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HOLY CROSS AND HOLY FIRE: CHRISTIANITY AND GEORGIAN MAZDAISM IN LATE ANTIQUE IBERIA ¹

The aim of the article is to focus on the issues of the spread of Zoroastrianism/Mazdeanism in Iberia in late antiquity and its relationship with Christianity, which Georgian historiography has paid less attention to. These issues are - Iberia as part of the Sasanian Commonwealth, the formation of a local, Georgian/Caucasian variant of Zoroastrianism (which an American historian Stephen Rapp, Jr. calls 'Georgian Mazdeanism'),² and the contrast between the hagiographic/historiographic narrative and the actual situation.

Unlike the Georgian paganism and Judaism, the Persian Zoroastrianism was the religion of the great empire. Zoroastrians were main religious adversaries of the Caucasian Christian Churches. Not surprisingly, late antique, and medieval Georgian and Armenian authors are especially hostile towards the Zoroastrian religion. The relation of the Zoroastrianism and Christianity dominates several major Georgian late antique and early medieval hagiographical texts. The presentation of the 'fire-worship' by these sources is, of course, distorted by the Christian bias. However, these texts still tell much about the religious environment of the late antique Caucasus.

Understandably, for the Christian authors conversion to the Zoroastrianism of a Christian was betrayal of the Christian religion. One of the dramatic events that had taken place among the late antique Georgian ar-

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² For the spread of Zoroastrianism in Georgia and the Persian origins of the Georgian pagan pantheon see Gvelesiani: 2003.

istocracy was caused because of the conversion to the Zoroastrian faith. The ruler of one of the major Iberian districts, *Gogarene* (Armeno-Georgian marchlands), named Varsk'en (467-482) from the House of Mihranids, went to the Sasanian court and converted to the Zoroastrianism in 468. His Armenian wife, Šušanik (the daughter of the famous Armenian commander Vardan Mamikonian (393-451)), who was a devote Christian, did not tolerate his apostasy, and left the palace. This was the beginning of the tragedy of Holy Queen who was tortured by her husband for six years (469-475) until she died and was canonized by both the Georgian and Armenian Churches (Abuladze 1938). The later sources preserved the name of Razhden who is named as a proto martyr in the later Georgian hagiographical literature (Thomson 1996: 271). Razhden was the tutor of Balenduxt, a Persian wife of the king Vaxtang Gorgasali. He arrived in Iberia with the Persian princess and stayed here for the rest of his life. After some times, Razhden converted to Christianity. When the Persians learned about his conversion to Christianity, they captured, tortured, and executed him. Later his body was taken by king Vaxtang and buried in the church of Nikozi (Kekelidze... 1954: 84-85). Another case of the conversion of the Persian to Christianity is described in the *Martyrdom of St. Eustathius of Mc'xet'a* which, according to Adolf von Harnack and Ivane Javakhishvili, was written by an unknown author in the beginning of the seventh century (Javakhishvili... 1901: 875-902). Eustathius, born Gwrobandak, was a Persian youth born and raised in the capital city of the Persian province Ādurbādagān, Ganzak. He was a son of the Persian Zoroastrian priest and from his early age was in constant search for the true religion. This search led him to Iberia where he rejected Zoroastrianism, was baptized, and received the Christian name *Eustathius* (Rapp 2012: 92-94). He married a Georgian woman and spent three years in the Persian community of Mc'xet'a, however, after three years he was executed because he refused to leave Christianity and return to his ancestral faith. The bitter opposition of Christianity and Zoroastrianism occurs in another late antique Georgian hagiographical text, namely, in the *Martyrdom of St. Abibos of Nekresi* (also composed in the beginning of the seventh century). According to the hagiographical circle of the *Life of the Syriac Fathers*, Abibos was one of the disciples of St. John of Zedazeni. He was consecrated by the Iberian Catholicos as the bishop of Nekresi where he led restless missionary activities (Rapp 2012: 99-103). Nekresi was one of the focal points of the spread of the Zoroastrianism in Georgia. Once, Abibos intruded in the fire-temple and extinguished the holy fire which led to his execution by the Persian marzipan (Matitashvili 2018: 13-14).

The early monuments of the medieval Georgian historiography, *The Life of the Kings*, *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali*, and *The Continuation by Ps.-Juansher* also show the hostile attitude towards the 'fire-worshippers',

however, their perception of the Persian religion (and, generally, Persian world) is not as unanimous and one-sided as of the hagiographical texts. Here, Persia is depicted not only as an oppressor of the Caucasian kingdoms, but also as a great civilization, the land where the first king on the earth, Nimrod (*Nebrot'* of the Georgian sources) ruled and after the great flood built the high tower of Babel. The perception of the Zoroastrianism is also not as negative as in the monuments of hagiographical literature (Rapp 2012; 169-375).

However, as in the case of paganism and Judaism, we should be able to move away from the narrow perspective of our sources and imagine a broader picture. I think that it is safe to say that after Christianity and local paganism, Zoroastrianism was the most widely spread and influential religion in the three Christian Caucasian kingdoms (Armenia, Iberia, and Albania). Besides, there is not any compelling evidence to claim that Persian court persecuted Caucasian Christians or, the Zoroastrian priesthood of the Caucasus initiated this kind of persecution. The late antique and early medieval Georgian hagiographical texts attest only the execution of those Persians who abandon the Zoroastrianism and converted to Christianity, although, it is important to mention that the Zoroastrian priests were not involved in their execution (Rapp 2012: 91). So we must remember that one thing is the reality depicted by written sources, and another is the actual historical reality.

The spread of Zoroastrianism in Iberia had a long history and it happened before the Sasanians or, the conversion of Iberia to Christianity. The *Life of the Kings* ascribes the pagan Iberian king Parnajom (109-190 A. D.) the introduction of the 'fire-worshipping' in Iberia. According to this narrative king Parnajom 'adopted the religion of the Iranians, fire-worship. He brought from Iran fire-worshippers and magi and installed them at Mc'xet'a, in the place which is now called Mogut'a. Archeologists unearthed several 'fire-temples' in eastern Georgia dated to the Hellenistic, Parthian, and Sasanian periods. The 'eternal fire' was burning in Nekresi, Dedop'lis Mindori, C'ixiagora, Samadlo, Up'lisc'ixe, Ġart'iskari, Diġmist'avi. Local Mazdean temples and more 'Orthodox' Zoroastrian shrines co-existed on the Georgian soil. Iberia had its local variant of the Zoroastrianism which was not unusual not only for Caucasus but for the northern districts of the Sasanian Persia. As Parvaneh Purshariati claims, the dominant religion of the northern provinces of Iran during the Sasanian period was not the 'Orthodox Zoroastrianism', but 'popular religious customs that betray strong currents of Mihr worship (Purshariati 2008: 368).' Evidently, the early infiltration of the Persian religion in Iberia produced the local, Iberian (Georgian), heterodox version of Mazdaism. However, the Caucasian Mazdaism was not a result of just copying from the Persian Zoroastrianism. It was produced by the mixture of the Persian, local, and

Anatolian elements. It was a creative adaptation and as Stephen Rapp Jr. suggests, 'this adaptive quality helps to explain Mazdaism's success in Caucasia (Rapp 2012: 157).

The local Mazdean community survived in Nekresi until the beginning of the seventh century. The Georgian (*Asomt'avruli*) burial inscriptions discovered in Nekresi were identified by Georgian archaeologist Levan Chilashvili as the inscriptions of the Mazdean Georgians. Chilashvili dated these inscriptions to the first century A.D. However, there is not any evidence that the Georgian script existed before the fifth century. The analysis of the inscriptions and the archaeological investigation of the site shows that the inscriptions could be dated to late antique and early medieval period (Rapp 2012: 214).

The Persian religious influence on Kartli was not limited to the spread of Zoroastrianism. Mithraism was also widespread in Kartli and Egrisi. The cult of Mithras was followed, for the most part, by Roman soldiers and the population living near Roman military camps (Liebenshuetz 2006: 997) and was very popular in ancient Georgia as well. However, it was far more influential in western Georgia or, Lazica, than in Iberia. Mithraism coexisted with the local pagan and Christian beliefs, and its strong influence survived in the religious practice of the western Georgian peasants till the early twentieth century in the form of the cult of *Jege-Misaroni*, mainly, in the mountainous areas of Samegrelo (Makalatia 1938: 15-25).

In conclusion, it should be noted that the Zoroastrian religion had a great impact on the Georgian culture of the ancient and early medieval periods. The aim of the article is to once again demonstrate the 'fire worship' as the dominant religion in the late antique Iberia. In addition, the study draws attention to a less studied issue in Georgian historiography: the opposition of the so-called Orthodox Zoroastrianism and the local, Georgian/Caucasian variant of "fire worship" and, finally, the contrast between the reality reflected in written sources (which is riddled with literary fiction and ideological bias) and historical reality. The fact is that the coexistence of different religious communities in the Kartli Kingdom was much more complex and diverse than written sources, in particular, hagiographic texts, attempt to portray.

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