

BISHOP IOHANE FROM KHIRBAT UMM LEISUN AND THE CAUCASIAN ALBANIAN CHURCH

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The lapidary inscription of Iohane, bishop of Purtavi, which was discovered in the burial crypt of the monastery at Umm Leisun (see Seligman, this volume: Fig. 9), has already drawn considerable attention from Georgian scholars, and will probably continue to provoke scientific discussion. Despite the archaeological attribution of the monastery to the sixth–seventh centuries CE, the inscription should be dated to the fifth–sixth centuries on paleographic grounds.

The name of the deceased and of his bishopric seat, Purtavi, cannot be identified with any known personalities and toponyms. The use of the word ‘Kartvelian’, meaning ‘a person from Kartli’, or eastern Georgia, was a matter of great surprise to Georgian scholars. From the seventh century CE on, the word ‘Kartvelian’ became a self-defining national term in the Georgian language, but nothing was known about its use in earlier periods. It is generally agreed that the inscription from Umm Leisun is the earliest known example for the use of this term in Georgian epigraphy (Seligman 2004a; 2004b; Mgaloblishvili 2006–7). The need for such a national definition is not clear, since the text itself is written in Georgian. Mgaloblishvili (2006–7:535–536; this volume) proposed that the name Purtavi has mixed Semitic and Georgian roots and derives from the Aramaic פורתא or the Hebrew פורה, but this interpretation is unconvincing. If that were true, Purtavi would have been the original name of the Umm Leisun monastery; however, nothing is known of such a bishopric seat in Byzantine Palestine.

Another interpretation of the inscription, and the Umm Leisun complex as a whole, is thus proposed in light of the Caucasian church history. Albania, the ‘forgotten Christian kingdom’ next to Armenia and Georgia, is the *terra incognita* of the Caucasus. Even the borders of the ancient country cannot be drawn clearly, and questions concerning the ethnic identity of the ancient Albanians, their language, script and material culture, are particularly sensitive (Trever 1959; Bais 2001).¹ Since their conversion to Christianity in the fourth century CE, the three churches of neighboring Armenia, Georgia and Albania were closely associated, and the same preachers and ecclesiastical hierarchs were often active in all these countries.

Two ancient texts mention the monastic presence of Caucasian Albanians in Jerusalem. The first is ‘The List of Armenian Monasteries’, traditionally attributed to a priest (in Armenian—*vardapet*) named Anastas (Sanjian 1969). This document, written in Armenian, survived only in late copies. The earliest known version dates to the sixteenth century, and can hardly be considered reliable; however, at its core it seems to retain a faithful rendition of an earlier text that is now lost (Sanjian 1969: 266). Anastas vardapet lists all the major and secondary Christian sanctuaries of Jerusalem as Armenian, and states whether they remained Armenian or were transferred to foreign hands. The latter include four monasteries that are attributed to the Albanian community.

The second text testifying to an Albanian presence in Jerusalem, ‘The History of Aluank Country,’ is the only extant Albanian

historical chronicle. It was compiled by Movses Dasxuranci (also known as Movses Kalankatuaci), in the seventh or tenth century CE. The final chapter of this historical composition contains a list of ten Jerusalem monasteries which, according to the author, belong to the Caucasian Albanians. Most of the monasteries in this list can no longer be identified, but it is clear that they were known according to the origins of their founders. The toponyms indicate the ancient Christian centers of Caucasian Albania.

The discovery of two Georgian palimpsests in the collection of St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai (Sin. Geo. N. 13 and 55), with an Albanian underlayer (Gippert et al. 2009), was the first material evidence testifying to the existence of an early Albanian Christian community in the Holy Land. It may also serve as additional evidence to the close ties between the Georgians and Albanians far away from home, ties that were previously known only through vague allusions in historical sources.

In the history of the Transcaucasian region, an eminent role was played by a city called Partav (Bardav). This city, once an important political, administrative and ecclesiastic center of Caucasian Albania, is today a small regional center by the name of Barda in the territory of modern Azerbaijan. The city of Partav was established in the fourth century CE, and a hundred years later, during the reign of King Vache II (459–481), became the capital of the country, and the bishop's see. In the following centuries the bishop of Partav was also the head of the Albanian Church, or Catholicos (Geiushev 1971; Anon. 1987; Kazaryan 2000). The city's name is mentioned by Movses Dasxuranci in 'The History of Aluank Country' as one of the monasteries owned by Caucasian Albanians in Jerusalem—the monastery near the Tower of David, dedicated to St. Mary Mother of god—is called by the author *Partava* (Movses 1961:51). The location of the Partava monastery can be associated with the building activity of Peter the Iberian (Vincent and Abel 1922:516–526; Tsafirir 1975:37–40, 84–87, 137), and its name, with the city of Partav

and therefore with the adjectival *Purtaveli*, mentioned in the Umm Leisun inscription.

The meaning of the Umm Leisun text becomes clearer, if 'the bishop of Purtavi' is interpreted as 'the bishop of Partav', and 'Kartveli' not as 'Georgian', but as 'from Kartli'. The person who was buried in the vicinity of Jerusalem was a native of the Kartli kingdom, but had served far away from his country, in Albania.

The Bishop of Partav served also as the head of the Albanian church. This can explain the inordinately large number of deceased buried in the monastery crypt. All the burials discovered at Umm Leisun probably belonged to monks. The results of the physical anthropology analysis of the remains support this interpretation (see Nagar, this volume). All but one of the identified skeletons are of men. Iohane, bishop of Purtavi was an important figure, venerated by his community. It is plausible that members of this community came from Albania, and desired to be buried near their shepherd (for comparison, see Goldfus 1997:241–243).

In the list of the catholicoi of the Albanian church the name Iohane appears twice (Movses 1961:24). The first Iohane led the church in the fourth century, before the transfer of the capital to Partav. The second was head of the church in the years 644–671 CE, a period that corresponds to the archaeological dating of the Umm Leisun complex. The sources give no information regarding pilgrimage, migration or death in the Holy Land of any of the Albanian catholicoi. The bishop who is buried in Umm Leisun may have been one of the active leaders of the church hierarchy during the period of the Caucasian churches unity, or on the contrary, one of the schismatics who escaped to Palestine from the endless tangled Caucasian conflicts. These are all questions that remain open for future studies, but there is no doubt that the archaeological research of the Holy Land has implications beyond the confines of the region and can make an important contribution to the study of the Caucasian history in general and the interactions between the Georgian, Armenian and Albanian Churches in particular.

NOTE

¹ Studies of the history and archaeology of Caucasian Albania were controversial even during the Soviet period, with its declared internationalist values. In modern times, the subject became “a question of national pride” in hostile Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is hard to mention even a single historical or archaeological work published in the last twenty

years, which is free of patriotic emotionalism and modern geopolitical agenda (see Eremian 1959; Mamedova 1986; Muradian 1991; Shnirelman 2003). For the border region of Hereti, between the ancient kingdoms of Kartli (Eastern Georgia) and Albania, see Papuashvili 1970.

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