

For Specification of One Context of “The Passions of Saint Shushanik” (“He Visited a Holy Man in His Place (Vani)...”)

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the specification of the context of one phrase from “The Passions of Saint Shushanik” – “He went to a holy man at his residence (*vani*) to ask about something.” This excerpt from the text gives rise to some questions: 1. Who is the holy man? Is he a secular or a religious figure? 2. Why do Iakob and Apots go to him – to ask about something or to make a visit to his place? 3. What could ‘*vani*’ (residence, monastery) mean in this context? The article discusses E. Chelidze’s interpretation of this phrase, according to which the holy man is a religious figure. At the same time, Apots and Iakob go to pay him a visit at his place. Taking specific arguments and the reading preserved in the earliest copy (A 95) of “The Passions of Saint Shushanik” into consideration, we try to show that the holy man must be a churchman, and Apots and Iakob went to him to ask about something. At the same time, the word *vani* probably means where a religious person resides – a monastery or a cell rather than a house.

Keywords: *Holy, Bishop, Monastery, Saints, Monk, Priest, Confessor*

INTRODUCTION

Iakob, Shushanik's confessor, and Apots, court bishop, learn about Varsken's adopting Zoroastrianism and the Queen's being stricken with grief from a deacon. They are visiting a holy man, and this is where the deacon, urgently sent from the palace as a messenger, calls upon them: Apots¹, the bishop of the Pitiakhsh's palace, was not there but was visiting a holy man at his residence (*vani*) to ask about something. Moreover, I, Queen Shushanik's confessor, accompanied the bishop" (A 95, 434). Here, the text is cited from the Parkhali Gospel, which preserves the earliest text of 'The Passions of Saint Shushanik.' This excerpt attracts our interest from several aspects: a) who is the *holy man*? b) what is the purpose of Apots and Iakob visiting him – *to enquire about something or to pay him an ordinary visit*? And what is the meaning of *vani* in this context?

After observing this section, researcher Edisher Chelidze concludes that the bishop would not visit a religious or secular figure to enquire about something. Consequently, the scholar believes that the phrase – "to ask about something" – was added to the text by the scribe and was not written by the author: "The holy man mentioned by Iakob, indeed, does not possess any religious title; otherwise, like in other cases, the author would have reported about it. He cannot be a monk either, as it is sometimes suggested because Iakob would comment on it. Even if the mentioned man possessed any degree or was a monk, it appears unconvincing that the bishop personally visited him to enquire about something instead of summoning him. Moreover, the bishop would never visit a secular figure, even a dignified Christian, for a reason mentioned above" (Chelidze, 2014, p. 297). Eventually, the author concludes that "the bishop and the priest paid a visit to a worthy member of their congregation who was unable to visit them probably because of his feebleness and illness." Resulting from the discussion, the *vani* (residence) should be considered not as a cell or a monastery, i.e., a religious abode, but the residence of a secular figure (this is how E. Chelidze explains it: "I went to that house (*vani*) together with him," A130, 172). Thus, it is necessary to specify the context to interpret the term.

METHODS

The methodology of this study employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining textual analysis, philological critique, and historical contextualization to address the questions raised by the excerpt from the Parkhali Gospel. The study conducts a comparative textual examination of the Parkhali Gospel and other manuscripts to identify variations, giving

¹ Manuscript A 95 mentions Aput; all the others mention Apots; it must be the case of confusion about the graphemes 't' and 'ts,' which resemble each other in *Bukhari*.

precedence to the earliest manuscript for authenticity, while semantic analysis explores the term *vani* within its immediate textual and broader ecclesiastical contexts. The application of the epithet “holy” is scrutinized to distinguish between religious and secular figures. Linguistic nuances are analyzed to evaluate potential scribal alterations, particularly omissions or additions that reflect theological or historical biases.

Historical contextualization situates the text within the framework of Georgian monasticism in the 5th and 6th centuries, correlating archaeological and historical evidence to reconstruct the development of monastic practices and the architecture of religious dwellings, such as cells, *lavras*, and cenobitic monasteries.

Finally, the study explores whether the “holy man” was a monk or secular figure and interprets *vani* as either a religious or secular residence, ensuring a nuanced analysis grounded in historical, linguistic, and textual evidence.

RESULTS

In our opinion, the researcher’s discussion mentioned above is somewhat contradictory. First, we should pay attention to the epithet ‘holy,’ which the author applies concerning this man. This epithet is mainly used in the text to refer to the martyred queen. Several religious figures (deacon, priest, bishop, archbishop) are shown in the plot as main characters. However, the author mainly refers to them by names and religious hierarchy – Bishop Ioane, Archbishop Samuel, etc., and there are only a couple of occasions when the author uses epithets such as holy and blissful (‘And the holy bishop was served a meal’; then blissful Bishop Ioane quickly brought a shroud for wrapping”) to refer to them. Thus, Iakob does not refer to even high-ranking religious figures as ‘holy,’ and it would be even weirder to use this epithet for a secular person. Therefore, the assumption that Iakob mentions the holy man to indicate a secular person – a member of the bishop’s congregation, rather than a religious figure renowned for his purity and worthy of this epithet, appears groundless.

E. Chelidze puts forward another argument to support his position and remarks: “The ‘holy man’ mentioned by Iakob, indeed, does not possess any ecclesiastical rank, or else the author, just like in other cases, would inform us about it. He cannot be a monk either, as it is sometimes assumed, because Iakob would mention it” (Chelidze, 2014, p. 298).

There are four religious figures in the text whose names are known to us – Iakob Khutsesi (his name is mentioned randomly), Archbishop Samoel, Bishops Apots and Ioane. Apart from them, another *priest* is mentioned in the text section where

the enraged pitiakhsh tells Bishop Apots on Easter Monday: ‘Hand my wife over to me, why are you keeping us apart?’ Moreover, he started cursing and condemning God fiercely. And a priest told him: “Lord, why are you behaving and speaking so cruelly and cursing the bishop and Saint Shushanik?” Two *deacons* are mentioned in the text: one, who informs Iakob and Apots about Varsken’s adoption of Mazdean religion, and the other – who tries to encourage the Queen and hides away halfway through his word for fear of Varsken. In addition, it cannot be excluded that the deacon mentioned twice in the text is the same person. As we see, the author does not consider it necessary to specify the names of these figures because they have no vital importance for the author’s purpose. Moreover, of no importance is the name of the holy man, who is not connected with the events in Pitiakhsh’s palace either.

In our opinion, the phrase “He went to his residence to ask about something” has an unambiguous context: accompanied by Iakob, the bishop went to a holy man to ask about something. This version is applied in the earliest copy – Parkhali Gospel. However, this phrase is missing in other manuscripts (they lack the ending – “about something”): “But Apots, the court bishop, was not there because he was visiting a holy man at his residence to ask after (or about something); and I, the Queen’s confessor, too, was accompanying him at that residence” A130, 172; comp.: But Apots, the court bishop, was not there because he was visiting a holy man at his residence (*vani*) to ask after (or about something), and I, the Queen’s confessor, too, was accompanying him at that residence” A170, 121; comp.: But Apots, the court bishop, was not there because he was visiting a holy man at his residence (*vani*) to ask after (or about something), and I, the Queen’s confessor, too, was accompanying him at that residence” A 176. 198, etc.). As we see, only the phrase from Parkhali Gospel includes ‘about something.’ Based on the other manuscripts, E. Chelidze considers that Iakob and Apots were paying an ordinary visit to the man rather than intending to find out about something. This assumption seems correct if we ignore the reading preserved in Parkhali Gospel and draw a conclusion from the incomplete phrase – “was visiting.”

Moreover, this form is encountered with precisely the same connotation at the beginning of the text (the servant sent by Varsken asked after Shushanik). However, it would be illogical to disregard the reading of the earliest copy and consider the version of the later manuscripts to be correct. We suggest that these two words (about something) were lost while copying, or if we consider editorial interference (which is less likely), then the scribe should be making corrections to the text according to the same logic as followed by E. Chelidze – the bishop would not go to a holy man to ask about something. However, if the bishop is unlikely to visit a religious figure, it is even more unlikely that he visited a secular one. Or, why the reason the

researcher considered it possible for the bishop to visit a secular person cannot be the same as one for visiting a religious figure? These reasons could be the age, feebleness, illness of the holy man, or a specific vow.

Thus, if we believe the reading of the earliest copy is correct, i.e., restore the phrase to its original version (it is pointed out by E. Chelidze too – “Generally, it is indeed much more convincing that the later scribe, who interpreted “ask” as “putting a question” rather than asking after, added the word ‘something’ instead of extracting it”). There is no ground to cast doubt on this reading. It becomes clear that with Iakob, the bishop went to a holy man – a religious figure - to ask about something; otherwise, the author would not use this epithet concerning him. However, the author does not specify his name for a simple reason – this man is not connected to the subject of his narrative. The author mentions him because Apots and himself went to this man to find out about something and because he probably could not go to the bishop due to his old age, illness, or a vow. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the pathos of the narrative of his section: “He went to a holy man to ask about something” – to the residence of a holy man to ask about *something*... It means that in this context, neither the person is essential, which is why it is “a holy man,” nor the subject, which the bishop tries to find out, that is why the problem is ‘something.’

Let us find out what ‘*vani*’ (residence) might mean.

The sentence should be interpreted as follows: Apots went to the residence of a holy man to find out something. Let us consider the holy man to be a religious figure. It is logical that the *vani*, where he is, must be a religious facility, the residence of a religious figure – a cell or a monastery.

But which? Which form of the above-listed activities can be presumed? Did the man reside in solitude, or could *Vani* imply a monastic unity?

Christianity recognizes three primary forms of ascetic practice: *anachoretic*, *lavral* and *cenobitic*. Anachoretic means living in solitude, while a person leading this life is called an anchorite or a hermit. They would settle in a desert or some other secluded site and try to conceptualize and conceive the notion of God. This practice became a religious lifestyle because of the many followers of such asceticism in the third century. The most renowned site for solitary life chosen by anchorites was the Desert of Thebaid in Egypt).

Lavra was a unity of monks in which members were essentially hermits. Each followed their way of spiritual life, but they were united around a leader (abba) as a single sizeable religious family. On Sundays and feasts, the brethren of a lavra would congregate in a typical church and conduct liturgy together. Lavra monasti-

cism was based on a close relationship with a specific virtuous person. There were no standard rules or a typicon, members of a lavra did not practice the tradition of dining together. Eventually, a lavra became a dense settlement, with the main church standing in the center and surrounded by a fence. Such architecture became a classical form of later-period Byzantine monasteries. After a certain period, a lavra was used to indicate simply a large monastery (Gabidzashvili, 2007, p. 476). *The Cenobitic* (κοινός+βίος, life in common) form of asceticism differed from the lavral one. It was based on the unity characterized by regulated community life of religious persons and strict discipline defined by the typicon.

RESULTS

What is the situation like in Georgia at the time?

K. Kekelidze suggests that the founding of early monasteries in Georgia must be associated with the beginning of activities of the Assyrian Fathers. M. Tamarashvili believes that in Georgia, “monastic life probably began not later than the fifth century since the priests sent from Constantinople or Antioch would not be able to ignore such a powerful means of distribution of the true faith” (Tamarashvili, 1995, pp. 334-345).

Based on recent research outcomes, D. Khoshtaria concludes that in Georgia, the first monasteries probably emerged not later than the fifth century, at least a century prior to the arrival of the Assyrian Fathers (Khoshtaria, 2001, p. 49). The scholar considers that the earliest source of the history of Georgian monasticism is the Greek inscription of the crypt of Tsilkani (“I, Tikas, and my monk, Abba Paranus, built this crypt with hewn stones for ourselves”), which, in terms of structure, content and paleographic features, must belong to the fourth-fifth centuries and must point to the burial of the monks of the monastery. This is evidenced by the remains of a hall-type church, which must be a rather old construction, revealed just three meters from the crypt. D. Khoshtaria considers that when Saint Ise of Tsilkani arrives in Tsilkani, there already exists a cathedral there, and he is ordained a bishop: “And Saint Ise became the bishop of Tsilkani and the grave of him, blissful, is still visible there” (Abuladze 1063, p. 229).

In the same period, there was another monastery in Kartli; an account about it is found in a Syrian document of the sixth century – in an epistle of Toma, superior of Beit Mar Isaak Gabuleli, which, apart from other information, contains that about the arrival of Mar Simeon, a Syrian monk, in Georgia. This fact took place in the 540s-550s. In Georgia, he visited Tana Monastery and anathematized unworthy bishops. According to G. Abramishvili, Tana Monastery must indicate Ateni – the

oldest and most important ecclesiastical centers of the Tana Gorge (Abramishvili, 1996, pp. 64-65). The original church was probably built here in the mid-fifth century, and this must also be the monastery's establishment date (Abramishvili, 1992, pp. 10-11). D. Khoshtaria suggests that the early dating of the monasteries of Ateni and Tsilkani gives grounds for our more careful approach to the account of the founding of Opiza Monastery in the second half of the fifth century, which is preserved in the 'Vita of Vakhtang Gorgasali' and which was considered to be an unreliable source by Georgian scholars (Kekelidze, Javakhishvili). Here, D. Khoshtaria notes that while discussing the early period of Georgian monasticism, it is necessary to consider the fact that a long time before the Assyrian fathers arrived in Kartli, there had existed Georgian monasteries in the Holy Land (mid-fifth century – the monastery of Iberians built by Peter the Iberian in Jerusalem, near Tower of David; the monastery of St. Theodore, discovered as a result of archaeological excavations near Bethlehem, as well as the monastery of Iberians in Jerusalem, which Procopius of Caesarea mention, are also associated with the name of Peter the Iberian, etc.) (Khoshtaria, 2001, pp. 53-54).

CONCLUSION

Thus, researchers conclude that in the fifth century, Georgian monasteries existed in Georgia and abroad. In contrast, the arrival of the Assyrian Fathers in Kartli in the mid-sixth century gave rise to asceticism - an eastern (Syrian) monastic practice – and the emergence of numerous new monasteries.

In old Georgian, *Vani* is a polysemic term meaning 1. *residence, dwelling*: 'many people came to *his residence (vani)*,' Acts 28:23; however, *sakhe/sakhed* is applied as its parallel from: "She (a Zoroastrian woman) came to Saint Shushanik to thank her and went back *home (sakhed)* delighted" (Abuladze 1063:23); "when dusk fell, she went to the entrance of the temple to the servants of his master, not to her home (*sakhed*)" (2 Kings, 11,13); 2. *Monastery/cell*: Hilarion the Iberian "built a *monastery (vani)*, let his mother into it and donated villages to it"; "I am not to blame if anyone goes back to their monastery (*vani*)" (Gogvadze, 1986, p. 177) [comp.: savane –(+14.8 Jerem. ZA)- residence ZAB; daivana (26, 17 Genesis) – camped ZAa). In "The Life of Grigol of Khandzta," *Vani* is used in the context opposite the *house*: "He owned villages *near the residence (savane)* of Blissful Grigol, when Grigol saw the poverty of his disciples, with God's will, he went to the *house* of Gabriel Dapanchuli." (Abuladze 1063:258). At the same time, *Vani* and *monastery* are used as *parallel forms*: "Blissful Father Grigol searched carefully and found a suitable place near Gunatle, blessed it, and a *monastery* of nuns was built there, now

called Gunatlis Vani. The priest conducting liturgy in this *monastery* (*vani*) was sent to Khandzta by Blissful Grigol on Gabriel's plea (Abuladze 1063:260). Moreover, they headed for the deserts in Samtskhe and Kartli and found two sites for the *monastery*, and built cells in both places. Tevdore's monastery (*vani*) was called Nedzvi, and that of Christepore – Kvirike-tsminda" (Abuladze 1063:279).

The above-mentioned gives grounds to assume that *vani*, where the holy man was staying, was a monastic complex, considering that we are dealing with the *cenobitic* form of monasticism here. But if this man is a hermit and ministers in solitude, then *vani* should mean a cell, a single-room residence of an anchorite.

Thus, in our opinion, the holy man is a religious person, a monk, whom Bishop Apots visits to ask about something. His dwelling – *vani* – is his cell, which could be the accommodation of an anchorite monk, or this cell could be part of a monastic complex since, as mentioned above, by this time in Georgia, there had already existed the communities of ecclesiastics that formed monasteries.

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