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## Early Georgian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Contact between Georgia and the Holy Land persisted throughout the Byzantine and Early Muslim periods, regardless of the political situation in the Christian kingdoms of the Caucasus. This ongoing connection can be summed briefly as a two-way pilgrims traffic between Georgia and the Holy Land, and a one-way transfer of manuscripts, from the Holy Land to Georgia. Georgian pilgrimage to the Holy Places of Palestine is recorded in historical sources and there is also archaeological evidence for it. Early pilgrims' graffiti written in ancient Georgian *asomtavruli* script survived in Nazareth, Bethlehem and Sinai<sup>1</sup>.

### Literary sources

While the corpus of Byzantine literature contains numerous references to the Georgian presence in the Holy Land, none exists for earlier Georgian pilgrims. In order to fill in the gaps, it is necessary to turn to the ecclesiastical sources written in Georgian language. Three hagiographic compositions mention the Georgian pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the pre-Crusade period: the *vitae* of the Georgian saints Peter the Iberian, David Garedjeli and Hilarion the Iberian.

The hagiography of the great Georgian ascetic, Peter the Iberian, was compiled a few years after his death in 491 by his disciple John Rufus, who belonged to the Monophysite community of Maiuma. The text was originally written in Greek, but survives only in Syriac and Georgian translations. The Syriac version is longer and, most probably, older than the Georgian one<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> According to the traditional approach of Georgian research, modern *mkhedruli* script is used in the present paper for transliteration of original *asomtavruli* inscriptions.

<sup>2</sup> Syriac version: Iohannes Rufus, *Vita Petre Iberi*, ed. and German trans. by R. Raabe, Leipzig 1895. English trans.: John Rufus, *The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem and the Monk Romanus*, trans. by C. Horn and R. Phenix (SBL Writings from Greco-Roman World 24), Atlanta 2008. Georgian version: *Tskhovreba Petre Iverisa*, ed. and Russian trans. by N.Y. Marr, Palestinskii Pravoslavnii Sbornik, St. Petersburg 1896. For the discussion on the source and other sources regarding the biography of Peter, see Lang 1951: 158-168. The updated discussion on the

By birth the son of an Iberian king called Bosmarios<sup>3</sup> or Murvan (Marouan)<sup>4</sup> (Vita 22), Peter spent his youth as a hostage in the Byzantine royal court in Constantinople (Vita 24-30). As he grew up, he decided to escape to the Holy Land, and did so together with his teacher and compatriot, the eunuch Mithridat (31). On the long journey they took with them the relics of Persian saints (32). In Jerusalem they were received by Melania the Younger (c. 383-439), her husband Pinianus and her mother Albina (39-41). Both became monks in the monastery of Gerontius on the Mount of Olives and received new names: Murvan became Peter, and Mithridat became John (44-48). After the place of their origin, one was called the Iberian, the other – Lazic<sup>5</sup>. Moved by the example of St. Passarion on Mount Zion, Peter decided to establish a monastery that will provide shelter for poor pilgrims (66-67). The chosen place was Mount Zion in Jerusalem, near the Tower of David (64). Following the advice of the archimandrite Zeno, both men entered a cenobitic monastery for a time (68), and then came back to Jerusalem (70). The Georgian version of the vita mentions also the construction of another monastery in the desert (20, Georgian version). Peter and John left Jerusalem ca. 444 and moved to Gaza, where Peter was ordained as a priest, and seven years later became the bishop of Maiuma (72-75). Peter died in 491, after a life of active participation in all the ecclesiastic and political controversies of the time, and many journeys around Palestine, as well as to Egypt, Arabia and Phoenicia. He died in Jamnia, surrounded by his disciples (177-181). As far as our subject is concerned, it seems important that the voyage of Peter from Constantinople to the Holy Land was undertaken as a pilgrimage. Peter continued to come on pilgrimages to the Holy Places as a bishop (Kofsky 1997: 209-222; Bitton Ashkeloni 2004: 107-129).

Peter's role in the monastic movement of the Holy Land, like that of his companion John, was not confined within the boundaries of the Georgian ecclesiastic community: they became the key figures of the Palestinian monasticism of the 5th century. As far as is known, both had no close disciples of Georgian origin (see Perrone 2009: 193-194). Nevertheless, the example of Peter inspired many of his compatriots to follow in his steps, both in the Holy Land and back home.

David Garedjeli<sup>6</sup>, an ascetic of the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century, is one of the most venerated saints of the Georgian Church. David, one of the "13 Syrian Fathers" who established monastic life in Georgia, was the founder, and later the superior of

source and its authorship can be found in Horn 2006: *Ascetism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian*, Oxford, 10-46 and Horn - Phenix 2008: LVIII-LXXV. Verses are given according to the Syriac version of *Vita* published by Horn - Phenix 2008, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Syriac version.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Georgian version.

<sup>5</sup> Lazistan, or Lazica – a region in Western Georgia, today in Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> *Garedjeli* – from Garedji region in Eastern Georgia.

the famous Garedji Laura. His Georgian hagiography<sup>7</sup> is part of the cycle known as “The Lives of the Syrian Fathers”, composed by the Patriarch of Georgia Arsenius II, and dated to ca. 955-980 (Martin-Hisard 1985-86; Gabidzashvili 2006: 269).

According to the *vita*, David Garedjeli went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a group of his disciples, but never entered Jerusalem. Approaching the high hill above the city, “the summit of Grace”, he found himself too unworthy to walk in the footsteps of Christ. David took three small stones as souvenirs, and with them “the whole grace of Jerusalem”<sup>8</sup>. His companions continued on their pilgrimage, and he returned to Garedji.

The chronological gap between the events described in the text and the date of the composition itself makes this source less reliable regarding the historical details of the Byzantine period. Even if the text describes the historical reality of the time of its composition however, its relatively early date (10<sup>th</sup> century) makes it possible to treat this didactic story as an important source-evidence for the Georgian pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the Byzantine-Early Muslim period.

Hilarion the Iberian is a Georgian saint of the 9<sup>th</sup> century who lived in Kakheti<sup>9</sup> and served as a hegumen of a monastery in the region. His *vita* was composed in one of the Georgian monasteries of Mount Athos, in the circle of the disciples of St. Euthymius Hagiorite, sixty or seventy years after the death of the saint<sup>10</sup>. The text is known in three different versions, the shortest of which is the original one, dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century; the other two are extended versions, dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century and embellished by numerous miraculous stories.

According to the text, one day Hilarion decided to leave his hegumen position and went on a long pilgrimage to the Holy Land. With his companions, he trav-

<sup>7</sup> Arsenius, *Tskhovreba Davidi Garedjelisa*. Critical edition: I. Abuladze (ed.), *Monuments of Ancient Georgian Hagiographic Literature*, I, Tbilisi 1963. Russian trans.: M. Sabinin, *Jizneopisaniya sviatikh gruzinskoi tserkvi* [The Complete Hagiography of the Georgian Saints], St. Petersburg (1871) 1994, 126-140. French trans.: Martin-Hisard 1986: 81-91. Adapted English trans.: D.M. Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, New York 1976, 81-93.

<sup>8</sup> After the miraculous vision of the Jerusalemite Patriarch, two stones were took back to the city, and the third one stays with David and found its place in Garedji monastery: “Thus the Lord commands you - Through your faith, you have taken away the grace and favor from my holy city of Jerusalem, but it has seemed good to me to restore two parts to Jerusalem, so that the city may not be entirely excluded from my mercies; but I will present a third of it to you to take back to your wilderness. Go then in peace and take this stone as a sacred relic to your hermitage, as a memorial and a testimony to your faith” (cit. acc. to Lang 1976). The stone of David is preserved in the Patriarchal Cathedral of Holy Trinity in Tbilisi, Georgia.

<sup>9</sup> Kakheti – a region in Eastern Georgia.

<sup>10</sup> *Tskhovreba Ilarioni Kartvelisa*. Critical edition: E. Gabidzashvili, in I. Abuladze (ed.), *Monuments of Ancient Georgian Hagiographic Literature*, IV, Tbilisi 1968. Latin trans.: *Saint Hilarion d'Iberie*, ed. by P. Peeters, *AnalBoll* 32 (1913) 243-269. Russian trans. of the three versions of the *vita* by G.V. Tsulaya, *Jitie i deyania Ilariona Gruzina* [The Life and Deeds of Hilarion the Iberian], Moscow 1998.

eled to Palestine through Syria. After meeting with a gang of robbers and other adventures, they reached the Holy Land. The *vita* mentions their visit to Mount Tabor, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Jordan river and the Laura of St. Sabas. Here Hilarion remained for seven years in the cave of a monastic hermitage<sup>11</sup>. This long pilgrimage ended with a miraculous vision of the Virgin Mary, who ordered the saint to return home.

The places which Hilarion visited on the way are described in considerable detail which makes it possible to reconstruct the Georgian pilgrimage routes of the time and compare them with routes that are known from non-Georgian sources. As a general discussion of one of the most obscure periods in the history of the Christian communities in Palestine, this document is of particular importance.

It is necessary to add a short note on the available information regarding the royal Georgian pilgrimages. Georgian historical tradition associates the beginning of the pilgrimage to the Holy Land with the names of the first Christian monarchs of the Kartli kingdom. According to the chronicle *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (Djuansher, “The Life of Vakhtang Gorgasali”, I)<sup>12</sup> the first to visit Jerusalem was the great King Vakhtang Gorgasali (446?-502), together with members of the royal family. Not only did he visit the Holy Land, but he also received a precious gift from the Byzantine Emperor: the land in the vicinity of the Holy City where the Monastery of the Cross will eventually be erected. According to the generally accepted interpretation, this narrative should be considered legendary. The author based his chronicle on the known fact of extensive Georgian pilgrimage to Palestine (Menabde 1980: 79-80; Tsulaya 2008: 127).

The Medieval tradition, preserved in the frescoes of the Monastery of the Cross in Jerusalem, names King Mirian III (284?-361), the first Christian king of the country, as the first Georgian monarch to visit the Holy Places. According to this tradition too, the king received from the Emperor Constantine a precious gift – a large tract of land, where the first monastery for his Georgian compatriots in Jerusalem was established, i.e. the Monastery of the Cross (Tzagareli 1888: 32). In reality, only one Georgian monarchic pilgrimage was planned in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, yet never fulfilled for security reasons. The story is narrated in “The Life of St. George the Hagiorite”, which details the preparations for the journey of Queen Maria, the mother of King Bagrat IV (1027-1074)<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> According to the extended version, the saint stayed not for seven, but for seventeen years in the cave of the prophet Elijah.

<sup>12</sup> *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Critical edition: S. Qaukhchishvili (ed.), *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, Tbilisi 1955. French trans.: M.F. Brosset, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, St. Petersburg 1849-1858.

<sup>13</sup> *Tskhovreba Georgi Mtatsmindelisa*. For partial French trans. and discussion see van Esbroeck 2000.

## Pilgrims graffiti

No monumental inscriptions that commemorate pilgrimage of noble Georgians are preserved from the Byzantine and Early Muslim periods, but there are a number of later ones (Guthe 1881). All the early Georgian pilgrims' marks discovered in the Holy Land are simple graffiti incised on stones, rocks or plaster. Graffiti not only extends the scope of the paleographical data base, it may also supply important information regarding the pilgrimage routes and traditions, religious beliefs and practices, personal names, status and even the self-esteem of pilgrims.

Dating these graffiti is always a matter of great difficulty. The inscriptions were incised on rocky surfaces, a difficult act even in the case of semi-soft sandstone. Sometimes the writing process is complicated by the choice of location, or is subject to the limitations of the author: his writing skills, condition of health, fatigue etc. Nevertheless, in the case of inscriptions incised on a rocky surface in the open air, as in the Sinai peninsula, only paleographic criteria can be relevant.

A particularly early archaeological dating of the Georgian inscriptions discovered in the Holy Land may lead to an upheaval in the general scheme of the script's evolution.

The paleographical peculiarities of these inscriptions – well developed forms of the uncial letters, use of abbreviations, and even the occurrence of inscriptions at such a distance from the motherland – point towards an earlier date for the invention of the alphabet than was generally accepted (Tsereteli 1960: 67-68). Had more of the pilgrims' inscriptions been discovered in archaeological context, as was the case with the Nazareth graffiti, the associated archaeological data may have helped considerably in their dating.

### *The Nazareth inscriptions*

Pilgrimage to Nazareth, the city of the Annunciation is recorded from the 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The earliest evidence is found in the pilgrimage itinerary of Egeria, ca. 383. Her words, as recorded by Peter the Deacon, are: "In Nazareth is a garden in which the Lord used to be after his return from Egypt", and "there is a big and very splendid cave in which she [Holy Mary] lived. An altar has been placed there"<sup>14</sup>. That was probably a small structure built by Joseph of Tiberias (Epiphanius, *Panarion* XXX.11). Jerome mentions that his disciple and companion Paula visited the city (*Ep.* CVIII 13.5). The "House of Mary" is mentioned also in the notes of a Piacenza Pilgrim (*Itinerario Piacentini*, 5) in

<sup>14</sup> Cit. according to English trans. by Wilkinson 1971: 193.

570. Most probably, the modest early shrine of Nazareth did not attract as many pilgrims as did the holy places in Jerusalem. Nazareth was at a certain distance from the main road, populated by Jews, and those who wanted to come there from Jerusalem had to pass through hostile Samaritan lands (Taylor 1993: 266).

During the excavations carried out by Franciscan Fathers under the direction of Bagatti in 1955-60 at the traditional place of the Annunciation, the remains of an ancient edifice were discovered under the floors of the Byzantine church (Bagatti 1969). On the thick coat of colored and white plaster covering various architectural elements of this early construction, numerous pilgrims' graffiti were found. The importance of these modest inscriptions cannot be overstated: they show that the edifice that was demolished to give way to the Byzantine structure, was itself an object of veneration (Bagatti 1969; Corbo 1987: 333-348; and contra: Taylor 1993: 221-267).

Most of the inscriptions were incised with a sharp instrument, some were written using charcoal. All the graffiti in Greek, Syriac, Latin, Armenian and Georgian are of religious character, and mostly contain private names and requests for divine mercy, typical of pilgrims' inscriptions (Testa 1969: 57).

The Greek, Syriac and Latin inscriptions were read soon after the excavation, and the results were published in the final archaeological report (Bagatti 1969: 123-131, 148-169, 196-218). The Armenian and Georgian inscriptions however, posed greater difficulty. A number of the published Armenian inscriptions contain mistakes, others were not considered to merit a proper scientific publication until some twenty years later (Stone 1990-91: 315-322; Stone - van Lint - Nazarian 1996-97: 321-337). An Armenian priest who assisted Bagatti in translation, said of letters he did not recognize because they are absent from contemporary Armenian alphabet, that he "believed that they may be of an older one" (Bagatti 1969: 156). The unrecognized letters were in reality ancient Georgian *asomtavruli* script – a common confusion in the world of Palestinian paleography. Due credit must be given to Bagatti for his comment: "Simply for comparison we can note that this letter appears several times in the Georgian inscription of Bir el-Qutt, which students place in the 5<sup>th</sup> century" (Ibid.). The Georgian inscriptions from Nazareth were finally published only recently (Alexidze 2000).

All Georgian inscriptions, three fragmentary and one complete, were discovered in the early structure under the mosaic pavements of the Byzantine church. The plan of this early structure is unclear because only a few fragments of walls, which were later incorporated into the Byzantine church building, survived. Leaving aside the discussion on the nature of the pre-Byzantine remains, it is only possible to say that the place was venerated by Christians since relatively early periods and served as a sanctuary. During the excavations, various architectural elements of the early structure, among them column bases, capitals and a threshold, were uncovered. Some were covered with plaster. All four identi-

fied Georgian inscriptions were incised on these plaster layers, next to the Greek and Armenian graffiti.

#### INSCRIPTIONS<sup>15</sup>

##### 1. Nazareth Kart. 1

[ჰა]ვლე

[მოციქუ]ლი

“Apostle Paul” (?)

##### 2. Nazareth Kart. 2

...ა...

...A...

##### 3. Nazareth Kart. 3.1

...კ...

...K...

##### 4. Nazareth Kart. 3.2

შ(ეიწყალ)ე ი(ეს)უ ქ(რისტ)ე გ[იორგი]

“Jesus Christ, have mercy on Giorgi”

Only one of the Nazareth inscriptions (Alexidze 2000: 21, Nazareth Kart. 3.2) can be interpreted as a complete sentence, a request for divine mercy written by certain Giorgi. It is noteworthy that all four words of the sentence are written in abbreviated form.

Two other inscriptions (Alexidze 2000: 20-21, Nazareth Kart. 2, Nazareth

<sup>15</sup> According to Alexidze 2000.

Kart. 3.1) consist of one letter each. It was proposed (Alexidze 2000: 20, Nazareth Kart. 2), that the Georgian capital letter A, being the first letter of the Georgian alphabet, is a representation of “I am Alpha and Omega” (Rev 1:8), but this proposition is speculative. Finally, the proposed reading of the fragmentary inscription Nazareth Kart. 1 (Alexidze 2000: 19) as referring to the “Apostle Paul” is somewhat confusing: St. Paul is not associated either with the sacred history of Nazareth, or with Georgia. Naturally, the fragmentary character of the Nazareth graffiti and their paucity prevent any general conclusions when discussing their content.

The remains of the pre-Byzantine structures where the graffiti were discovered are dated by the excavator to the 4<sup>th</sup> - beginning of 5<sup>th</sup> centuries (Bagatti 1969: 213-218; Corbo 1987: 343). This claim is based on the ecclesiastic sources and on the dating of the Byzantine mosaics decorated with crosses that sealed the early structure. According to Epiphanius, the earliest churches in the Galilean Jewish towns, including Nazareth, were built by Joseph of Tiberias, acting under orders from the emperor Constantine (*Panarion* XXX.11). The names that appear in the text, of Jewish patriarchs and of Constantine himself, date this building activity to 330-350. The date of the Byzantine mosaics covering the early sanctuary was established by Bagatti as no later than 427: from this year on, it was forbidden by the imperial edict of Theodosius II to use the cross motif in floor decoration (Bagatti 1969: 213-218). Possibly the edict was not always followed in practice, especially in the provinces (Taylor 1993: 239), but in any case, the Byzantine church cannot be later than the end of 5<sup>th</sup> - beginning of 6<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ibid.: 266). The early sanctuary in Nazareth should therefore date between 330 and 427, and the Georgian and other graffiti should be discussed within this chronological frame. A mid 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> centuries date seems appropriate for the Greek and Syriac inscriptions, but is extremely early for the Armenian and Georgian graffiti. Paleography provides little help in this case: according to modern understanding of the Georgian script development, it is only certain that the Nazareth inscriptions were written before the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Alexidze 2000: 24). In view of the clearly sealed archaeological context of these inscriptions therefore, their importance cannot be overestimated: it seems that the whole chronology of the Georgian *asomtavruli* script should be reconsidered (Ibid.: 25).

### *Sinaitic inscriptions*

In addition to the evidence of historical sources and manuscripts, inscriptions found during the archaeological survey of Sinai contributed imported information concerning the Georgian pilgrimage to the holy places of Sinai.

The systematic study of the Sinai graffiti was carried out by A. Negev (1977). Thanks to his survey, hundreds of rock-cut inscriptions, written in various lan-

guages, were discovered, starting with the Nabatean period and up to the modern Bedouin ones. According to Negev's classification, all the inscriptions that have Christian character, mainly written in Greek, but also in Armenian and Georgian, should not be dated prior to the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Negev 1977: 76-80). Subsequent research verified this chronology. Additional survey of inscriptions was carried out in Sinai by M. Stone with the express aim of discovering Armenian graffiti that may have eluded researchers who did not know the Armenian language (Stone 1982). During this survey a total number of twelve Georgian inscriptions were discovered. Eight of them were within the chronological range of the 7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the other four dated to later periods. The reading of the Georgian corpus and its publication was prepared by van Esbroeck (1982).

Like the similar Greek and Armenian inscriptions, the Georgian ones were left by pilgrims on their way to the sanctuaries of Sinai or on the way back (Stone 1982: 57; Mayerson 1982: 44-57). Their distribution may help in reconstructing the major pilgrimage routes to the local holy sites. Georgian pilgrims' graffiti were discovered in the Wadi Mukatab and Wadi Haggag areas, both principal arteries of pilgrim-traffic in the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. Wadi Mukatab together with Wadi Maghara was part of the main route passing through Western Sinai, in the picturesque landscape of sandstone rocks. According to historical records, this was the road that most pilgrims followed to Mount Sinai. The Wadi Haggag road runs through the sandstone rocks in the Eastern part of Sinai. Approaching Mount Sinai by Wadi Haggag one can enjoy the impressive panorama of the high mountains, unfolding from afar (Stone 1982: 48).

The distribution of the Georgian inscriptions is surprising: six were discovered in Wadi Haggag and only two along the major route that passes through Wadi Mukatab. The location of the Armenian inscriptions described by Stone is similar: only five graffiti were found along the western road, while seventy were discovered in Wadi Haggag. In contrast, the distribution of the Greek Christian inscriptions is similar along both roads, eastern and western (Stone 1982: 41-51).

## INSCRIPTIONS<sup>16</sup>

### 1. M Georg. 1

ქ(რისტე) ზოსიმე შ(ეიწყალ)ე

“Christ, have mercy on Zosime!”

<sup>16</sup> According to van Esbroeck 1982.

## 2. M Georg. 2

ქ(რისტე) შ(ეიწყ(ა)ლუ მ)ონ(ა)დ  
 შ(ე)ნი ბ(ა)ს(ი)ლი ჯ(ა)ბ(ა)რნის ძე  
 ვინ წაიკითოთ  
 (ლოცვა) ყავთ

“Christ, have a mercy on your monk  
 Basili Djabarisdze.  
 Whoever will read it (this?),  
 pray”.

## 3. H Georg. 5

ევსები

“Evsebi”

## 4. H Georg. 10

წ(მიდა)ო სინა შ(ეიწყალ)ე მე წ(მიდა)ო  
 ...ა...

“Holy Sinai, have mercy on me, o holy”  
 ...a...

## 5. H Georg. 8

დ[იდ]ე[ბა] ამ[ენ]

“Greatness, amen” (?)

## 6. H Georg. 9

ო(ზფალ)ო შ(ეიწყალ)ე მისქი

შ(ეიწყალ)ე ხ(ი)ლნი

გ(ა)ბ(რიე)ლ

“O Lord, have mercy on Miski,  
have mercy on the (fruit?)  
of Gabriel”

## 7. H Georg. 4

ე[ველრებ]დ გ[ანძ]ვ ?

“For prayer” (?)

## 8. H Georg. 6

გრიგოლ

“Grigol”

Most of the inscriptions are incised in relatively low, easily accessible places. Usually the pilgrims chose the northern and eastern slopes of the rocks along the road. Most probably, the location was related to the pattern of caravan traveling. During the evening rest, the northern and eastern slopes were in shadow. According to Negev, this was the time when the graffiti were written, once the fatigue of the journey had passed, giving place to poetic mood:

“The softish rocks of the northeastern Sinai would just invite the pilgrims to scribble their names and those of their families, accompanied by pious formulae, asking for heaven’s assistance and safe guidance in these difficult and dangerous routes” (Negev 1977: 76).

A stylistic difference between the Greek, Georgian and Armenian inscriptions, is that the Georgian and Armenian characters are usually small, their size not exceeding few centimeters. Even the biggest of the Georgian inscriptions (van Esbroeck 1982: 173, M Georg. 1) with its 12 cm high letters is not of monumental character: in common with all the other graffiti it is written some-

what crookedly, with unequal space between the letters. All the inscriptions are written in curved *asomtavruli* script.

Given the total absence of any archaeological context to the Sinai inscriptions, only paleographical criteria are relevant for their dating. According to the reading of van Esbroeck, the chronology of the Georgian graffiti from Sinai should be established as follows: three inscriptions can be dated to the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries (van Esbroeck 1982, M Georg. 1, H Georg. 5, H Georg. 10), three to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (M Georg 2, H Georg. 8, H Georg. 9) and the other two between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (H Georg. 4, H Georg. 6). It is known that Sinai was not only a pilgrimage destination for Georgians, but also a home for a Georgian-speaking monastic community. The presence of Georgian monks in the Sinai peninsula is documented in Byzantine literature from the 6<sup>th</sup> century (*Itinerarium Piacentini*, 37; Anastasius the Sinait, 8). The community increased in number during the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, following the mass migration of the monks from the Palestinian monasteries, particularly from St. Sabas. The colophons of Georgian manuscripts preserved in the collection of St. Catherine's monastery, give evidence to the existence of Georgian churches and monasteries in the vicinity of the main complex (Shanidze 2006: 254). The monastery preserves a large number of Georgian icons dated to the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chichinadze 2000). Georgian pilgrims to Sinai could therefore depend on the hospitality of their compatriots.

The content of the inscriptions written by Georgian pilgrims is not different from the standard Christian graffiti repertoire. Mostly they record requests for divine mercy, and individual names without titles, rank, or other identifying details. It is not clear whether this last is an indication of a certain pilgrimage tradition, or if all the authors were simple people (Stone 1982: 20).

Pilgrims' inscriptions, whether short or long, almost invariably contain proper names: Basili, Eusebi, Grigol, Miski, Zosime. All apart from one belong to the standard repertoire of Christian names. The outstanding "Miski" of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (van Esbroeck 1982: 178-179, H Georg. 9) is probably a derivation of the Georgian "Meskhi", i.e., Meskhian. Only one name, from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, is followed by a surname: "Basili Djabaris-dze", i.e. "son of Djabar" (van Esbroeck 1982: 173-174, M Georg 2).

Some inscriptions contain only the name, always a single one; others include a request for divine mercy: "O Christ, have mercy on..." or "O Lord, have mercy...", or applying to the Holy Place: "Holy Sinai, have mercy on me, o holy!". It is worth noting that the standard self-disparaging epithets ("sinner", "worthless", "disobedient" etc.) were not in use in early Georgian inscriptions, while they do appear in the later examples. Most of the inscriptions use the abbreviations for *nomines sacri*: "Christ", "Lord", "Holy", but also for the words "mercy" and "amen". Most of the inscriptions are linear, only one, dated

to the 10th century, is executed as a cross with four letters placed at the corners between the arms of the cross (van Esbroeck 1982: 178, H Georg. 8).

### Discussion

Not all Georgian visitors showed the modesty of David Garedjeli who found himself unworthy to enter Jerusalem, and went back home the same day he arrived. It can certainly be established that some of the pilgrims stayed in the Holy Land for a long period, and even for the rest of their lives (see Talbot 2001: 102). The first known Georgian centers in Byzantine Palestine were established in the 5<sup>th</sup> century by Peter the Iberian and Ioanne the Laz, who came to the Holy Land as pilgrims and only later decided to stay. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Hilarion the Iberian came to Jerusalem as a pilgrim, and spent several years in a cave-hermitage in the desert. The picture emerging from the epigraphic evidence discovered during archaeological excavations is similar. The tombstone found in Umm Leisun (Seligman 2004) belongs to a non-Palestinian bishop, who probably came to the Holy Land as a pilgrim and stayed in the monastery. The inscriptions in the water cistern in H. Burgin (Tchekhanovets 2010) could not have been written by a mere passer-by, but rather by someone who had spent a certain period of time at the site in prayers for the salvation of his soul.

The hagiographies of Peter the Iberian, David Garedjeli and Hilarion the Iberian, mention the destinations of Georgian pilgrims in the 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Naturally, these are identical to the destinations visited by all Christians pilgrims: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Mount Tabor, the Jordan river, the desert monasteries (primarily the Great Laura), Mount Nebo, Sinai. The routes of the pilgrims can be reconstructed according to non-Georgian sources. The only Georgian reference is from “The Life of St. Hilarion the Iberian” which states that the saint and his companions came to the Holy Land from Syria.

Not much is known about the Georgian pilgrims’ accommodation either, apart from the mention of a pilgrims’ hostel in Jerusalem in “The Life of Peter the Iberian” (66-67). Presumably, the Georgian pilgrims were accommodated in the Georgian monasteries or in the numerous hostels that were built in Jerusalem by the Holy Land church authorities and by private benefactors. Far away from the capital city, accommodation in monasteries, or simply camping may be assumed.

Graffiti inscriptions left by Georgian pilgrims identify certain destinations of the voyagers. It is clear that Georgian pilgrims reached the Holy Places in the north of the country, in Galilee, as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Most probably, already in this early period they did not visit only Nazareth, but also continued to other Galilean sites, such as Mount Tabor, one of the most important pilgrimage

sites of Byzantine Palestine (Stone 2004: 79-89). In the southern direction Georgian pilgrims reached the Sinai peninsula.

According to the preliminary review published by the “Jerusalem expedition” of Georgian scientists, in addition to the Nazareth and Sinaitic graffiti described above, numerous pilgrims’ graffiti were discovered in the Nativity Church in Bethlehem, St. Sabas Monastery and various churches in Jerusalem (Gagoshidze 2003). All but two are dated to a later period (14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries – the peak of Georgian activity in the Holy Land). The two exceptions are earlier inscriptions with the names of “Theodore” and “Giorgy”, incised on a column of the Nativity Church. These graffiti can be dated according to their script – a transitional form between *khuzuri* and *mkhedruli* – to the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Gagoshidze 2003: 35).

So far, no early Georgian graffiti or any other inscriptions have been published from the Holy Sepulcher Church, not even from the most ancient sections of the building, despite the fact that the manuscripts’ colophons mention Georgian monastic presence in the church from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onward, referring to “the monk of Golgotha” and “the monk from the Resurrection Temple” (Tsagareli 1888: 115).

According to the Georgian monk Laurentius from Okrib, who came on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land before the great fire in the Holy Sepulcher in the years 1805–1807, “the wooden doors of the Temple [*H.S.*] were all covered by old Georgian inscriptions, supplying new information about the church and the city, and giving important evidence regarding the role of Georgians in the Holy Land” (Tsagareli 1888: 114). Tsagareli who was the first scientist to examine the Georgian antiquities in 1883, did not show much excitement about these inscriptions: “I saw Georgian letters, or better to say, scratches, on the wall near the main doors. But those, as much as I could see, were only the names of pilgrims, besides they were late ones” (Ibid.). According to the survey undertaken in the church by the “Jerusalem expedition” of Georgian scholars these inscriptions date to the 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Gagoshidze 2003)<sup>17</sup>.

No inscription in the Monastery of the Cross could be dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, although it was considered to be the main Georgian ecclesiastic center in the Holy Land, and was inhabited by the Georgians already at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Pilgrims’ inscriptions bear witness to active pilgrims’ traffic from Georgia to Palestine and Sinai from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onward. It is astonishing how soon after the adoption of Christianity Georgians began to go on pilgrimage to the Holy

<sup>17</sup> Georgian inscriptions were registered in the Holy Sepulchre Church by M. Stone during the “Rock Inscriptions and Graffiti Project” in the 1990’s. All the inscriptions are mentioned in the catalogue of the expedition, but were never deciphered, dated and published (Stone 1992-94: Nos. 6462, 6512, 6513, 6533, 6537, 6545, 6552, 6555, 6557, 6563, 6602, 6603, 6606, 6613, 6627, 6793, 6797, 6799, 6929, 7992).

Places. At this very early stage they succeeded in reaching even the most distant sanctuaries, which (even though these) were not always part of the standard pilgrimage. Surprisingly, the earliest Georgian graffiti were preserved in these distant places – Nazareth and Sinai.

The inscriptions in these locations owe their preservation, in the case of Sinai, to the special environmental conditions and lack of human activity, and in Nazareth, to the fact that an early sanctuary was sealed by Byzantine floors. There is little doubt that pilgrims would not have bypassed the major sanctuaries of the Nativity and the Resurrection on their way to the more remote pilgrimage centers, and therefore the absence of early Georgian pilgrims' graffiti in Jerusalem and Bethlehem can only be explained by random preservation. The study of Georgian pilgrims' inscriptions in Jerusalem and Bethlehem is, however, in its preliminary stage, so any conclusions should be considered tentative.

All Georgian pilgrims mentioned in the literary sources were clergymen: Peter the Iberian, who had arrived as an ordinary man and continued his journeys after becoming a monk and later a bishop; David Garejeli and Hilarion the Iberian who were abbots and traveled together with their disciples. In graffiti left by pilgrims, however, most of the names that appear in these inscriptions are not followed by any titles and ranks, neither church, nor civilian. Only in a single case the voyager adds a monastic status to his name (“Your monk Basili Djabarisidze”, Sinai, 10<sup>th</sup> century, van Esbroeck 1982: 173-174, M Georg 2).

Support for a clerical status of most pilgrim may be found in an unusual item of luggage taken back home. Surprisingly, none of the usual pilgrimage souvenirs of Palestinian origin were discovered in archaeological excavations in the territory of modern Georgia<sup>18</sup>. Instead, pilgrims returning from the Holy Land brought back with them manuscripts that were produced in the Palestinian and Sinaitic scriptoria. A number of such manuscripts were preserved in the distant mountainous region of Svaneti in north-western Georgia. The beginning of this “book traffic” can be traced back to the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of the manuscripts that found their way to Georgia were books copied by the scribes of the scriptoria of St. Sabas (Tsagareli 1888: 159-163; Mgaloblishvili 2001: 230-233; Tomadze 2006), St. Chariton (Tsagareli 1888: 112; Tomadze 2006: 254) and St. Catherine (Alexidze *et alii* 2005; Shanidze 2006).

The manuscripts that were translated in the Holy Land from Greek and Arabic, exhibit a very diverse character, including liturgical, hagiographical and hymnographical texts. Especially remarkable is the discovery of the earliest known ver-

<sup>18</sup> The only known example of pilgrimage souvenir found in Georgia is of Syrian origin. A silver pilgrim token representing St. Symeon Stylite the Younger, dated to the 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries was discovered in the Gareji monastery complex in Georgia (Skhirtladze 1995: 277-282).

sion of the Georgian historical chronicle *Mokcevey Kartlisay* (“Conversion of Kartli”). Its finding place, in the library of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai, leaves open the question of the authorship of this chronicle (Alexidze *et alii* 2005: 365-366). The members of the early Georgian monastic communities in the Holy Land were Greek-speaking, and therefore could use the Greek liturgical and other texts without any difficulty. The translation of certain church documents, especially of liturgical texts, may have been a matter of community prestige. On the other hand, given the size of the Georgian community in the Holy Land, their consumption of manuscripts would have been relatively modest. Numerous copies of a limited number of works indicate therefore an intention of distributing these manuscripts. Apparently, the manuscripts of Palestinian and Sinaitic scriptoria were translated and copied specifically for distribution among the monasteries and churches in Georgia, and were sent there with pilgrims returning back home. Only a few examples survive in Georgia<sup>19</sup>, but the work of the Sabait and Sinaitic Georgian literary schools had a great influence on the development of Georgian liturgy, language and literature. This influence can be explained by the great, almost absolute authority of the word coming from the Church of Jerusalem.

The work of the Georgian monks in the Holy Land gains in importance when viewed in the context of the difficulties experienced by the Church in Georgia: the Arab invasions of the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries limited the scientific and scribal work of the Georgian monasteries for almost two hundred years. It was only natural that the highly educated Georgian monks living in the Holy Land monasteries, the most important cultural centers of Christendom, would take upon themselves the burden of translating, composing, and copying the church literature for their suffering homeland. The role of Georgian pilgrims in spreading the word of the Jerusalem Church, is therefore unique.

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<sup>19</sup> Various manuscripts – liturgical, hymnographic and hagiographic compositions, – were probably distributed all over the country, but survived only in Svaneti region. This mountainous isolated region never surrender to the foreign occupation and turned to a real Christian treasury. In the hour of danger, during the unless invasions, when the churches and monasteries were destroyed by the invaders, the population of the plains transfer the most precious relics to Svaneti, to save it from the elimination. For centuries martial and severe Svans were protecting the church treasures, finally rediscovered only in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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