Creating an »Orthodox« Past: Georgian Hagiography and the Construction of a Denominational Identity

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In the early Middle Ages, Georgia consisted of two kingdoms. The western part was called Egrisi by the local inhabitants, and Lazica by the Byzantines and to the east of the Likhi range of mountains was Kartli, known as Iberia to outsiders. Egrisi was ruled from Constantinople for much of this period with vassal overlords, but Kartli was harder to control and its leaders often played the Byzantine and Persian Empires off against each other in order to maintain some autonomy over their territories. Until the early seventh century Kartli was under the religious jurisdiction of the Armenian Catholicos and officially non-Chalcedonian (miaphysite), but at the Council of Dvin in 610 the Kartvelians rejected Armenian ecclesiastical authority and declared an autocephalous Georgian Church. This new Church joined the Chalcedonian fold and accepted the authority of the patriarch of Constantinople.

One of the defining events of Georgian ecclesiastical history is the arrival of the Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers in Kartli in the sixth century. The *vitae* of these shadowy figures and their origins and doctrinal beliefs are still rigorously disputed today. The information given (or deliberately obscured) in eighth and ninth century accounts of the (As)Syrian Fathers is crucial for our understanding of how Kartvelian confessional identity evolved and was conflated with ideas of Kartvelian nationhood. This paper will explore the construction of Kartvelian national identity through the lens of ecclesiastical history and examine how past events, in particular the narrative of the (As)Syrian Fathers, were deliberately obfuscated in the quest to create an »Orthodox‹ past.

Keywords: Georgia; Egrisi/Lazica; Kartli/Iberia; Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers; monophysite; miaphysite; dyophysite

The country that we know today as Georgia consisted of two kingdoms in the early Middle Ages. The western part was called Egrisi by the local inhabitants and Lazica by the Byzantines. To the east of the Likhi range of mountains was Kartli, known as Iberia to outsiders. Egrisi was ruled from Constantinople for much of this period by vassal overlords who reported to the Byzantine emperor. However Kartli was harder to control and its leaders often played the Byzantine and Persian Empires off against each other in order to maintain autonomy over their territory.

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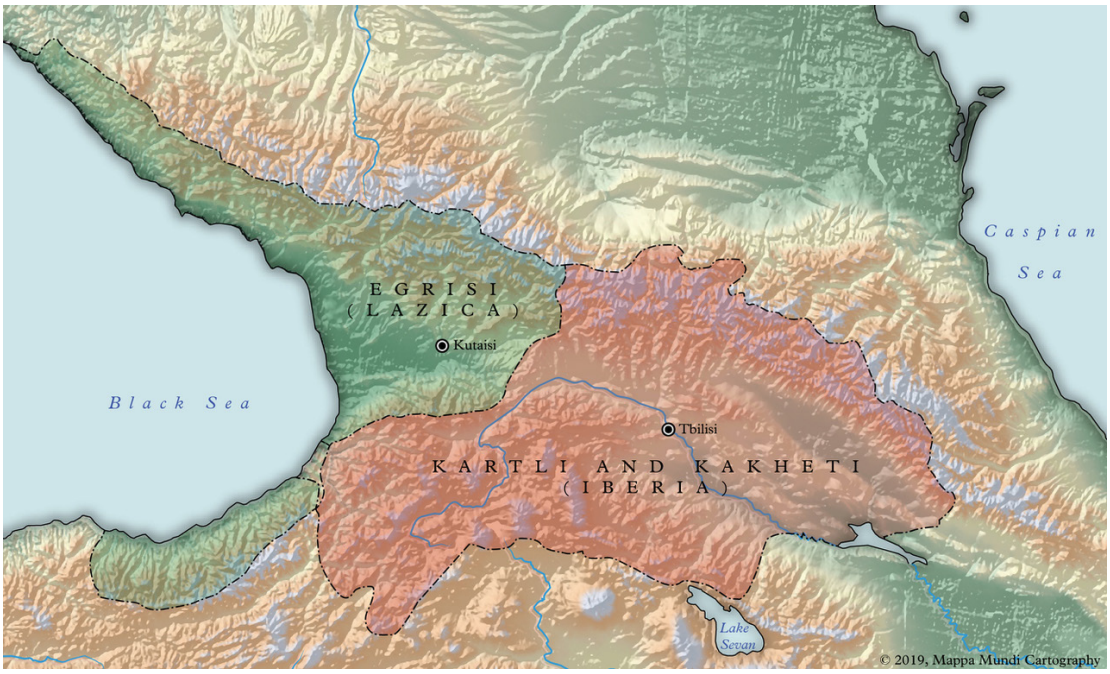

Fig. 1: Egrisi and Kartli in the eighth to tenth centuries

In this paper we will be concentrating on Kartli (eastern modern Georgia) and the events that brought the country into the Chalcedonian Orthodox fold. This discussion will look at these events through the hagiographical literature of Georgia and, in particular, the works relating to the Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers. We will explore how ostensibly devotional works of literature were manipulated by their writers to reflect the ecclesiastical politics of the seventh and eighth centuries rather than being the straightforward panegyrics to holy men that they purport to be.

At this point a brief digression is necessary to explain the confessional divisions of the Near East and the Caucasus from the sixth century onwards and why the events of the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) had such a formative role in the evolution of Christian Caucasian identity. The Council of Ephesus had led to the Church of the East (formerly pejoratively referred to as Nestorians) being anathematized for their perceived insistence on the humanity of Christ and not sufficiently recognising His divinity. This persecution by the Church hierarchy led those who rejected Ephesian teaching to migrate eastwards into Persian territory and ultimately found their own Church. Whereas most Christians in the Persian Empire were viewed with suspicion as possible fifth-columnists, possibly on a »enemy of my enemy is my friend« basis, those who rejected the Third Ecumenical Council were tolerated and, at times supported by, the shahs so that the Church of the East took root outside the environs of the Byzantine world. Twenty years later the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon led to the so-called monophysites (who are more accurately referred to as miaphysites) breaking with Constantinople over their insistence that Christ had one nature that was indivisibly human and divine at the same time. These non-Chalcedonian believers were increasingly persecuted by those who upheld the teachings of the Third Council and by the reign of the Emperor Justinian (527-565) the division had become so acrimonious that there was no way back. The Syriac-speaking heartlands around Edessa were a centre for non-Chalcedonian Christians and those who rejected Chalcedon eventually became the Syrian Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Churches (the Copts and Ethiopian Orthodox are also non-Chalcedonian, but they are of no concern for this paper).

This is where the issue of Kartvelian Christian identity begins to enter the picture. It is traditionally believed that Kartli was converted in the fourth century by a woman of Cappadocian origin named Nino. This event is placed in the 330s in the reign of King Mirian, with the story recounted in the text named *The Conversion of Kartli*.[1] The oldest extant manuscript of this was written c. 950 but it employs archaicisms that suggest to specialists that it was drawing upon source material dating back at least to the seventh century.[2] Interestingly the narrative is given credibility by the fact that certain passages of the text are supported by Rufinus' *Historia Ecclesiastica* of 403, telling us that the basic outlines of the conversion narrative were widely known in this period – although the conversion in Rufinus' text is performed by an unnamed »captive woman« and the figure of St. Nino, the Illuminator of Kartli, only emerges in later sources.[3] This textual evidence is also supported by archaeological finds suggesting an early Judaeo-Christian presence in and around Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Kartli.[4] Carbon dating on ecclesiastical sites in Kakheti in the east has shown that large basilicas were also being built near Caucasian Albania (the exact location of Albania is unknown but it is believed to have been located in the region of modern Azerbaijan) by the mid-fourth century,[5] suggesting that Christianity was well-established throughout the region by the end of the fourth century. However, despite the reference to the conversion of Kartli in Rufinus, there is extremely little textual evidence from Kartli itself in the early Middle Ages. We know that the Georgian alphabet developed in the fourth/fifth century and that this is when the Kartvelian language was written down for the first time. The earliest extant evidence for this comes from two inscriptions dated 430 and 432 respectively, found in the mid-twentieth century at Bir El Qutt between Bethlehem and Jerusalem in the Holy Land.[6] In Georgia itself the earliest evidence is an inscription on the exterior of the nave of Bolnisi Sioni church, in the south of Georgia, dated 494.[7] There are various hagiographical texts in Georgian that have been dated to the first few centuries after it became a written language, but it is the work known as *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, »the History of Kartli«, of which the *Conversion of Kartli* is a constituent part, that is the first literary account in Georgian of the political and religious history of the country.[8] This is significant because as a retrospective account of events it has more reason than most chronicles to obfuscate matters of religious authority and allegiance.

When we examine its ecclesiastical history, Georgia is something of an anomaly in denominational terms, as it remains the only early Christian nation to have changed its confessional identity. This change was formalised at the Third Council of Dvin in 609-610, but it remains unclear whether this was a sudden break or, more plausibly, the formal announcement of a parting of the ways that had occurred sometime previously. Whilst the picture is

1 Anonymous, Life of Saint Nino, trans. Wardrop, 3-88.

2 Rayfield, *Literature of Georgia.*

3 Rufinus of Aquileia, *Historia ecclesiastica*, trans. Amidon, 10:11.

4 Mgaloblishvili and Gagoshidze, Jewish diaspora and early Christianity.

5 Loosley Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism*, 50.

6 Corbo, Monastero di Bir El-Qutt, 110-139.

7 Rapp Jr, *Sasanian World*, 41.

8 *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, ed. Metreveli and Jones.

opaque, the fact is that in 610 Kartli officially changed from a non-Chalcedonian position in union with the Armenian Orthodox Church, and embraced Chalcedonian Orthodoxy and Constantinopolitan religious authority. Therefore, although we are not sure what the exact situation in the country was before the early seventh century, the assumption has been that whilst Egrisi (modern Western Georgia) was already in the Chalcedonian fold, in Kartli the Church was non-Chalcedonian. The primary evidence for this assumption is that the Church in Kartli was subservient to the Armenian Catholicos and therefore part of the autocephalous Armenian Church that was firmly miaphysite. However, as the late Tamila Mgaloblishvili cogently pointed out,[9] just because the hierarchy takes one doctrinal stance it does not mean that the wider populace all conform to this position and we cannot assume that the entire country was non-Chalcedonian simply on this basis. When we consider that all the Georgian written evidence of the split with the Armenian Church was written at least a hundred years after the events that they purport to relate,[10] this means that the history of the country is written exclusively from the viewpoint of Chalcedonian Orthodox court scribes and clerics giving a partial, and often confused, account of the ecclesiastical history of Kartli at a time when the confessional identity of the majority of the population remains unclear.

It is at this stage that it makes sense to turn to hagiography to try and elucidate the early ecclesiastical history of Kartli. As mentioned above, hagiography is the first surviving genre of original Georgian literary composition – as opposed to other early Georgian texts that utilised sources written in other languages and translated them into Georgian. The first original text in Georgian is the *Passion of Queen Shushanik* which purports to have been written by Shushanik's chaplain Iakob Tsurtavi, as an eye witness account of the late fifth century martyrdom of a Christian queen at the hands of her Zoroastrian husband.[11] As with many other early sources, the earliest extant manuscript of this text is six hundred years younger than the events of the narrative, but despite many later linguistic interpolations, the account is widely accepted as having substantial fifth-century content.[12] Obviously hagiographical texts dating back to the fifth century bear little information about doctrinal conflict unless they are written by clergy involved in the theological minutiae of the debate and so we cannot use this text or the handful of other early Georgian hagiographies to tell us about Kartvelian confessional identity, but one group of hagiographical works has been endlessly debated by Georgian scholars for signs of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy or otherwise and it is to these works that we shall now turn.

The most significant moment in early Georgian ecclesiastical history after the conversion of Kartli is the arrival of the *Asirieli Mamebi* (Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers) in Kartli in the sixth century. The *vitae* of these shadowy figures and their origins and doctrinal beliefs are still rigorously disputed by scholars today as they are credited with bringing monasticism

9 Tamila Mgaloblishvili, *pers. comm.,* 2013.

10 The only near contemporary accounts of these events are from the Armenian side, see Garsoïan, *L'Église Arménienne*. Rapp argues in *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes* that the *Conversion of Kartli* was produced in the years after the Third Council of Dvin and reflected this break with the Armenian tradition and the growing links with Byzantium; Rapp, 107.

11 See Peeters, Sainte Sousanik, 5-48 and 245-307 for a critical edition; see Lang, *Lives and Legends* for an English translation.

12 Rayfield, *Literature of Georgia*, 42.

to Kartli and founding the earliest and most influential monasteries in the country.[13] As is common for this era, and as we have found elsewhere in Georgian literature, the first written accounts of these Fathers were written in the eighth and ninth centuries and therefore they post-date the Third Council of Dvin and the rejection of non-Chalcedonian Christology in Kartli. These *vitae* of the (As)Syrian Fathers are crucial for our understanding of how Kartvelian confessional identity evolved because the authors have gone to great effort to link these figures to significant historical personages and artefacts in an effort to give their narratives a retrospective aura of authenticity. This information has become a key element in modern attempts to try and discover the confessional identity of these Fathers, and this exercise has become increasingly political in contemporary Georgia where adherence to Georgian Orthodoxy is now often viewed as synonymous with Georgian identity as a whole.[14]

It is perhaps instructive to begin our exploration of these sources with Ioane Zedazneli, who is regarded as the leader of the Thirteen Fathers, and, as the narratives imply that these figures did not all arrive together, was responsible for the first group of monks to arrive on Kartvelian territory. In the metaphrastic *vita* of Shio Mghvimeli it says that Ioane »ascended to the great luminary Symeon of the Admirable Mountain … who blessed Ioane and his disciples and they prayed before following the road to Kartli.«[15] The anomaly of this statement is that a number of Georgian commentators, including Korneli Kekelidze on whose work most contemporary arguments are based, have made the assumption that the Fathers were monophysite.[16] This interpretation of their doctrinal loyalties is problematic with regard to the *vita* cited above given that our evidence relating to Symeon Stylites the Younger (or Symeon of the Admirable Mountain) in his own *vita* and that of his mother Martha makes clear that he was an enthusiastic supporter of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy. Therefore he would not have offered his blessing, as the metaphrastic *vita* of Shio claims, to a group of monks fleeing northwards to escape persecution for their anti-Chalcedonian beliefs. Kekelidze does not acknowledge this fact in his work, but, on the contrary, remains clear in his view that these figures were non-Chalcedonian. Part of his argument is to point out that although much of the written evidence suggests that they had Chalcedonian sympathies, given that the texts were written post-610 in a Chalcedonian context they are unlikely to »reflect reality«.[17]

As evidence to back his interpretation of their faith, Kekelidze points to a famous episode in the *vita* of Davit Garejeli, another of the Thirteen Fathers. In this account Davit turns back suddenly from his pilgrimage within sight of Jerusalem believing himself unworthy of entering the holy city. He takes three stones from the hill that he has reached with him as *eulogiae* and turns away. In a vision he is asked to return the stones as he is told that they contain the Grace of the Lord and that he is removing this grace from Jerusalem, so he sends two stones back by messenger and retains the third, which he carries with him home to Kartli.

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13 Abuladze, *Dzveli kartuli agiograpiuli literaturis dzeglebi*. For more recent discussion (in English), see Loosley Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism* and for those who read Georgian the works of Matitashvili are an excellent introduction to the literature. In particular see Kartuli bermonazvnoba VI–VIII saukuneebshi: Sirieli Mamebi, 216-230.

14 The growing power of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the political narrative that the Church embodies the authentic mode of Georgian identity means that those belonging to ethnic and religious minorities in the country are increasingly marginalised as being »non-Georgian«, or, more dangerously, even viewed as »anti-Georgian«.

15 Translation author's own from Kekelidze, Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi, 103.

16 I use the term monophysite here as a direct translation of the Georgian sources.

17 Kekelidze, Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi, 103.

Kekelidze interprets this event as meaning that Davit feels unworthy of entering Jerusalem because of his monophysitism.[18] However, despite his place as the pre-eminent twentieth century Georgian historian on this subject, Kekelidze is an ambivalent (one could even say unreliable) interpreter of these sources as on the one hand he uses them to date the time that the Fathers arrived in Kartli, but on the other, he dismisses other elements of the texts on the basis that they were at least partially falsified in a later era and that this accounts for their often pro-Chalcedonian statements. This ambivalence is reflected in the somewhat startling interpretation he has of the assertion that the Fathers are purported to have spoken fluent Kartvelian (Georgian) even though they were native Syriac[19] speakers; for Kekelidze this circumstance is not miraculous as the *vitae* claim, but is more plausibly understood as being »no more no less than Kartvelians speaking Kartvelian to each other.«[20] This view that these figures were in fact ethnic Kartvelians returning to their homeland has found much support with contemporary Georgian scholars. It enables the Church to view these Fathers as homegrown Georgian saints and can be used, in direct opposition to Kekelidze's position, to argue for a pre-610 Chalcedonian presence in Kartli. One of the most forceful voices in favour of the view that the Thirteen Fathers were ethnic Georgians is Goiladze,[21] but his arguments have been contested by Matitashvili who takes issue with Goiladze's assertion that Georgians and »related tribes« had settled in north Mesopotamia and along its rivers:

> The author [Goiladze] believes that the Assyrian Fathers, who were Georgians by their mentality, moved towards Georgia from Edessa, but we cannot agree with this. Here again we have a case of the wrong interpretation of the source. Not one work on the lives of the Assyrian Fathers, nor any other medieval narratives or epigraphical sources mention the Georgian origins of the Syrian Fathers (or that they were monophysites, however V. Goiladze believes that they were dyophysites) in the slightest reference to their origins, but the researchers frequently draw attention to the appeal of their own interpretation and how the sources prove their ideas, which are explained in a highly subjective manner. Accordingly we must conclude that the Assyrian Fathers who came to Kartli were dyophysite Syrian figures.[22]

Whilst Matitashvili is using Georgian literary sources to refute Goiladze's argument it must also be noted that no archaeological evidence has yet been found of any Georgian presence on Syrian or Mesopotamian territory except for the Georgian monasteries built around Antioch in the eighth-tenth centuries. In addition there is a lot of extant literary evidence from Edessa, but nobody has yet made reference to extensive Georgian settlement in the city in Late Antiquity. When we take this combination of factors into account, Matitashvili's view that Goiladze has interpreted the information in an especially subjective manner is fully justified, even if his own arguments for seeing the Fathers as dyophysite Syrians are largely unsubstantiated.

18 Kekelidze, Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi, 99.

19 The Georgian historians refer to them as speaking Aramaic or Assyrian, but as they are ascribing a miaphysite identity to these men then we should make the assumption that they would have been speaking the Syriac vernacular that spread across Syria and Mesopotamia.

20 Kekelidze, Sakitkhi siriel moghvatseta kartulshi, 103-104.

21 Goiladze, *Asurel mamata samsshoblo da sakartvelo*. This is a self-published booklet.

22 Translation author's own from Matitashvili, Kartuli bermonazvnoba VI–VIII saukuneebshi, 226-227.

Referring back to Mgaloblishvili's comments on the difficulties of establishing what the confessional beliefs of Kartvelian Christians were before 610, it is clear that we must use an interdisciplinary approach to try and elucidate the problem. Given the relative paucity of texts on the subject, it makes sense to include also information from the material culture of the time to try and bring an extra perspective to bear on the problem. Mgaloblishvili herself took this view by working with the archaeologist Iulon Gagoshidze to explore the veracity of the stories in the *Conversion of Kartli* of positive Jewish-Christian interactions and she believed that the same approach would help identify the confessional identities of the Thirteen Fathers, who she was convinced arrived at different times throughout the sixth century from various locations and, accordingly, followed different doctrinal beliefs.[23] In particular she believed that some of the stories of the easternmost Fathers, such as Abibos Nekreseli, pointed to Persian origins, whilst other accounts, such as that relating to Ioane Zedazneli, pointed to a Syro-Palestinian identity. Following this logic, these figures can be considered to have arrived from various countries of origin and it could be argued that their confessional identities would have been similarly varied. Mgaloblishvili also endorsed the view of Kekelidze that it was extremely unlikely that there were thirteen Fathers – this number was a synonym for »many« and was chosen for its obvious Biblical resonance.

Returning to the arguments relating to disparate doctrinal beliefs, the story of Abibos Nekreseli is one that offers us particular reasons to argue for the varied origins of the Fathers. We have already encountered the narrative of Ioane Zedazneli in the metaphrastic *vita* of Shio Mghvimeli that places Ioane and his disciples at Symeon the Younger's monastery in the environs of Antioch, which, despite the narrator's reference to them being miaphysite, suggests that these figures were Chalcedonian monks. The narrative of Abibos situates him in the context of the Persian Empire and paints him as an indefatigable opponent of Zoroastrianism, which would logically suggest that he was most likely an adherent of the Church of the East. The cultural affinity of Kakheti with Persia and the porous borders of the time makes it clear that there was a great deal of movement between Persia and its client state of Kartli in this period – in fact these themes are clearly mentioned in the fifth-century *Passion of Queen Shushanik* mentioned above – therefore it seems entirely plausible that some of these Fathers were Assyrian Christians (members of the Church of the East), just as others espoused Chalcedonian Orthodoxy and yet others supported the non-Chalcedonian stance of the Kartvelian Church in the sixth century. Whilst this would seem to many to be a fairly straightforward and uncontroversial statement, in contemporary Georgia it is far from easy to make such a case without eliciting strong reactions. When Mgaloblishvili died last year, her long-term research on Peter the Iberian remained unpublished, at least in part because of her difficulty in overcoming Church opposition to work on Peter due to the suspicion that he was non-Chalcedonian. In reality we do not know with certainty where he stood on this debate because, as with many other people who lived in the mid-fifth century, it is unclear if he realised how cataclysmic the long-term effects of the Council of Chalcedon would become.

23 Tamila Mgaloblishvili, *pers. comm.,* 2013.

Accepting the argument for waves of small groups of monks arriving from different locations at different times in the sixth century is strengthened by the fact that Kekelidze suggested this in his work back in the 1920s, along with the assertion that the number thirteen had been chosen for its Biblical resonance rather than for any logical reasons of authenticity. This line is also followed by Zaza Aleksidze who attempts to cross-reference the varying names and *vitae* of the Thirteen Fathers. He explains that some manuscripts list as many as fifteen or sixteen Fathers and that, given the names do not exactly map on to each other across manuscripts, there are even more »Fathers« if we were to list all variants from all extant sources.[24] His solution to this question is to suggest that as the accounts got further and further from their origins, more and more layers of interpretation were added to the texts, so that ultimately prominent disciples of the original Fathers were included amongst their number, causing the disparities in names and numbers.

This is important because Aleksidze attempts to understand how a notable relic, namely the *mandylion*, came to be employed as a mark of authenticity in *vitae* relating to one group of Fathers, just as Symeon the Younger was used for the same purpose to authenticate the journey of the group including Ioane and Shio. Aleksidze discovered that the earlier strata of the *vitae* clearly differentiated between the »Icon of Edessa« (*mandylion*) and its secondary relic the *keramidion*. His research demonstrates that the *keramidion* of Hierapolis was reputedly translated to Kartli by Ezderios/Isidore Nabukeli, later known as Isidore Samtavneli, one of the Thirteen Fathers, who took the role of »censer and servant of the *keramidion*«.[25] The *vitae* then suggest that a later group included Theodosius/Tadeoz/Tata of Urhai (Edessa) bearing the »Icon of Edessa« (*mandylion*) to Kartli and that he settled there near Isidore and became known as Theodosius Rekhali or Stepantsmindeli. The significance of this earlier testimony is that whilst both Isidore and Theodosius are still counted amongst the Thirteen Fathers, today they are joined by Anton Martqopeli who is also listed as the Father who translated the *keramidion* to Kartli, although at some point this has shifted from the secondary relic to the primary icon. Today visitors to Martqopi, his eponymous monastery, are shown modern frescoes showing Anton bearing the *mandylion* and monks tell visitors that the relic is secreted safely somewhere on the territories of the monastery awaiting someone pure of heart to reveal its location.[26]

This digression concerning the personages linked to the *mandylion* and *keramidion* is important for two reasons. Firstly Aleksidze has deftly demonstrated what Kekelidze posited, but failed to prove in detail; later accretions to the *vitae* of the Fathers grew more implausible in terms of the Fathers' origins and tied them ever closer to a Chalcedonian interpretation of events. They also included mention of notable personages and artefacts in an effort to anchor them firmly in the chosen historical milieu and offer »authenticity« to the narratives. The second factor we need to consider is that the *vitae* are the only evidence to support this narrative of a link with Edessa and Kartli. There is no reference to these figures in Syriac literature and, although there are competing narratives as to the fate of the *mandylion*, the stories linked to the Thirteen Fathers and the *mandylion* and *keramidion* are unknown outside

24 Aleksidze, Mandilioni da keramioni and *id.*, New recensions.

25 Aleksidze, Mandilioni da keramioni, 13.

26 Based on the author's visit to Martqopi in 2016.

Georgia. In fact, in contemporary Georgia the most significant relic associated with the *mandylion* today is Anchiskhati (»the image of Ancha«).[27] This *mandylion*-type encaustic icon dates back to the sixth century and remained in Ancha, a Georgian city that was overrun by Ottoman Turks in the seventeenth century, at which point it was translated to the Kartvelian heartlands to protect it. Therefore it becomes clear that by the tenth century the chroniclers were deftly constructing an alternative Georgian ecclesiastical past that tied the country into significant events in the surrounding territories and, subtly or overtly, increasingly glossed over the doctrinal ambiguities of the past to present a society that had always, at heart, been loyal to Chalcedonian Orthodoxy.

Why was this recasting of Kartvelian doctrinal identity so necessary and why does it still matter so deeply? One factor is the longstanding enmity between Georgia and her Armenian neighbour. Divided by language and ethnicity, although culturally not entirely unrelated, the Georgian Church chafed at being subordinate to the Armenian Catholicos in Late Antiquity and it is still seen as a matter of national humiliation today. To admit that this was the sole reason to break with the Armenian Church would risk placing human hubris above divine law and so insisting that the division was solely down to the need to reject a »heretical« doctrinal stance has become a necessary fiction to satisfy national pride.

If we accept that there was undoubtedly a political dimension to these events, we can see that embracing Chalcedonian Orthodoxy meant suggesting a cultural affinity with Constantinople and fellow Kartvelian-speakers in Egrisi, rather than with non-Chalcedonian Armenia that was culturally linked with Persia and in doctrinal union with Syriac-speaking Christians from Mesopotamia and Northern Syria. It signified west-facing ecclesiastical and political classes who wished to use Byzantine power to push back the influence of Persian culture. Whether this was strongly the case in the sixth century is unclear, but by the tenth century, when many of the later *vitae* were written, Kartli had been ravaged by the Arabs and repeatedly pillaged by the Persians. As an early target for Arab expansion it is easy to see how a narrative linking Kartli to an ancient Christian power was desirable at this time; playing on an ancient loyalty to Constantinople, suggesting a »pure« Chalcedonian past was a valuable aid when Kartli needed Byzantine support against eastern and southern aggression. Once again it also outlined how they differed from Armenia – as »heretics« the Armenians had placed themselves beyond mainstream Christianity and were therefore unable to expect as much sympathy and aid from their co-religionists to help them negotiate a place in an Arab- and Persian-dominated era.

If this is the case, then why has the story of the »Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers« retained its importance in the national consciousness? St. Nino is believed to have been Cappadocian and later recensions of her story have embroidered her a backstory that links her family to the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Why did Kartli also need to have these foreign monks as part of their religious heritage? Here, again, we can perhaps see seeds of local rivalries influencing these narratives. Armenia has long claimed primacy as the first Christian nation in the world, it was because of the older and more established Church hierarchy in Armenia that

27 Here I am referring to the icon of this name housed in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Art in Tbilisi, not the basilica of the same name in the old city of Tbilisi.

Kartli was subservient to the Armenian Church in the first place. Edessa in Mesopotamia has long claimed the laurels for being the first city-state to officially proclaim Christianity as its official religion and Syro-Palestinian Christianity could, for obvious reasons, claim the oldest Christian communities of all. Therefore, if Kartvelian ecclesiastics wanted to claim a link with ancient forms of monasticism it added a layer of mystique and added authenticity to suggest that the first Kartvelian monasteries were founded by exceptional ascetics who had trained in Syria and exported their way of life to the Caucasus in an attempt to escape persecution and experience the peace of the valleys, mountains and steppe of the region. Of course, we are still left with the question as to why foreigners needed to perform this function when epigraphy and archaeology has provided copious evidence of Kartvelian monasteries in the Holy Land from the early fifth century onwards. Why do the *vitae* not cast the Fathers as monks returning from the monasteries in the vicinity of Bethlehem and Jerusalem to their ancestral territory to spread ascetic practices to their Kartvelian brethren? This is a question that needs a great deal of further exploration.

Naturally, ecclesiastical history was a forbidden genre of study for most of the twentieth century in Georgia and an emphasis on national identity and ethnicity rather than doctrine and ascetic practice was the only way that such research could pass the censors. Consequently, this is a growing area of study today as scholars are not only free to research these issues unhindered, but, with the internet and freedom of travel, they also have more opportunity to pursue comparative studies and place this material into a wider context. It is to be hoped that hardening doctrinal stances across the Eastern Orthodox world will not prevent this kind of research evolving and that a measured, informed debate can develop. This will enable us to further explore how the construction of confessional identities has shaped the formation of contemporary Caucasian nation states and is still relevant to questions of Caucasian Christian identity today.

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Figure 1: Egrisi and Kartli in the eighth to tenth centuries