

THE INSCRIPTION FROM KHIRBAT UMM LEISUN, AND GEORGIAN PRESENCE IN THE HOLY LAND

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In July 2002, during the excavation of the monastery at Umm Leisun southeast of Jerusalem (see Seligman, this volume), a crypt was discovered under the floor of the monastery chapel. The crypt contained 24 interments, and upon one of the tombs was an inscribed stone (see Seligman, this volume: Fig. 9).² To our great delight the newly-discovered inscription proved to be in ancient Georgian:

*ese samarxoi iohane purtavel episkoposisai
kartvelisai*

This is the grave of Iohane Bishop of Purtavi, Georgian

Paleographic analysis dates the inscription to the end of the fifth century or the first half of the sixth century (see Gagoshidze, this volume). This date makes it one of the oldest Georgian inscriptions in the Holy Land, together with the ones discovered by Virgilio Corbo in the nearby site of Bir el-Qatt (Corbo and Tarchnisvhili 1953:181–186; Corbo 1955:279–284; Tarkhnishvili 1954:12–17; Nutsubidze 1959:4, I, No. 3 (11309); 1966:97–106, 107–124, 454–474; Kekelidze 1960a:72–80; 1980:39, 89; Qaukhchishvili 1959:58–62; Tsereteli 1960; Gamqrelidze 1956:6; Giorgadze 1959:33–38).

GEORGIAN MONASTIC SETTLEMENT IN THE HOLY LAND

I shall review briefly the sparse information available regarding the history of Georgian settlement in the Holy Land in the Early Islamic

period (640–1099 CE), in order to outline the significance of this inscription, not only for the history of this settlement, but also for the history of monastic life in the Holy Land and of Christianity in general.

According to Georgian tradition, relations between Georgia and the Holy Land extend over 2600 years, since the arrival of the first Jews to Georgia after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar the Great in 586 BCE (Qaukhchishvili 1955:72–130). Georgian written sources tell of several subsequent waves of Jewish immigrants settling in Georgia between the first century BCE and the first century CE (Qaukhchishvili 1955:17, 36, 44, 88–89, 95, 98, 115–116). Otherwise, direct evidence for the presence of Jews is available only in the first centuries CE (Hvolson 1884; Tsereteli 1940:5–6; Babalishvili 1971:4).

Relations with the Holy Land became especially close during the fourth century, when Christianity was declared the state religion in Georgia. At that time, Georgians began to adopt Christian culture and to translate and distribute the literature of the new church. Georgian spiritual and secular figures, readily supported by the monarchy, strove to establish literary centers and seats of Georgian culture, not only inside the country, but also beyond its borders.

A particular desire of the population of the newly baptized country was to make the pilgrimage to Palestine, to see the holy places with their own eyes, and to offer their prayers at the holy sites. They did not delay long, and it seems that the first Georgians appeared in Palestine in the latter half of the fourth century,³ their numbers increasing in the fifth–sixth

centuries (Menabde 1980:20–25; Lolashvili 1988 79–203; Abuladze 1967:213–263). At first, the Georgians lived in well-known places, where they set up communities and built hostels for their fellow countrymen and women. The first Georgian pilgrims were members of the royal family and representatives of nobility. They worshipped in their native language in the laurae of St. Saba and St. Theodosius, as they had done in Iberia. This is attested to by the will of St. Saba (d. 532), and by the sixth-century biography of St. Theodosius (Patrich 1995:251, 338; see also: Cyr. Scyth. *Vita Sabae*; Teodorus of Petra; Festugière 1962:124n., 291; Milik 1960:354–367, 550–591; Kekelidze 1956:84–98). It is noteworthy that from the fifth to the tenth centuries the divine service in Georgia followed the tradition and practice of Jerusalem (Kekelidze 1912; van Esbroeck 1975; Metreveli, Chankievi and Khevsuriani 1980; Mgaloblishvili 1991), and that the first books used for the liturgy in the Georgian Church reflected the Jerusalem practice, the liturgical rites of the church of the Holy Sepulchre (Kekelidze 1912; Metreveli, Chankievi and Khevsuriani 1980; Mgaloblishvili 1991:165–190).

The geographical scope of the activities of Georgians in Palestine during the fifth–sixth centuries is quite impressive. There is evidence of Georgians living in Jerusalem and its surroundings, as well as in the Judean Desert. They lived in most of the oldest monasteries and laurae, but also built and ran numerous new monasteries. The number of pilgrims and travelers from Georgia was so large that, according to Peter the Iberian’s *Georgian Vita* (hence: *Life*), he was obliged to build not only churches and monasteries, but also guesthouses in the Holy City:

[Peter the Iberian and Ioane the Laz] built a house for the guests within the city i.e., Jerusalem where the visiting Greek and Georgian brethren could take shelter. So they could wash their feet, have their meals and sleep at night and they [Peter the Iberian and Ioane the Laz] spent some of the treasures they had been given by God. Then they went to the desert, gathered their brethren

and built a monastery for themselves (Abuladze 1967:229).

According to this version of *Life*, Peter, Ioane and their disciples “went to Egypt and Scetis to visit the monasteries”. They offered prayers in all of them, then selected a site and built a monastery and a church and “again returned to Jerusalem and built another guesthouse in the city” (Abuladze 1967:235). In the Syriac-language edition of Peter the Iberian’s *Life*, which has not been preserved in its original form, but came down to us only in its edited version, only the construction of the monasteries is mentioned. Nothing is said about the building of the guesthouses (Lolashvili 1988:79–203).

In spite of the fact that two versions of the *Life* of Peter the Iberian are extant, one in Georgian the other in Syrian, the information they provide is too scant to be linked with the Georgians who lived and worked in the Holy Land, or even with the activities of Peter the Iberian himself. In fact, so far it has been difficult to find and identify the monasteries that Peter the Iberian built. Also scant is the general information preserved in written sources, whether in Georgian or in other languages, about the building activities of Georgians. The extensive losses incurred during the Persian invasion in the sixth century, and in the course of the Early Islamic period (640–1099 CE), pose a complex problem for contemporary scholars who try to trace or identify Georgian Christian monuments of the Byzantine period (324–600). Close attention should therefore be paid to the description of the wall paintings in the Holy Cross Monastery in the text of the *Mimoslva (Pilgrimage)* written by Timothy Gabashvili, a Georgian scholar and traveler of the eighteenth century (Gabashvili:85–86; Metreveli 1962:60).

In 1758, while travelling in the Holy Land, Gabashvili viewed a group portrait in the Holy Cross Monastery. The painting depicted the Georgian Holy Fathers accompanied by explanatory inscriptions (Gabashvili:82–86; Metreveli 1962:59–60). Nicholas Chubinashvili

still saw the fresco, with the inscriptions, in the twentieth century (Chubinov 1894:44–452). It should be noted that although a number of the Fathers in this group portrait can be identified, others are unknown. Since their names are not attested in Georgian liturgical and hagiographic monuments, their popularity, as Elene Metreveli suggests, may never have reached beyond the Georgian settlement in Palestine (Metreveli 1962:60–61; see also Batonishvili 1948:184). The fact that their names are absent from the Collection of Agapes in the Jerusalem Holy Cross Monastery indicates that they lived and worked before the Georgian community of Jerusalem began to record the activities of Georgian clergymen (Metreveli 1962:60–61). This tradition was introduced in a comparatively late period, in the eleventh century, after Prochore Shavsheli had built the Holy Cross Monastery. Prochore Shavsheli's name was the first to be mentioned in the Collection of Agapes of the Holy Cross Monastery, in honor of his great contribution to the construction of the monastery (Metreveli 1962:61; and see Jer. Georg. N. 24–25, in Blake 1924). The possibility that earlier sources for the history of the Georgian community in Jerusalem were destroyed between 640 and 1099 cannot be excluded.

The Holy Fathers and martyrs depicted in the portrait that Gabashvili saw in the Holy Cross Monastery may have lived and worked in the Holy Land between the fifth and tenth centuries. The names he notes were the martyr priests Mose the Georgian and Mari, and the bishops Kind the Georgian and Nunus the Georgian (Gabashvili:85–86; Metreveli 1962:60), none of whom can be found in other Georgian sources. Only one of these names—Kind—is attested to in an Armenian source, a description of the monasteries of Palestine in the seventh century. Among the Armenian monasteries, the author mentions the monastery of the Beatific Kind, which is situated at the approach to the Jehoshaphat Valley. The editor of the source, G. Alishan, can say nothing about the Beatific Kind, except for suggesting that he may have

been an ecclesiastic figure in the latter half of the fourth century, a pupil of St. Nerses (*Société de l'Orient Latin* 1884:394–399). It is very difficult to make a connection between the two 'Kind's, but the fact that a seventh-century Armenian source mentions the Beatific Kind and a monastery which bore his name, is interesting in itself.

It is clear that Gabashvili's list of the Georgian holy fathers and martyrs in the Holy Land is not complete. This surmise is corroborated by the absence of the name of Samuel, the Georgian bishop who is mentioned in the Greek inscription on the tombstone which was found by chance during construction work outside the wall of the Holy City. According to the inscription, the Iberian (i.e., Georgian) monastery of the Iberian bishop Samuel was situated near the Tower of David, by Jaffa Gate (Iliffe 1935:78–80; Israeli and Mevorach 2000:173). The inscription is dated to the fifth–seventh centuries and is now at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem (Israeli and Mevorach 2000:173, 224). I believe that further study of this inscription can lead to a more accurate dating.

It is also clear that from the fifth century onward, the presence of Georgians in the Holy Land was significant. This is attested to not only by the two versions—Syriac and Georgian—of Peter the Iberian's *Life*, but also by the now lost wall painting of the Holy Cross Monastery mentioned above (Gabashvili:82–83). Additional confirmation may be found in some of the surviving Byzantine sources concerning St. Gerasimus and his monastery. According to these sources, Georgian (Iberian) monks lived and worked in the Judean Desert and the Jordan Valley both before and after the Crusades. Some were even stylites whose faith and devotion to God were such, that the devout gained great spiritual benefit from approaching them or coming into contact with them. The same Byzantine sources preserve information regarding the Georgian monks who lived in Calamon, and emphasize their role in saving the monastery of Calamon and the other holy

places in the Jordan Valley that were associated with the name of St. Gerasimus. The Georgians were able to achieve this due to their close contacts with the Mamluks and the Caliphs of Baghdad (Wilkinson 1988:330–331; *St. Gerasimus*). According to these sources, the Georgian inscriptions on the walls of the Calamon Monastery existed even before the Crusades (*St. Gerasimus*:45).

The activities of Georgians in the deserts of Palestine have always aroused great interest among scholars of Georgian studies and early Christianity. The Judean Desert merits special attention, since from the emergence of monastic life in the fourth century, Christians of all nationalities, including Georgians, sought ardently the great honor of living and working in the monasteries and laurae situated there. By the fifth century and for many centuries to come, the Judean Desert was the most important center of monastic life in the Christian world.

Since the written sources for this period are few, archaeological remains are particularly important. The beginning of archaeological excavations in the Judean Desert in 1918 is associated with the name of the British historian Dervas J. Chitty (Chitty and Jones 1928; Chitty 1930; Hirschfeld 1992:2–6). Subsequent work was undertaken by the well-known Franciscan scholars Virgilio Corbo and Belarmino Bagatti, who researched the monastic sites in the vicinity of Bethlehem and in the Judean desert (Hirschfeld 1992:6). Since 1967, Israeli archaeologists initiated intensive work in the area, with impressive results (Hirschfeld 1992:6). Although work has been carried out on a large scale, unfortunately no particular archaeological research of Georgian sites has ever been attempted. The material uncovered by Jon Seligman on the edge of the Judean Desert near Jerusalem is therefore exceptional. The discovery of a previously unknown Georgian monastery is as significant as Corbo's discovery of Peter the Iberian's monastery at Bir el-Qatt. For us Georgian scholars, it is a great privilege to have witnessed this important discovery.

THE UMM LEISUN INSCRIPTION IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER GEORGIAN INSCRIPTIONS

On the basis of palaeographic analysis, the Umm Leisun inscription should be dated to the end of the fifth/beginning of the sixth centuries. The name 'Iohane' mentioned in the inscription, also points to its antiquity. This form of the name is attested in Georgian texts from the fifth century to the first half of the seventh century (e.g., Khanmeti Lectionary, Khanmeti Polycephalon and Khanmeti Gospels). By the latter half of the seventh century, only the form 'Ioane' appears (Chelidze 1996:286–291). Thus, the use of Iohane in our inscription, confirms a date between the fifth and seventh centuries. Unfortunately, Georgian and foreign written sources do not attest to Iohane the Bishop of Purtavi among the Georgians who lived and worked in Palestine during the early Byzantine period (fourth–eighth centuries).

The explanatory 'Purtaveli', which was added to the name of Iohane in the Umm Leisun inscription, is of great interest. The Georgian reader is inevitably tempted to identify it with the name of Ioane Tsurtaveli, who was bishop of Tsurtavi during the fifth century (Abuladze 1964:11–29). In my opinion, however, Tsurtavi and Purtavi are quite different.

The etymology of Tsurtavi is still unknown, although in the scholarly literature it is associated with Georgia. I believe that Purtavi must be of Semitic origin and located within the Holy Land. Such an association is not exceptional in the history of Georgian settlement of the Holy Land, where names of Georgian monasteries were not always of Georgian origin, as for example Devtubani (a compound word; Tseradze 2003), but also of Semitic origin, as in the case of Dertavi/Deltavi and Dertupha (also compound words; Metreveli 1962:174; 1976:89). Further support for this assumption is that together with the name of Iohane the Bishop of Purtavi (Purtaveli), his nationality—'Kartveli' (i.e., Georgian)—is also mentioned. I would venture to suggest that the ethnonym 'Kartveli'

(i.e., Iberian-Georgian) in the Umm Leisun inscription, means simply a native of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli (Iberia). This inscription is the earliest use of the term, which in Georgian sources is known only from the seventh century, with this meaning (Muskhelishvili 1993; 2002:5–17). The discrepancy in time should not be considered strange, because even the Georgian chronology for the era of the creation is attested in Georgia itself only from the ninth century, while in the Holy Land it is known already in the fifth–sixth centuries (Di Segni 1993:158–168).

The tomb of Bishop Iohane is separated from the other tombs in the crypt of the monastery, indicating his prominent position. This distinction, and the fact that the inscription of the main tomb in the crypt was inscribed in Georgian, is compelling evidence that we should consider the monastery to be Georgian. And yet, the inscription on Iohane's tombstone refers to his nationality. Why would it have been necessary to mention the nationality of a Georgian bishop, in a Georgian inscription, in the crypt of a Georgian monastery? The answer may be related to the problem of the name Purtaveli ('of Purtavi'). Had Purtaveli been a word of Georgian origin, and Iohane a bishop of a monastery called Purtavi situated in Georgia, then mention of the bishop's nationality in a Georgian inscription along with his place of origin, Purtavi, would have been unnecessary. If we presume, however, that the name Purtaveli was given to the bishop in the Holy Land and that it was not of Georgian origin, mentioning his nationality becomes more comprehensible.

In contrast, it is quite understandable why the nationality of the Georgian bishop Samuel (Georgian/Iberian) is mentioned in the Greek language inscription on his tombstone, which was found at the Jerusalem YMCA, in a Christian cemetery outside the Holy City wall: "The private tomb of Sa(mue)l Bishop of the Georgians [Greek: Iberians] and of the monastery which they bought [or frequented] in the Tower of David" (Israeli and Mevorach 2000:173). Clearly this inscription tells us

about the Iberian monastery founded by Peter the Iberian near the Tower of David in the Holy City. But the burial of Bishop Samuel with its inscribed tombstone was discovered 700 m west of Jaffa Gate, in a public Christian cemetery. In this case, beyond the walls of the Georgian monastery, and generally beyond the walls of the Holy City, it is understandable that the inscription had to be in Greek, the *lingua franca* of Byzantine Christian Palestine. It is also clear that not only the name of the bishop and his nationality, but also the location of the monastery and its name (Iberian) should be indicated.

All of the above makes it possible to surmise that bishop Iohane's additional name—Purtaveli—is likely to be of local Semitic origin. This explanatory name must have derived from Purtavi, possibly the name of a monastery, or it may have had its origin in an old toponym associated with the place. Considering the above, when searching for an etymology for Purtavi/Purtaveli, two Semitic words come to mind, one is the Hebrew *pura*—winepress—the installation in which grapes were trodden to make wine; the other is the Aramaic *purta*—small or little—i.e., a small part separated from a larger whole (Shapiro 1963; Even-Shoshan 1999).

If we consider the Georgian Purtavi to be based on the Hebrew *pura*, then the source for the second part of the word, *-tavi*, may be found in the Aramaic word *tav*, meaning sacred, good, blessed (Payne Smith 1973). The Georgian Purtavi would then be a compound word consisting of *pura* + *tav*; the final *a* of *pura* is dropped according to the rules of the Georgian language to form *purtav-i*, with the final *i* as the nominative case inflexion. The meaning of this compound word, which may have given the name to the monastery, was thus 'sacred winepress' or the site where the sacred winepress was located.

It is noteworthy that some commentators of the Bible believe that the winepress and treading of the grapes have a symbolic meaning, namely the punishment of the enemies of God (Lopukhin 1987:526–527). It is through

the influence of this symbolism that the Hebrew *pura* (winepress) can be seen in the stems of Arabic toponyms such as Khirbat el-Fureihiyye in Samaria, meaning ‘ruins of the winepress’,⁴ and Khirbat Fureir—‘ruins of Fureir’ (Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994:125). Is it possible that the early Roman-period remains that were found at Umm Leisun indicate that this compound word, meaning sacred winepress, may have been the name of this location? If this was so, then the name in all likelihood disappeared after the Arab invasion of the seventh century, and was preserved only in the ancient Georgian inscription. If this theory is correct, we can further propose that the name of another Georgian monastery in Palestine, Dertavi, is similarly a compound word composed of the Arabic *dayr* ‘monastery’ and the Aramaic *tav*, and may mean ‘the holy monastery’ (Metreveli 1976:74–78).

Let us now turn to the Aramaic *purta*, meaning little, a small part (Even-Shoshan 1999). The word is not found in the Bible. If we accept that the Georgian Purtavi derives from the Aramaic *purta*, then it must mean a small, minor monastery that was separated from a larger one, and the transformation from the Aramaic *purta* to the Georgian Purtaveli is an easy one. If the name of the monastery was Purta, then its bishop would be *Purta-el-i episkoposi* (bishop of Purta). Inserting an epenthetic *v* between the final *a* and the suffix *el* would accord with the phonetics of Georgian, the result being *Purtaveli* (*Purta-v-el-i episkoposi* (bishop of Purta, where *v* separates the two vowels, *el* is a suffix denoting origin, and *i* is the nominative case inflexion).

It should be emphasized that toponyms derived from *purt/furt* are also attested

in Palestine (e.g., Furt, the village near Eleutheropolis, on the road to Gaza; Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green 1994:125). If this assumption is acceptable, then the name of another Byzantine monastery, Katamon, must be a derivation of the Greek *kata* and *mone* with the same meaning—a separate, individual unit (Lampe 1994), i.e., a small monastery subordinated to a bigger one. For a certain period Katamon too belonged to the Georgians (Metreveli 1962:89; Pahlitzsch 2003:104–131), and was subordinate to the Holy Cross monastery of Jerusalem, together with the monastery of St. Nicholas, which was situated near the Holy Cross, but now lies in ruins (Metreveli 1962:145). All three monasteries lay within a radius of 4–5 km.

The situation of Purtavi may have been analogous. The monastery of Umm Leisun is situated between the two monasteries of Peter the Iberian: one near the Tower of David, the other at Bir el-Qatt. All three were likewise within a radius of 4–5 km, and perhaps Umm Leisun was given the name Purtavi because it was a dependency of one of the other two.

It should also be noted that the bishop of Purtavi, like Bishop Samuel, must have been a bishop of only one monastery. Hierarchically, the jurisdiction of a bishop usually embraces several monasteries with their abbots, but in early Christianity it was common for a bishop to be the abbot of a single monastery, and Palestine could not have been an exception.⁵

The possibilities discussed above are hypothetical, and no definite conclusion can be drawn at the present state of research. Hopefully, as more information relating to the history of the Georgian community in the Holy Land comes to light, there will be firmer grounds for such assumptions.

NOTES

- ¹ Centre for the Exploration of Georgian Antiquities.
- ² At the invitation of the excavator, Jon Seligman, the inscription was examined on September 18, 2002, by Giorgi Gagoshidze (art historian and epigraphist), David Tskhadadze (art historian and photographer), Lasha Zhvania (former consul of Georgia in Israel), Paata Gigauri (sculptor) and the author.
- ³ According to some scholars, Evagre Pontoeli (Evagrius Ponticus) was the first Georgian monk to arrive in Palestine (see Janin 1921:11; Tarkhnishvili 1952:25; 1958; Kekelidze 1960b; Assfalg and Kruger 1975:139; Egender 1998:132; see also Qaukhchishvili 1967:107–117). The graffiti that was found on a plaster fragment from the church that was destroyed in the first half of the fifth century, on the site where the new Catholic Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth now stands, must also have referred to Georgian activities in the Holy Land; see Aleksidze 2000.
- ⁴ A village on the western border of the plain of Jezreel; see Tsafir, Di Segni and Green 1994:125.
- ⁵ Yana Tchekhanovets, in her study *The Georgian Church in the Holy Land* (Tchekhanovets 2012), indicates that the name Iohan appears in Albanian sources (Tchekhanovets 2012:22). She therefore proposes that the inscription from the Umm Leisun

monastery may relate to a Georgian bishop from the city of Partav in Caucasian Albania (Barda in modern Azerbaijan), and that emphasis is given to his Georgian ethnicity because Bishop Iohane served outside his place of origin (Seligman, this volume; Tchekhanovets 2009:110–114; this volume). This hypothesis, however, seems doubtful, since according to the ancient sources, the name of the modern city of Barda in Azerbaijan was Partav/Bartav, not Purtav, and see also the scholarly studies of N. Adontz, V. Bartold, K. Trever, V. Minorsky, C. Toumanoff, R. Hewsen, T. Mamedov, and more (Kalankatuatsi Movses 1985:29; Eghishe:154–155; Eremyan 1963:109; Hewsen 1992:65A; Ghewond 1862:82, 116; Ukhtanes 101; Gandzaketsi 1976:133–135, etc.). Furthermore, according to the linguistic rules of Georgian, the transformation of Partav/Bartav into ‘Purtav’ is not possible.

As to Tchekhanovets’ second argument, that the name of the bishop from the Umm Leisun inscription—Iohane—does appear in Albanian sources, Iohane (Ioane, Ioann, John etc.) is one of the most widespread names, attested in Christian sources in many languages, starting from the New Testament, and thus cannot serve as an argument for the identification of the historical person.

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