

## LITERATURE

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### PLACE OF BURIAL OF ST. SHUSHANIK

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#### ABSTRACT

The issues concerning Saint Shushanik's preparation for death, determining the location where she should be buried, and description of the process of her death/punishment take an important place in the structure of the text. Saint Shushanik's grave, according to her will, is in Tsurtavi, the very place where Varsken dragged her from for the first time. This is Iakob Khutsesi's statement and we come across the same information in all lists except A 95, which is not complete and where the last third part of the story is missed. As a matter of fact, there is some other information. According to some sources, Shushanik was reburied to Tsurtavi after the death of Varsken, while according to other sources, the tortured queen was reburied from Turtavi to Tbilisi and was buried in Metekhi Church. In our research, we observe all information concerning the location of Saint Shushanik's grave and discuss how realistic the information can be.

*Keywords: Saint Shushanik; Tsurtavi; Iakob Khutsesi; Varsken; Metekhi Church*

## Introduction

According to the hagiographical canon, God informs saints of the time of their death. They prepare for this important event by intensifying prayer, chanting, blessing relatives/congregation, and saying goodbye to them by giving alms... in order to complete earthly deeds and be granted eternal rest among the righteous. By such a miraculous prophecy, the author wants to point out the synergy between God and man. Their death was predicted by *Abo Tbileli* (“Tomorrow my soul will leave my body and I will go to my God, Jesus Christ,” (Abuladze, 1963, p. 67)), *Grigol of Khandzta* (“Worthy Father Grigol had a premonition that he would depart and go to God. God informed him that His will shall be fulfilled”, Abuladze 1963, 313), *Serapion Zarzmeli* (This is the end. The time has come I should depart this world and misery be replaced by joy”, Abuladze 1963, 341), and other saints. Shushanik also foretold her death.

## Discussion

Bearing the heavy burden in the seventh year of her torture, the Queen says to the priest: “I will soon leave my miserable body and depart this life” (Abuladze, 1963, p. 25). The author devotes a long narrative to saints’ preparation for death and the description of the attitude of their relatives and other members of society towards this fact. In the first place, Jojik and his family members – wife, children, servants – go to Shushanik and beg “Christ’s martyr” for blessing. Following Jojik, *the clergy* - Archbishop Samoel, Bishop Ioane and his relatives” (Abuladze, 1963, p. 27) and *representatives of virtually all classes*: “grand dukes, noble-born ladies, noblemen and commons from the villages of Kartli” (Abuladze, 1963, p. 27) go to the saint to bid her a final farewell. On the day she departed this world, Shushanik called Bishop Apots and Iakob Khutsesi over to her, thanked them again for their support, and pleaded to Apots, as the ‘father and teacher,’ for Iakob. Following this, she instructs them where her body should be buried: she begged them to be buried in the place where she was first dragged from” (Abuladze, 1963, p. 28). The will is performed according to the queen’s desire: “We carried her righteous body to the church and interred Shushanik’s holy, glorious, and righteous body in a place prepared in advance” (Abuladze, 1963, p. 28).

The grave of the saint has sacral significance. Believers associate it not only with the saint herself but with the Kingdom of Heaven. The saint’s grave and

her relics are great solace and hope for believers, the hope of healing, purification, and receiving help from God. In 'The Martyrdom of Abo' Arabs address a special request to the Amir to order to burn Abo's corpse so that his grave would not become a holy site for Christians: "If someone devotes themselves and sacrifices themselves to Christ, Christians are in the habit of stealing their body and paying respect by interring it. They will spread rumors that the body does miracles and heals the sick. That is why they will distribute their clothes, hair, and bones among themselves as if these will protect the sick, which will mislead many ignorant people" (Abuladze 1963,71-72). However, if someone sacrifices themselves to Christ, it will not become a hindrance to Christians' adoration of Abo. "Lots of Christians visited the site where Saint Abo departed this life; they overcame the fear of the conquerors, and everybody went to the place where Saint Abo's body had been burnt; they would take some soil from the site, bring the sick there who would be healed on the same day" (Abuladze, 1963, p. 74).

The monks of Khandzta are deeply concerned about the fact that aged Grigol of Khandzta is going to end his life in Shatberdi ... "Therefore, whoever was able to walk, they arrived in Shatberdi together" (Abuladze, 1963, p. 308) and asked their spiritual father to return to Khandzta, so that his holy body would be buried in Khandzta, in the place where the great confessor embarked on independent activities.

Thus, the resting place of a martyr saint is a hugely important site for Christians, and the saint herself is well aware of this fact. Therefore, Shushanik chooses the place, which has a symbolic significance for her as a martyr, of her burial.

The text provides a straightforward account of the fact that Shushanik passed away in Tsurta and was buried in the place where Varsken the Pitiakhsh had dragged her out for the first time. This is what the text says, and this account is provided in all the extant copies of 'The Passions of Saint Shushanik', except for A 95, which is incomplete and lacks the last third of the text.

Catholicos Anton's redaction of 'The Passions of Saint Shihsanik,' which has a much more extensive ending than the text by Iakob Khutsesi, reads: "On hearing about Saint Shushanik's torture and death, Bakur, King of the Abkhazians and Georgians, secretly gathered his army and campaigned against Varsken. At the time, Varsken stood on the bank of the Mtkvari, where it joined the river Anakret. Moreover, he attacked Varsken, captured him, and hung him, already

stabbed with a sword, on a pole” (Martyrica 1980, 104-105)<sup>1</sup>. Bakur III, son of Parsman IV, mentioned in this section of the text, ruled in the sixth century. Therefore, according to this account, whose source is ‘Life of Kartli,’ a chronology of the text changes substantially. Following this, Anton focuses attention on another account of the chronicler, according to which Bakur transferred Shushanik’s relics and interred them with great honor: “King Bakur brought Shushanik’s holy relics to Tsurtaivi with great honor” (Martyrica, 1980, p. 105). However, Anton realizes this information is unreliable and adds: ‘I believe that the church which Iakob Khutsesi says Shushanik should be buried in is Tsurtaivi” (Martyrica, 1980, p. 105).

As we see, there are two inaccuracies in the section mentioned above of the text: 1. Varsken’s punishment is attributed to Bakur III rather than to Vakhtang Gorgasali; 2. After Shushanik died and was interred, her body was transferred to Tsurtaivi and reburied there. Anton casts doubt on the second account, whereas he shares the other one about the punishing Varsken by Bakur, which is provided in ‘Life of Kartli’ by Juansher (“Then Bakur, King of Georgians, appealed to all his governors, secretly gathered the army and marched towards Varsken. At the time, Varsken was standing on the bank of the Mtkvari, where the river Anakert joins the Mtkvari; he attacked Varsken and captured him; his body was cut into pieces, and its parts were hung on a tree, while Shushanik’s body was moved and buried in Tsurtaivi with great honor” (Kaukhchishvili 1955,216). This information is encountered in Ioane Batonishvili’s ‘Kalmasoba’ (Alms-gathering) (H 2170, 287r-v), and the abbreviated version of ‘Kalmasoba’ (S 3687, 61v) with minor alterations (see: Tskhadadze 1978, 177).

P. Ioseliani first published this account. The scholar makes a correction to the part of the text that tells about the punishment of Varsken and replaces Bakur III with Vakhtang Gorgasali; however, he does not consider Catholicos Anton’s note and leaves the story of the transfer and reburial of Shushanik’s body unchanged (Joseliani, 1850, 62-63.)

M. Sabinin, the first publisher of ‘The Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik,’ adds the section mentioned above of the text of ‘Life of Kartli’ to the text following Anton:

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<sup>1</sup> K. Tskhadadze provides an exciting discussion of the problem in the work ‘From the History of the First Edition of The Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik,’ 1978, 169-182, in the jubilee collection of ‘The Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik,’ Tbilisi, 1978, Tbilisi State University Publishing House.

Table 1

Catholicos Anton	M. Sabinin
On hearing about Saint Shushanik's torture and death, Bakur, King of the Abkhazians and Georgians, secretly gathered his army and campaigned against Varsken. At the time, Varsken stood on the bank of the Mtkvari, where it joined the river Anakret. Moreover, he attacked Varsken, captured him, and hung him, already stabbed with a sword, on a pole (Martyrica, 1980, p. 105).	On hearing about Saint Shushanik's torture and death, Vakhtang Gorgasali, King of the Abkhazians and Georgians, secretly gathered his army and campaigned against Varsken. At the time, Varsken was standing on the bank of the Mtkvari, where it joins the River Anakret. Moreover, he attacked Varsken, captured him, and hung him, already stabbed with a sword, on a pole (Sabinin).

As we see, two substantial differences exist between the two cited texts: 1. Anton considers Bakur III as the one who inflicted punishment on Varsken. At the same time, Sabinin believes it is Vakhtang Gorgasali 2. Catholicos Anton casts doubt on the account about the place of Shushanik's burial - 'I believe that the church which Iakob Khutsesi talks about as Shushanik's burial place is Tsurtavi' (Martyrica, 1980, p. 105), which M. Sabinin does not direct attention to at all.

Anton ends the narrative with the part cited above, if not considered a minor prayer of thanksgiving, which could be more informative. However, Sabinin adds another piece of information to the text: Catholicos Kirion had Shushanik's body transferred from Tsurtavi to Tbilisi, and Queen Tamar abundantly adorned her coffin with jewels (Sabinin). K. Tskhadadze notes that the source of this account of Sabinin should be 'Kalmasoba' by Ioane Batonishvili, or an abbreviated version of 'Kalmasoba' which slightly differs from the original one (Tskhadadze, 1978, p. 180). 'Kalmasoba' reads: "Tradition has it that Queen Tamar had the body of Saint Shushanik moved and deposited in a coffin which is in the church of Tbilisi palace, on the right side in Metekhi (H 2170, 257v).

According to Platon Ioseliani, Shushanik's body was transferred to Tbilisi, in the church of Metekhi, 120 years after her death. Separation of the Armenian church from the world church and ruling of the church of Tsurtavi by an Armenian bishop were the reasons why 120 years after the saint's death, in 586, Catholicos Simeon

or Kirion of Georgia banished the Armenian bishop from Tsurtavi and gave the order that the corpse of Saint Shushanik, who had been buried in the church of Tsurtavi, should be transferred with proper honor to Tbilisi and interred in Matekhi Church. Her grave is still preserved in the chapel (diaconicon) south of the altar (Joseljani, 1850, pp. 62-63) (translated by me N.M).

Metekhi Church is mentioned by Vakhushti Batonishvili as well. He describes the setting: A perfectly built domed church of the Virgin of Metekhi, the seat of the archimandrite, is in the fortress on the rock over the Mtkvari. Here is the bridge between Kala and Isani, between the fortresses. On the south, near the bridge, is the grave of Abo, whom Persians tortured<sup>2</sup>. (Vakhushti Batonishvili 1904, 72).

The information about transferring Shushanik's body to Tbilisi and interring it in Metekhi Church is not supported by any ancient sources. Moreover, V. Beridze considers that the presence of Shushanik's grave in the diaconicon of Metekhi Church and the construction of the church by Vakhtang Gorgasali must be just oral tradition and cannot have any connection to reality. It is probably the result of this tradition, too, that feasts commemorating the saint were celebrated here every year (Beridze, 1969, pp. 7-25).

In chapter three of 'The Passions of Saint Abo,' Ioane Sabanisdze describes a place which, according to scholars, is in the environs of Metekhi Fortress; however, Sabanisdze does not mention the church, but *Sagodebeli* (place of wailing) and *Sadilego* (place of dungeon): When Saint Abo's body was brought, moved from the cart and deposited on the ground, they brought wood, hay and kerosene and lit fire... until the body of this saint was burnt in the place which is a fortress east of the city, on the edge of the rock, in a place called Sadilego (dungeon), on the bank of the river that flows to the east and is called the Mtkvari" (Monuments, 2020, p. 73).

According to scholars' observation, it is the area where presently the church of Metekhi stands, with the grave of Saint Abo nearby.

### *Conclusion*

Thus, the information about bringing Saint Shushanik to Tsurtavi and burying her there cannot correspond with reality. The account about her transferring to Tbilisi and being buried in Metekhi Church is even less trustworthy. We believe that the most reliable information is provided in the text itself, and the martyr must be interred in the place where she desired herself – Tsurtavi, the place where Varsken

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<sup>2</sup> It is known that Arabs, not Persians tortured Abo.

first dragged her out and which the Queen considered the beginning of her martyrdom.

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