from the north, east and south. Despite this, the evidence from recent excavations at Chabukauri and Dolochopi on the territory of Nekresi show that large Christian basilicas were being built from the fourth century onwards.[35] This was happening far from any major centres of power—the towns in question were hubs for the northern Alazani Valley but do not appear to have had a greater geographical significance. The excavation of a pagan temple in the territory of Nekresi that appears to have died out in the

33 Thanks are due to Dr Iulon Gagoshidze who has excavated at the sites mentioned above for his information on the religious practices of these settlements in late antiquity and his observation that Christianity seems to have taken root in the provinces first. Work at a number of these locations is ongoing, has not been published or is only available in Georgian language archaeological journals. The exception is the Dedoplis Gora project that has been fully published in an English language monograph: Furtwängler, A., Gagoshidze, I., Löhr, H. & Ludwig, N. (eds.), *Iberia and Rome: The Excavations of the Palace at Dedoplis Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*, Beier & Beran; Langenweißbach, 2008.

34 This is the subject of a forthcoming collaboration by the author and Nodar Bakhtadze.

35 See Chapter 2.

third century CE[36] would also support this narrative of the older faith(s) declining in this area by the fourth century and thereafter the swift Christianisation of the wider region.

Taking this into account, if this pattern is supported by excavations in other regions we have a situation where Zoroastrian and other dualist religions (the Armazian tradition, Manichaeism) were superseded by Christianity in a process that travelled at different rates but that appears to have been largely complete in the Kartvelian lowlands by the sixth century CE. What we also know is that the highlands had regular contact through trade and, in the case of the Tushes, a pattern of seasonal migration that would have brought them into proximity with lowland religious practices. This raises the question as to how far their beliefs absorbed elements of these religions and whether or not this can help us discern any early Christian practices left as vestiges of traditional worship.

## Some Thoughts on Christian Remnants in Vernacular Religion

As discussed in chapter six, there is an intriguing hint of a link between Mesopotamian Assyrian liturgical tradition and Kartli in the possible survival of a variant of the liturgy of the *bema* in vernacular worship. This possibility is suggested as a use of the nave platforms that appear to have been widespread in early and medieval Kartvelian Christianity, but that now only remain in a handful of sites such as Anchiskhati basilica in Tbilisi and Jvari outside Mtskheta. There is also the unresolved issue of how these platforms and their pre-altar crosses were transmitted to the western regions and how the practice of large pre-altar crosses became ubiquitous in Svaneti. We then have the question of whether the syncretistic practices recorded with Svan pre-altar crosses as late as the 1980s[37] fit into this overall pattern. Even at this stage, whilst acknowledging that the subject needs much more attention, there is a possibility that this link is another 'false friend' in our hunt for links between Kartli and Syria.

This is because although the largest number of nave-platforms (*bemata*) still extant are located in approximately fifty churches on the Limestone Massif of

36 Simonia, Irakli, Ruggles, Clive & Bakhtadze, Nodar, 'An Astronomical Investigation of the Seventeen Hundred Year Old Nekresi Fire Temple in the Eastern Part of Georgia', *Journal of Astronomical History and Heritage* 12:3 (2009), pp. 235–239.

37 My thanks to Kevin Tuite to confirming the continuation of these rituals and to explaining how they have become endangered with the post 1991 growth of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

northwest Syria, they appear to have fallen out of use from around the seventh century onwards. However, the liturgical evidence suggests that this *bema* liturgy remained a central element of the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Maphrianate of Takrit well into the medieval era.[38] This region was of course part of Assyria (Mesopotamia) and once again we are led in the direction of an Assyrian influence, but without further research cannot definitively rule out that this particular liturgical practice may have entered Kartli from Syria.

The other possible remnant of an earlier tradition that appears to have survived in vernacular religion is the festal calendar. Naturally this should not come as a great surprise given how many 'Christian' festivals appropriated earlier feast days and assimilated them into the new faith. As discussed briefly in chapter six, the distinctive mode of dividing periods of time into Pentecostads is an element of Armenian and Assyrian Christian calendars that appears to have entered Christianity via an older tradition that has been traced back at least as far as Second Temple Judaism.[39] This ancient calendar has survived in Christian traditions of different doctrinal schools as we find the Assyrians (non-Ephesian) and the Armenians (non-Chalcedonian) both honouring ancient festivals of obscure origin on this calendar and yet the West Syrian non-Chalcedonian Syrian Orthodox Church does not have an analogous rite. On the other hand the Christianised traditional rite of *Atenagenoba*[40] derives from the *Vardoba-Atenagenoba* rite that is still practiced by both the Armenians and the Assyrians.

The Armenian calendar equates *Vartavar* with the Christian Feast of the Transfiguration, even though the Armenian Church acknowledges that this timing is appropriated from an earlier, pre-Christian feast:

> In pagan times, *Vartavar* was the "festival of roses"—*vart* is the name of the flower in Armenian (and Persian)—associated with the summer activities of the agricultural cycle. Draft animals would have their foreheads adorned with roses as they went about their work in the fields,

38 See Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema in Fourth to Sixth-Century Syrian Churches*, USEK, Patrimoine Syriaque vol. 2; Kaslik, Lebanon, 2003 (re-issued in a second edition by Brill, 2012).

39 Lourié, Basil, 'The Liturgical Cycle in *3 Maccabees* and the *2 Enoch* Calendar', *Études Bibliques* (2016), forthcoming.

40 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, 'The most Ancient Feast of *Vardoba-Athenagenoba*', in Stone, Michael E., Ervine, Roberta R. & Stone, Nira (eds.), *The Armenians in Jerusalem and the Holy Land*, Peeters; Leuven, 2002, pp. 157–165.

> and athletic competitions of strength, speed and skill would be held to honor the month of Navasart, ringing in the Armenian New Year. *Vartavar* was also steeped in the familiar pagan cult of love and death: it was the major midsummer festival of the water-born goddess of love—Aphrodite in Greece, Astghik in Armenia—and her handsome-but-doomed-consort …[41]

The quotation above is taken from a guide to the Festival of the Transfiguration written for members of the Armenian Church and it goes on to point out that the priest sprinkling water over the congregation (and the laity throwing water over each other in fun) is a remnant of this earlier tradition. In fact such a tradition also continues elsewhere—the Syrian Orthodox (West Syrian) Church follows this practice but in their case the water throwing occurs on Pentecost, not on the Feast of the Transfiguration.[42] On the other hand the Assyrian Church celebrates *Nusardel* or 'Assyrian Water Day' at approximately the same point in the Church calendar as *Vartavar*. Whilst we can posit a link between all these practices, the same guide to Armenian Transfiguration beliefs appositely states that:

> The regional character of the older observance can be seen in the fact that the Georgian Orthodox Church once celebrated a feast known as *Vardoba-Atenagenoba* around the same time of year—although the Georgian event had no connection to the gospel episode of the Transfiguration.[43]

Therefore what this suggests is that whereas in Armenia this earlier pagan festival was eventually conflated with a Christian festival and survived in that manner, and something similar appears to have occurred in the Assyrian tradition where *Nusardel* is part of their liturgical year, in Georgia there was no linking of *Vardoba* with a major Christian feast. Whereas in the Kartvelian context this observance seems to have fallen out out of mainstream Christian practices, it survived in the grey area between Christianity and vernacular belief as the *Atenagenoba* festival. Therefore it now forms part of the Georgian tradition of

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41 Antreassian, Elise, Findikyan, Daniel & Zakian, Christopher, *Living the Gospel of Christ: Transfiguration*, Diocese of the Armenian Church of America Eastern; New York, 2013.

42 The author knows this from having been soaked by children and teenagers on overhead balconies in the *Hay al-Suryan* quarter of Aleppo after the Pentecost service.

43 Antreassian, Elise, Findikyan, Daniel & Zakian, Christopher, *Living the Gospel of Christ: Transfiguration*, Diocese of the Armenian Church of America Eastern; New York, 2013.

regional festivals that may or may not have ostensibly Christian origins and which occur throughout the calendar year.

These observations are of course still very much preliminary thoughts on these issues and it is to be hoped that future research will clarify these questions in the future. It is widely acknowledged that research often raises as many questions as it answers and, within the parameters of the current research, these are the intriguing 'loose ends' that need to be examined further.

# Conclusion

## The Anomaly of the Missing Artefacts and Its Cultural Significance

As this research progressed over the last five years a strange phenomenon became more and more apparent; with the exception of the ubiquitous Syrian glass, there was an astonishing lack of Syrian artefacts in Eastern Georgia. When this absence was raised with Georgian colleagues working on the archaeology of the classical and late antique periods their initial reaction was to dispute this claim, but on reflecting and examining their records they all conceded that this was in fact the case and nobody had any idea as to why this might be. Brief forays into the literature on excavations in the west of the country produced evidence of classical hoards with significant mumbers of coins minted in Antioch and Emesa (Homs) demonstrating that there had been a regular trade with Syria in the western territories of Lazica/Egrisi, yet this was not replicated on the other side of the Surami ridge in Iberia/Kartli.

This mystery deepened when it emerged that this same dichotomy emerged in the archaeology of the Bronze Age[1] with there being evidence of trade with the Levant via Asia Minor in the regions west of the Surami ridge, but only the material culture of eastern-facing regions such as Persia east of the range. As it has long been apparent that the much higher and more difficult routes across the Greater Caucaus to the north have never offered any impediment to the free movement of people, ideas and artefacts, then it is clear that something else must be responsible for this strange lack of communication. As the archaeologist and director of Tbilisi Archaeological Repository, Mikheil Abramishvili has observed the impediment appears to have been the result of psychological and cultural factors rather than being a question of geographical isolation.[2]

This apparent repetition of a pattern that occurred in the Bronze Age reoccurring in Late Antiquity is reinforced by the fact that in both of these periods there was one exception to this rule; the region of Zemo (Upper) Imereti was culturally, intellectually and often politically dominated by the east even though it is located west of the Surami ridge. The fact that Zemo Imereti maintained this pattern through both the above periods serves to reinforce the parallels between these two periods and underlines the fact that there is something

1 Many thanks are due to Mikheil Abramishvili for talking this through with me and making me aware of the parallels between the Georgian Bronze Age and the situation in Late Antiquity.

2 Mikheil Abramishvili pers. comm.

currently inexplicable going on. Identifying this phenomenon is in itself an important step forward in our understanding of trade and cultural relations in this period, but at the time of writing the *reasons* for this apparent cultural divide remain unknown.

The discovery of this recurrent phenomenon in the archaeological record leads us to hypothesise several points about the legends concerning the Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers. Firstly the fact that the accounts of these figures were only written down even in the earliest estimation in the eighth or ninth centuries, some two to three hundred years after the events that they purport to recount, can be held responsible for some minor discrepancies. Secondly if we take into account the degree of lexical imprecision encountered in some of these sources and interpret these figures as being *Assyrian* rather than *Syrian* then this fits in with the evidence of the material culture, which shows abundant interaction with the Persian Empire in Late Antiquity. There are large quantities of Persian coins, monuments such as Zoroastrian Fire Temples (*Ateshgah*) and many other factors suggesting widespread interaction between the two regions and thus making it entirely plausible that a group of Christian holy men would have been free to travel from the Persian Empire to Kartli and Kakheti. Since this empire included the land formerly known as Assyria, it seems probable that any such travellers were coming from the environs of modern Iraq or possibly the parts of Mesopotamia that now fall in the countries of Syria and Turkey. However we must bear in mind that the question of a *Syrian* identity for these figures is not entangled simply with questions of material culture; it is also a reference to the vicious doctrinal disputes of the time and this is the factor that we shall turn to next.

### Building an 'Orthodox' Past

It is clear that all literary references to the Thirteen *Assyrian* Fathers, as we shall finally call them, were written post 610 and the final divorce of the Georgian and Armenian Churches at the Third Council of Dvin. This is of course highly significant in helping us understand the political and doctrinal biases of the authors of these texts. The saints' *vitae* were sanitised as far as possible to make them appealing to a Chalcedonian Orthodox population. On the other hand the events of the past were problematic in that they had occurred before the 'triumph of Orthodoxy' in Kartvelian lands and therefore there was only so much obfuscation possible in trying to create an 'orthodox' interpretation of a period when Kartli and Kakheti were in union with the anti-Chalcedonian Armenians (and therefore by extension also in union with the Syrian mia-

physites). It is here that, in the opinion of this writer, the deliberate haziness between *Syrians* and *Assyrians* began to be employed for the first time. Whilst the Syrians had incorrectly been labelled monophysite[3] this was perhaps for many Chalcedonian commentators a preferable 'heresy' than to have been of the Assyrian doctrinal party. The Assyrians, who have historically been pejoratively referred to as Nestorians by their detractors, had become the majority Christian group in the Sassanian Empire due to their persecution on Byzantine territory. To the Chalcedonians who were fiercely at odds with the miaphysites over the phrasing of how Christ's humanity and divinity intersected, this 'Nestorian' rejection of Mary being *Theotokos* (God-bearer) instead merely accepting her as the *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer) was so far from their concept of 'orthodox' thinking that it was perhaps a lesser evil to accept a miaphysite past than to acknowledge the possibility that monasticism came into Kartli and Kakheti via monks who rejected not only Chalcedonian teaching, but also the Ephesian Mariological definition as well.

By the eighth or ninth century, when the accounts of the *vitae* of the Assyrian Fathers were put down on paper there were also other political and ethnic factors coming into play that could have made the desire to merge Syrian and Assyrian identities seem more palatable to a contemporary audience; as the newly autonomous Georgian Orthodox Church was taking great pains to distance themselves from an 'heretical' past in doctrinal terms, it was also an astute move to try and place some distance between themselves and their Persian past. As the Church relied on Constantinople for both spiritual and temporal succour, a narrative of *Syrian* monastic missionaries kept the conversation within the parameters of the Byzantine Empire. It meant the question of the 'otherness' of the Persian Empire could be neatly sidestepped and left out of the conversation.

At the same time as we can see an underlying doctrinal imperative shaping this narrative, we must also conclude that the (to us) odd vacuum in which these events purport to take place was also very much a product of its time with regard to the tropes of late antique hagiography. In this genre conforming to a known pattern of events and reinforcing the tropes of the form were more important than including historically verifiable elements or placing the action within a familiar and geographically identifiable location populated with notable figures. Finally we must also remember that concepts of ethnic-

3 See Brock, Sebastian P., 'Miaphysite, not monophysite!', *Cristianesimo nella storia* 37:1 (2016), pp. 45–54 for a summary of the ongoing discussion on the reasons why this term is no longer valid.

ity and nationhood were understood and expressed in very different terms in this period and, when we look at Northern Mesopotamia, the region we chiefly associate with Assyrian Christianity, there is evidence to suggest that these contemporary preoccupations were not relevant in the lives of the people of the time. Payne observes that:

> Although historians frequently classify the population of Northern Mesopotamia into discrete Aramean and Iranian groups, those individuals who did not espouse an Iranian ethnicity do not appear to have shared a similarly cohesive epithet.[4]

Payne's arguments that the middle class Christian élite of Mesopotamia developed an historical origin story that did not equate to the same thing as a cohesive ethnic identity, is instructive when related to the context of Kartli and Kakheti. If we accept the view that ethnic identity was fluid in this particular circumstance, then it makes sense that our Assyrian Fathers would have arrived speaking the Aramaic that was the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire and they would automatically been able to communicate with the highest level of Kartvelian society; in this context the conversations between kings and missionaries are no longer miraculous, nor do they need complex historical justifications to explain how Kartvelians and Assyrians could find a mutually intelligible language. As with Russian in the Soviet Union, all educated people of the Persian Empire had a common tongue and that helps explain the many narratives that suggest the conversion of Kartli and Kakheti was a top-down affair in many regions.

At the same time it also answers the question as to why no evidence of Syriac epigraphy has yet been discovered in Kartli and Kakheti; if they were using Aramaic we have examples of Persian and native Kartvelian (Armazian) inscriptions across Kartli and Kakheti and elsewhere—it occurred in Armenia at places such as Garni for example. However, these Sassanian-educated missionaries would have understood that their Syriac dialect would not have been understood in Kartvelian lands and that could account for its absence. On the other hand, it may have been that given the ethnic ambuiguity of their homeland that they did not strongly identify with their homeland or city and therefore saw no need to continue using a 'vernacular' language once settled

4 p. 206, Richard E. Payne, 'Avoiding Ethnicity: Uses of the Ancient Past in Late Sasanian Northern Mesopotamia' in Pohl, Walter, Gantner, Clemens & Payne, Richard E. (eds.), *Visions of community in the post-Roman world the West, Byzantium and the Islamic world, 300–1100*, Ashgate: Farnham & Burlington, VT, 2012, pp. 205–221.

in their new home. For all of these reasons it seems more and more likely that we are dealing with a group or groups originating in Northern Mesopotamia who left to spread their faith in Kartli and Kakheti at some point in the sixth century.

### The Hagiopolite Relationship

One factor that has been a persistent theme in the study of early Kartvelian Christianity is the enduring devotion to the Holy Land, and Jerusalem in particular, in Kartvelian lands. This was, quite naturally, seen as a factor to support the view that these missionaries came from Syria, or as the literature often stated it, Syria-Palestine. However this devotion for the places identified with Christ's time on Earth had become a factor across wider early Christian society from the time of Constantine onwards and the dominant place of hagiopolite rites in the Kartvelian liturgy can easily be explained by the presence of Iberian/Kartvelian monastic communities from at least the fifth century—with Peter the Iberian remaining the most famous of these monastic figures.

However back in Kartvelian lands it seems that, as observed above, this cultural phenomenon of a strong east-west division meant that this Palestinian influence was probably transmitted to Egrisi/Lazica via the coast of Syria (now Lebanon) and Asia Minor. In the east any hagiopolite link was more complicated and mediated via the doctrinal and cultural viewpoints of Assyria—it is perhaps an echo of this process that is recalled in the now famous story of Davit Gareja turning back from his goal within site of Jerusalem saying that he was not worthy to enter the holy city. In this interpretation the hagiopolite influence was always present, but was strengthened post 610 and the reinvention of the Kartvelian Church as an Orthodox, Chalcedonian institution.

### The Identity of the Assyrian Fathers

At some point in the sixth century a group, or more likely several groups over a period of years, travelled together or as individuals from Northern Mesopotamia to Kartli and Kakheti. They came overland on routes that would have taken them across parts of what is today Eastern Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and possibly Iran, before reaching the territory of the Kartvelians. There they commenced preaching and living an ascetic life in the hope of pleasing God and attracting disciples to a life of prayer. Their exact number and individual identities are difficult to ascertain with any certainty, and thirteen is always a number

with an obvious Christian resonance, but it does seem probable that there were real men who inspired Georgian stories and beliefs in the *Asirieli Mamebi*.

There will be many people, especially in Georgia, who will at the very least be uncomfortable with the above conclusions. Therefore it is important to note here that this project was approached with no preconceptions and, if anything, there was a strong presumption at the outset that there would be copious evidence linking Syrian and Kartvelian society in the fourth to seventh centuries. When one by one 'Syrian' artefacts turned out to be anything but and 'Syriac' inscriptions revealed themselves to be early Arabic or pseudo-kufic decoration and the like, there was a brief period of panic and despair before the pieces began to realign into a clearer and more logical pattern.

This is not to say that this work is intended to be the last word on this subject. Rather it is intended to open a discussion and encourage more interdisciplinary and international debate on these questions. With several honourable exceptions, few non-Georgian scholars have made serious efforts to engage with the large volume of Georgian language literature on this subject. On the other hand many of the Georgians working on this issue pay too little attention to non-Georgian literature and regrettably not one Georgian scholar working on this subject has ever travelled to Syria to study Syrian material culture in context. Naturally the years of war, first in Georgia and now in Syria, have made this a hugely complicated endeavour, but there does need to be more awareness of this lacuna when writing on these issues.

At a time when too many students are turning their backs on studying languages for languages' sake and barriers between societies are proliferating, it only remains to urge future scholars to invest time and patience in trying to truly understand other cultures; only in this way can we illuminate the past and hope to show others how to avoid repeating the same mistakes over and over again.

Tbilisi and Exeter, October 2017

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