

History

Some Issues of Political Legitimization through the Cult of Saints in Late Antique Caucasia

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(Presented by Academy Member Davit Muskhelishvili)

The paper discusses the regional peculiarities of the cult of saints in late antique Caucasia. It argues that the Caucasian, i.e. Albanian, Armenian and Georgian written sources introduce distinct concepts, practices and rhetoric of sanctity into the saintly discourses of the Eastern Roman Empire. In late antique Caucasian sources one can identify a particularly strong interest in the interrelationship of the cult of saints and the political discourses, most notably in the context of the legitimization of royal rule. For this purpose the paper analyzes two late antique literary productions: Agathangelos' fifth-century *History of Armenia*, written in Armenian, and the anonymous *Life of Vač'agan the Pious*, a part of the *History of Albanians*, also written in Armenian albeit with a complicated date, with a brief reference to the Georgian *Conversion of Kartli*. Based on a study of these texts, the paper further argues that the politicization of saints' relics that these texts engage are on the one hand adopted from eastern Roman rhetoric, in particular Constantinian and Theodosian authors, and, on the other hand, borrowed from Iranian and Zoroastrian concepts of royal investiture. According to these early Caucasian narratives, the relics serve the purpose of legitimizing the political state of affairs; they sanctify a monarch's rule through creating a metaphysical bridge between the foundations of Christianity and the recent times, by assigning to the kingdom or monarch a central place in the Universal salvation history.
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Cult of saints, Caucasia, relics, kingship

While by the fifth century most features of the cult saints were formed in the Eastern Roman Empire, the Caucasian sources offer a somewhat different trajectory of the development of the cult of saints and of the saint's relics. The regional peculiarity in the Caucasus' case is the very political nature of the cult of saints and of saints' relics. Below, I would like to highlight one of the most important aspects of the political

legitimization through cult of saints in late antique Caucasia is highlighted that can serve as an important contribution to the study of the emergence and development of the cult of the saints and their relics among late antique Christians in general. This is the thoroughly political nature of early Caucasian cult narratives used in power and identity discourses since the early years of literacy in this region, revealed most notably in three texts:

Agathangelos' *Life of Gregory the Illuminator*, the *Life of Vač'agan the Pious* and the Georgian *Conversion of Kartli*.

Agathangelos' *History of Armenia*, alternatively known as the *Life of Gregory the Illuminator*, recounts the Christianization of Arsacid Armenia and of its king T'rdat in the early fourth century and the establishment of the national Church, patriarchal succession and other Christian institutions that were central to medieval Armenian identity discourses. Agathangelos' *History* was written in the circumstances when native Arsacid kingship was annihilated in Armenia, therefore it is the founder of the Armenian Church, Patriarch Gregory who is presented as the creator of the new Christian Armenia, with its new religious hierarchical system. In this account, political institutions give way to a thoroughly religious conceptualization of Armenia and Armenianness. In Robert Thomson's words, "the church was left as the sole focus and instrument of national solidarity" [1: xci-xciii]. The founder of this new Armenia, St. Gregory himself is presented as a martyr who survives the pagan king T'rdat's torture and through divine intercession and miracle converts the king. Henceforward, the *History* provides political theologization over the essence of the new Christian Armenian nation, manifested in two crucial events that immediately follow king T'rdat's conversion: Gregory's sermon and his vision. The story of Gregory the Illuminator is therefore a rite of passage of Armenia from a pagan and "barbaric" people to a Christian nation and an integral part of the Christian Oecumene. In his sermon, Gregory recounts and explains the universal salvation history from Creation to Incarnation, eventually culminating in the creation of the Christian nations, specifically that of Armenia. The vision of Gregory is essentially a culmination of the entire narrative and underscores the national character of the account.

Gregory's martyrdom and his conversion of the royal family and of the Armenian kingdom was

however preceded by the first shedding of the blood for Christ's sake on Armenian soil. The virgins Hrip'simē and Gayanē, who had escaped persecution in Rome, had then fallen into the hands of the still pagan T'rdat by whose hands the two had been executed. In Gregory's perception, as articulated by Agathangelos, the martyrdom of the virgins Hrip'simē and Gayanē is an act of apostolic significance which has confirmed the universal message of the Gospel, and marked the final stage in the history of salvation.

The intercessory powers of Hrip'simē and Gayanē are provided to the king and to the political realm: "Behold the thirty-seven Christian cups who came to serve you!" Gregory thus addresses T'rdat, the king of Armenia: "But now God has sent his Son to mankind who came and walked on earth and sent his disciples throughout the whole world. These blessed ones [Hrip'simē and Gayanē], who have come as far as you, have shown you not only mere words, but also signs of their miracles through your punishments. Although yesterday you [T'rdat] killed them, they are God's and now are living and will live forever. By their intercession you will be reconciled with God according to the instructions of the companion apostle to those apostles of yours, the great Paul, who said: "Through us be reconciled with God by the death of his Son [II Cor. 5:18]. For the Son of God died and lived, and likewise his beloved martyrs are alive and intercede for you" [2: 169, 180].

This is the earliest attestation in late antique corpus of "political" intercession, whereby the martyrs' relics legitimize and bless a monarch's rule. Gregory's sermon is followed by his account of the vision that he had seen, an important apocalyptic episode in the history of late antique Armenian writing and crucial for subsequent Armenian identity discourse. Here Gregory theologizes on the first martyrs of the Armenian tradition, Hrip'sime and Gayanē, and elaborates on the foundation of the Armenian Church. He sees the two martyrs as two pillars and priesthood as the

third pillar of the Church. Gregory sees how the Armenian nation, embedded in its Church, is based on the relics of these saints. “And I looked up and saw three other bases: one in the place where saint Gayanē was martyred with her two companions, and one in the place where saint Hrip‘simē was martyred with her thirty-two companions, and one in the place of the wine-press. And these bases were red, the colour of blood, and the columns were of cloud and the capitals of fire. And on top of the three columns were crosses of light in the likeness of the Lord’s cross. And the crosses of these columns were level with the capital of the column of light, for that one was higher than they. And from the four columns, above the crosses, marvellous vaults fitted into each other. And above this I saw a canopy of cloud, wonderfully and divinely constructed in the form of a dome. Under the canopy but above the vaults I saw these thirty-seven holy martyrs in shining light, with white garments, which I am not capable of describing” [3: 213-274].

The symbolism of the vision is straightforward. “The bases mark the sites of the main church and the three martyria built to house the relics of the 37 martyred virgins. The arches represent the unity of the Christian Church, the canopy is a type of the celestial city, the throne represents the almighty nature of God, the torrent flowing forth is baptism, the plains turn blue because the earth will become like heaven, and the many altars indicate the expansion of the service of the Eucharist over the whole country” [1: 287]. S. La Porta argues that Gregory’s vision too is an attempt to superimpose a Christian superstructure over an earlier Zoroastrian structure. “Thus in the vision, Agathangelos converts the Armenians – even before their actual conversion – on at least three different levels: on the narrative level by usurping the function of an apocalyptic vision from its Iranian context; on the symbolic level through the reapplication of traditional Zoroastrian imagery for Christian purposes; and on the physical level by alluding to the concrete displacement of a fire

temple by the *katholikē*. These three modes of expression are critical in the definition of religious identity and through their conversion the vision provides a new paradigm for an Armenian Christian self-definition that accords with their new faith.” [4: 213-274]

Immediately after recounting his vision, Gregory and everyone present start building Armenia’s first church. For this purpose, Gregory brings the relics of two martyr saints: John the Baptist and the martyr Athenogenes, killed during the Emperor Diocletian’s persecutions. The choice of the relics, although not explicitly explained by Agathangelos, serves as a material confirmation of Gregory’s sermon and vision. In Gregory’s sermon, John acts as a mediator between the two covenants, the Old and the New, as a symbol of the transition to Christianity, and of the universal salvation history. Besides, John is the proto-martyr, the earliest witness of Christ and martyr for the faith. Athenogenes, on the other hand, is a recent martyr, a victim of Diocletian’s persecutions and, crucially, a martyr of Caesarea from where the Armenian Apostolic Church traditionally takes its origin and legitimacy. The relics of the two saints underline Armenia’s double belonging: to universal salvation history and to the recent history of Christianity and of its hierarchy. These two relics however are based and validated by the most important relics – the properly Armenian martyrs and virgins, Hrip‘simē and Gayanē, martyred and killed by King T‘rdat himself before his punishment and eventual conversion. Gregory the Illuminator theologizes on the meaning of history and on the Armenia’s place in the salvation history through conceptualizing the relics of universal and national martyrs. While John and Athenogenes are saints and martyrs of the Universal Church, Hrip‘simē and Gayanē are national martyrs, thus creating an assembly of relics which legitimates the *raison d’être* of the Christian Armenian nation. Through the interaction of three levels of history, Biblical, Christian and national, embodied in three types of relics, the essence of the

Armenian Church, and, *mutatis mutandis*, of the Armenian body politic, are validated and constitute the basis of Armenianness and of its integrity.

Agathangelos' account of the transfer of saints' relics to the new foundation is perhaps anachronistic to the early fourth century, however by the fifth century, when the account was supposedly written down, the eastern Roman Empire had a good experience of transferring relics for foundation purposes and political legitimization. The relics of apostles Andrew, Luke and Timothy were transferred to Constantinople to the Emperor Constantine's mausoleum by the Emperor Constantius. In 392, the head of John the Baptist was discovered and transferred to Constantinople. Of late antique eastern Roman monarchs, the Empress Pulcheria was the most innovative and meticulous in her treatment of saints' relics. In 420, she welcomed and deposited the relics of St Lawrence and prophet Isaiah in Constantinople. Here too, Pulcheria's choice of relics underlines the two times of Christian history, that of the Old Testament and of the recent Christian history.

Agathangelos' account exercised a fundamental impact on subsequent Armenian writing and provided models for the conceptualization of the metaphysical image of the Armenian nation. It also set the tone for the perception of the role of the relics of the saints in Armenian and other Caucasian religious and political rhetoric. Similarly to Agathangelos' account, other historical narratives, in particular, the stories of the conversion of the two kingdoms and people, meditate on the idea of two times of the Salvation history cleaved and generated by the momentous act of the conversion.

While Agathangelos' *History* is concentrated on the figure of Gregory the Illuminator and his succession, in the centre of the Albanian founding narrative is its fifth-century king. The *History of Caucasian Albanians* is a compilation of chronicles of the history of Albania, written at various times between the sixth and the eleventh century, and

commonly attributed to a certain Movsēs Kałankatwac'i or to Movsēs Dasxuranc'i, who arguably lived in the tenth century, although some scholars prefer a seventh-century date. Although the corpus recounts the history of Caucasian Albania, it has survived in Armenian, or, and more likely, was originally written in Armenian. The *History of Albanians* is far from being a single or even coherent narrative, and is rather a collection and edition of disjointed quasi-historical accounts related to Caucasian Albania, often revealing awkward attempts to sustain continuity. The earliest strata of Book One of the *History* are conventionally dated to as early as the second half of the sixth century, while the rest is markedly late, with the final parts dating to the eleventh century. The opening chapters of Book 1 focus on the reign of Vač'agan III the Pious, Albania's late fifth-century king who restored Christianity in Albania and thereby founded a new political order. There is a general, albeit a cautious consensus, that the part that can be called the *Life of Vač'agan*, must have been created as an independent text, and may be dated to the aftermath of the king's death in the sixth century.

Life of Vač'agan adopts Agathangelos' political theology of saints' relics and adapts it to the Albanian rhetoric. Vač'agan's quest and discovery of relics is one of the most elaborate and complicated narratives of the genre, and to my knowledge possesses no analogy in contemporary Christendom. The final goal of the processions and quest is the invention of the relics of Albania's founding Patriarch, and first martyr, Grigoris (grandson of Gregory the Illuminator). As with the relics of Hrip'simē and Gayanē which Gregory presents as the pillars of the Armenian Church and the nation, Grigoris is both the instrument of Christianization and Albania's own martyr. Following Agathangelos' model, through the ritualized procession, the author's intention is to define the place of Albania's political body in universal salvation history through the appropriate

inclusion of the cult of the relics in political rhetoric.

While Vač'agan's ultimate purpose is to discover the 'national' saint, a figure who founded the Albanian Church, he achieves this through a journey with the relics of two other central saints. Mirroring Agathangelos, these are the relics of Zechariah, a New Testament martyr and father of John the Baptist, and Pantaleon, who, like Athenogenes, was martyred in Nicomedia during Diocletian persecutions. These relics were allegedly brought to Albania by Grigoris himself when he established Christianity in the country, and since then have been lost just like the relics of Grigoris himself: the venerable [Grigoris] took along with him [to Albania] the marvellous and most revered stipend [of all], the honoured blood of the great patriarch and martyr Zechariah, John's father, and the relics of Saint Pantaleon who confessed the true faith of Christ and was martyred in the city of Nicomedia. [Grigoris] brought the most holy relics of the martyrs to the great city of C'ri in the principality of the Albanians. He constructed a small church there and with great care he placed in it a portion of Zechariah's blood, and some of the remains of Saint Pantaleon [5: 15].

It was upon Vač'agan's accession to the Albanian throne that the relics of Zechariah and Pantaleon began to miraculously manifest themselves, as a premonition of a new era in Albania's political history, reminding us of similar wonders and punishments exercised by the wondrous treasures: "Numerous signs and miracles took place in the city named C'ri in that spot where the relics of the holy martyrs in Christ lay, although no one knew precisely where the remains of the Saints were. Despite the fact that the inhabitants of the land were pagans, those with fevers and illnesses went to the church where the relics lay, and took earth from the place. Many of these people, though pagans, were greatly cured nonetheless. The foolish religion of the evil Persians, which was always in opposition to the

Church of God [was practiced by] a certain Persian mage who came to the place where these relics lay to mock them by relieving himself on them. However, when he loosened his pants his intestines fell out upon the earth, and he died in the greatest agony." [5: 24].

Therefore, the relics of Grigoris on the one hand, and of Zechariah and Pantaleon on the other, validate each other and create a political and theological dialectic of the universal and the national. The author of the *History* however adds another dimension to the Albanian quest for identity. As noted by J.-P. Mahé, the author of the narrative was probably an Armenophile Albanian, whose literary language was the Armenian, in which he composed the narrative; therefore, association with the Armenian tradition, and presenting Albanian history as an integral part of Armenian history, was an imperative. The author makes sure to incorporate in Vač'agan's quest also the relics of Armenia's saints and martyrs – of Gregory the Illuminator and of Hrip'simē and Gayanē [6].

Finally, the early medieval Georgian tradition of the conversion must be mentioned which is arguably built on same narrative tropes in its attempt to create a continuity of Georgian Christianity with the Universal salvation history. While this in Agathangelos' and Albanian case is achieved through the translation and conceptualization of the relics of a biblical saint and of the recent martyr in order to create a foundation of the Christian Armenian and Albanian kingdoms, the medieval Georgian narrative tradition achieves the same through the conceptualization of a biblical relic of the tunic of the Prophet Elijah and the Chiton of the Lord, which according to the *Life of Nino*, have been translated to Mtskheta in order to create a continuity between Christianity's foundation and national Christian history [6].

To conclude, the three Caucasian foundation narratives extensively theologize on the historical and political function of saints' relics, a tendency

that was established in Constantinople under Constantine, Constantius and later the Theodosian dynasty. The relics of the saints serve the purpose of legitimizing the present political state of affairs, sanctify the monarch's rule through creating a certain metaphysical bridge between the foundations of Christianity and the recent times, or in other words, through assigning to the kingdom or

individual monarch a central place in the Universal salvation history.

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ისტორია

წმინდანთა კულტისა და პოლიტიკური ლეგიტიმაციის საკითხები გვიანანტიკურ კავკასიაში

ნ. ალექსიძე

კორნელი კეკელიძის სახ. საქართველოს ხელნაწერთა ეროვნული ცენტრი, აღმოსავლურ და სომხურ ხელნაწერთა დეპარტამენტი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის დ. მუსხელიშვილის მიერ)

სტატიაში განხილულია გვიანანტიკური კავკასიის წმინდანთა კულტის რეგიონული თავისებურებები. სტატიის მთავარი არგუმენტია, რომ კავკასიური, ანუ ქართული, სომხური და ალბანური წყაროები ამკვიდრებენ განსხვავებულ კონცეპტებს, პრაქტიკებს და რიტორიკას აღმოსავლეთ რომის იმპერიის წმინდანებთან დაკავშირებულ დისკურსში. გვიანანტიკურ კავკასიურ წყაროებში შესაძლებელია წმინდანთა კულტისა და პოლიტიკურ დისკურსების დაკავშირების განსაკუთრებული მცდელობების წაკითხვა, განსაკუთრებით კი სამეფო ხელისუფლების ლეგიტიმაციის კონტექსტში. ამ მიზნისთვის სტატიაში განხილულია ორი ტექსტი: აგათანგელოსის მეხუთე საუკუნის „სომხეთის ისტორია“, ალბანური ანონიმური და რთულად დასათარიღებელი „ვაჩაგან მეფის ცხოვრება“, რომელიც არის „ალბანთა ისტორიის ნაწილი“. ასევე მოკლედ იმავე კონტექსტში მიმოხილულია ქართული „მოქცევაჲ ქართლისაჲ“. ტექსტებზე დაყრდნობით, სტატიის მთავარი არგუმენტია, რომ წმინდა ნაწილების პოლიტიზაცია, ერთი მხრივ, ნასესხებია აღმოსავლურ რომის იმპერიის რიტორიკიდან, განსაკუთრებით კი კონსტანტინეს და თეოდოსიოსის თანამედროვე ავტორებისგან, ხოლო მეორე მხრივ, ნასესხებია ირანული და ზოროასტრული სამეფო ხელისუფლების კონცეფციები. ამ გვიანანტიკური ტექსტების მიხედვით, წმინდა ნაწილების ფუნქციაა პოლიტიკური წყობის ლეგიტიმაცია და სამეფო ხელისუფლების სანკტიფიკაცია ქრისტიანობის დასაწყისსა და აწმყო მდგომარეობას შორის ერთგვარი მეტაფიზიკური ხიდის გადებით და სამეფოსთვის და მისი მონარქისთვის მსოფლიო ხსნის ისტორიაში ცენტრალური ადგილის მინიჭებით.

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