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ON THE HISTORY OF CREATING THE FIRST BASILICA IN THE PLACE OF THE MONASTERY OF THE CROSS IN JERUSALEM

by Besik Khurtsilava
Georgian National Youth Palace, Tbilisi

The history of establishing Holy Cross Monastery (The Monastery of the Cross) in Jerusalem is still vague. The scientific and popular literature abound in various opinions. Due to the scarcity of written evidence the scholars have to substantiate their opinions with oral traditions. However, the oral tradition is also scanty and includes only Georgia and Greek stories. The written sources of the Byzantine period do not mention the Monastery of the Cross. The experts have no doubts, however, that a Christian monks' abode existed there in that period.¹ The archeological excavations conducted in Holy Cross Monastery in the 1960s-1970s revealed the fact that there was quite a large basilica here at the beginning of the Byzantine period. If the basilica was connected to the place where the True Cross tree grew and also named "Valley of the Cross", the fact that it was not mentioned in the written sources seems strange and has to be explained.

The scholars assume that the Monastery of the Cross built in the Byzantine period did not survive the Persian invasion (614 A.D.) and the Arab invasion (637-640 A.D.) of Palestine. Some also point out the persecution of the Christians under the fanatic Egyptian Caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996-1021), destruction of more than 30,000

¹ A. Economopoulos, *Fresh Data Resulting from the Excavation in the Church of the Monastery of the Holy Cross at Jerusalem: A Preliminary Report*. "Actes Du Xe Congres International D'Archeologie Chretienne". Thessalonique 28 Septembre – 4 Octobre 1980. Thessalonique, 1984, 377-390; D. Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: Volume 3, The City of Jerusalem: A Corpus*, Cambridge 2007, 33; R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Bizantine to Islamic Rule: A Historical and Archeological Study*, Princeton, N.J., 1995, 341; V. Tzafiris, *The monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem*. Jerusalem, 1987, 7-13; A. Ovdiah, C. Gomez de Silva, *Supplement to the Corpus of the Bizantine Churches in the Holy Land*. Part I, "Levant: Journal of the British School of Archeology in Jerusalem and the British Institute at Amman for Archeology and History", XIV, 1982, 137 etc.

Christian churches in Egypt and Syria-Palestine and seizure of their property. However, no archaeological evidence supports the assumption that Holy Cross Monastery was demolished by the Persians or the Arabs. The destruction of old churches and monasteries in Palestine was often caused by natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes) and abandonment.

We will discuss the Georgian and Greek traditions regarding the establishment of Holy Cross Monastery below and historic facts reflected in these traditions. We will also review the findings of the archaeological excavations. All of these materials will allow us to thoroughly explore this issue and draw the conclusions.

The Georgian tradition is older than the Greek. The former is also different from the latter. According to the Georgian tradition Holy Cross Monastery was established during the reign of Mirian, the first Christian king of Iberia (first half of the 4th century). There are two versions of this story: one says that Mirian bought this place and the other says that Emperor Constantine the Great gifted this place to Mirian as the fellow Christian. According to the tradition, the pious King Vakhtang Gorgasali (442-502) then built the Monastery of the Cross.²

Although the Georgian tradition is older than the Greek one, it is noteworthy that the Georgian story was documented in writing quite late. This can be explained by the fact that the Georgians owned the monastery for a long time without any other Christian community laying claims to it in the 11th-14th centuries. All the pilgrims and travelers of that period mentioning Holy Cross Monastery recognized its ownership by the Georgians. The echoes of this tradition can be heard in the 18th - 20th centuries when the Georgians lost the ownership of the Monastery. The tradition is still alive among the residents of the Old City in Jerusalem. The Georgians felt the need to document the historic tradition regarding the ownership of the monastery only when their ownership rights were threatened. Later the owners of the Monastery also faced this threat and needed to create the alternative Greek version of the Monastery establishment. This version is based on the assumption that the Monastery was founded by the Byzantine Greeks.

The Georgian tradition attributes the establishment of the Monastery to King Vakhtang Gorgasali. The information on Vakhtang Gorgasali building churches and monasteries (including the Monastery of

² Timote Gabashvili, *მიმოსვლა (Travels)*, „ქართული პროზა“, Tbilisi 1983, pp. 538-539.

the Cross) in the Holy Land appeared in the late middle centuries. It is hard to specify now exactly when this connection appeared. One of the earliest references to Vakhtang Gorgasali as the founder of Holy Cross Monastery was found in the Monastery itself. The Georgian inscription on one of the marble slabs inserted in the floor left of the alter mentioned Vakhtang Gorgasali as the founder of the Monastery. The text of the inscription which was already damaged then can be found in the works of Alexandre Tsagareli and Tedo Zhordania.³ Unfortunately, this inscription was almost completely erased by the 1960s when the Georgian scholars and documentary film makers saw it. Therefore the paleographic aspect of the inscription is unclear. Alexandre Tsagareli dated the inscription to the 11th-16th centuries. i.e. to the period when the Georgians owned the Monastery.

The inscription above the portrait of Vakhtang Gorgasali on western wall of the main church of Holy Cross Monastery also mentions Vakhtang Gorgasali as the Founder of the Monastery.⁴ Gorgasali's mural was placed beside the portraits of the Georgian kings Mirian and Bagrat IV. These murals and inscriptions can no longer be found in the Monastery now. We only have the copies made by Timote Gabashvili in 1758. The historic sources mention that the main church was restored and repainted several times. The church was painted in the 11th century. At the beginning of the next century the Russian hegumen and travel-writer Daniel of Kiev saw the painted church.⁵ According to the Monastery chronicles the wall paintings were renewed in the 14th century when they were seen by the Arab writer Al-'Umari.⁶ The last renewal of the paintings under the guidance of Nicholas Cholokashvili (Nikiphores Irbachi), the father superior of the Monastery was carried out in 1643-1644. Therefore, we can argue that the story of Vakhtang Gorgasali being the Founder of the monastery was alive in the 1640s and probably in the 11th-16th centuries. The Vita of Saint Prokhore the Georgian does not

³ А. Цагарели, *Памятники грузинской старины в Святой Земле и на Синае* // Православный Палестинский сборник. Выпуск 10. (Т. 4. Вып. 1.), Санкт-Петербург, 1888, p. 246; T. Zhordania, *The Chronicles and other materials of history and writing of Georgia*, Book 2 – from 1213 to 1700, ქრონიკები და სხვა მასალა საქართველოს ისტორიისა და მწერლობისა, წიგნი მეორე – 1213 წლიდან 1700 წლამდე, Tbilisi 1897, p. 522.

⁴ А. Цагарели, *Памятники грузинской старины в Святой Земле и на Синае* // Православный Палестинский сборник. Выпуск 10. (Т. 4. Вып. 1.), Санкт-Петербург 1888, p. 245.

⁵ P. Ingogva, *თხზულებათა კრებული (The Collection of works)*, Volume 1, Tbilisi 1963, pp. 789-790.

⁶ Житие и хождение Даниила, *Русской земли игумена. Путешествия в Святую Землю: Записки русских паломников и путешественников XII-XX вв.*, Москва 1995, p. 32.

mention this story. The story of Vakhtang Gorgasali visiting Jerusalem existed three centuries before Prokhore in Georgia. Juansher Juansheriani (the 8th century chronicler) says that during this visit Vakhtang prayed in the Church of the Resurrection and other holy sites in Jerusalem and made lavish donations to them.⁷ This tradition continued in the following centuries and acquired the new strata over the time.

Timote Gabashvili (1758) provided the most detailed story. According to him the sultan of Egypt asked Vakhtang Gorgasali to free Jerusalem from the Crusaders (“French”). Vakhtang Gorgasali did his bidding, ousted the Crusaders from the Holy City and then built numerous monasteries in Jerusalem and Palestine.⁸ He also says that Gorgasali “invaded” Jerusalem and Palestine.⁹ It seems that the story of Juansher gave the idea of Gorgasali invading Jerusalem to Timote Gabashvili. According to Juansher Vakhtang Gorgasali raiding Sindh says that by participating in this campaign he saved Jerusalem from danger.¹⁰ The mentioning of Vakhtang Gorgasali, the Sultan of Egypt and Crusaders (“French”) in Gabashvili’s story is an obvious anachronism. Gabashvili argues that he read this information in the written sources. The events of various time periods are clearly mixed up here. The written sources inform us that the namesake of Vakhtang Gorgasali, King Vakhtang III (1299, 1302-1308) canonized by the Georgian Church, raided Jerusalem with the Mongols in 1299/1300. His attempt to free Holy Cross Monastery from the Muslims (1273-1305) is reflected in the Monastery chronicles. The anonymous Georgian chronicler of the 14th century tells the story of Vakhtang III participating in the military campaign with Ghazan Khan in Syria and Palestine and the army of the Georgians and Mongols reached Jerusalem and Gaza.¹¹ It should be mentioned that Timote Gabashvili’s contemporaries often emphasized the similarity between the spiritual endeavors of the aforementioned namesakes.¹²

The materials described above clearly show that Timote Gabashvili confused the chronology of the past events. However, the Georgian tra-

⁷ Al-‘Umari, Ibn Fadl Alah, *Masalik al-Absar fi Mamalik al-Amsar*, ed. By ‘Abdalah b. Yahya al-Surayhi, Abu Dhaby 2003, pp. 426-428.

⁸ Djuansher Djuansheriani, ცხოვრება ვახტანგ გორგასალისა (*The Lives of Vakhtang Gorgasali*), „ქართული პროზა“, Tbilisi 1982, p. 567.

⁹ Timote Gabashvili, მიმოსვლა (*Travels*), Tbilisi 1983, p. 539.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 543.

¹¹ Djuansher Djuansheriani, ცხოვრება ვახტანგ გორგასალისა (*The Lives of Vakhtang Gorgasali*), pp. 571-572.

¹² Zhamtaaghmtsereli, ასწლოვანი მაგიახე (*The Chronicle of One hundred years*), Tbilisi 1987, pp. 209-210.

dition regarding the connection of Vakhtang Gorgasali to Jerusalem was obviously strong as evidenced by the Patriarch of Jerusalem Dositheos II Notara's (1641-1707) letter in which he talks about an old manuscript written by Vakhtang Gorgasali which he saw on Golgotha.¹³ The Georgian tradition also credits Vakhtang Gorgasali for the establishment of the Georgian settlement in Malha near the Monastery of the Cross. The inhabitants of Malha still keep memory of the Georgian ancestors.¹⁴

Whether the Georgian tradition names the founder of Holy Cross Monastery (Vakhtang Gorgasali) correctly or not, we should emphasize that the Georgian tradition asserts that the Monastery existed in the Byzantine period (much earlier than the period of Prokhore the Georgian) and it was established by the Georgians and belonged to them. This memory had been alive among the Georgian residents of the Monastery long before they lost the Monastery and the other claimants to the site appeared.

The revival of Jvari Monastery in the 1030s is associated with the Georgians (King Bagrat IV, Prokhore the Georgian). Since that period the Georgians possessed the Monastery until 1685. Unfortunately, the written sources do not mention the condition of the buildings which existed in Holy Cross Monastery site in the period of the Founder Prokhore the Georgian (†1066). One of the Georgian manuscripts contains Prokhore's will saying that he became worthy of building Holy Cross Monastery.¹⁵ The inscription on one of the manuscripts copied in Kalipos Monastery in Antioch in 1040 mentioning that this book was donated to Holy Cross Monastery built by Prokhore the Georgian near Jerusalem during the reign of Michael IV the Paphlagonian (1034-1041) in Byzantine and Bagrat IV (1027-2071) in Georgia.¹⁶ Vita of St. Prokhore the Georgian written by an anonymous author in the 1060s says that Prokhore built and furnished Holy Cross Monastery west of Jerusa-

¹³ Vakhushti Batonishvili, აღწერა სამეფოსა საქართველოსა (*Description of the Kingdom of Georgia*), „ქართლის ცხოვრება“, Volume 4, Tbilisi 1973.

¹⁴ *Послания Иерусалимского патриарха Досифея (в 1680 г.) в Грузию*. „Духовный вестник“ за Май 1866 г./Изд.: П. Иоселиани, пер. С греческого еп. Порфирий (Успенский), Тифлис 1866.

¹⁵ B. Khurtsilava, მალხელი გურჯების ნაკვალევზე (*The Sentries of Jvari: On the footsteps of the Malbian Gourjs*), „ჯვარის გუმბანი“, Part 1, 5(65) Part 2, 6(66), „სტორიანი“, Part 1, Tbilisi 2016, pp. 36-42; Part 2, „სტორიანი“, Tbilisi 2016, pp. 46-53.

¹⁶ R. Janin, *Les Géorgiens à Jérusalem*, „Echos d'Orient“, 16, 1913, pp. 32-38; A. Цагарели, *Памятники грузинской старины в Святой земле и на Синае*, Православный Палестинский сборник, 4, вып. I (46), Санкт-Петербург, 1888, pp. 42-44; L. Menabde, *The Old Georgian liter-*

lem.¹⁷ We can conclude that Prokhore in fact constructed new buildings and structures on the site of the old ones. Therefore, the source does not mention the renovation or restoration of the old monastery. As the construction took quite a long time (about 20 years) it can be concluded that Prokhore was a builder of the new monastery and not the restorer of the old destroyed or badly damaged one. However, in legal terms this construction must have been the restoration of the old monastery as in that period Muslim rulers in the Holy Land only allowed the Christians to restore the destroyed and badly damaged churches and monasteries. The Christians were strictly forbidden to build new structures.¹⁸ For this reason some scholars argue that Holy Cross Monastery was built on the ruins of the old one in the 11th century. By the same logic, the ruins in the site either had no owner or had belonged to the Georgians.¹⁹

As it was mentioned above, the Georgians did not hide the fact that there was an older monastery on the site where Prokhore the Georgian built a new one. The Georgians' position was transparent. The site and the ruins belonged to their ancestors and they had a legal right to build here. Later the archaeological excavations in the vicinity of Jerusalem (Bir el Qutt, Umm Lisan, Beit Safafa) revealed the remains of the other Georgian monasteries. All of them were built in the Byzantine period and were later destroyed. The site of Holy Cross Monastery suffered the same fate. We have every right to say that the Georgians chose the site for a good reason. As the written sources of that period do not provide any direct information we can only suppose that the Georgians in the 11th century knew about their ancestors' right to that land since the 4th century.

As regards the aforementioned inscription mentioning Prokhore the Georgian, it also shows the sanctity of the site. A tree grew there from which the cross was made for Jesus Christ.²⁰ No Christian nation would

ary hubs, ძველი ქართული მწერლობის კერები, II, Tbilisi 1980, 69-139; T. Mgaloblishvili. *The monastery of Jvari*, ჯვრის მონასტერი. "Academia", Volume 5/A, Tbilisi 2003, p. 21; I dem. *The monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem: Legends and Reality. Georgians in the Holy Land. The Rediscovery of a Long-Lost Christian Legacy*, London 2014, pp. 32-33.

¹⁷ А. Цагарели, *Памятники грузинской старины в Святой земле и на Синае*. Православный Палестинский сборник, 4, вып. I (46), Санкт-Петербург 1888, p. 185.

¹⁸ პროხოორეს ცხოვრება (*The Life of Prokhore*), „ქართული პროზა“ 3, Tbilisi 1982, pp. 19-20.

¹⁹ A. S. Tritton, *Caliphs and their non-Muslim subjects: a critical study of the covenant of Umar*, London 1970, p. 37; G. Japaridze, ქართველთა საგანგებო და სამონასტრო თემი წმინდა მიწაზე XI-XVIII საუკუნეებში. არაბული ნარატიული და დოკუმენტური წყაროების მიხედვით (*The Georgian monasteries and monastic community the Holy Land in the 11th-18th centuries. According to the Arabic Narratives and Documentary Sources*), Tbilisi 2018, pp. 45-49.

²⁰ G. Japaridze, ქართველთა საგანგებო და სამონასტრო თემი წმინდა მიწაზე XI-XVIII საუკუნეებში. არაბული ნარატიული და დოკუმენტური წყაროების მიხედვით, pp. 49, 52.

abandon a monastery built on such a holy site unless it was completely destroyed. Even then the owners would not give up such a place. Therefore, the story that Holy Cross Monastery and its site belonged to the Georgians in the 4th-5th centuries seems credible. The absence of any information on the purchase of the monastery site in the Georgian sources also confirms the aforementioned.

As it was mentioned earlier the Greek tradition on the establishment of Holy Cross Monastery is different from the Georgian one. The current owners (since the 18th century the Monastery has belonged to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem) believe that the Monastery was founded either by Queen Helena (†330) or her son Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337) in the early Byzantine period and later the Monastery was renewed by Emperor Justinian I (527-565) or Heraclius I (610-641). This tradition argues that none other but the Byzantine Greeks were the founders of the Monastery.

The Greek tradition on the establishment of Holy Cross Monastery appeared much later than the Georgian one after the loss of the Monastery by the Georgians (1685). It does not appear in the written sources before. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century this version was promoted by a number of Holy Cross Monastery scholars (1853-1908) (Nikodemos Constantinidis, Chrysostomos Papadopoulos, Kyrillos Anastasiadis, Beniamin Ioannidis, etc.). After the archaeological excavations of 1969-1971, this version also appears in the works of Greek historians (A. Economopoulos, V. Tzaferis).

When Holy Cross Monastery became the property of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the new owners naturally wanted to explore its past. As there was no other historic tradition regarding the Monastery but the Georgian one, at first the Greek scholars used it as well. This way the Greek readers were introduced to Mirian, Vakhtang Gorgasali, Bagrat, Prokhore and other Georgian historical figures connected to Holy Cross Monastery. The interest in the past of the monastery grew in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The representatives of the theological school established in Holy Cross Monastery in 1853 played an important role in the process. The Greek scholars still based their history of Holy Cross Monastery on the Georgian tradition. However, this history also acquired some new

E. Mamistvalishvili, იერუსალიმის ჯვრის მონასტრის ისტორია. ქართული პერიოდი, *(The history of the Monastery of the Cross in Jerusalem. The Georgian period)*, Gori 2002, p. 9.

aspects and details. The works of the Greek authors of that period contain some serious blunders which can only be explained by the absence of the Greek tradition. Even the brief review of the data presented in the aforementioned works shows this. One of the most absurd statements is that „in 1177, Vakhtang Gorgasali, King of Iberia and the ally of the Sultan of Egypt” seized the monasteries in Jerusalem, including Holy Cross Monastery.²¹ These authors placed Vakhtang Gorgasali in the 12th century and name Tatian (Tatianos) to be the Georgian king in the 5th century. They also argue that Tatian built Holy Cross Monastery on the land gifted to him by Emperor Constantine the Great, the Monastery was then damaged in 614 during the Persian invasion and restored by Emperor Heraclius I. Some of the authors refer to the manuscript of the later date which they believe was kept in the library of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and listed Holy Cross Monastery among the monasteries outside the wall of Jerusalem in the 6th-7th centuries.²² It should be mentioned that the aforesaid document has been published for public review and some scholars doubt its authenticity.²³ This manuscript was first mentioned by Palmer in Appendix D to his book. He pointed out that the materials presented in his book (the list of cities where metropolitan bishops, archbishops and bishops were based) was extracted from the “canonical and holy list” prepared by Georgius Cyprius under Patriarch Photius I of Constantinople (858-867, 877-886) in the year of Adam 6391 from the beginning of times (=883 AC) and kept in the Big Library of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem.²⁴ The Monastery of the Cross built on the site of the Holy Cross tree is men-

²¹ T. Mgaloblishvili, ჯვრის მონასტერი (*The Monastery of the Cross*), pp. 22-25; idem. იერუსალიმის წმ. ჯვრის მონასტერი. ლეგენდები და სინამდვილე (*The Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem: Legends and Reality*). „ქრისტიანობის 20 საუკუნე“, Tbilisi 2004, pp. 176-192.

²² Β. Ιωαννίδης, Προσκυνητῆριον τῆς Ἁγίας Γῆς. Ἡ Ἁγία Βηθλεὲμ καὶ τὰ περιχώρα αὐτῆς, Ἱεροσολῶν 1867, pp. 87-89/ 1877, pp. 295-296; Κ. Αθανασιάδης, Αρχιμανδριτης. Το Καταμύνας: Ἦτοι σύντομος περιγραφή τοπογραφική του Μονυδρίου Καταμύνας /ὑπὸ Κυρίλλου Αθανασιάδου αρχιμανδριτου, εκδίδεται κελεύσει του μακαριωτάτου των Ἱεροσολύμων Ἱεροθέου. Ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις: Ἐκ του Τυπογραφείου του Π. Τάφου, 1881, p. 5.

²³ E. H. Palmer, *The Desert of the Exodus: Journeys on Foot in the Wilderness of the Forty Years' Wanderings; Undertaken in Connection with the Ordnance Survey of Sinai and the Palestine Exploration Fund*, Cambridge 1872, p. 452; V. Tzafiris, *The Monastery of the Cross in Jerusalem. Ancient Churches Revealed*, Edited by Tsafirir Yoram, Jerusalem 1993, p. 100; I. David, *The Georgian Palestinianiana. The writings* (ქართული პალესტინიანა. ნაწერები), Volume 1, Tel Aviv-Jerusalem 1976, 261-262; E. Mamistvalishvili, ქართველები და ბიბლიური სამყარო, Tbilisi 1998, p. 78; idem. იერუსალიმის წმ. ჯვრის მონასტერი, Tbilisi 2014, p. 69.

²⁴ G. Japaridze, ქართველთა საეპანები და სამონასტრო თემი წმინდა მიწაზე XI-XVIII საუკუნეებში. არაბული ნარატიული და დოკუმენტური წყაროების მიხედვით, pp. 53-54 n. 52.

tioned in connection with the of Helenupolis archbishopric as one of the monasteries outside Jerusalem. Unfortunately, we are not familiar with the source mentioned by E. Palmer. Even if its authenticity is proved, this document only confirms the existence of Holy Cross Monastery in the 6th-7th centuries and not its establishment in that period as some scholars believe.²⁵ We can also mention the opinion of some scholars that the total destruction of Holy Cross Monastery was the result of the fanatic Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim's (996-1021) repressions.²⁶ However, as it was mentioned above, the manuscript has never been published before and we cannot make far-reaching conclusions.

The authors mentioned above do not have any strong arguments in favor of naming Emperor Heraclius I as the founder of Holy Cross Monastery. No such arguments can be found in the written sources or the oral tradition. The biased opinion of V. Tzaferis, the archaeologist is especially strange. The people interested in the past of Holy Cross Monastery often refer to this work. Therefore, we need to attract the readers' attention to some of the conclusions made in this work.

Discussing the tradition regarding the Monastery of the Cross V. Tzaferis rightly notes in his work that „the data of modern historical science cannot prove the authenticity of the tradition regarding the establishment of Holy Cross Monastery”. Then the author becomes apparently biased when he says, „the presence of Iberian monks, nuns and pilgrims, especially of the royal family, in Palestine in the 4th-5th centuries is a historic fact. However, no evidence of that period was found on the existence of the Iberian Monastery of the Holy Cross near Jerusalem. There is no historic proof that the Iberian kings Tatian and Mirian visited the Holy Land. Besides, the very existence of the Iberian King named Tatian is doubtful. Unlike them, the names of the byzantine emperors Justinian and Heraclius are closely connected with the Christian shrines and establishment of churches and monasteries in the Holy Land. Therefore their names in the aforementioned tradition is historically justified”.²⁷

²⁵ E. H. P a l m e r, *The Desert of the Exodus: Journeys on Foot in the Wilderness of the Forty Years' Wanderings: Undertaken in Connection with the Ordnance Survey of Sinai and the Palestine Exploration Fund*, Cambridge 1872, pp. 449-450.

²⁶ Χρ. Π α π α δ ό π ο υ λ ο ς, *Ιστορία της εκκλησίας Ιεροσολύμων*. Ιεροσολύμοις-Αλεξανδρεία 1910, 366; V. T z a f e r i s, *The Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jeusalem. Ancient churches Revealed*. Adited by Tsafirir, Yoram. Jerusalem 1993, p. 100.

²⁷ V. T z a f e r i s, *The Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jeusalem. Ancient churches Revealed*. Adited by Tsafirir, Yoram. Jerusalem 1993, 143-146; D. P r i n g l e, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: Volume 3, The City of Jerusalem: A Corpus*, Cambridge 2007, p. 33.

We already discussed the contents of the so called “Greek tradition”. Therefore, historical justification is out of the question here. Moreover, Procopius of Caesarea, the contemporary chronicler of Justinian does not mention Holy Cross Monastery when he lists the churches and monasteries built by this emperor. Written sources do not mention the establishment of this Monastery by Emperor Heraclius the Great. Based on the archaeological evidence we can only assume that the Monastery was probably renewed under this emperor. Regarding V. Tzaferis’ skepticism about Iberian King Tatian, researcher makes it sound as if the Georgian sources mentioned the 5th century King of Georgia named Tatian not the Greek ones. In fact, the Greek authors of the 19th- 20th centuries name Tatian as the King of Iberia instead of Vakhtang Gorgasali. We will try to explain the source and reason for this confusion. The new owners of Holy Cross Monastery along with the Greek inscriptions found the Georgian ones. Two of these inscriptions mention Levan Dadiani, the ruler of the Principality of Mingrelia. With his financial assistance the Georgians restored the Monastery of the Cross in 1643-1644. One of the Greek inscriptions calls him Leon Tatian and other – Tatian. Some Greek authors mention Tatian both in the 5th century and in 1644.²⁸ This date is indicated in the Greek version of the inscription commissioned by Nikoloz Cholokashvili. The date in the Georgian version is different. It is 1643. All these blunders show that until the 18th century apart from the Georgian tradition the Greek side had no other sources about the past of Holy Cross Monastery. Surprisingly, V. Tzaferis who witnessed the archaeological excavation in Holy Cross Monastery does not mention the conclusions made by his colleague A. Economopoulos based on the archaeological evidence. According to these conclusions the first church on the site of Holy Cross Monastery existed long before the 6th-7th century.

The only issue on which the Greek and Georgian traditions agree is the legend of the True Cross tree which grew on the site of the Monastery. According to the legend the Monastery was built on the site where biblical Lot planted three trees to redeem his sins. One these trees was then used to make a cross for Jesus Christ. The first written evidence of this legend is the aforementioned inscription of Prokhore the Georgian.²⁹ The legend is mentioned by Scandinavian pilgrim Zeewolf

²⁸ V. Tzaferis, *The Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem. Ancient churches Revealed*, 100.

²⁹ Β. Ιωαννίδης, Προσκυνητάριον της Αγίας Γης. Η Αγία Βηθλεέμ και τα περίχωρα αυτής, Ιερουσαλήμ 1867, pp. 87-89.

(1102-1103), Daniel the Traveller from Russia (1107), Joannes Phokas from Crete (1177), in a Serbian manuscript of 1662, Timote Gabashvili (1758), Teimuraz Bagrationi (the 18th century), Giorgi Avalishvili (the 19th century), Petre Konchoshvili (the 20th century), etc.

The archaeological evidence discovered in the excavations of 1969-1973 is crucial for exploring the past of Holy Cross Monastery. The excavations were guided by the archaeologist Atanasios Economopoulos. The results of the excavations were very interesting but neither the Georgians nor the Greeks gave it the attention they deserved. The reason is that the excavation results were not in line with the existing tradition.

During the restoration the stone floor slabs of the alter and the adjacent areas were completely removed and the remnants of the Byzantine mosaics were revealed. Based on the mosaics discovered in the other churches in the Holy Land A. Economopoulos dated some of the mosaics to the late 4th century and some – to the 6th-7th centuries.³⁰ It became clear that there was a basilica on this site in the Byzantine period. According on the Greek archaeologist the size of the basilica was about the same as that of the Monastery. The Byzantine mosaics did not shed light on the origin of the monastery. All the Christian monasteries in the Holy Land had such mosaics, including the Georgian monasteries (Bir el-Qutt, Umm Leisun, Beit Safafa, YMCA).

The aforementioned excavations also revealed other interesting materials. When the upper layer of the floor was removed, the ancient tombstones were found on both sides of the alter. 1.76m tall elderly man was buried in the right tomb which A. Economopoulos considered to be the first father superior or the ktetor of the monastery. A bronze coin of the emperor brothers Arcadius and Honorius (395-408) period was found in the grave and terminus ante of the grave was determined as 395. The archaeologist determined the time of constructing the first basilica on Holy Cross Monastery site as the last quarter of the 4th century and the early 5th century.³¹ The coin was placed in the grave during the funeral. Therefore, the lower chrono-

³⁰ T. Mgaloblishvili, ჯვრის მონასტერი (*The Monastery of the Cross*), pp. 22-25; idem. იერუსალიმის წმ. ჯვრის მონასტერი. ლეგენდები და სინამდვილე (*The Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem: Legends and Reality*), pp. 176-192.

³¹ A. Economopoulos, *Fresh Data Resulting from the Excavation in the Church of the Monastery of the Holy Cross at Jerusalem: A Preliminary Report*. "Actes Du Xe Congres International D'Archeologie Chretienne. Thessalonique 28 Septembre – 4 Octobre 1980. Thessalonique 1984, pp. 388-390.

logical limit is 395. It is also evident that the deceased was buried when the alter was already built (no matter he prepared the grave during his lifetime or the grave was dug by the monastery inhabitants after his death). It means that the monastery and the first church were built shortly before 395. A. Economopoulos also used the details of the alter to prove that the church was built around that time. However, he did not give answer the question about the founders of the Monastery. Instead, he asked a rhetoric question: "If the Georgians are to be considered as the possible founders of the monastery, the question arises whether Georgian monks had founded any churches in Palestine before the arrival of Peter of Iberia (430-1.12.487 AD)".³²

At that time there was no evidence of the Georgian church building in the Holy Land before Peter the Iberian. Therefore the scholar's question was an answer to itself. However, he failed to name the persons who could initiate the construction of a basilica on this site in the late 4th century.

A. Economopoulos only made a general conclusion that the archaeological evidence supported the opinion that the establishment of Holy Cross Monastery was associated with Emperor Constantine the Great.³³ Actually, the time of the first church construction (the end of the 4th century) was different from the time mentioned in the Greek tradition and different than the period of Peter the Iberians and Vakh-tang Gorgasali.

Compared to the Greek tradition, the Georgian tradition seems more trustworthy. It does not state that King Mirian built the Monastery but points out that Mirian got the land where the Monastery was built later. This part of the tradition does not contradict the conclusion made on the basis of the archaeological excavations. The legend about Emperor Constantine or Queen Helena establishing the Monastery is contested by the archaeological evidence as V. Tzaferis pointed out. However, the biographers of Vakhtang Gorgasali and Peter the Iberian do not mention that they established Monastery of the Cross. No Byzantine written sources mention the monastery and the archaeological evidence shows that the Monastery was founded no earlier than the last quarter of the 4th century. This is the most important conclusion made on the basis of the archaeological findings. We have no reason to question this conclusion.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 381-382, 388.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

The question who could be the initiator and donator of establishing a monastery in the late 4th century is not answered in A. Economopoulos' report. He believes that the most appropriate candidate for the donator is Constantine the Great (306-337) and does not mention the Georgian candidate at all. He only asks a rhetoric question whether the Georgians built anything in Palestine before Peter the Iberian. As it was mentioned above, the question is an answer to itself. The written sources do not say anything about the Georgian church building in Palestine and no scholars (except Giorgi Tsereteli, Shalva Nutsidze) supported this opinion. The archaeological excavations left two crucial questions unanswered: 1) Who initiated and financed the construction of the first basilica on the monastery site? 2) Was it called Holy Cross Monastery from the beginning?

A. Economopoulos believes that the Monastery was originally named after the Holy Cross. In support of his view he pointed out the surviving image of the cross on the cross-shaped encaenion of the first basilica. The Georgian tradition also names the monastery built by Vakh-tang Gorgasali (i.e. in the Byzantine period) as the predecessor of the Monastery constructed in the 11th century and its only name is „Jvari” (Cross). The valley where the Monastery was built also has no other name but „Cross”. However, facts are stubborn things. The Byzantine written sources do not mention the Monastery under such name. Nonetheless, the same tradition mentions the church of the holy Cross from the 380s. Pilgrim Etheria (Egeria) was the first to mention the church of the Holy Cross in her „Itinerarium” (381-384). She describes it as the church located on Golgotha and names it along with the churches of the Resurrection (Anastasis) and Martyrium.³⁴ The Christian tradition ascribes the discovery of the Holy Cross to Queen Helena. According to the scholars, the veneration of the Holy Cross started in the middle of the 4th century. The written source „Itinerarium Burdigalense” created in 333 does not mention it, but Cyril of Jerusalem (350-386) already knows about it.³⁵ In view of the above, the Christian tradition regarding the Holy Cross did not exist before the aforementioned period.

³⁴ A. Economopoulos, *Fresh Data Resulting from the Excavation in the Church of the Monastery of the Holy Cross at Jerusalem: A Preliminary Report*. “Actes Du Xe Congres International D’Archeologie Chretienne. Thessalonique 28 Septembre – 4 Octobre 1980. Thessalonique 1984, p. 388.

³⁵ Etheria, *The pilgrimage*, M. L. McClure and C. L. Feltz, ed. and trans. London 1919, pp. 53, 60, 65, 76, 80.

The church of the Holy Cross was situated on Golgotha near Christ's tomb. The Holy Cross was erected on the site of Christ's crucifixion with the large basilica of Martyrium (Martyrion) built by Constantine the Great behind it. The crypt of the basilica comprised the site where the Holy Cross was discovered. John Rufus, the biographer of Peter the Iberian mentioned the church of the Holy Cross most clearly. According to him, as Peter and his companion, John the Laz were approaching Jerusalem they saw from a top of a hill "the high roof of the holy and worshipful churches, that of the saving and worshipful Cross, of the holy Anastasis, and again of the worshipful Ascension, which is on the mountain opposite it".³⁶

Then they walked until they reached the wall of the city and "hugged the pedestal of the venerable Cross (I am speaking of the holy Golgotha) and the foundation of the church of holy Anastasis".³⁷

It is noteworthy that Rufus gives a clarification that the revered Cross means Golgotha. This clarification may point to the fact that in that period (Peter and John first came to Jerusalem in 437/438) there was another place of worship with the same name. As the Byzantine authors called the church on Golgotha the church of the Holy Cross this could be the reason why Holy Cross Monastery is not mentioned in the Byzantine sources of that period. The church at one of the great Christian holy sites probably outshone a modest monastery built in the place of the holy cross tree. It is noteworthy that Joannes Phokas³⁸ and other writers of the later period also called it "the Iberian Monastery". We can conclude that it was one of the alternative names of Holy Cross Monastery.

The Georgian tradition insisting that Vakhtang Gorgasali was the founder of Holy Cross Monastery can be explained with the following: Juansher mentions that Vakhtang made lavish donations to the holy sites. The story of Vakhtang building the Monastery of the Cross was probably based on this fact. The monastery was a complex of including a church, lodgings, economic and fortification structures. The Georgian tradition says that Vakhtang ensured the safety of the Monastery. This may imply the construction of the wall. The events of the last quarter of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century are not properly

³⁶ S. Heid, *Der Ursprung der Helenallegende im Pilgerbetrieb Jerusalems*, JbAC, 32, 1989, 41-71.

³⁷ John Rufus, ცხოვრება პეტრე იბერიისა, (*The Life of Peter the Iberian*), Tbilisi 1988, pp. 100-101.

³⁸ Иоанн Фока, *Сказание о святых местах Палестины конца XII века*, „Православный палестинский сборник”, Выпуск 23 (т. 8, Вып. 2), Санкт-Петербург 1889, p. 53.

reflected in the Georgian chronicles. Based on the information that Holy Cross Monastery was built in the Byzantine period, the authors of the Georgian tradition did not have much choice in selecting the founder of the Monastery. Vakhtang Gorgasali was in fact the only choice for them as the Georgian sources did not mention any other Georgian king's visit to Jerusalem in the aforementioned period.

The knowledge about the donator of the church built at the end of the 4th century was probably lost quite soon. However, we can give a positive answer to the rhetoric question asked by V. Tzaferis if the Georgians established any monasteries in Palestine before Peter the Iberian. One such monastery was built by the Georgians in the 380s-390s between Jerusalem and Bethlehem in Bir el-Qutt.³⁹ We also know that its donator was Peter's famous grandfather Bakur (Bacurius) the Iberian. The art historian Leonid Matsulevich pointed out the similarity of the mosaics in St. Theodore Monastery of B'ir el-Qutt and Holy Cross Monastery of Jerusalem (as well as Pitsunda church).⁴⁰ Historian Mose Janashvili (1855-1934) questioned the story that King Mirian founded Holy Cross Monastery and assumed that this story could be connected to Bakur the Iberian.⁴¹ The presence of Bakur in the Holy Land in 382-394 is confirmed by the reliable written sources. According to the archaeological data, St. Theodore Monastery of Bir el-Qutt and Holy Cross Monastery of Jerusalem were constructed at about the same time (the last quarter of the 4th century). In the given period Bakur the Iberian was in the Holy Land as the Dux Palestine.

The written sources does not contain direct indication that Bakur initiated the construction of the first basilica of Holy Cross. However as Dux Palaestine Bakur certainly had the power and resources and more importantly commitment to build a monastery. During Bakur's presence in the Holy Land the first Latin monasteries appeared there (on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem in 379 and in Bethlehem in 385). According to Rufinus, while living in Jerusalem Bakur had close relationship with the monks of the Roman monastery and cared about faith (religionis) and truth (veritatis).⁴² Bakur told Rufinus and Gelasius of Caesarea about the

³⁹ B. K h u r t s i l a v a, *The inscriptions of the Georgian Monastery in Bi'r el-Qutt and their chronology*. "Journal Christianity in the Middle East", №1, Moscow 2017, pp. 129-151.

⁴⁰ Л. М а ц у л е в и ч, *Мозаика Бир-аль-Кута и Пищуны*. "Византийский временник", т. 19 (44), Москва 1961, pp. 138-143.

⁴¹ М. Д ж а н а ш в и л и, *История грузинской церкви*. Книга I. *Обращение Картвельцев*, Тифлис 1898, p. 60.

⁴² R u f i n u s, *რუფინუსი, „გეორგიკა“*, Volume 1, Tbilisi 1961, p. 207.

conversion of Iberia, which then became known in the Christian world. It is noteworthy that the information about Bakur is mostly provided by the foreign (Greek-Roman, Armenian) sources. Among the Georgian chronicles only the chronicle “Mok’ tsevey Kartlisay” (The Conversion of Georgia) mentions Bakur.⁴³ The scarce information available to us shows that after the return to his homeland Bakur carried out large-scale construction projects building churches, monasteries, asylums and castles. Peter the Iberian’s biographer John Rufus tells us that Bakur lead an ascetic life and followed the example of monks.⁴⁴

Therefore we believe that Bakur the Iberian was the founder of Holy Cross Monastery. It is reasonable to assume that a church was built on the site obtained during king Mirian’s reign much earlier than indicated in the Georgian tradition. Unlike Vakhtang Gorgasali, Bakur was a close descendant of Mirian. When the Georgian Prince came to the Holy Land (accompanied by a train and armed guards) he established two churches - one dedicated to St. Theodore Tyron, a popular saint among warriors at that time near Bethlehem (present-day B’ir el-Qutt) and another dedicated to the Holy Cross near Jerusalem. It seems to be logical as these two places are the beginning and the end of Christ’s life on earth and the most venerated sites for the Christians. Later Bakur’s grandson Peter the Iberian expanded the network of the Georgian monasteries in the Holy Land reaching the city of Jerusalem.

⁴³ „მოქცევაჲ ქართლისაჲ“, ძველი ქართული აგიოგრაფიული ლიტერატურის ძეგლები, 1, Tbilisi 1963, p. 17.

⁴⁴ John Rufus, ცხოვრება პეტრე იბერისა, (*The Life of Peter the Iberian*), p. 82.

On the History of Creating the First Basilica in the Place of the Monastery of the Cross in Jerusalem

There are Georgian and Greek traditions regarding the establishment (early history) of Holy Cross Monastery and they differ vastly from each other. Therefore, the establishment of the monastery is still vague and has not been clarified yet.

The research showed that the Greek tradition emerged only after the Greeks became owners of the monastery in 1685. This made-up tradition changed several times in the period between the 18th-20th centuries and was finalized as the biased story acceptable to the Greek party.

The archaeological excavations (1969-1973) did not help to clarify this issue. The conclusion that Holy Cross Monastery was established in the last quarter of the 4th century is not in line with either of the traditions. The article shows that Vakhtang Gorgasali (the 5th century), Emperors Justinian I and Heraclius I (the 6th-7th centuries) cannot be founders of this Monastery. The author believes that the donator of Holy Cross Monastery was Peter the Iberian's grandfather Bakur (Bacurius) who was Dux Palestine in the 380s.

The author thinks that the Monastery was known as Holy Cross Monastery from the beginning. The Monastery of the Cross is not mentioned in the Byzantine sources of that period because the church on Golgotha was also called the church of the Holy Cross and it probably outshone a modest Iberian monastery built in the place of the holy cross tree.