

NIKOLOZ ZHGENTI

Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National
Center of Manuscripts,
Georgia
nikozhgenti@gmail.com

ANOTHER LOST ANTIQUITY FROM MOUNT SAINT GEORGE MONASTERY – THE ICON OF SAINT GEORGE HAMMERED UNDER THE KTETORSHIP OF KUTSNA MKHEIDZE

This paper scrutinizes to one of the lost antiquities belonging to Mount Saint George Monastery – the icon of Saint George seen in 1925/6 in the village of Tsknori and described by G. Bochoridze. The inscription mentioned some Kutsna Mkheidze. It does not bear a date and its ktetor has not been identified yet.

By comparison with other icons created under the ktetorship of the Mkheidzes during the first half of the 16th century - the icons of Saint Mary from Gelati Sokhastery and of Saint George from the village of Gurna - Kutsna was a son of upper Imereti seigniors - Piran Mkheidze and Elene Abashidze. In the mid-16th century, or in the second half, Kutsna Mkheidze had a new icon embossed expressly for Mount Saint George Monastery

KEYWORDS: Kutsna, Piran, Elene, Mkheidze, icon.

Mount Saint George Monastery also known as Leknari and Mtasakdari in the scientific literature is located in lower Racha on the uttermost northern slope of the Racha Range and is erected on a high rock. It dates approximately from the second half of the 9th century to the first half of the 10th century. The northern annex to the main nave is attributed either to the end of the 10th century or to the first thirds of the 11th century, but the western annex was built later (Dvali 1968, 155-165; Bochoridze 1995, 85-90). The coordinates of the monastery are the following: 42°26'10.45"; 42°58'32.15 (see figure 1 and a map).

During the research of the history of Mount Saint George Monastery, very interesting ritual antiquities belonging to the church have been uncovered. Their quantity is up to 14. Currently, most of the antiquities are lost. The information about the antiquities can be found in the historical deeds of Mount Saint George Monastery and in G. Bochoridze's works. Bochoridze visited and described the relics during his journey in the

1923-1926s through Racha-Lechkhumi and Imereti (Gurgenidze 1986, 162). The antiquities appear to be important monuments for not only the history of the monastery itself but also for art, political and church history of the Middle Ages of Georgia.¹

In this paper, I discuss the icon that belongs to Mount Saint George Monastery and which is now considered lost.

Bochoridze saw the icon in Saint George Church in the village of Tsknori in Okriba approximately between 1925-1926. Tsknori is located about 10km (see the map) southeast of Mount Saint George Monastery. Since the time of David IV the Builder, if not even earlier, this village has been offered to Mount Saint George. In addition, the residence of “mebartlome” - estate supervisor (mouravi) of landownership of Mount Saint George Monastery was situated in the village (Zhgenti 2011, 244-260; Zhgenti 2020b, 91). The locals confirmed that the relics preserved in the village had been brought exactly from that Monastery (Bochoridze 1995, 88-89).

The description of the icon given by G. Bochoridze kept in the Depository of Materials of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia was published as far back as in a 1995-year book “Imereti Historical Monuments and Relics”. For more clarity, I fully quote the description below:

“The icon of Saint George hammered on silver, 36¼X28 cm, stretched over a slat, its back side is upholstered with leather; it is adorned by 5 gems, the sixth one is hung on it; 4 gems are missing. The Icon is severely damaged: only the face of Saint George is visible, other parts are only fragmentary; there are also many other cloths sewn on it.

The icon has an Asomtavruli inscription on the upper part of Saint George and on the left:

1 I have already published two papers from the cycle on the antiquities (Zhgenti 2019 <http://www.spekali.tsu.ge/index.php/ge/article/viewArticle/13/202>; Zhgenti 2020a, 299-309), the second part is being prepared for print, they are the following: “From the History of Landownership and Relics of Mount Saint George Monastery - Shaori Village and the Icon of the Archmartyr,” (International Conference: *Archeology, Source Studies - Trends and Challenges, Collected Papers*); “Front Altar Lost ‘Cross of John the Baptist’ of Mount Saint George Monastery (id. Dzmuisi “Golden Cross”) with Ktetor/Memorial Inscriptions for Arsen the Pauper, Bagrat Kurapatat and Chief Lords - Kakhaber and Michael,” (*A Historical Digest*, №8); Tao-Klarjeti Antiquity of Mount Saint George Monastery - An Unknown 11th Century Ishkhani Fragment of the Front Altar Cross?” (*Collected Papers dedicated to the Anniversary of E. Gabidzashvili*).

the 16th century, while the icon belongs to the 16th century (Nikoleishvili 2001, 29-30). As for Soselia, the researcher deems this person to be Piran II and does not identify this individual with Piran I with respect to his own numeration (Soselia 1973, 23). At this stage of my study, I share Nikoleishvili's opinion and consider that among other individuals having the name Piran Mkheidze who lived later, according to paleographic signs of the inscription, Piran - son of chief royal treasurer Sargis Mkheidze is much closer to Piran Mkheidze noted in the inscription of the Sokhastery icon. As for the date of the Sokhastery icon, I suppose the icon must be attributed to the first half of 16th century, respectively.¹

The date of the Sokhastery enables us to date the above-mentioned Gurna Saint George icon by the same time period because the ktetors of the Gurna icon, as of the Sokhastery, were Piran Mkhetsidze and his wife Elene Abashidze. The difference between them is that the ktetors of the Sokhastery icon inscription mention their sons anonymously (see above), whereas the Gurna icon inscription names Kutsna and Giorgi (see above). Accordingly, I assume that the Sokhastery icon was made within the time span of the first part of the 16th century when Kutsna Mkheidze's and Elene Abashidze's sons Kutsna and Giorgi were infants. That is why the inscription mention them anonymously.² The Gurna icon was made within the time span of the first part of the 16th century when the sons of the ktetors were relatively adults. If my observation is valid, it means that the Sokhastery icon was made ahead of the Gurna icon.

1 I have endeavoured to find others sources about the peasants (Bezhan Beridze, Bezhan Sakhechidze, Gogichai Bubashvili) who, according to the Sokhastery inscription, were offered to the icon by Piran Mkheidze and Elene Abashidze. This could have helped us to date the icon. Unfortunately, I have found nothing about these individuals in other sources. I only remark that Queen Tamar Diasamidze offered to Gelati Saint George Church some Anvara Sakhechidze living in Chkhari in 1586 (Surguladze et al 2007, 155). Saint George Church as well as Sokhastery Church is part of the Gelati Monastic Complex. At this stage of my research, it is impossible to conclude anything concerning the ties of relationship between Bezhan Sakhechidze noted on the Sokhastery icon inscription which dates the first half 16th century, and Anvara Sakhechidze offered to Gelati Saint George Church in 1586 mentioned in the donation deeds. With respect to name, seigniorial and ecclesiastical affiliation, historical and geographic areas, and chronological similarities, we cannot exclude the possibility that Bezhan might be Anvara's ancestor. This could have unfolded the history of the Sokhastery icon. However, the assumption remains only as a theoretical possibility.

2 Generally, this part of the inscription is damaged and is dubious to read. In spite of the fact that the grapheme *d* is followed presumably by the contours of *᠗* and *᠔*, and followed by the word „ჩ(᠗)᠒᠖(᠒)სა“, grammatically it corresponds more to the word „ძისა“. Thus, it is less realistic but the possibility still exists that this part of the inscription restores as „d[᠒᠔](ა) ჩ(᠗)᠒᠖სა“ rather than „d[᠒ს](ა) ჩ(᠗)᠒᠖(᠒)სა“. In this case, we logically come up with a set task that the Sokhastery Saint Mary icon was forged when Piran Mkheidze and Elene Abashidze had only one son named Kutsna certainly earlier than the Gurna Saint George icon in which Kutsna and his brother Giorgi are mentioned together.

Above we have already put forward an opinion about the sameness of Kutsna Mkheidze mentioned in the inscription of the Gurna Saint George icon as Piran Mkheidze's elder (?) son and Kutsna Mkheidze, the ktetor of the Tsknori Saint George icon.

As we have already observed, according to Tsknori Saint George icon, Kutsna Mkheidze is a ktetor of the icon which also names his family anonymously. This fact must indicate that the Tsknori Saint George icon is embossed later rather than the icons from Sokhastery and Gurna where in one case Kutsna, as the ktetors' son is anonymous and in another case is mentioned with his younger (?) brother. Correspondingly, the Tsknori Saint George icon the ktetor of which is Kutsna Mkheidze must be attributed either to the mid-16th century or to the second half.

As we already know the ktetor's identity and the approximate date of the Tsknori Saint George icon, we must refer to an identity issue of the icon's blacksmith.

Unfortunately, the identity of the master is still unknown. As we have seen above his name is encrypted in the inscription as ka~mia (კა~მია). Bochoridze was not able to restore the blacksmith's name. I have tried to find a similar name to this encrypted word in other written sources, but my endeavour was not successful.¹

1 For this part, I took account of the 141st manuscript in A collection of the Korneli Kekelidze National Centre of Manuscripts. According to the description of the manuscript, this is an 11th century collection. On its pages 89v-90r, there is a postscript written in Nuskhuri in the 18th century: „სულსა კამნია გრ~ლსა, მოძღუარისა დიონისსა შნ~ს ღ~ნ, და მისთა დედა-მამათა და მიცვალებულთა შნ~ს ღ~ნ.“ (Bregadze et al 1976, 174-175). Thus, the name „კამნია“ (kamnia) well conformed to the encrypted name კა~მია (ka~ mia), the master hammering the Tsknori icon. Moreover, in the index of persons of manuscript descriptions „კამნია გრ~ლსა“ is transformed as „კამნია გორელი“ (Bregadze et al 1976, 370). However, in reality this postscript of A 141 manuscript can be read as the following: „ს(უ)ლსა კამნიაგ~რლისა მოძღუარისა დიონისსა, შ(ე)უნდ(ვ)ნ(ე)ს ღ(მ)ერთმა)ნ“ (A 141, 89v-90r). Thus, here we do not deal with any person's name კამნია (Kamnia) but we have to do with a place of a specific geographical origin where Father Dionysius came from or served.

The examination of the mentioned toponym is another issue. I am conveying just a certain observation here which was revealed during the endeavour of identifying the blacksmith კა~მია of the Tsknori icon.

We can read a later postscript written in Nuskhuri on the page 14r of the 4927th manuscript (id. Parkhali II Gospel), in S collection of the Korneli Kekelidze National Centre of Manuscripts: „მე ყოველთა ცოდვილთ |² უცოდვილესმან ფრ(ი)ად ც³ოდვილმ(ა)ნ კამნაგარე|⁴ლმ(ა)ნ ზანდარ, ესე ქრის|⁵ტეს სახარებ(ა)დ მნუედ მი⁶ძიმედ მოჭედელი იყო დ|⁷ა ურჯულთ აგა|⁸რიანთა დაელენა და |⁹ დაეჭრა ესე სრულა. |¹⁰ მე უნდო-ულირსმან ავი|¹¹ლე ჳელათ და შევი|¹²კაზმე, მრავალი სარჯ|¹³ული გარდამწდა, [ღ] (მერთმა)ნ უ|¹⁴წყის, ბატონიც ჩ(ე)მი კარგი|¹⁵ად მომეწმარა, ღ(მერთმა)ნ გი|¹⁶(ა) უმაჩკოს, ვინც ამაზე|¹⁷დ მომეწ(მა)რა, შ(ე)უნდ(ნ)ეს ღ(მერთმა)ნ დედი|¹⁸ა-მ(ა)მ(ა)თა ჩ(ემ)თა შ(ე)უნდ(ნ)ეს ღ(მერთმა)ნ. ჩ(ემ)ს |¹⁹ გ(ამ)ზ(ი)დებს თუალმელნი|²⁰სას შ(ე)უნდ(ნ)ეს ღ(მერთმა)ნ, ჩ(უ)ენთა შ(ე)უნდ(ნ)ეს ღ(მერთმა)ნ“ (S 4927, 14r; Bregadze et al 1969, 175). I suppose that in the postscript of the A 141 collection the word „კამნიაგ~რლისა“ must

In conclusion, we can say about the Tsknori Saint George icon the following:

In the 16th century, the members of the Mkheidze/Mkhetsidze/Mqetsidze seigniorial family paid much attention to upper Imereti, especially to the Gelati Sokhastery Church and to Okriba shrines offering precious icons to them (Chubinashvili 1959, 630; Nikoleishvili 2001, 29-31).

Within the time of our interest, the Mkheidzes and the Abashidzes are illustrious upper Imeretian noble families in the Imereti church and political circles. The Mkheidzes had the title of chief royal treasurer and owned large estates. However, from the mid-16th century they were losing some of the estates and by the end of the century they lost the title of royal treasurer (Soselia 1973, 16-20). The Abashidze family is very promoted by the turn of the century. Members of this feudal family hold the positions of abbot of Gelati Monastery, Catholicos of Abkhazeti, amirejibi, royal secretary-chancellor, etc. In contrast with the Mkheidze family, they remain powerful over the existence of the Kingdom of Imereti (Soselia 1973, 153-209). Unfortunately, in contrast with Piran, it is impossible to ascertain Elene Abashidze's patronymic name. The ktetorial inscriptions on the Gurna and the Tsknori icons of Saint George provide additional information about the two important aristocratic families.

In the second half of the 16th century, Piran Mkheidze's and Elene Abashidze's elder son – Kutsna Mkheidze ordered some blacksmith Kamia (?) to forge a Saint George icon specially for Mount Saint George Monastery for the deliverance of himself and his wife and children. It is understandable because, as we have already indicated above, Mount Saint George Monastery on the Racha Range is located on Mount Saint George and overlooks Okriba, as most of the landownership of the family was in Okriba.¹ Kutsna Mkheidze, an Okriban lord (possibly even mouravi of Okriba), pays particular attention to the Monastery by offering a precious icon.

be restores as „კამნიაგარელისა“ (kamniagarelisa), as it is given in the postscript of the Parkhali II Gospel. The A 141 collection as well as the Parkhali II Gospel is of Tao-Klarjeti origin, namely Taoan. Most likely, both manuscripts once belonged to the members of the Kavkasidze seigniorial family (Kudava et al 2017, 417-8, 424; Surguladze et al 2018, 106, 289). Later on, after the Ottoman conquest of Tao, both manuscripts were sent for safety to different parts of Georgia. Accordingly, the geographical or church location named კამნაგარა/ი (Kamnagara/i) or კამნიაგარა/ი (Kamniagara/i) has to be investigated in the future.

¹ I spoke thoroughly on historical and territorial distribution of landownership of Mount Saint George Monastery in lower Racha, upper Imereti and on the Likhi Range at the David the Builder VII International Conference (Gori University, February 21, 2010). In the nearest future, the materials of the conference are to be published in the issue 19 of the *Gori University Proceedings*. The issue includes my paper titled “On One of the Lost Historical Acts of David the Builder and Demetre I (an 1106-1125 deed of offerings to Mount Saint George Monastery).”

The icon was preserved in Mount Saint George Monastery presumably until the early 20th century. Since then, like other relics of the Monastery, this icon has been brought down to one of the village of Okriba - the Tsknori Saint George Church. It is unknown when the icon was damaged. Bochoridze saw it already significantly damaged in 1925-1926.

Apparently, people offered money as sacrifices to the icon because Bochoridze states, "there is a lot of money with the icon".

Currently, the icon is considered lost. Up until now, only six beads have been survived (out of 23). Bochoridze brought them to the Kutaisi Historical and Ethnographic Museum.

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