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**The Canonical Status of the Iberian (Eastern Georgian) Church during
Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages**

MA Thesis in Late Antique, Medieval and Early Modern Studies

Central European University Private University

Vienna

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Shota Matitashvili

(Georgia)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,
Central European University Private University, Vienna, in partial fulfillment of the
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Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

Chair, Examination Committee

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Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, **Shota Matitashvili**, candidate for the MA degree in Late Antique, Medieval and Early Modern Studies, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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Abstract

The eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia was converted to Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century. One of the most important questions regarding the Christianization of Georgia was the relation of the Church of Iberia with other neighboring churches. The canonical status of the Georgian church is one of the major problems in this context.

What was the canonical status of the eastern Georgian Church of Iberia during late antique and medieval periods? What was the place of the Iberian Church in the ecclesiastical system of the Christian East? There was a great variety of scholarly opinions about this vexed issue. According to one of the most widespread theories, after the conversion to Christianity of Georgia, the Church of Iberia fell under the jurisdiction of Antioch. Another theory claimed that the Iberian Church was under the jurisdiction of the Armenian Church. However, as it appears, both these theories lack any compelling evidence.

In my study I argue that the most important ecclesiastical centers for the Church of Iberia were Constantinople and Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Only in the context of the relation with the Byzantine and the Persian churches we can clearly understand the place of the Georgian Church among other eastern Christian communities during late antiquity and early middle ages.

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Introduction

Almost all Georgian and non-Georgian sources agree that the Iberian kingdom¹ was converted to Christianity by a young Christian virgin often described as a ‘captive’ known in the Georgian sources as Nino. Later Georgian and Armenian sources depict this young woman as a refugee from the Roman empire. Pious legends tell about her childhood and later life.² According to these legends, she was born to the Roman aristocratic parents who devoted their life to Christian asceticism. Nino dedicated her life to asceticism and missionary activity. God led her to the ‘northern’ country of Iberia where she conducted many healings and miracles. After the conversion of the queen Nana, king Mirian III (ca. 284-362)³ was also converted by

¹ For the Greek and Roman historians, the Eastern Georgian kingdom was known as Iberia, while in Georgian sources it was called *K’art’li* and *Gurzān* in Middle Persian. *Colchis* was the Greek name for the Western Georgian kingdom, Stephen H. Rapp, Jr. *The Sassanian World Through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2016), 21; Cyril Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1963), 59, 67, 84; David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 BC-AD 562* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 8-39.

² For the various sources about the life of St. Nino see Zaza Aleksidze, ‘Four Recensions of ‘The Conversion of K’art’li,’ in *Caucasus Christianus*, II. ed. Dali Chitunashvili (Tbilisi: National Centre of Manuscripts, 2011), 100-104; Stephen H. Rapp, Jr. *The Sassanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 105-185. Stephen H. Rapp, Jr and Paul Crego, “The Conversion of K’art’li: The Shatberdi Variant (Kek. Inst.S-1141)” in *Languages and Cultures of Eastern Christianity: Georgian*, ed. Stephen H. Rapp, Jr. and Paul Crego (London: Routledge, 2012), 105-125. [Mariam Chkhartishvili] მარიამ ჩხარტიშვილი, *ქართული ჰაგიოგრაფიის წყაროთმცოდნეობითი შესწავლის პრობლემები* [*The problems of source study research of Georgian hagiography: The Life of St. Nino*] (Tbilisi: Mec’niereba, 1987), 24-34; Shota Matitashvili, ‘Female Asceticism in Late Antique Georgian Literature: The Life of St. Nino,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 75 (2020): 1-25.

³ He was known to the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus as *Meribanes*. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, 83-84, 377, Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 259.

miraculous events when he was hunting in the woods. Thus, the conversion of Iberia begun.⁴ King Mirian sent his envoys to the emperor Constantine to ask for clergy for the newly-established Church of Iberia. The first bishops who came from the Roman empire were called John and Jacob.⁵ They became the first prelates of the Iberian church, first John and, then, Jacob. Now, the main question arises in this regard: from where did Christianity spread in Iberia and did the Iberian church fall under the jurisdiction of any great ecclesiastical center?

Scholars sought to discover the sources of the major influences on early Georgian Christianity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a Georgian-Scottish scholar Nicholas Marr along with his disciple Ivane Javakhishvili and the philologist Korneli Kekelidze promoted the idea of the ‘eastern’ influence on early Georgian Christian culture. This theory claimed that from the fourth up to the eighth (or even ninth) century Georgia was under the strong impact of Syriac and Armenian Christianity. Georgians actively adopted Syrian and Armenian literature and liturgical tradition. But after the eighth century Georgians turned their back to this ‘eastern Christianity’ and turned towards Byzantium.⁶ However, this theory is an oversimplification and schematization of the history of early Georgian Christianity. As it

⁴ According to the general scholarly opinion, the conversion of Iberia happened during 324-330, [Nodar Lomouri] ნოდარ ლომოური, *ნარკვევები ქართლის (იბერიის) სამეფოს ისტორიიდან* [*Studies in the History of the Kingdom of K'ar'tli (Iberia)*] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1975), 79-83.

⁵ Constantine Lerner, *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography: The Early Medieval Historical Chronicle 'The Conversion of Kartli' and 'The Life of St. Nino'* (London: Bennett and Bloom, 2004), 145-147.

⁶ Nicholas Marr, ‘Крещение армян, грузин, абхазов и аланов святым григорием (арабская версия) [Baptism of Armenians, Georgians, Abkhaz and Alans by St. Gregory (the Arabic Version)],’ *Zapiski Vostochnogo Otdeleniya Imperatorskogo Russkogo Obchestvo* 16 (1904-1905: 54-149; [Ivane Javakhishvili] ივანე ჯავახიშვილი, *თხზულებანი თორმეტ ტომად* [*The collection of the works in twelve volumes*] (Tbilisi: Tbilisis universitetis gamomc'emloba, 1977), 105-106; [Korneli Kekelidze] კორნელი კეკელიძე, *ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია* [*The history of old Georgian literature*] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1980), 523-525.

appears, Iberia was strongly oriented towards Constantinople already at a very early stage of Christianization. I argue that Georgians often (even if not always) appealed to Constantinople for the consecration of their bishops. This does not exclude tight connections to other churches. This means that the historical circumstances were much more complicated than it was imagined by the twentieth-century scholarship.

The Church of Iberia and the Eastern Christian World

As it is well-known, from the first century Christian communities were established throughout the Roman empire and even outside the empire. The main body of the ecclesiastical hierarchy consisted of a bishop, priest and a deacon. Every Christian community was under the supervision of a bishop. During centuries bishops of the great cities acquired more power and influence. These bishops received the title of *Metropolitan* (μητροπολίτης) because they resided in the chief cities (μητρόπολις) of the empire. They resided in the centers of a province of the Roman empire and administered the Christian community of this province. After the fourth century, the most powerful among the metropolitans, namely, the bishops of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch, spread their influence over various provinces of the empire. In the sixth century this process ended in the formation of *Pentarchy* (Πενταρχία) or the rule of the five patriarchs (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem). During the early middle ages they sought to spread their influence over the Christian communities who lived outside the Byzantine empire (see below).

My master thesis discusses the place of the Church of Iberia in this ecclesiastical structure (which means its canonical status). While I am focusing on the canonical issues, I will avoid (but not entirely) the discussion about the theological or doctrinal stance of the Iberian church during this period (which is another great aspect of the late antique and early medieval

Georgian church). The main questions of my master thesis are: what kind of canonical relation had the Church of Iberia with other neighboring churches? Did the Georgian church fall under the canonical jurisdiction of any other great church? From which great ecclesiastical centers spread Christianity in Iberia? And, how was this process related to the canonical status of the Iberian church?

Here also appears the problem of the definition of the concept of autocephaly. The term *autocephaly* (αὐτοκεφαλία or the self-governance) is traditionally interpreted as the ecclesiastical independence of the local church unit from any other great ecclesiastical center (for example, the Church of Cyprus is a self-governing or independent church and is not under the jurisdiction of any other church). According to the most widely-accepted theory, the Church of Iberia received its autocephaly or independent ecclesiastical status from the Church of Antioch (in the fifth or in the eleventh century). But I argue that during late antiquity autocephaly did not have the meaning which it acquired during the high and later middle ages (and during the nineteenth century when Balkan states fought for their political and ecclesiastical independence). Often, the nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars projected the modern concepts on late antiquity and the early middle Ages. But this kind of interpretation of historical events is certainly misleading. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries great ecclesiastical centers (Constantinople, Moscow and etc.) gave independent status to the communities which were under their jurisdiction. But in the early Christian period the situation was different. Every Christian community was an independent unit. Through the process of the centralization in the Roman empire, they lost their independence and fell under the jurisdiction of the great patriarchates.

Sources and Methodology

The two major Georgian sources for the investigation of the history of late antique and medieval Georgia are *ქართლის მოქცევა* (*The Conversion of Georgia*) and *ქართლის ცხოვრება* (*The Life of Georgia*). Both these sources have a long and complicated history of edition. Both of them consist of various layers which are dated to different times and it is often extremely difficult to distinguish these layers from each other.

The Conversion of Georgia was found in 1888 by Nicholas Marr.⁷ *The Conversion* consists of two parts. The first part is a historical chronicle: it describes the history of Georgia (mainly eastern Georgia) from the fourth century B.C. up to the ninth century A.D.⁸ Presumably, the first edition of the historical part of *The Conversion of Georgia* was composed in the beginning of the seventh century (before the Arab invasion).⁹ The composition of the chronicle went through the long way from the seventh century till the ninth century. In the ninth century an unknown editor added to this chronicle a list of presiding princes and the prelates of the Iberian church and edited the whole chronicle.¹⁰ The second part of *The Conversion of Georgia* is the so called extended edition of *The Life of St. Nino* – one of the major medieval

⁷ For the discussion of the history of the publication and various editions see Stephen Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Context* (Lovanii: In Aedibus Peeters, 2003), 245-248.

⁸ Stephen H. Rapp, Jr. *The Sassanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 105-185. Stephen H. Rapp, Jr and Paul Crego, “The Conversion of K’art’li: The Shatberdi Variant (Kek. Inst.S-1141),” 105-125.

⁹ Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 246-247. [Korneli Kekelidze] კორნელი კეკელიძე, [Alexandre Baramidze] ალექსანდრე ბარამიძე, *ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია* [*The history of the old Georgian literature*] (Tbilisi: TSU gamomc’emloba, 1987), 60.

¹⁰ [Kekelidze...] *ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია*, 60.

Georgian hagiographical compositions which is dated to the eighth and ninth centuries.¹¹ Obviously, these two parts of *The Conversion of Georgia* are separate compositions united in the ninth century. An unknown author of the latest edition of this work apparently had the intention to narrate the history of pagan and, then, Christian Georgia. *The Conversion of Georgia* gives a fragmentary information about the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Georgian church. Here, the glimpses of the historical reality are mixed with the pious legends and oral tradition. However, decades of scholarly work enabled historians to decipher the authentic information preserved in this early medieval Georgian chronicle.

The Life of Georgia is a collection of the royal annals. It was composed from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries and consists of various chronicles. *The Life of the Kings* is the first account in the corpus of *The Life of Georgia*. It describes the ancient history of Georgia from the times immemorial up to the conversion to Christianity (the reign of king Mirian III).¹² Medieval Georgian tradition ascribes its authorship to the eleventh-century Georgian bishop Leontius of Urbnisi.¹³ However, Steven Rapp argues that *The Life of the Kings* was composed in ca. 800 by an unknown author.¹⁴ *The Life of the Kings* is followed by a brief historical chronicle depicting the life and deeds of the successors of king Mirian III.¹⁵ After this brief account comes *The Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali* narrates about the life of three Georgian kings

¹¹ However, I argue that the origins of this remarkable hagiographical composition goes back to late antiquity (fifth and sixth centuries), see Shota Matitashvili, ‘Female Asceticism in Late Antique Georgian literature,’ 4-5.

¹² Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 101-105; [Korneli Kekelidze...] *ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია*, 129; Rapp, *Sassanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 187.

¹³ [Kekelidze...] *ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია*, 129-130.

¹⁴ Rapp, *Sassanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 187-260

¹⁵ Rapp, *Sassanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 261

– Arčil I (ca. 422-437) who was the brother of Peter the Iberian’ grandfather,¹⁶ Mirdat V (ca. 437-447) and Vaxt’ang I Gorgasali (ca. 442-502).¹⁷ Rapp also places its creation in ca. 800.¹⁸ According to the medieval Georgian tradition the author of *The Life of Vaxt’ang Gorgasali* is an eighth-century Georgian nobleman – Juansher Juansheriani. This medieval claim was seriously questioned by the twentieth-century scholarship but recently the authenticity of this claim was revisited.¹⁹ The next account is *The continuation* of Vaxtang’s life. It was also ascribed to Juansher but this is even more doubtful than the Juansher’s authorship of king Vaxtang’s *Life*. Rapp denotes this unknown author of *The Continuation* as Ps. Jaunsher. This account covers the period from the end of the sixth century to the end of the eighth century.²⁰ And last accounts of *The Life of Georgia* narrating the historical events in late antique and early medieval Georgia are *The History of K’art’li* and *The Life and Tale of Bagrationis*.²¹

These major late antique and early medieval accounts preserved a great deal of information about the ecclesiastic hierarchy of Georgia. The main difficulty arises when scholars try to explain various contradictions and anachronisms of the data. The part of the

¹⁶ John Rufus: *The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem, and the monk Romanus*, edited and translated with an introduction and notes by Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix Jr. Writings from the Greco-Roman World, Number 24 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical literature, 2008), 8 no. 2-9.

¹⁷ I do not agree with the chronology of Vaxt’ang’s life and reign proposed by Cyril Toumanoff. Toumanoff’s chronology lacks any serious basis. He associated Georgian king Gurgenes (who after anti-Sasanian rebellion in 523 escaped in Byzantium) mentioned by the sixth century Byzantine historian Procopius with Vaxt’ang Gorgasali based on the alleged similarity of the name ‘Gurgenes’ and Vaxt’ang’s nickname ‘Gorgasali,’ Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, 360-382. There are various chronologies of Vaxt’ang’s life and reign given by scholars, but I prefer most widely accepted dates established by Ivane Javakhishvili,

¹⁸ Rapp, *Sasanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 271

¹⁹ [Leri Tavadze] ლერი თავაძე, *საქართველო VIII საუკუნეში: პოლიტიკური ისტორია* [*Georgia in the eighth century: a political history*] (Tbilisi: Universal, 2020), 15-17.

²⁰ Rapp, *Sasanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 331-333.

²¹ Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 338-340.

evidence recorded in these accounts enabled scholars to reconstruct the major events of the late antique and early medieval ecclesiastical history of Georgia to some extent. Both *The Conversion of Georgia* and *The Life of Georgia* have lists of the prelates of the Georgian church from the beginning of the fourth century to the end of the ninth century. However, due to the later elaborations and editions these lists are distorted and incomplete (the names of some of the prelates are omitted, distorted or replaced to a different period).²² The lists were specially studied and critically investigated during the twentieth century. After the painstaking research of generations of scholars, we can deduce some authentic information from these lists. The two lists also complete each other because when one list lacks the names of some prelates of the Iberian church, another one adds this missing information. Of course, there are several chronological layers of the lists. The original list could be created in the beginning of the seventh century and it was certainly based on earlier, now lost, accounts.

Another major Georgian sources for the research of the canonical status of the Georgian church is the famous account of the eleventh-century Georgian theologian and ecclesiastic writer Ephraim Mc'ire ('the Lesser') (ეფრემ მცირე) about the ecclesiastical history of Georgia.²³ Ephraim was an excellently learned expert of the Byzantine literature. He intended

²² [Michael Tarnichsvili] მიხეილ თარხნიშვილი, *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია დასაბამიდან მე-7 საუკუნის დასასრულამდე* [*The history of the Georgian church from the beginning up to the end of the seventh century*] (Tbilisi: Universal 2014), 316-320; But these are two major lists. There had been preserved other lists of the Georgian catholicoi dated by various periods, [Polievktos Karbelashvili] პოლიექტოს კარბელაშვილი, *იერარქია საქართველოს ეკლესიისა: კათალიკოსნი და მღვდელთმთავარნი* [*The hierarchy of the Georgian Church: catholicoi and bishops*] (Tbilisi: Kabadoni, 2010), 19-20.

²³ [Ephraim Mc'ire] ეფრემ მცირე, *უწყებაჲ მიზეზსა ქართველთა მოქცევისასა* [*Narrative on the Reason for the Conversion of the Georgians*], ed. [Tama Bregadze] თამარ ბრეგაძე (Tbilisi, 1959), 012-014. Ephraim was a member of the eleventh-twelfth-century Georgian intellectual circle. They translated a large body of Classical and Byzantine theological and philosophical literature into

to gather all kinds of information preserved in the Byzantine theological, historical and canonical literature about the Georgian church. As a result, he produced his informative account. However, in his account Ephraim often unquestionably accepts data given by the Byzantine authors, without any critical evaluation.

Other Georgian sources include the hagiographical works, liturgical books and epigraphy. The late antique Georgian literature gives us some information about the Georgian hierarchy and ecclesiastical relations with other churches. The liturgical books reveal how the various liturgical practices were adopted by the Iberian church. Of course, this kind of influence was a part of the network of ecclesiastical relations where the Iberian church had its own place.²⁴ From the liturgical practice of these churches was derived the liturgy of the Georgian church. This fact can tell much about the canonical relation of the Georgian church with other local churches, while epigraphy gives us the names of some of the distinguished Georgian bishops and information about the territory of their jurisdiction.²⁵

Archeology has a major importance for the reconstruction of the historical picture of early Georgian Christianity. Written materials are extremely scarce and full of pious imagination introduced by later hagiographers. Many expeditions organized by Soviet

Georgian. In their translation, the eleventh and twelfth-century Georgian intellectual milieu was influenced by the ideas of Aristotle and Neoplatonic philosophers. During this process of the adaptation of the great Greek and Byzantine thinkers, Georgian translators elaborated their own methods of translation and interpretation of the Greek texts (and these methods differed from each other), Elguja Khintibidze, *Georgian-Byzantine Literary Contacts* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert Publisher, 1996), 55-74.

²⁴ [Tamila Mgaloblishvili] თამილა მგალობლიშვილი, *კლარჯული მრავალთავი [The Klardjeti polyecephalon]* (Tbilisi: mec'niereba, 1991), 131-202.

²⁵ ქართული წარწერების კორპუსი: ლაპიდარული წარწერები, I: აღმოსავლეთ საქართველო (V-X საუკუნეები) [The Georgian lapidary inscriptions: eastern Georgia (fifth-tenth centuries)], ed. [Nodar Shoshiashvili] ნოდარ შოშიაშვილი (Tbilisi: Sak'art'velos mec'nierebat'a academia, 1980).

archeologists during decades shed the light on the many aspects of pagan and early Christian Georgia. The investigation of the archeological materials enables scholars to track the geography and intensity of the spread of Christianity and compare these materials to the written sources.²⁶ The archeological excavations of Mc'xet'a revealed the highly developed culture of ancient Iberia.²⁷ Iberia was connected with various routes to the major centers of the Hellenistic world. The Roman and the Parthian (and then, the Sasanian) empires had major influence on Iberia and other Caucasian countries (Armenia and Albania).²⁸ Not surprisingly Iberia soon became the home for the Jews and Manicheans. Also, Christianity spread earlier than the fourth century (especially in western Georgia). The revolutionary change marked by the conversion to Christianity naturally found its expression in the archeological materials. The main center for the spread of Christianity was Mc'xet'a. The archeological research of Mcxet'a and its outskirts exposes the rapid spread of the new religion.²⁹ However, one wave of the spread of Christianity was not enough. The materials indicate that if the one generation in a family was Christian, the second could be pagan again.³⁰ Various pre-Christian habits and traditions never died, especially in the Georgian highlands. What is important to us here is that archeological materials reveal the main centers for the spread of Christianity in Georgia. They confirm many

²⁶ [Giorgi Lomtadze] გიორგი ლომთათიძე, *საქართველოს მოსახლეობის კულტურა და ყოფა I-XIII საუკუნეებში* [*The culture and everyday-life of Georgian population in first to thirteenth centuries*] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1977), 56-72; [Aleksi Bokhochadze] ალექსი ბოხოჩაძე, *არქეოლოგიური გათხრები აგაიანსა და ძალისაში* [*Archeological excavations in Agaiani and Dzalisa: the works of archeological expedition of Nastakisi*], vol. I (Tbilisi, 1981), 24-25.

²⁷ Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 211-238.

²⁸ Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 152-238.

²⁹ [Lomtadze], *საქართველოს ყოფა და კულტურა I-XIII საუკუნეებში*, 56-88.

³⁰ [Ts. Lomidze] ც. ლომიძე, “აბანოსხევის ადრეული შუა საუკუნეების სამაროვანი [The early medieval burial of Abanosxevi],” in *P'eodaluri sak'art'velos ark'eologiuri žeglebi*, VI (Tbilisi, 1998): 49-52

elements given by the medieval Georgian authors which scholars considered doubtful before, specifically, about the establishment of the earliest bishoprics in Georgia.³¹

My master thesis aims to deconstruct dominant theories concerning the canonical status of the Georgian church during late antiquity and the early middle ages. This method enables me to show the actual historical picture of the relation of the Georgian church with other local churches. The sources are scarce and often very later. This forces the student of the Georgian ecclesiastical history to go back and forth in different periods which could be somehow confusing.

Greek and Armenian sources about the canonical status of the Georgian church are later and biased. The bias of these sources is quite obvious and understandable. Greek patriarchates of the east (and Antioch among them) constantly claimed their sovereignty and sought domination over other churches (in the Roman empire and outside the empire). The Armenian church claimed the supreme authority in the Caucasus. This caused the production of the various sources which are full of the ethnocentric narrative and idea of Armenian superiority. As Nina Garsoian and Robert Thomson exposed, Armenian sources depict the conversion of Armenia in extremely legendary and biased way. These depiction has almost nothing common with the historical reality.

The student of the Caucasian history must avoid the schematization which we often encounter in the scholarship. It certainly impairs the proper understanding of the complexities of Caucasian history. Caucasus as the crossroad of the civilizations reflected the rise and fall of many great cultures. Like in other aspects of its history, the spread and establishment of Christianity in Caucasus has a complicated and multifaceted history. This process is deeply intertwined with the history of the Greek and Syrian Christianity. The way I chose to investigate the vexed issue of the canonical status of the Church of Iberia is the way of reconstruction through deconstruction. The student of late antique and early medieval Caucasian history has to take a path of the deconstruction of both historical and scholarly myths. Through this deconstruction of the dominant theories the various aspects and circumstances of the canonical status of the Iberian church becomes more clear and understandable.

³¹ Nodar Bakhtadze, Vazha Mamiashvili, Bachana Gabekhadze, Jimsher Chkhvimiani, *An Archeological Study of the Ancient monasteries in the Former City of Nekresi* (Tbilisi: Ilia State University, 2018), 8-12.

Chapter 1. A Brief History of the Georgian Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

1.1. Scholarship about the canonical status of the Georgian Church in the Late Antique and the Early Medieval periods.

When the Russian empire and the eastern Georgian kingdom of K'art'li and Kaxet'i concluded the Treaty of Georgievsk on the 24th of July, 1783, the Russian side agreed to allow the political autonomy of the Georgian kingdom as well as the independence of the Georgian church.³² However, after the Russians forcibly abolished the eastern Georgian kingdom and then the western Georgian kingdom of Imeret'i (followed by the abolishment of the western Georgian principalities), they also abolished the independence of the Georgian church in 1811.³³ In the nineteenth century, the Georgian Orthodox Church became a part of the Russian Orthodox Church, headed by an exarch, who was always an ethnic Russian (except for the first exarch, the Russified Georgian Varlam Eristavi) and had always serious problems with the local Georgian dioceses.³⁴

³² [Mzia Surguladze] მზია სურგულაძე, *მცხეთის სახლი [The House of Mc'et'a]* (Tbilisi: Universal, 2016), 207-209; David Marshall Lang, *Last Years of the Georgian Monarchy: 1658-1832* (New York: Columbia University Press), 183-184. For the English translation of the Georgievsk Treaty see <http://www4.westminster.edu/staff/martinre/Treaty.html>

³³ Paul Werth, "Georgian Autocephaly and Ethnic Fragmentation of Orthodoxy," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 23 (2006): 82-83.

³⁴ Werth, 'Georgian Autocephaly,' 84.

In the nineteenth century, scholars began to actively investigate the history of Georgian Christianity. In 1843 the first work was published about the history of the Georgian church by Georgian theologian and church historian Plato Ioseliani.³⁵ In 1862, the Georgian historian Dimitri Purtseladze published a long article in the most popular Russian language magazine in Georgia at that time *Kavkaz* (published in Tbilisi).³⁶ Here, the author discussed several important aspects of the ecclesiastical history of Georgia. In 1877, Mikheil-Gobron Sabinin published another work about the early history of Georgian Christianity.³⁷ The most famous nineteenth-century foreign scholar of the Georgian history, Marie-Félicité Brosset, made several suggestions about important issues of the ecclesiastical history of Georgia.³⁸ In 1886, the Georgian historian and philologist Mose Janashvili published a brief overview of the history of Georgian church.³⁹ But none of these scholars paid much attention to the canonical issues, including autocephaly, and scholarship on Georgian Christianity was severely hampered in this regard. First of all, the political context did not allow active discussion about the ecclesiastical independence of the Georgian church. Secondly, the sources were problematic. The majority of the narrative, archeological, and epigraphic sources of Georgian history were unpublished, undiscovered, or poorly studied.

³⁵ Plato Ioseliani, *A Short History of the Georgian Church*, trans. and ed. S. C. Malan (London: Saunders, Otley, 1866).

³⁶ [Shota Matitashvili] შოთა მათითაშვილი, “დimitრი ფურცელაძე ახალი ქართული საეკლესიო ისტორიოგრაფიის სათავეებთან” [Dimitri Purtseladze at the beginning of modern historiography of Georgian church],” *Georgian Source-Studies* 15-16 (2014): 81-87.

³⁷ [Mikhail Gobron Sabinin] Михайл Гоброн Сабинин, *История грузинской церкви до конца VI века* [*The history of the Georgian church till the end of the sixth century*] (Tbilisi, 1877).

³⁸ Marie-Félicité Brosset, *Histoire de la Géorgie depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'au XIXe siècle* (Saint Petersburg: Académie impériale des sciences, 1849), 147, 194.

³⁹ [Mose Janashvili] მოსე ჯანაშვილი, *საქართველოს საეკლესიო ისტორია* [*Ecclesiastical history of Georgia*] (Tbilisi: Ekvtime Kheladzis Stamba, 1886).

The situation changed considerably at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the 1905 Russian Revolution the Georgian national-liberation movement inspired the demand for the restoration of ecclesiastic independence.⁴⁰ This movement caused lively scholarly debates about the origins of the autocephaly of Georgia. Distinguished members of the Georgian clergy and intellectuals began publishing their works about Georgian autocephaly.

A well-known member of the Georgian autocephalist movement, priest and future Catholicos-patriarch of Stalin-era Georgia, Kalistrate Tsintsadze, claimed that after the Christianization of Georgia, the church of Iberia fell under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Amasia, in Hellenopontus. Through the bishop of Amasia Iberia became the canonical territory of the patriarchate of Antioch (because the author thought that Hellenopontus was the part of Antiochian patriarchate). According to the investigation of Kalistrate Tsintsadze, after Antiochian church, the patriarchate of Constantinople spread its influence on the Georgian church.⁴¹ Kalistrate Tsintsadze' ideas were criticized by Sego Gorgadze.⁴² Sergo Gorgadze argued that the Church of Iberia was under the jurisdiction of Antioch.⁴³ The same claim about the relation of Georgia and Antioch was made by Georgian historian Tedo Zhordania, who

⁴⁰ Werth, "Georgian Autocephaly," 76.

⁴¹ His first work was *Автокефалия Церкви Грузинской: исторический очерк* [*The autocephaly of the Georgian church*] (Tbilisi: Skoropechatnaya Kutateladze, 1905), 3-58.

⁴² This erroneous assumption was derived from the confusion of the names *Iberia* (eastern Georgia) and *Ibora* (latter was under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Amasia, in Hellenopontus), see "[Davit Chikovani] დავით ჩიქოვანი, 'ქართლის ეკლესიის შესახებ ნილოს დოქსოპატრუსის ერთი ცნობის განმარტებისათვის' [Towards the explanation of one of the notes of Nilus Doxopatrus about the Church of Iberia]" in *Proceedings of National Parliamentary Library's First Young Humanitarian Conference* (Tbilisi: national Parliamentary Library of Georgia, 2019), 15-22; [Sergo Gorgadze] სერგო გორგაძე, *თხზულებანი* [*Selected works*], vol. I (Tbilisi: national Center of Manuscripts, 2017), 105,141-153. The same confusion produced the widespread belief among Georgian scholars that Evagrius of Pontus was Georgian (he was from the city of Ibora in Hellenopontus).

⁴³ [Gorgadze], *თხზულებანი*, 86-153.

suggested that the Georgian church received autocephaly from the Church of Antioch in the fifth century.⁴⁴

After the February Revolution in March 1917, the Georgian church announced the restoration of its autocephaly. This caused the disruption of relations with the Russian Church, which protested Georgia's ecclesiastic independence. Georgian hierarchs appealed to various local churches to receive their support for their autocephaly.⁴⁵

In 1921, Georgia was occupied by the Bolsheviks. During the 1920-30s, the Georgian church went through rough times. However, the situation changed during World War II when Joseph Stalin decided to use the Orthodox Church for political and ideological purposes. He forced the patriarchate of Moscow to recognize the autocephaly of the Georgian Church, which sparked a new interest in the history of the Georgian church and particularly, in the history of its canonical status.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ [Tedo Zhordania], *თხზულებათა კრებული [Collection of the works]* (Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2011), 364-374.

⁴⁵ [Davit Tkeshelashvili] დავით ტყეშელაშვილი, *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ავტოკეფალიის ისტორიის ძირითად საკითხები [The main problems of the history of autocephaly of the Georgian church]* (Kutaisi: MBM Poligrapi, 2014), 306-316. This work reviews the general history of development of Georgian autocephaly, however, it does not make any kind of original contribution to scholarship and often accepts religious and nationalistic myths without any critical scholarly evaluation (for example, the discussion of the issue of Georgian autocephaly at the sixth ecumenical council which is not confirmed by any compelling evidence), [Tkeshelashvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ავტოკეფალიის ისტორიის ძირითადი საკითხები*, 80-92.

⁴⁶ Stalin was very interested in the history of his native country. He even instructed prominent Georgian historians Simon Janashia and Nikoloz Berdzenishvili how to teach and research Georgian history, [Nikoloz Berdzenishvili] ნიკოლოზ ბერძენიშვილი, “შეხვედრა სტალინთან [Meeting Stalin],” *Tsiskari* 1-2 (1998): 97-110.

The two most prominent scholars who dedicated their research to this issue were the Georgian philologist Korneli Kekelidze (1878-1965) and the Georgian Catholic priest Michal Tarnischvili (1897-1958). While Tarnischvili supported the most popular view about the ecclesiastical dependence of the Church of Iberia from the Church of Antioch,⁴⁷ Kekelidze proposed an original theory about the canonical organization and status of the Georgian Church during late antiquity and the early middle ages. According to Kekelidze, the Church of Iberia was not under the jurisdiction of any other great ecclesiastical centers. According to this theory, before the reforms of the king Vaxt'ang Gorgasali the eastern Georgian church consisted from one diocese. This means that there was only one bishop in Iberia. Only after the ecclesiastical reforms of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali there appeared other bishoprics.⁴⁸ The data preserved in the Georgian and non-Georgian sources clearly contradict Kekelidze's claim and it was criticized and rejected in the scholarship.⁴⁹

In the second half of the twentieth century the most influential works about Georgian autocephaly were published by the Georgian historians Babilina Lominadze and Zaza Aleksidze.⁵⁰ Both supported the traditional view that the Church of Iberia received autocephaly

⁴⁷ Michael Tarnishvili, "The Origin and Development of the Ecclesiastical Autocephaly of Georgia," in *Languages and Culture of Eastern Christianity: Georgian*, 193-216.

⁴⁸ [Korneli Kekelidze] კორნელი კეკელიძე, "კანონიკური წყობილება ძველ საქართველოში [Canonical organization in the medieval Georgia]," *Bulletin de l'universite de Tiflis* 10 (1930): 313-345.

⁴⁹ [Tarnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია დასაბამიდან მე-7 საუკუნის დასასრულამდე*, 237-240.

⁵⁰ [Zaza Aleksidze] ზაზა ალექსიძე, "ვატანგ გორგასლისა და მიქაელ მთავარეპისკოპოსის კონფლიქტის გამო [On the conflict of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali and archbishop Michael]," in *ძიებანი საქართველოს და კავკასიის ისტორიიდან [Studies in the history of Georgia and Caucasus]* (Tbilisi: Sak'art'velos SSR mec'nierebat'a akademiya, 1976), 99-107; [Babilina Lominadze] ბაბილინა

from the Church of Antioch. The same claim was made by the authors of more recent studies about the canonical status of the late antique and early medieval Georgian Church.⁵¹

In the twentieth century, the “Antiochian theory” became dominant among scholars. They assumed that after the conversion the Church of Iberia fell under the jurisdiction of Antioch. During the ecclesiastical reforms of King Vaxt’ang Gorgasali, the Georgian Church acquired autocephaly or ecclesiastical independence. Among some western scholars “the Armenian theory” still prevailed.⁵²

However, more close and scrupulous investigation of the canonical issues of the Georgian Church history enables us to reject these theories and to research the history of the Church of Iberia in the connection with the patriarchates of Constantinople and Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

ლომინაძე, “საქართველოს საპატრიარქო და მისი ავტოკეფალია [The patriarchate of Georgia and its autocephaly], *Religion* 1-2 (1992): 118.

⁵¹ [Giorgi Mamulia] გიორგი მამულია, *ქართლის ეკლესია V-VI საუკუნეებში [The church of Iberia in the fifth and sixth centuries]* (Tbilisi: Mec’niereba, 1991), 17-34. This claim is still popular and widely-accepted in the modern Greek scholarship, see [Vlasios Phidas] Βλάσιος Φειδάς, “Το αυτοκέφαλο της Εκκλησίας της Γεωργίας,” *Επιστημονική επιτηρις της θεολογικής σχολής*, 24 (1979-1980), 91-140.

⁵² For the discussion of these views see Nikoloz Aleksidze, *The Narrative of Caucasian Schism: Memory and Forgetting in Medieval Caucasia*, CSCO, sub. 137, vol. 666 (Lovani: In Aedibus Peeters, 2018), 103-109.

1.2. Georgian Prelates between the fourth and sixth centuries

As noted previously, two lists of the Georgian prelates were preserved in the two major Georgian sources (*The Conversion of Georgia* and *The Life of Georgia*). Despite the fact that there are some serious discrepancies and inconsistencies between them, they still help reconstruct a more or less full sequence of Georgian prelates. In most cases it is impossible to define exactly the years of bishops' episcopacy, which should be determined in relation to the ruling periods of kings. Both these sources provide very brief descriptions of the life and activities of the heads of the Iberian church.⁵³

The first bishop⁵⁴ who came to Georgia at the earliest stage of Christianization in the 320-30s was John. He was a contemporary and active co-worker of King Mirian. Presumably, he died at the beginning of the 360s (c. 362).⁵⁵ John was succeeded by Jacob who also came from the Roman Empire and was John's assistant. According to the *Life of Nino*, St. Nino herself named Jacob as the next head of Georgian church.⁵⁶ Jacob is highly regarded as a "true bishop" in the medieval Georgian tradition.⁵⁷ The third archbishop of the eastern Georgian church was Job, who had formerly served as a deacon of the prominent Armenian Catholicos,

⁵³ [Polievktos Karbelashvili] პოლიევქტოს კარბელაშვილი, *იერარქია საქართველოს ეკლესიისა: კათალიკოსნი და მღვდელთმთავარნი* (*The hierarchy of the Georgian church: Catholicoi and bishops*) (Tbilisi: Kabadoni, 2011), 20.

⁵⁴ There is no clear indication in the sources about the exact title of the first prelates of the Iberian church. Sometimes they mentioned as 'bishops,' sometimes as 'archbishops.' The latter should be more authentic, Tarchnischvili, *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 234-235.

⁵⁵ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 198-199.

⁵⁶ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 200.

⁵⁷ Robert W. Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles; The Original Georgian Texts and Armenian Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 157.

Nerses (c. 353-373). The Georgian *Life of the Kings* presents Job as a contemporary of T'rdat, a pious king and heir to Mirian, but due to the doubtful character of the Georgian sources in this case, not much is known about T'rdat, who presumably ruled in the 360s, if he is not a complete invention of later Georgian sources.⁵⁸

Elijah (Ilia) I was the fourth head of Georgian church probably in the 410s, or earlier. He was succeeded by Simon (Simeon). After Elijah and Simon, Jonas occupied the throne of archbishop. The *Conversion of K'art'li* mentions him as a contemporary of King Arčil (c. 422-437), a well-known Georgian king noted in the Georgian, Armenian, and Syriac sources,⁵⁹ but after Jonas, some archbishops of the Iberian church did not fit into the Orthodox Chalcedonian doctrine of the later authors. In all probability, the next three bishops shared the doctrine of the theological school of Antioch and were associated by later authors with "Nestorianism" (see below).⁶⁰ For this reason, *The Conversion of Georgia* does not mention their names, but their names (Gregory, Basil and Mobidan) had been preserved in *The Life of Georgia*:

In the time of Arc'il passed away the three bishops: Iona, Gregory, and Basil. After Basil Arc'il appointed a bishop named Mobidan. He was a Persian by race, and professed the orthodox faith. But (in fact) he was an impious magus and subverter of Church order. However, king Arc'il and his son were unaware of Mobidan's impiety and thought he was a believer. He did not reveal the preaching of his religion out of fear of the king and the people; but secretly he wrote books of total deceit. After his time all his writings were burned by the true bishop Michael.⁶¹

After Arčil died, his heir, Mirdat ascended the throne, although his relation to Arčil is unclear. His reign was short-lived. He died shortly and left the kingdom without a king. His son, Vaxt'ang, was still a minor. During Vaxt'ang's minority (c. 438-446), the Iberian kingdom

⁵⁸ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 201-202

⁵⁹ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 211-213.

⁶⁰ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 230-233.

⁶¹ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 157.

was ruled by King Mirdat's widow, Sagduxt, a daughter of Barzabod, a Persian appointee in the Caucasus. Sagduxt feared that her father would take revenge on the Georgians who constantly harassed his troops. She decided to regain her father's trust, went to Bardav,⁶² met his father and asked him not to devastate Iberia. Her father demanded to preach Zoroastrianism freely in Iberia.⁶³ Sagduxt agreed and Persian priests were granted with unlimited rights to preach Zoroastrianism everywhere in Iberia. The *Life of Georgia* presents the words of Barzabod:

I shall not make you force any Georgian to give up the Christian religion. But I shall send fire-worshippers to your city, and they will act there as overseers of our religion over them. If any Georgian of his own will chooses our religion, you will not prevent him.⁶⁴

The Zoroastrian high priest, Bink'aran, preached actively, and he converted many of the common people to Zoroastrianism. However, according to *The Conversion of Georgia*, Queen Sagduxt took measures against the increasing Zoroastrian influence and called from "Greece" Michael, an active and zealous Orthodox Christian preacher (as he is depicted in the *Conversion*), who strengthened the positions of Orthodoxy in Iberia.⁶⁵ He was also the tutor and spiritual supervisor to the young King Vaxt'ang. Obviously, the queen and the archbishop were actively engaged in the political affairs and jointly ruled eastern Georgia until the king Vaxt'ang Gorgasali⁶⁶ came of age.

⁶² Bardav/Partaw was Albanian city - a residence for the Persian appointee who controlled Caucasian countries, Rapp, *The Sasanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 78.

⁶³ Rapp, *The Sasanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 319-321.

⁶⁴ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian history*, 79.

⁶⁵ [Surguladze], *მცხეთის სახლი*, 28-29; Tarnischvili, *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 218. 'Greece' ('საბერძნეთი') denotes the Roman/Byzantine empire in the medieval Georgian sources.

⁶⁶ After the half-legendary founder of the Iberian kingdom king P'arnavaz I (299-234 B.C.), king Vaxt'ang I Gorgasali is the most distinguished monarchs of ancient and late antique history of Georgia.

Once Vaxt'ang became king, the relations between the king and the archbishop deteriorated. Scholars speculated about the conflict between the theological doctrines adhered by the king and the archbishop. Even though there is no any direct evidence that the conflict between king Vaxt'ang and archbishop Michael had a doctrinal character, Michel van Esbroeck argued that one of the main reasons of this embittered controversy between the king and the archbishop actually had a religious basis. According to the investigations of Michel van Esbroeck, king Vaxt'ang followed the religious policy of emperor Zeno while archbishop Michael was a Chalcedonian and harshly condemned the religious policy of king Vaxt'ang.⁶⁷ Vaxt'ang wished to remove Archbishop Michael because he could not control him. He intended to install a new archbishop of Iberia who would receive the honorary title of *Catholicos*. Vax'tang's efforts proved to be successful (see below).

In the second half of the fifth century, the Georgian church was led by two Catholicoi: Peter I and Samuel I. They are depicted by the Georgian chronicles—especially by an author of *The Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali*—as pious prelates actively supporting the royal house in

There is not much agreement in scholarship about the chronology and major events of his life but it is safe to assume that Vaxt'ang reigned eastern Georgian kingdom during the second half of the fifth century. He fought against the Persian domination over Georgia and held pro-Byzantine political and religious course. The foundation of Tbilisi as a capital for the Iberian kingdom (and subsequently, for the untied Georgian kingdom) is associated with his name. For the life and reign of king Vaxt'ang Gorgasali see Christopher Hass, 'Geopolitics and Georgian Identity in Late Antiquity: The Dangerous World of Vakhtang Gorgasali,' in *Georgian Christian Thought and Its Cultural Context*, ed. Tamar Nutsubidze, Cornelia B. Horn, and Basil Lourie with collaboration of Alexey Ostrovsky (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), 29-45.

⁶⁷ Michel van Esbroeck, *Les plus anciens homélieares géorgiens: étude descriptive et historique* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1975), 145-155, 299-300.

Georgia.⁶⁸ But Georgian chronicles completely ignore Gabriel I, another Georgian Catholicos who ruled the Georgian church around the turn of the fifth century.⁶⁹

The sixth century was both a remarkable and decisive period for the Georgian church. At the beginning of the sixth century, the Georgian royal throne was occupied by Dači (ca. 502-506), the son of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali, who was actively engaged in the Christian mission among the Georgian highlanders. He seems to have maintained his father's anti-Chalcedonian program after the Georgian church accepted the *Henoticon* in 491 (see below). Georgian chronicles put the time of Peter's death and Samuel's ascendance to the throne of Catholicos to the years of his reign.⁷⁰ At the beginning of the 510s, a certain T'avp'ečag/T'avp'ačag (თავფეჩაგ/თავფაჩაგ) became the head of the Iberian church and he was succeeded by Čimaga/Čermag (ჩიმაგა/ჩერმაგ). These names are of Iranian origin, which clearly indicates that they were consecrated and sent from the Persian church.⁷¹ After the death of king Dači, the Sasanian oppression grew in Iberia. Certainly, the political domination was accompanied by the spread of the ecclesiastical influence of the Persian church—once again, after almost one hundred years.⁷²

There is no any evidence that subsequent bishops were sent from the church of the East. According to the Georgian chronicles, Catholicos Saba (Dasabia) (520-30s) was the first Georgian Catholicos of the Iberian church. Georgian accounts insist that prior to Saba the

⁶⁸ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 180.

⁶⁹ Obviously, Catholicos Gabriel was ignored because of his acceptance of *Henoticon*, [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 389

⁷⁰ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 275-276. But this raises the question when exactly Catholicos Gabriel II ruled the Iberian church. In my opinion, the only probability here is that he led the church of Iberia between the reigns of Peter and Samuel.

⁷¹ Rapp, *Sasanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 264.

⁷² [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 279.

prelates of the Iberian church came from “Greece” (the Roman/Byzantine Empire) and Saba was the first ethnically Georgian prelate of the Iberian church.⁷³ After him, the throne of the Iberian catholicos were occupied by Georgian members of the two local noble houses of Mc’xet’a. After Saba, Evlale (probably, his name derives from the Greek Eulalios) I became the Catholicos (c. 543-551). Georgian sources place the arrival of the Syrian missionary monks—known as the Thirteen Syrian Fathers (ცამეტი სურელი მამა’)—to his reign.⁷⁴

The next Catholicos were Macarius I, Samuel II, Simon-Peter, Samuel III, Samuel IV and Bartholomew I. This list, however, raises a problem of chronology. *The Martyrdom of Eustathius of Mc’xet’a* reveals that, when the Persian Christian Eustathius arrived in Iberia, the kingship here had been already abolished.⁷⁵ Adolf von Harnack and Ivane Javakhishvili place the date of Eustathius’s arrival in Georgia to c. 541 during the Catholicosate of Samuel II.⁷⁶ However, according to Georgian chronicles, at that time Iberia still was ruled by the kings of

⁷³ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 279.

⁷⁴ Shota Matitashvili, ‘The Monasteries Founded by Thirteen Syrian Fathers in Iberia: The Rise of Monasticism in the Sixth-Century Georgia,’ *Studies in Late Antiquity* 2 (1) (2018): 6-7, accessed May 11 2021: <https://online.ucpress.edu/SLA/article-abstract/2/1/4/67571/The-Monasteries-Founded-by-the-Thirteen-Syrian?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

⁷⁵ *The Martyrdom of Eustathius of Mc’xet’a* is one of the main late antique Georgian hagiographical compositions. Composed at the end of the sixth century the *Martyrdom* narrates the life of a certain young Persian man named Gwrobandak, who later became known by his Christian name Eustathius. Gwirobandak searched for the truth back in his homeland (Persia) until he came to the Christian church and converted to Christianity. Then, he arrived in Iberia and settled down in Mc’xet’a. He married a Christian woman. After some time, local Persians found out that he was not Zoroastrian but Christian. He was reported to the local Persian official. Finally, his refusal to abandon the Christian faith caused his execution, Rapp, *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 45-51, for the German translation of the original old Georgian text see I. Dschawachoff, and A. von Harnack, ‘Das Martyrium des heiligen von Mzcheta,’ *Sitzungsberichte der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 38 (1901): 875-902.

⁷⁶ Dschawachoff, ‘Das Martyrium des heiligen von Mzcheta,’ 895.

the house of P'arnavaziani.⁷⁷ There is no indication that Georgian sources are wrong in this case. And as Cyril Toumanoff convincingly shows, the kingship in Iberia was abolished in 580.⁷⁸ Thus, the reign of the above-mentioned Catholicos and the arrival of Eustathius took place during the second half of the sixth century.⁷⁹

In c. 590, the throne of Georgian Catholicos was occupied by Kyrion I (ca. 590-616).⁸⁰ Kyrion tried to establish contacts with the great ecclesiastical centers, especially with Rome and Jerusalem.⁸¹ During his reign the relations between the Georgian and Armenian Churches became tense. The Armenian church leaned towards the anti-Chalcedonian doctrine while the official Georgian position remained firmly Chalcedonian which eventually caused the schism between these two churches (in 607-09).

1.3. The Georgian Prelates during the Seventh and the Tenth Centuries

The beginning of the seventh century is often imagined as a watershed in the religious history of the South Caucasian region. As medieval sources (mainly Armenian, partly Georgian) claim, it was marked by the great Caucasian schism (607-09): a religious rift which

⁷⁷ This ancient Georgian dynasty ruled the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia from the end of the fourth century BCE. According to the Georgian historical tradition, the founder of this dynasty was king P'arnavaz I (ca. 299-234 BCE), who became king of Iberia after the fall of Alexander the Great's empire. Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 199, 385.

⁷⁸ Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, 367.

⁷⁹ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 281-282.

⁸⁰ About Catholicos Kyrion see Nikoloz Aeksidze, *Identifying Kyros of Alexandria*: Master Thesis in Medieval Studies (Budapest: Central European University, 2009).

⁸¹ [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 281-282

finally divided the Georgian and Armenian churches. The Armenians rejected Chalcedon, while the Georgians finally chose Chalcedonian position.

Not much information is available about the activities of the heads of the Iberian church in the seventh century. Georgian accounts preserved only a list of their names, although the names of some of the catholicoi are accompanied by the brief description of their lives and deeds. During the reign of the presiding prince, Stephen I (c. 637-655), the Catholicoi were Samuel V and Evnon. After Evnon, *The Conversion of Georgia* names nine prelates who had one unifying distinguished feature: they were married. The names of these prelates are T'avp'ečag II (c. 650s-60s), Eulalios (Evlale) II (c. 664-668), Joel (Iovel) II (c. 668-670), Samuel (Samoel) VI (c. 670-677), George (Giorgi) I (c. 677-678), Kyrion (Kyrion II ?) (c. 678-683), Izid-Bozid (ca. 683-685), Theodore (T'eodore) I (685-689), Peter (Petre) II (ca. 689-720).⁸² The fact that they were married was emphasized by the medieval Georgian authors because the celibacy of the bishops was already a wider-spread practice in Greek and Roman Christianity.⁸³ Beside this, the names of two Catholicoi (T'avp'ečag and Izid-Bozid) are clearly Iranian which obviously means the renewal of the Persian jurisdiction over Iberia (see below).⁸⁴

The reign of these Catholicoi coincided with the first period of the Arab dominance in Georgia. The Arab oppression became especially unbearable during the eighth century when the caliphate sent several great military expeditions to the Caucasus against the Georgians, Armenians, Albanians and Khazars. There are two distinguished Catholicoi in this century—Catholicos Mamay (c. 720-744) and Catholicos Samuel VII (c. 780-784)—mentioned in *The*

⁸² [Tarchnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 316-317.

⁸³ Peter L'Huillier, 'Episcopal Celibacy in the Orthodox Tradition,' *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35, no. 2-3 (1991): 271-300.

⁸⁴ Rapp, *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 264.

Martyrdom of Abo.⁸⁵ After Samuel VII, the throne of Georgian Catholicos was occupied by Cyril I (c. 781-802), Gregory III (802-814), Samuel VIII (814-826), George II (c. 826-838), Gabriel II (c. 830-850s), and Hillarion (in the 850s) who, before his ascendance on the throne of Catholicos, was the abbot of Cqarost'avi monastery in Klarjet'i.

After Hillarion, Arsenius the Great became the Catholicos. Catholicos Arsenius I the Great was a disciple of the eminent Georgian monastic leader, Gregory of Xazt'a (758-861), who led the monastic colonization of the southern Georgian provinces from the 780s onwards.⁸⁶ The monasteries of southern Iberia spread their influence even in Mc'xet'a, when a former disciple of Gregory of Xanzt'a, Arsenius I of Sap'ara (860-887), became the Catholicos of Georgia.

The tenth century was a definite watershed in the history of the Georgian church. Medieval Georgia started the process of political and religious unification. The most distinguished tenth-century Catholicos was Arsenius II (c. 955-980), a prominent ecclesiastical writer and theologian.⁸⁷ From the beginning of the eleventh century, the Georgian prelates who

⁸⁵ *The Martyrdom of Abo* describes the story of a young Arab boy who converted to Christianity. In 774 the Arab Caliph Mansur suspected the presiding prince Nerse II (ca. 760-781) of conspiracy against Arab dominance in the Caucasus, summoned him to Bagdad, and imprisoned him. After three years, the new caliph released Nerse. Abo became acquainted with the Georgian members of Nerses's retinue and became interested in Christianity. He followed the Georgians back to Iberia and settled here. He also accompanied Nerse on his journey to Khazaria and western Georgia. He was imprisoned by Arabs and when he refused to abandon Christianity, he was executed in Tbilisi. His martyrdom is described by eighth-century Georgian theologian and ecclesiastical writer John Sabanisdze (იოანე საბანისძე). David Lang, *The Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956), 115-133.

⁸⁶ For the monastic communities of the Southern Georgian provinces of Tao and Klarjet'i, see Wachtang Djobadze, *Early medieval Georgian monasteries in historical Tao, Klarjeti, and Shavshethi* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992).

⁸⁷ Matitashvili, "The Monasteries Founded by the Thirteen Syrian Fathers in Iberia," 13.

resided in Mc'xet'a acquired the honorary title of patriarch, and received the full canonical jurisdiction all over the medieval Georgian kingdom.⁸⁸

Chapter 2. Chalcedonian Patriarchates and Bishoprics

2.1. The Concept of Autocephaly

The concept of autocephaly resurfaced during the emergence of the nation states in the Balkans striving to liberate themselves from the Ottoman rule. The Orthodox Christian nations that acquired political independence from the Porte and formed new states demanded their own ecclesiastic hierarchy, independent from the Patriarchate of Constantinople.⁸⁹ The struggle for autocephaly continued throughout the course of the twentieth century and the issue is still problematic, especially in the connection with the recently proclaimed autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.⁹⁰ From the end of the first millennium autocephaly acquired quite new meaning. Autocephaly became intertwined with question of the political independence of the states. From the end of the first millennium to the middle of the second millennium

⁸⁸ [Surguladze], *მცხეთის საბჭო*, 171-206.

⁸⁹ Charles Wegener Sanderson, *Autocephaly as a Function of Institutional Stability and Organizational Change in the Eastern Orthodox Church*, Ph.D. diss. (University of Maryland, 2005), 106-111.

⁹⁰ Cyril Hovorun, 'Autocephaly as a Diachronic Phenomenon and its Ukrainian Case,' in *A Jubilee Collection: Essays in Honor of Professor Paul Robert Magocsi on his 70th Birthday* (Uzhhorod/Prešov/New-York: Valerii Podiak Publishers, 2015), 274.-276.

autocephaly transformed into a factor of identity for states and peoples.⁹¹ In modern and contemporary history, ecclesiastical autocephaly is closely linked with the formation of nation states demanding their own local independent churches. The original meaning of this canonical phenomenon had been obscured by the newly developed ethnic nationalism.

The term “autocephaly” had different meanings in different times. Its precise definition was always problematic. This caused various interpretations among theologians and church historians despite the seemingly obvious meaning of the term.⁹² But it is safe to say that in late antiquity the term “autocephaly” was not used in its modern connotation which implies the independent status of the local church. “Autocephalous” was called a bishop who was under the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Constantinople without any kind of dependence to his local metropolitan.⁹³

The principles of the ecclesiastical governance in the Roman Empire were entirely accommodated to the political and administrative system of the state. The gradual transformation of the organization of the church was caused by the major shifts in the relationship between the church and the state. Diocletian’s administrative reforms and the legalization of Christianity had profound effects on the system of the ecclesiastic rule.⁹⁴ The independent status of the local churches was not “acquired” by legislative activity of ecclesiastical leaders, but this status already existed. It was recognized and codified by ecclesiastical legislation.⁹⁵ As the American Orthodox theologian John Erickson suggests,

⁹¹ Hovorun, ‘Autocephaly,’ 274.

⁹² John Erickson, “Autocephaly and Autonomy,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 60: 1-2 (2016): 92.

⁹³ Sanderson, *Autocephaly as a Function of Institutional Stability and Organizational Change in the Eastern Orthodox Church*, 79.

⁹⁴ Sanderson, *Autocephaly*, 50.

⁹⁵ Sanderson, *Autocephaly*, 50.

Even before the establishment of Christianity as the favored religion of the state, before structures of coordination were defined in written form by conciliar canons, ecclesiastical organization in the Roman empire already was modeled along the lines of civic administration. Roughly speaking and with several important exemptions, the churches of each province, headed by the metropolitan (i.e. the bishop of the capital city) and the other bishops, constituted what was in effect an autocephalous unit. They *were* autocephalous, they did not *become* autocephalous nor were *granted autocephaly* by some higher authority.⁹⁶

Ecclesiastical legislation recognized the extant independence of all local churches in the Roman Empire. According to the precise definition of the French Orthodox bishop and canonist Peter L'Huillier the independent status of ancient local churches

consists precisely and uniquely in the fact that all the bishops of a territory are elected and consecrated by the episcopal college of the territory and that the primate does not need to receive his investiture from any other primate.⁹⁷

This means that at the beginning of the fourth century every ecclesiastical unit (province and its metropolitan) was an independent community without any kind of hierarchical dependence on another major see.⁹⁸ The Council of Nicaea confirmed the authority of local metropolitans. This authority was corroborated and enlarged by the Council of Antioch in

⁹⁶ John H. Erickson, *The Challenge to Our Past: Studies in Orthodox Canon Law and Church History* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), 94.

⁹⁷ Peter L'Huillier, "Problems Concerning Autocephaly," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 24 (1979): 168.

⁹⁸ Sanderson, *Autocephaly*, 52.

341.⁹⁹ However, the process of the centralization of ecclesiastical power in the hands of the five most powerful metropolitans (later patriarchs) had already begun and was inevitable.¹⁰⁰

The second ecumenical council (381) elevated the see of Constantinople, and recognized it as second after Rome which elicited Rome's bitter protest. But Constantinople did not yet have the power that it would possess later. This council also recognized the independent status of Thrace, Asia, and Pontus.¹⁰¹ The second canon of the second ecumenical council determined that the governance of the church should continue according to "the ancient custom" that had existed from "ancient times".¹⁰² However, this "ancient custom" soon changed in favor of the growing process of centralization. The fourth ecumenical Council in Chalcedon (451) placed the formerly independent dioceses of Thrace, Asia and Pontus under the jurisdiction of Constantinople.¹⁰³ This centralization process of the Pentarchy system continued under the rule of Justinian.¹⁰⁴ It was finally confirmed at the Council of Trullo (Quinisext Council) in 692 by the power of Canon 36. Yet, the decisions of the Quinisext council were not accepted by Rome, nor did Rome accept the status of Constantinople as Second Rome. The idea of the Pentarchy was accepted in the Eastern Churches, too, but not without substantial change. Abdisho of Nisibis in his *Nomocanon* defining the canonical order of the Church of the East, claims that the five patriarchates had been designed by the apostles,

⁹⁹ Sanderson, *Autocephaly*, 62.

¹⁰⁰ Peter L'Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils* (New-York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 45-53.

¹⁰¹ Sanderson, *Autocephaly*, 59.

¹⁰² Sanderson, *Autocephaly*, 60.

¹⁰³ However, not every local church was happy with this process. For example, the Church of Carthage rejected the idea of dependence from another ecclesiastical see, and announced its independent status at the council held in 419-424, Sanderson, *Autocephaly*, 67.

¹⁰⁴ John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Division: The Church 450-680 A.D.* (New-York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), 58-59.

and list the following five main sees: first Babel, that is, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, second Alexandria, third Antioch, Rome being only at the fourth place, and the fifth being Constantinople.¹⁰⁵

This system of the *Pentarchy*, considered God-given by the Byzantines, yet contested by Rome and seriously modified in the Church of the East, was perceived by later Byzantine church historians and theologians as the primordial system, which fact has led to an anachronistic perception of the historical past. This kind of perception ignores the gradual development of the ecclesiastic hierarchy in the Roman empire. Also, it served as a justification for the claims of the superiority of the Byzantine patriarchates over the Christian communities in the Roman empire and outside its borders.

2.2. Constantinople

Unlike neighboring Armenia and Albania, we have more reliable and trustworthy sources about the conversion of Iberia. At least there are two very early accounts depicting the Christianization of eastern Georgia and missionary activities of its female apostle. Recent scholarship promotes the possibility that originally, the conversion of Iberia was described by Gelasius of Caesarea (ca. 335-395) in his lost *Ecclesiastical History*.¹⁰⁶ Gelasius' account was

¹⁰⁵ István Perczel (ed), *The Nomocanon of Metropolitan Abdisho of Nisibis: A Facsimile Edition of MS 64 from the Collection of the Church of the East in Thrissur*, second, revised edition (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Scriptorium, 2009), Second Part, Ninth Memra, p. 379-80, Syriac text, oral information from I. Perczel.

¹⁰⁶ Gelasius (ca. 335-395) was a nephew of the famous bishop of Jerusalem Cyril. His ecclesiastical carrier was actively promoted by his uncle. In ca. 365 he occupied the throne of the bishop of Caesarea which was the major see of Palestine, Gelasius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History. The extended Fragments with Appendix Containing the Fragments from Dogmatic Writings*, ed. Martin Wallraff, Jonathan Strutz, Nicholas Marinides, translated by Nicholas Marinides (Berlin/Boston: Walter de

edited and extended by Rufinus of Aquileia (344-411) who personally knew the famous late antique Georgian prince and general of the Roman Army – Bacurius.¹⁰⁷ He met Bacurius in Jerusalem. Bacurius was a hero of the infamous battle of Adrianople (378) where he appeared as the *tribunus sagittariorum*. During 378-94 Bacurius served as *dux Palaestinae*; by 402-3 he was *comes domesticorum* and fought bravely in the battle of the Frigidus in 394.¹⁰⁸ It has been suggested that after a successful career in the Roman army he might have returned to Georgia and ascended the Iberian throne but the lack of sufficient evidence does not allow to clarify the subsequent fate of Bacurius.¹⁰⁹ Bacurius was also a distinguished intellectual of his time. He

Grutyer GmbH, 2018), xi-xvi Gelasius composed several dogmatic, historical and canonical works. The majority of his writings is lost. *Ecclesiastical History* – his one of the major compositions was also lost, see “Introduction” in *Ecclesiastical History*, xvi-xvii. The extraction of the lost fragments of Gelasius’ works from the works of various authors is extremely complicated work but still, through the painstaking work of the generation of the scholars, at least, the partial reconstruction of Gelasius’ work became possible, “Introduction” in *Ecclesiastical History*, xix-xxviii.

¹⁰⁷ According to the recent scholarly investigation, Rufinus uses Gelasius’ accounts for Book 10 of his *Ecclesiastical History* but not for Book 11, “Introduction” in *Ecclesiastical history*, xxxi. Rufinus informs us about the origins of the Book 11. He refers to the information which he acquired directly from eyewitnesses or from oral tradition, ‘Introduction,’ xxxiv. The surviving fragment of Gelasius’ *History* in the writings of the unanimous author known as *Anonymus Cyzicenus* differs from the account given by Rufinus. This factor led scholars to the conclusion that ‘we cannot definitely show from the information at hand that the Greek source (Gelasius) was the original written source, but our analysis at least leaves open the possibility that he was, without denying credit to Rufinus for confirming his account with original oral sources,’ “Introduction,” xxxvi. It is quite possible that Bacurius knew both Gelasius and Rufinus and told them his story separately. Anyway, despite the fact that we do not know for sure which was the original source (probably it was Gelasius later supplemented by Rufinus), we can say that we have two (Greek and Latin) early (fourth -century) accounts describing the conversion of Georgia.

¹⁰⁸ Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 246-247

¹⁰⁹ Rapp, *The Sasanian World Through Georgian Eyes*, 72-75. Recently, it was suggested that Bacurius could start his military career in Britain, [Nikoloz Nikolozishvili] ნიკოლოზ ნიკოლოზიშვილი, “ვინ არის ბრიტანული ეპიგრაფიკული წყაროების BAKVRA [Who is BAKVRA mentioned in British Epigraphic Sources]” *Kadmos* 10 (2018): 152-173.

had correspondence with the famous late antique pagan philosopher Libanius.¹¹⁰ As a holder of such a high office Bacurius definitely should have been personally acquainted with both Gelasius and Rufinus. In all probability, Bacurius told both Gelasius and Rufinus about the conversion of eastern Georgia which happened only two generations earlier.¹¹¹

The Greek church historians Socrates (380-439) and Sozomen (400-450) described Nino's mission following Rufinus' account without any serious alterations.¹¹² The narrative of another late antique church historian Theodoret of Cyrus (393-458) differs in some details which means that he must have had some other sources for Nino's life.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 248

¹¹¹ How did Bacurius know the story of the conversion of Georgia? There are two major possibilities. First of all, it is the oral tradition. This explanation is more plausible. Apparently, the conversion to Christianity which took place during the 320-30s was still alive in the memory of the generation which lived at the end of the fourth century and in the beginning of the fifth century. The second explanation is a written record. This point of view promotes an idea that the story told by Bacurius to Rufinus was based on some written account. However, this opinion is quite problematic. There is no evidence that the Georgian alphabet existed in some form before the fifth century. The attempts of Prof. Mariam Chkhartishvili to prove the existence of the Georgian alphabet before the Christianization of Georgia ultimately fails due to the lack of any kind of compelling evidence, [Mariam Chkhartishvili] მარიამ ჩხარტიშვილი, *საქართველო III-IV საუკუნეებში: ხოსროვანთა სამეფო სახლის ისტორია* [*Georgia in third to fifth century: The history of the house of Xosrovans*] (Tbilisi: Nekeri, 2018), 259-279. It is safe to assume that the Georgian alphabet was created after the spread of Christianity in Georgia. In my opinion, the story told by Bacurius was based on the oral tradition which probably existed at the Georgian royal court.

¹¹² For the review of late antique Greek and Roman sources about Nino see *Georgica: ბიზანტიელი მწერლების ცნობები საქართველოს შესახებ* [*The notices of Byzantine writers about Georgia*], ed. [Alexandre Gamqrelize] ალექსანდრე გამყრელიძე, [Simon Kaukhchishvili] სიმონ ყაუხჩიშვილი. Vol. 1 (Tbilisi: Sak'art'velos mec'nierebat'a akademiis gamomc'emloba, 1961), 179-248.

¹¹³ [Giorgi Alibegashvili] გიორგი ალიბეგაშვილი, Nino Zhvania ნინო ჯვანია, “უცხოური წყაროები საქართველოს მოქცევის შესახებ [Foreign sources on the conversion of Georgia]” in *წმინდა ნინოს ცხოვრება და ქართლის მოქცევა* [*The Life of St. Nino and the Conversion of*

I am not going to discuss the whole story of the conversion of Georgia. My primary focus is the place of Constantinople in this story. All early Greek and Latin sources which narrate about the conversion of Iberia (Gelasius, Rufinus, Sozomen, Socrates, Theodoret of Chyrrus) agree that after the Georgian king Mirian believed in Jesus Christ as incarnated God he sent his envoys to Constantinople to notify the emperor about the conversion and to ask him to send the clergy. Considering the political context, it is quite understandable that Mirian immediately sent envoys to the emperor. After treaty of Nisibis treaty in 298 Iberia was under the political dominion of the Roman empire.¹¹⁴ According to the Greek and Latin accounts Constantine rejoiced when he learned about the conversion of Iberia.¹¹⁵ The depiction of events regarding the conversion of Iberia and its relation to the Roman empire hardly can be the imagination of later authors. It fits well in the political and religious atmosphere of the beginning of the fourth century. However, did this mean that Iberian church fell under the jurisdictional dependence of the bishop of Constantinople? This is a vexed question and there is not direct answer to this question because of several reasons. During the conversion of Iberia Constantinople was a newly-founded city. Its bishop did not exercise the ecclesiastical power he acquired later. At that time, even the local churches of Asia Minor were not under the canonical jurisdiction of Constantinople. Thus, it is doubtful that the Iberian church could have fallen under the direct jurisdiction of Constantinople. But here appears another aspect. According to the Georgian sources, first two bishops of the Iberian church (John and Jacob) came from ‘Greece.’ I think that it would be reasonable to assume that they were sent from Constantinople. But what about other bishops? From where did they come?

Georgia] ed. [Soso Makharashvili] სოხო მახარაშვილი (Tbilisi: Literaturis institutis gamomc'emloba, 2009), 127.

¹¹⁴ Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 245.

¹¹⁵ Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 246-254.

As it was mentioned above, Georgian chronicles insist that before Catholicos Saba (520-30s), the prelates of the Iberian church came from the Byzantine empire. Evidently, the first archbishops of the Iberian church certainly were consecrated in the empire but we do not know exactly where. My guess is that they received consecration in Constantinople. *The Conversion of Georgia* says about the third archbishop of Iberia – Job – that he was the deacon of the Armenian Catholicos Nerses I.¹¹⁶ *The Life of Georgia* claims that he was Armenian (Job the Armenian),¹¹⁷ while the Armenian translation of *The Life of Georgia* directly claims that he was ordained by Catholicos Nerses.¹¹⁸ Considering the contemporary political situation (war between Romans and Persians over Caucasus),¹¹⁹ it seems that the bishop could not come from the Roman empire, thus the Georgians asked Catholicos Nerses to consecrate an archbishop for them. However, this did not mean any kind of canonical dependence on the Armenian church (see below in the chapter about the Armenian church). We do not know from where the next archbishops came. Several archbishops during the reign of king Arčil were sent from Persia or, at least, were consecrated by the confirmation of the Persian king and the Catholicos-Patriarch of the church of the East.¹²⁰ Michael, the defender of Byzantine Orthodoxy, was sent from the Roman empire (summoned by queen Sagduxt).¹²¹ The first two Catholicoi – Peter I and Samuel I were also sent from the empire. We still do not have any information about the next catholicoi, but I have already mentioned above that at least two sixth-century Catholicoi were apparently sent from Persia.

¹¹⁶ Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 303.

¹¹⁷ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 148.

¹¹⁸ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian history*, 147.

¹¹⁹ Romans and Persians waged war for Iberia. Eventually, Persians seized Iberia. Romans were forced to give up Iberia in 378, Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 260-261.

¹²⁰ [Tarnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 240.

¹²¹ [Tarnischvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 233

In 484 Vaxt'ang Gorgasali rebelled against the Sasanians. He was joined by Armenians.¹²² Georgians and the Armenians hoped that help would come from Constantinople but their expectations had gone in vain. Georgians and Armenians had to face the Sasanian forces all alone. The rebellion was unsuccessful.¹²³ Vaxt'ang escaped to western Georgia. However, this did not mean that the Georgians and Armenians abandoned their pro-Byzantine course by any means. After while, Vaxt'ang returned to eastern Georgia and started preparation for a new rebellion. He maintained loyalty to the Byzantine politics. In this context should be discussed the acceptance of the new ecclesiastical policy of the imperial court and the patriarchate of Constantinople by Caucasian nobility and clergy.¹²⁴ In 482 emperor Zeno and patriarch Acacius issued the decree of the *Henoticon*.¹²⁵ Following this policy, the Caucasian churches accepted the *Henoticon*. Traditionally it was held that the Caucasian churches accepted the doctrine of the *Henoticon* at the council of Dvin (506) but as Nina Garsoian has showed that Georgians, Armenians and Albanians accepted this doctrine much earlier, at the council of Vafarshapat in 491.¹²⁶

Georgians maintained the pro-Byzantine course during the sixth century. However, Byzantine empire could not provide efficient support for Georgians. According to Procopius, in 523 the head of the lesser branch of the Georgia royal house of P'arnavaziani - Gurgenes - rebelled against the Sasanian empire but the rebellion was crushed and Gurgenes escaped to

¹²² [Lasha Janashia] ლაშა ჯანაშია, *ლაზარე პარფელის ცნობები საქართველოს შესახებ* [*Lazar Parpec'i account about Georgia*] (Tbilisi: Sak'art'velos SSR mec'mierebat'a akademiis gamome'emloba, 1962), 136-165.

¹²³ [Janashia], *ლაზარე პარფელის ცნობები საქართველოს შესახებ*, 165.

¹²⁴ Esbroeck, *Les plus anciens homéliers géorgiens*, 299-300.

¹²⁵ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (London: James & Clark Ltd, 2008), 143-144.

¹²⁶ Nina Garsoian, *Studies on the Formation of Christian Armenia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 504-505.

Constantinople.¹²⁷ The growing Persian oppression caused the abolishment of the Georgian kingship in the eastern Georgia at the end of the sixth century (see above).

This connection with the see of the imperial capital certainly was reactivated and cemented after the military campaign of emperor Heraclius in Caucasus (during 626-627).¹²⁸ We do not know much about the relations of the Iberian church with Constantinople during the seventh and eighth centuries. Certainly, after the spread of iconoclasm in the empire, Iberian church distanced from the imperial ecclesiastical policy. Iberia remained firmly loyal to the worship of icons as it is obvious from the *Life* of John of Gothia. Because John could not find an Orthodox (i.e. icon worshipper) bishop in the whole Byzantine empire, he arrived in Mc'xet'a where he was ordained as bishop by the Catholicos of Iberia in 759.¹²⁹ After the restoration of icon-worship in the empire, the relationship with Constantinople had been restored. The ninth and tenth centuries are the period when the Georgian church made steps towards the adoption of Byzantine ecclesiastical culture which was expressed in the ecclesiastical art and translation of Byzantine theological, hagiographical, liturgical and canonical literature. However, there is no indication that Constantinople exercised the jurisdictional rights over the eastern Georgian church during this period.

My conclusion about the relation of the Iberian church with the church of Constantinople is that the Church of Iberia had strong ties with the Church of Constantinople. Georgians deemed the bishop of Constantinople as a highest authority in the ecclesiastical matters and applied to the church of Constantinople when a complicated situation required it.

¹²⁷ Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 282-284, 287, 290.

¹²⁸ Cyril Toumanoff, 'Caucasia and Byzantium,' in *Culture and Languages of eastern Christianity: Georgian*, 8.

¹²⁹ Alexander Vasilev, *The Goths in the Crimea* (Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1936), 91

This does not mean that bishops of Constantinople directly intervened in every ecclesiastical matter of the Iberian church (or, they consecrated every bishop of this church). It is well-known that, for example, Constantinopolitan prelates consecrated the bishops of Asia Minor during the fourth century and in the beginning of the fifth century when these dioceses were not under the jurisdiction of Constantinople. It is also known that many members of the clergy of another diocese often applied to the court of the Constantinopolitan bishop (for example, the case of the ‘Tall Brothers’ during the reign of John Chrysostom).¹³⁰ It seems that the Iberian prelates followed this practice. They applied to the church of Constantinople when they needed consecration of the bishops and resolution of the important ecclesiastical matters.

We should also pay attention to the archeological and architectural evidence. It is quite obvious that the main influence for early Georgian Christian architecture came from the Roman/Byzantine world. The second major source for the inspiration of late antique Georgian masons was the Sasanian world. The spread of centrally planned churches is especially notorious in this regard.¹³¹ Emma Loosley Leeming asks the question how centrally planned churches emerged in the Caucasus. She proposes two possibilities: they entered from the west and south (Roman Empire) or from Sasanian Persia.¹³² Both these possibilities are very realistic, especially this phenomenon in late antique Georgian architecture very well corresponds to what we know from the narrative accounts about very close relation of the Church of Iberia with the churches of Constantinople and Seleucia-Ctesiphon. I believe that this assumption can be strengthened with the evidence which came to us from the discovery of the two major early Christian basilicas in the eastern Georgia - Chabukauri and Dolochoپی.¹³³

¹³⁰ L’Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils*, 121, 275.

¹³¹ Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism*, 122.

¹³² Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism*, 122-145.

¹³³ [Bakhtadze...] *Nekresi*, 28-51; Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism*, 47-51.

The construction of these huge churches far from the capital of Iberia at such an early stage is a very significant fact for early Georgian Christianity. This fact certainly indicates that the major influence on Georgian Christianity came from the Roman empire. Both these basilicas are built according to the eastern Roman Christian traditions (not without influence coming from the Syriac Christian art).¹³⁴ The discovery and study of these churches once again revealed that the information about the close relations of the Georgian church with the imperial church is authentic and preserved a great deal of historical reality.

2.3. Antioch

During the second half of the twentieth century the prevailing scholarly theory was that the Church of Iberia fell under the jurisdictional dependence of the great church of Antioch.¹³⁵ By the end of the century, it became the most widely accepted opinion about the canonical status of the Georgian church during late antiquity and the early middle ages. According to this theory, from the beginning of the fourth century, when Georgia (both Iberia and Colchis) were Christianized, the Iberian church fell under the jurisdiction of the Antiochian church. What did this dependence imply? On the one hand, it is assumed that the Antiochian bishops (and then patriarchs) consecrated and sent bishops for the newly founded Iberian church. On the other hand, this meant that the see of Antioch had the superior authority in all religious matters concerning the Iberian church.¹³⁶ Medieval Greek and Georgian authors claimed that the famous anti-Arian bishop of Antioch, Eustathius (326-331), came to Iberia and established

¹³⁴ [Bakhtadze,,] *Nekresi*, 69-76.

¹³⁵ [Surguladze], *ძვ. ხეობის სახელი*, 156.

¹³⁶ Tarchnishvili, "The Origin and Development of the Ecclesiastical Autocephaly of Georgia," 193-216; [Mamulia], *ქართლის ეკლესია V-VI საუკუნეებში*, 17-34.

Christian hierarchy there. The theory also surmises that the Iberian church was under the ecclesiastical authority of the Antiochian church until the reign of king Vaxt'ang I Gorgasali (ca. 447-491), who had in mind the reorganization of the Georgian church.

There is a general agreement in the scholarship that Vaxt'ang Gorgasali was a restless rival of the Sassanian Empire and intended to liberate the Iberian kingdom from the oppressive Persian domination, which also implied the strong influence of the Persian church. From *The Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali* we know that he appealed to the church of Constantinople and asked the patriarch for the consecration of a *Catholicos*. *Catholicos* was the honorary title for the heads of the eastern (i.e. Syrian and Armenian) Christian churches.¹³⁷ The patriarch of Constantinople agreed to Vaxt'ang's request. According to *The Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali*, the patriarch of Constantinople wrote to the patriarch of Antioch. This alleged letter of the patriarch of Constantinople to the patriarch of Antioch had been preserved in *The Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali*:

First, at the beginning of the conversion of K'art'li by the Roman lady Nino, a bishop was sent from here because there was turmoil between the Persians and the Greeks, and thus it was not possible to arrange the matter in accordance with the requirements of the law. For we know that K'art'li and the east and the north belong to your holy see, as the apostles ordained in the gospel what the order of precedence should be.¹³⁸

According to *The Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali* the emperor and the patriarch sent to Antioch Peter and the twelve bishops (including Samuel) for the consecration:

¹³⁷ William Ainger Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church or The Church of the Sassanid Persian Empire 100-640 A. D.* (London: Society for Promoting the Christian Knowledge, 1910), 91-92.

¹³⁸ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 215.

The patriarch of Antioch consecrated the twelve bishops and Peter as Catholicos. They went to Constantinople, and the king gave them valuable gifts. He also handed over his daughter, named Elene, for King Vaxt'ang and sent her with a large army as far as the borders of Armenia. There King Vaxt'ang met them, and the Greek troops returned, while (the others) went on to Mc'xet'a. There they installed Peter as Catholicos and Samuel as bishop of the episcopal see of Mc'xet'a.¹³⁹

In twentieth-century scholarship, this great victory of Vaxt'ang's ecclesiastical politics was interpreted as acquiring ecclesiastical independence or autocephaly.¹⁴⁰ However, the actual source does not imply in any way that before Vaxt'ang's appeal, the Church of Iberia was under the jurisdiction of Antioch. If we put this episode of the Georgian Church history in the greater context of the contemporary fifth-century church history, than we can better understand the situation which led to the establishment of the Catholicosate. Why did Vaxt'ang appeal to Constantinople? I argue that there are two reasons for this. First of all, as it was already mentioned, Georgians saw Constantinople as the supreme authority in the ecclesiastical matters. Secondly, after the council of Chalcedon (451) Constantinople acquired immense power and authority while the role of Antioch was somehow diminished.¹⁴¹ The Georgian king sent his envoys to Constantinople and asked for the consecration of the Catholicos and twelve bishops, but the patriarch of Constantinople sent them to Antioch. According to the alleged letter preserved in the *Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali*, the patriarch of Constantinople claims that the 'east' was the jurisdiction of the patriarch of Antioch. This claim very well corresponds to the Byzantine canon law and the widespread notion that the 'east' was under the jurisdiction of

¹³⁹ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 216-217.

¹⁴⁰ [Mamulia], *ქართლის ეკლესია*, 75.

¹⁴¹ L'Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils*, 268-296.

Antioch.¹⁴² Beside this, I think that we should see in this gesture of the patriarch of Constantinople (sending clergy for the consecration to Antioch) some kind of retribution to the Antiochian bishops for the diminished position in the ecclesiastical system of the Roman empire. By this gesture, the patriarch of Constantinople showed respect to the ancient position and right of Antioch.

Now, the main question remains: when did the head of the Church of Iberia receive the honorary title of *Catholicos*? There had been a great deal of variety of scholarly opinions in this regard. But the majority of scholars assume that this happened in the second half of the fifth century (more precisely, in 470-80s).¹⁴³ After the scrupulous analysis of the doctrinal content of the Georgian liturgical readings, Michel van Esbroeck assumed that these texts had a compromising character (implying the compromise between the doctrines of Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians).¹⁴⁴ According to Esbroeck, this compromise in Georgia was possible during the reign of the king Vaxt'ang Gorgasali. In all probability, emperor Zeno (476-491) and patriarch Acacius (472-489) were 'the king and the patriarch' mentioned in *The Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali* to whom king Vaxt'ang appealed.¹⁴⁵ Tamila Mgaloblishvili assumes that the establishment of Catholicosate happened during 482-484, after emperor Zeno issued the *Henoticon* and before the Georgians and Armenians started rebellion against the Persians.¹⁴⁶ It is highly unlikely that king Vaxt'ang initiated such an important and complicated diplomatic and ecclesiastical mission after the rebellion was crushed and he escaped in western Georgia.

¹⁴² L'Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils*, 50.

¹⁴³ [Tkeshelashvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ავტოკეფალიის ძირითადი საკითხები*, 20-79.

¹⁴⁴ Esbroeck, *Les plus anciens homélieares géorgiens*, 299-300.

¹⁴⁵ [Mgaloblishvili], *კლარჯული მრავალთავი*, 186.

¹⁴⁶ [Mgaloblishvili], *კლარჯული მრავალთავი*, 190.

As opposed to this, some scholars claim that the Georgian church gained ecclesiastic independence in the eleventh century.¹⁴⁷ This opinion emerged from an episode recounted in *The Life of St. George of Athos*.¹⁴⁸ This relates that when visiting Antioch, George of Athos had a dispute with the patriarch of Antioch, Peter III (1052-1056).¹⁴⁹ Some members of the Greek clergy accused the Georgians of heresy and disobedience to the patriarch of Antioch. George of Athos refuted the accusation of heresy. He also defended the ecclesiastical independence of the Georgian church:

[...] the monk said to the patriarch: ‘Holy Master, you say that you are presiding over the See of the Apostle Peter, but we are the flock and lot of the First-Called, the one who is also called his brother, and we are converted and enlightened by him. Furthermore, one of the Twelve Apostles, namely Simon the Canaanite, is buried in our land in Abkhazeti, in the place called Nikopsia. We were enlightened by these Holy Apostles and, since we have confessed One God, we have never renounced Him, nor have our people ever been inclined towards heresy...And, again he spoke light-heartedly to the patriarch: ‘Holy Master, is it not right that the one who was called should obey the one who called? Should Peter not obey his caller, his brother Andrew

¹⁴⁷ For the review of the scholarly literature see [Surguladze], *ძვ. ხუროთს სახელი*, 160.

¹⁴⁸ George of Athos (გეორგი ათონელი) (1009-1065) was a prominent leader of Georgian monastic community on the Holy Mountain of Athos, where Georgians settled at the end of the tenth century. His *Life* was composed by his disciple, George the Lesser (გეორგი მცირე) in the 1070s: *Georgian Monks on Mount Athos: Two Eleven-Century Lives of the Hegoumenoi of Iviron*, ed. and trans. Tamara Grdzelidze (London: Bennet & Bloom, 2009), 11-50.

¹⁴⁹ It is not quite clear who was the patriarch of Antioch to whom George of Athos spoke, Peter III (1052-1056), John IV (1056-1057) or Theodosius III (1057-1059). There is a confusion of the names in the manuscripts of the *Life of Saint George of Athos*, Tkeshelashvili, *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ავტოკეფალიის ისტორიის ძირითადი საკითხები*, 151-153. But I think that this patriarch was Peter, because Theodore Balsamon mentions him (see below).

and therefore you should obey us...” The patriarch smiled and said to the hierarchs and the people: “Do you see how this monk alone wins over one number?”¹⁵⁰

The patriarch condemned the Georgians for abandoning their mother-church—which in the eyes of the patriarch was Antioch—and for no longer obeying the Church of Antioch. The patriarch claimed that Antioch was founded by the apostle Peter himself, thus the Georgian Church should be under the jurisdiction of Antioch. George of Athos defended the independence of the Georgian church referring to Byzantine sources. Of course, it is hard to pick apart actual historical reality and pious hagiographical imagination glorifying George of Athos as a brilliant theologian and rhetorician. The Georgian hagiographer presents a traditional Georgian medieval narrative conceived by the leaders of the Athonite Georgian monastic community about the uncorrupted Orthodoxy of the Georgian church¹⁵¹ cemented by the belief that the holy Apostles preached in Georgia.¹⁵² But still, in all probability, some kind

¹⁵⁰ *Georgian Monks on Mount Athos*, 129.

¹⁵¹ The idea of the uncorrupted Orthodoxy of the Georgian church is also a later construct. It ignores the doctrinal plurality which certainly existed in Georgia during late antiquity and early middle ages.

¹⁵² From the tenth century, the belief that the holy Apostles preached in Georgia became a traditional narrative, Ioseliani, *A Short History of the Georgian Church*, 1-8. This was the part of pious legends about the passion of Christ and the itinerary of the Apostles. See Theodore E. Dowling, *Sketches of Georgian Church History* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Literature, 1912), 36-37. This belief was introduced to Georgians by the Georgian translation of Byzantine hagiographical works about the Apostles. Two Byzantine writers described Andrew's mission in the Georgian lands: Epiphanius of Constantinople – a Byzantine monk residing in Constantinople - composed *the Itinerary of Apostle Andrew* in the first half of the ninth century (approximately during 815-830) and the second one was created in the second half of the ninth century by another Byzantine monk - Nikita-David of Paphlagonia (died ca.890). The text of Nikita-David was translated from Greek into Georgian by the prominent Georgian Athonite monk Euthymius (ca. 955-1024). The Byzantine narrative describes three missionary trips of the apostle Andrew among Georgians. Recent archeological discoveries advertise the claim of some historical reality preserved in the Byzantine accounts of St. Andrew, but this

of dispute should have taken place between the patriarch of Antioch and George of Athos.¹⁵³ This episode led some scholars to the assumption that the Georgian church received its autocephaly in the eleventh century.¹⁵⁴

The ‘Antiochian’ theory was widely spread at the beginning of the twentieth century when the movement for the restoration of autocephaly grew strong among Georgian intellectuals. Scholars actively investigated the origins of the ecclesiastical independence of the Georgian Orthodox Church.¹⁵⁵ Most Georgian and non-Georgian scholars based their claim on the evidence given in the Byzantine sources about the canonical subordination of the Iberian church to the Church of Antioch. But how trustworthy is this evidence? Did scholars who investigate these sources evaluate them critically? Did they understand the bias and motivation of Byzantine authors writing about the Georgian church? The answer to these questions will clarify the confusing question of Georgian autocephaly.

From the earliest period of the spread of Christianity, Antioch gained considerable influence compared to other eastern Christian communities. At the beginning of the fourth

archeological survey of St. Andrew’s foot-steps lacks any serious scientific argumentation. It is based on the geographical locations given in later Georgian tradition. These locations (later medieval inventions, in fact) are completely useless for an investigation of the first century apostolic mission. The problem of apostolic mission in Georgia is still unresolved and, hopefully future investigation will reveal more about this foundational topic of Georgian church history, *მიმოსვლა ანდროს მოციქულისა* [*The itinerary of the holy apostle Andrew*], ed. [Malkhaz Kobiashvili] მალხაზ კობიაშვილი (Tbilisi: St. Andrew the First-Called University of the Patriarchate of Georgia, 2008), 9-10.

¹⁵³ Most probably, Theodore Balsamon, the patriarch of Antioch (ca. 1140-1199), [this would have been a rare longevity] refers to this debate when he speaks about the autocephaly of the Georgian church (see below).

¹⁵⁴ [Mamulia], *ქართლის ეკლესია*, 85.

¹⁵⁵ [Vakhtang Goiladze] ვახტანგ გოილაძე, *ქართული ეკლესიის სათავეებთან* [*At the origins of the Georgian church*] (Tbilisi: Sak’art’velo, 1991), 134-152.

century, the Antiochian see already had authority over other Christian communities in the eastern diocese of the empire. It claimed the precedence all over “the East.” But this raises several questions. What did “East” mean in the original sources? Did the ecclesiastical domination of Antioch spread outside the Roman Empire? Did the term “east” include not only the eastern provinces of the empire but also the eastern “barbarian lands” outside the Roman realm?¹⁵⁶

One of the first examples for the claim of Antioch’s supreme authority in the East appears in the correspondence between Alexander, the bishop of Antioch (413-421), and Pope Innocent I (402-417).¹⁵⁷ As it is well-known from the church history, the Antiochian see made claims over the Church of Cyprus but could not provide any sufficient evidence, and the third ecumenical council (431) dismissed the pretensions and preserved the ecclesiastical independence of Cyprus.¹⁵⁸ In a letter by John, patriarch of Antioch (429-441), to Proclus, patriarch of Constantinople (d. 446), Cyprus is not in the list of sees submitted to Antioch, which suggests that Cyprus successfully maintained its ecclesiastical independence afterwards.¹⁵⁹ But the ambitions of the bishops of Antioch grew. For example, Peter the Fuller, patriarch of Antioch (471-488) and a famous anti-Chalcedonian ecclesiastical leader, also made claims about the primacy of Antioch.¹⁶⁰ And this constant claim of authority should be remembered in any discussion about the relationship of the Church of Antioch with other local churches as it plainly explains the bias and main motive of the Greek sources describing these canonical relations.

¹⁵⁶ Peter L’Huillier, *The Church of the Ancient Councils*, 50.

¹⁵⁷ Glanville Downey, “The Claim of Antioch to Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Over Cyprus,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 102, no. 3, (1958): 224.

¹⁵⁸ Downey, “The Claim of Antioch to Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Over Cyprus,” 226.

¹⁵⁹ Downey, “The Claim of Antioch,” 226.

¹⁶⁰ Downey, “The Claim of Antioch,” 227-228.

A significant Greek source about the subordination of the Georgian church to the Church of Antioch comes from later period. This source the so-called *Taktikon*, is a treatise by the famous eleventh-century monk and theologian Nikon of the Black Mountain (ca. 1025-1105). This treatise is the collection of various ecclesiastical canons, typicons, and stories which Nikon discusses and comments upon.¹⁶¹ The reference about the ecclesiastical subordination of the Iberian church to the church of Antioch is Nikon's mention about an otherwise unknown lost document known to him as *Antiochian Chronography*. According to Nikon, this account described the relationship between Antioch and Georgia. Nikon narrates the eighth-century events when the Georgian monks went to Antioch and asked the patriarch to consecrate their Catholicos because the Georgian delegation had not visited Antioch for this purpose from the times of Anastasius II the Martyr, patriarch of Antioch (ca. 599-609), because of the unstable and turbulent political and military situation. Patriarch Theophylactus (744-751) consecrated the Georgian Catholicos and gave Georgians the right to consecrate their own Catholicos without visiting Antioch. In exchange of this decree, the Antiochian patriarch obliged Georgians to mention Antiochian prelates in the liturgy and to pay a thousand-drachma annual tax to the church of Antioch. Moreover, patriarch Theophylactus preserved for himself the right to send an exarch to Georgia in the event of heretical teaching spreading in Iberia.¹⁶²

This reference was accepted by some scholars as trustworthy.¹⁶³ Nikon (or, his alleged source) believes that Georgians did not have a Catholicos from the beginning of the seventh century to the reign of Patriarch Theophylactus, who consecrated a Catholicos for the Georgians and also gave them partial ecclesiastical independence. Partial, since according to

¹⁶¹ *Тактикон Никона Чернигорца* [*'Taktikon' of Nikon of the Black Mountain*], ed. [V. N. Beneshevich] В. Н. Бенешевич (Petrograd, 1917), 1-4.

¹⁶² Tarchnishvili, "The Origins and Development of the Ecclesiastical Autocephaly of Georgia," 204-205.

¹⁶³ Tarchnishvili, "The Origins and Development of the Ecclesiastical Autocephaly of Georgia," 205.

Nikon, Antioch still preserved some rights over the Church of Iberia.¹⁶⁴ Both medieval Georgian ecclesiastical writers and twentieth-century scholars referred to Nikon as a reliable source. For example, the Georgian theologian, translator and ecclesiastical writer Ephraim Mc'ire, or Ephraim the Lesser, used Nikon's treatise as an authoritative source for the historical past of the Georgian church. In his treatise about Georgian ecclesiastical history, Ephraim unquestionably accepts the information given by Nikon:¹⁶⁵

In the days of Emperor Constantine named Copronymus and Patriarch Theophylactus of Antioch, two monks arrived from Iberia [in Antioch] as ambassadors, and told blessed Theophylactus that the Christians of the Georgian lands are in great despair because no Catholicos-archbishop had been consecrated for them since the days of Anastasius the Martyr, the patriarch of Antioch, due to the dangers of the road, for no one dared to travel because of the Arabs. And he [Theophylactus] with the council of the archbishops, metropolitans and bishops gave to the Georgians the *Protreptikon* which is the decree of liberation, so that now, time after time, they [the Georgians] could consecrate the bishops as Catholicos of Iberia from their own lands as the divine grace would show them, and as they would choose with the assistance of the flock of the church and with the help and confirmation of the bishops according to the ecclesiastical law. And [patriarch Theophylactus] wrote down the description of the commemoration for him and for this council. He

¹⁶⁴ Tarchnishvili, "The Origins and Development of the Ecclesiastical Autocephaly of Georgia," 204-205.

¹⁶⁵ [Ephraim Mc'ire], *უწყებად მიზღუდა ქართველთა მოქცევისასა*, 012-014.

consecrated one of two monks who had arrived before him, named John, as the Catholicos for that time.¹⁶⁶

However, can eleventh-century accounts serve as reliable sources for the late antique and early medieval period? As it appears, these sources have serious problems and do not

¹⁶⁶ დღეთა კონსტანტინე სკორის მოსახელისათა, ანტიოქიას პატრიარქობასა ნეტარისა თეოფილაქტესსა, მოვიდეს ქართლით მოციქულად მონაზონნი ორნი და მიუთხრეს ნეტარსა თეოფილაქტესს, ვითარმედ დიდსა ჭირსა არიან ქრისტიანენი მკვდრნი ქართველთა სოფლებისანი. რამეთუ დღითგან ანასტასი მღვდელთმოწამისა ანტიოქელ პატრიარქისა, არა კურთხეულ არს მათდა კათალიკოსი მთავარ-ეპისკოპოსი. სიმნელისათჳს გზისა. რამეთუ აგარიანთაგან ვერვინ იკადრებს სლვად. ხოლო მან ბჳობითა კრებისაჲთა, მთავარ-ეპისკოპოსთა, მიტროპოლიტთა და ეპისკოპოსთა თჳსთათანა, მისცა ქართველთა პროტრეპტიკონი, რომელ არს გაჴსნილი. რათა თჳთ მათისა საზღურისა ეპისკოპოსთაგან ჴელნი დაესხმოდინ ჟამადჟამადსა კათალიკოზსა ქართლისასა. რომელიცა საღმრთო მან მადლმან უჩუჴნოს მათ და რომელი გამოირჩიონ მოყუასთა მის ეკლესიისათა. თანადგომითა და წამებითა ეპისკოპოსთაჲთა, წესთაებრ საეკლესიოთა — და შეუქმნა მათ აღწერით მოსაჴსენებელი თავისა თჳსისათჳს და მუნ შემოკრებულისა კრებისათჳს და ჴელთ-დასხმულ ყო ერთი ორთა მათ მისსა მოვლინებულთა მონაზონთაგანი სახელით იოანე მის ჟამისა კათალიკოსად მათდა.” Ephraim Mc’ire, *უწყებაჲ მიზეზსა ქართველთა მოქცევისასა*, 9 (translation my own). The Old Slavonic translation of Nikon’s work almost invariably follows Ephraim’s words: ‘Яко при Константине Царе Копрониме, Патриарху сушу блаженному Феофилакту, яко в нужди суть христиане сел Иверьских, не имуша съборнаго Епископа, от дний блаженнаго Анастасия священномученика Патриарха Антиохийскаго не поставлен бысть им Архиепископ съборный, остроты ради путныя, и за еж не смети кому Агарян ради мимо ходити. И съборным судом своим Митрополит, и Архиепископ и Епископ, повелительное писание дасть Ивиrom, постовлятьсѣ от Епископ предела его, иж в дни тыя, съборному Архиепископу Иверьскому. По еж быти избранию от них, и сътворити и жребий, и по жребию, идеже божественная благодать объявить того по церковному уставу; и съ зорша написаниш въспоминание о том сшедайся събор и запечатлев дасть им, и постави единаго от обою посланню мниху Ивана именем,’ [Archimandrite Leonid] Архимандрит Леонид, ‘Три статьи по русскому палестиноведению [Three articles about the Russian Studies of Palestine], in *Pravoslavnyi Palestinskiy Sbornik*, vol. 6. (St. Petersburg: Izdanie V. N. Khitrovo, 1889), 47-48. The only minor difference is that the Old Slavonic translation speaks about the election of Catholicos by casting lots (*жребий*).

provide authentic historical information regarding the canonical status of the Georgian church during late antiquity and the early middle ages. First of all, the problem is that medieval authors and modern scholars look back at the ecclesiastical affairs of late antiquity through the concept of the *Pentarchy*. This theory implies that the whole Christian world should be under the rule of five patriarchates. But the doctrine of pentarchy seems to be a later construction. As was mentioned, the formation of the ecclesiastical system of the Roman Empire was a long and complicated process, and the pentarchy appeared as the result of this process.¹⁶⁷

Nikon's account also claims that the position of the Georgian Catholicos was vacant from the beginning of the seventh to the mid-eighth century, but the names and activities of Catholicoi who ruled the Georgian church in this period are well-known from Georgian and Armenian sources.¹⁶⁸ Another problem is the financial matters described in this alleged Antiochian decree. It is apparent that the patriarchs of Antioch sought to justify their financial demands by referring to such "old" and "authoritative" documents. Thus, the information of Nikon of the Black Mountain and Ephraim Mc'ire tells us more about the bias of Byzantine church officials than about the historical reality of late antiquity and early middle ages.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 297.

¹⁶⁸ [Roin Metreveli] როინ მეტრეველი (ed). *საქართველოს კათალიკოს-პატრიარქები* [*Catholicos-patriarchs of Georgia*] (Tbilisi: Nekeri, 2000), 30-33.

¹⁶⁹ The legend about Eustathius of Antioch (324-330) preaching in newly converted Iberia should also be discussed in the context of this Byzantine bias. Certainly, the visit of Eustathius of Antioch in Georgia is entirely fictitious. There is no early reference about Eustathius preaching in Georgia. He was very actively engaged in the Arian controversy during his six-year reign, and considering the distance between Antioch and Georgia and then the time he had to spend in Iberia, this account seems even less reliable. Carsten-Michael Walbinger, "Accounts on Georgia in the Works of Makāriyūs Ibn az-Za'im," *Parole de l'Orient* 21 (1996): 245-247; Carsten-Michael Walbinger, "Die Beziehungen zwischen dem Griechisch-Orthodoxen Patriarchat von Antiochia und der Kirche von Georgien vom 14. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert," *Le Muséon* 114 (2001): 237-238.

There is no compelling evidence for the canonical dependence of the Iberian church to the Church of Antioch in late antique and early medieval Byzantine sources. The Church of Iberia is absent in the list of the bishoprics under the jurisdiction of Antioch, which was composed during the patriarchate of Anastasius I (561-571).¹⁷⁰ This list is based on later Greek manuscripts, but the Iberian church is also absent in the more ancient Syrian redactions of this list, which, according to Ernest Honigmann, was translated from the original Greek manuscript.¹⁷¹ Another early source highlighting the relation between Antiochian and Iberian churches is the letter of the miaphysite patriarch of Antioch, John (631-648), to the miaphysite metropolitan Marutha of Taghrit (629-649).¹⁷² In this letter, Patriarch John admits that before the death of Catholicos Babai (484),¹⁷³ the Persian, Armenian and Georgian churches had been subordinated to Antioch, and this changed afterwards. John is forced to admit the real situation of his time: the Georgian church was free from the jurisdiction of Antioch. At the same time, he also clearly fabricated the subordination of these churches to Antioch before 484. As it is well known in scholarship, neither the Armenian nor the Persian church was ever subordinated to the Church of Antioch.¹⁷⁴

The independence of the Georgian church is confirmed by the famous canonist and the patriarch of Antioch, Theodore Balsamon (c. 1140-1199). This confirmation is repeated by

¹⁷⁰ Francois Nau, "Les suffragants d'Antioch au milieu du VI-e siècle," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 4, no. 2 (1909): 209-211. There is a sequence of twelve metropolitans, eight autocephalous metropolitans, eight archbishops under the jurisdiction of Antiochean patriarch, Nau, "Les suffragants d'Antioch au milieu du VI-e siècle," 215-217.

¹⁷¹ Ernst Honigmann, "Studien zur Notitia Antiochena," *Bizantinische Zeitschrift*, 25 (1924): 60, 73-75.

¹⁷² Michael Tarchnishvili, "The Origins and Development of the Ecclesiastical Autocephaly of Georgia," 196.

¹⁷³ Actually it was Catholicos Bābōē not Catholicos Babai, Bābōē, Catholicos (d. 481 or 484), *Encyclopedia Iranica*//accessed May 25 2021 <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/baboe-catholicos//>

¹⁷⁴ Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East: Concise History*, 17.

another ecclesiastical scholar Mathew Blastares (c. 1290-1360) in his *Syntagma Canonum*. However, Theodore insists that before the independence, the Church of Iberia was under the jurisdiction of Antioch:

[The archbishop] of Iberia was honored by a decree of the Council of Antioch. For it is said that, in the days of the most holy patriarch of Theoupolis, the great Antioch, Lord Peter, a conciliar arrangement was made, according to which the Church of Iberia which was, by then, subordinated to the patriarch of Antioch, would become free and autocephalous.¹⁷⁵

Obviously, Theodore Balsamon refers to the dispute between patriarch of Antioch Peter III (1052-1056) and George of Athos. There was no other orthodox patriarch called Peter in Antioch. He may not refer to Peter the Fuller, because he would not call the latter *ἀγιότατος πατριάρχης*. Apparently, Balsamon has an independent tradition from that of the *Life of George of Athos*. It is well imaginable that in the time of Peter III there was a jurisdictional debate, which finally ended with the recognition of the autocephaly of Iberia by Antioch. Of course, this does not mean that then was the beginning of the autocephaly.

Another aspect of the relation of the Georgian church with the Church of Antioch is the issue of myrrh. The consecration of myrrh was an important prerogative in the practice of the eastern churches. Antiochian tradition claimed that the Iberian church received the right to consecrate myrrh from Antioch, however, earliest Georgian documents reveal that see of

¹⁷⁵ ‘Τὸν δὲ Ἰβηρίας ἐτίμησε ἡ διάγνωσις τῆς ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ συνόδου. Λέγεται γὰρ ὅτι ἐπὶ τῶν ἡμερῶν τοῦ ἀγιότατου πατριάρχου Θεουπόλεως μεγάλης Ἀντιοχείας, κυροῦ Πέτρου γέγονεν οἰκονομία συνοδική, ἐλευθέραν εἶναι, καὶ αὐτοκέφαλον, τὴν ἐκκλησίαν Ἰβηρίας, ὑποκειμένην τότε τῷ πατριάρχῃ Ἀντιοχείας.’ J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca*. vol. 137 (Paris, 1865), 320 (translation my own).

Mcx'et'a acquired this privilege from the Church of Jerusalem from the patriarch of Jerusalem Sergius I (842-844) by effort of the Georgian monks Michael and Arsenius.¹⁷⁶ This right was confirmed by the measures taken by the famous bishop of early medieval Georgia – Ephraim of Acquri (ca. 855-895).¹⁷⁷ The eminent tenth-century Georgian hagiographer George Merčule in his most important composition the *Life of Gregory of Khandzta* states very clearly:

Ephraim the Great, however, acquired a great many good things for our land, for he was the first to bring the myrrh of the Eastern Patriarchs from Jerusalem. Through the commandment of Christ, he joyfully established the blessing of myrrh in Kartli through the decree of the Patriarch of Jerusalem.¹⁷⁸

One of the Georgian documents dated by thirteenth/fourteenth century known as the *Sanctification of Holy Myrrh* (კურთხევა ძირიწისა) claims that the consecration of holy myrrh as the privilege of the Georgian Church originally was introduced by the famous eighth-century king Arčil II.¹⁷⁹ However, as this reference comes from the very late source, we cannot say anything definitely about the consecration of myrrh during the reign of king Arčil II.

¹⁷⁶ [Surguladze], *მცხეთის სახლი*, 169.

¹⁷⁷ [Surguladze], *მცხეთის სახლი*, 169.

¹⁷⁸ George Merchule, *The Life of St. Gregory of Khandzta*, tr. Theophan Erik Halvorson (The Diocese of Nikozi and Tskhinvali, 2015), 153. However, this means that George Merchule somehow forgets about the contribution of Michael and Arsenius (probably for purely rhetorical intention in order to magnify the deeds of Ephraim of Acquri who was a disciple of Gregory of Xantz'a).

¹⁷⁹ Surguladze, *მცხეთის სახლი*, 170. *ქართული სამართლის ძეგლები [The monuments of the Georgian law]*, ed. Isidore Dolidze [ისიდორე დოლიძე] (Tbilisi: Sak'art'velos SSR mec'nierebat'a academia, 1965), 47.

Chapter 3. The Non-Chalcedonian Patriarchates

3.1 The Armenian Church

Without any doubt the history of the three late antique and early medieval Caucasian *ethnies* (Georgians, Armenians and Albanians) are deeply interwoven with each other.¹⁸⁰ Only the perception of the joint history of these three nations can shed light on the complicated and controversial issues of Caucasian history. However, scholars often overestimate the intensity of these relations. It must be remembered that despite the strong religious, social and political connections these three Caucasian nations never had strong feelings of a common identity.¹⁸¹ This was also true for the fourth and fifth centuries when the Caucasian churches shared a common faith. We also cannot say that the conversions of Georgia and Armenia were somehow interrelated because there is no clear and sufficient evidence for this. Scholars catch only sporadic glimpses of the historical relations between early Georgian and Armenian Christianity.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ The term for the pre-modern ethnic groups in Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 19-28.

¹⁸¹ Despite the fact that the perception of Caucasus as one region certainly exists in the writings of some of the medieval historians (for example, those of Movses Xorenac'i and Leontius of Urbnisi), the formation of common Caucasian identity is a much later phenomenon, Rapp, *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 1, n. 2.

¹⁸² For sources about the relationship between early Georgian and Armenian Christianity, see Michael Tarnnischvili, "Sources arméno-géorgiennes de l'histoire ancienne de l'église de Géorgie," *Le Muséon* 60, 1-2 (1947): 29-50. For the general overview of the late antique and early medieval Georgian and Armenian sources about early Caucasian Christianity see Jean-Pierre Mahé, "Systèmes d'écriture et historiographie de la christianisation du Caucase," in *The Creation of Caucasian Alphabets as Phenomenon of Cultural History* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen akademie der wissenschaften,

The conversion of Armenia is traditionally ascribed to King Trdat III (298-330), and Gregory the Illuminator.¹⁸³ The main sources for the history of the conversion of Armenia are *The History of the Armenians* by an unknown author named Agathangelos,¹⁸⁴ and *The History of the Armenians* by Movses Xorenac'i whose narration is based on Agathangelos's story.¹⁸⁵ Both of these sources describe the deeds of St. Gregory and the martyrdom of the holy Hripsimians—holy virgin Hripsime and other holy virgins following her—who were executed by King Trdat because of their refusal to abandon Christianity before the official conversion of the country.¹⁸⁶ Both sources are largely legendary and fictional. For example, about the anachronisms in Agathangelos's account Robert W. Thomson points out that “such anachronisms are but another reflection of the fact that the History of Agathangelos does not offer us an eyewitness account of the conversion of king Trdat, but rather a tendentious

2011), 73-82. Mahé's article is informative, however, author maintains some of the outdated claims about the origins of the Georgian bible and relation of the Georgian and Armenian Churches, Mahé, “Systèmes d'écriture et historiographie de la christianisation du Caucase,” 73, 78.

¹⁸³ According to the generally accepted opinion, Armenia converted in c. 314 and its first bishop—St. Gregory the Illuminator—was consecrated in Caesarea by Bishop Leontius. Richard Hovannisian (ed.), *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times, vol. 1: The Dynastic Periods: From Antiquity to the Fourteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 81-82. Although it is not supported by clear evidence, Christian communities seem to have existed in greater Armenia prior to the official conversion. Robert W. Thomson, “Mission, Conversion, and Christianization: The Armenian Example,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12/13 (1988/1989): 29-30.

¹⁸⁴ Various editions of Agathangelos survived—Armenian, Greek, Arabic and Georgian. Agathangelos, *The History of the Armenians*, ed. Robert W. Thomson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976), xxiii. For the Syriac version see Michel van Esbroeck, “Le résumé syriaque de l'Agathange,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 95/3-4 (1977): 291-358.

¹⁸⁵ Movses Khorenats'i, *History of the Armenians*, ed. and tr. Robert W. Thomson (Carav'n Book Ann Arbor, 2006), 1-60. For late antique and early medieval Armenian sources for the conversion of Armenia, see Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians*, xxv-xcvii.

¹⁸⁶ Agathangelos, *The History of the Armenians*, 147-149.

compilation and elaborated tradition.”¹⁸⁷ The fictitious character of Gregory’s large-scale missionary activity is especially apparent.¹⁸⁸ The *Life of Gregory* was created at the end of the fifth century and *The History of Armenia* by Moses Xorenac’i dates to the eighth century.¹⁸⁹ Unlike the missionary of Georgia, contemporary Greek and Latin sources do not mention St. Gregory.¹⁹⁰ The cult of Gregory the Illuminator emerged gradually from the end of the fifth century onwards. The transformation and aggrandizement of St. Gregory’s figure can be traced through the Armenian, Greek, Syriac and Arabic recensions of Agathangelos.¹⁹¹

The belief that St. Gregory converted Armenia, Iberia, Lazica and Albania and established Christian churches there, was the main justification for the Armenian prelates to claim the authority of the Armenian church over other Christian communities of Caucasus. Early medieval Armenian authors created an ethnocentric theory of Caucasian Christian communities under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction and unquestionable spiritual authority of the Armenian prelates while early Greek and Latin sources about Caucasus know nothing about this primacy. According to this theory, at the beginning of the fourth century Georgians and

¹⁸⁷ Agathangelos, *The History of the Armenians*, xxix.

¹⁸⁸ Thomson, “Mission, Conversion, and Christianization,” 33-36. Nina Garsoïan even proposed the possibility that St. Gregory’s mission actually took place in the southern Armenian satraps, not in greater Armenia, [Nina Garsoïan] Н. Г. Гарсоян, “Армения в IV веке: К вопросу уточнения терминов ‘Армения’ и ‘верность’” [Armenia in the fourth century: an attempt to redefine the concepts ‘Armenia’ and ‘loyalty’], *Journal of Social Sciences of the Armenian SSR* 3 (1971): 55-62. In this case, the relationship between the conversions of Georgia and Armenia is even less possible.

¹⁸⁹ This is contrary to the long-standing opinion that dated the *History of Armenia* to the fifth century, and which was recently reiterated by Giusto Traina, *Une année ordinaire à la fin de l’empire romain* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2009, English translation Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁹⁰ For example, Sozomen mentions the conversion of Armenians and King Trdat but he does not mention St. Gregory, *Patrologiae cursus completus. Series graeca*, vol. 67 (Paris, 1864), 954-956.

¹⁹¹ Aleksidze, *Narrative of Caucasian Schism*, 48-52. The geographical area of St. Gregory’s activities doubtless expanded in accordance with the geopolitical situation in the early medieval period in the Caucasus, Aleksidze, *Narrative of Caucasian Schism*, 52.

Albanians received “the true faith” from St. Gregory the Illuminator. From that time until the end of the sixth century, Caucasian Christians shared a common Orthodox faith unaltered by heretical teachings. Then the evil seeds of “the accursed council of Chalcedon” appeared in the Caucasus. Georgians betrayed their faith and joined the Chalcedonian heretics and abandoned the Orthodoxy brought to them by St. Gregory.¹⁹²

St. Gregory’s image given by later Armenian authors is more the product of pious imagination and hagiographical fiction than actual historical reality. As Robert Thomson’s research reveals, both major Armenian sources about the conversion of Armenia are full of later interpolations, ethnocentric bias, and apparent forgeries.¹⁹³ One of the most obvious falsification is the depiction of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Iberia. Armenian authors imagined Iberia as politically and then (during and after conversion) religiously subjected to Armenia. Armenia is depicted as the great and powerful kingdom dominating all its neighbors. Agathangelos and Movses Xorenac’i ascribe to Gregory not only the conversion of Armenia but also the conversion of both western and eastern parts of Georgia.¹⁹⁴

But the evidence given by Greek and Latin ecclesiastical historians seems more consistent. As noted, the fourth- and fifth-century Greek and Latin authors who describe the conversion of Iberia and Lazica do not mention St. Gregory’s activities in the Caucasus. Gelasius of Caesarea, Rufinus of Aquileia, Theodoret of Cyrus, Sozomen, and Socrates provide nearly identical narratives of the conversion of Georgia—with minor differences as it was mentioned above. But they do not relate the relationship between the conversions of these two

¹⁹² Nina Garsoïan, *L’Eglise arménienne et le grand schisme d’Orient*. Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 574; Subsidia 100 (Louvain: Peeters, 1999), 322.

¹⁹³ Agathangelos, *The History of the Armenians*, xxv-xcvii.

¹⁹⁴ In the words of Robert W. Thomson, “the Armenian tradition as found in Agathangelos and Moses gives an anachronistic and simplistic impression that ‘Armenia’ was a single entity rather than a country into two spheres of influence,” Agathangelos, *The History of the Armenians*, xxxv.

countries, nor do they mention Gregory or any other Armenian missionary or prelate when they speak about the Christianization of Iberia and Lazica.

As it was mentioned, St. Gregory the Illuminator's leading role in Armenian sources served for the justification of the hierarchical submission of Georgian and Albanian churches to the Armenian church. According to Armenian authors, Georgian and Albanian communities were subjected to the authority of the Armenian prelate from the beginning of the fourth century. Later Armenian sources also insisted on this theory. Beside Agathangelos and Movses Xorenac'i, these are the two letters of the Armenian Catholicos Babgen (490-516), the *Book of Letters*, and the writings of the tenth-century Catholicos Uxtanes.¹⁹⁵

Two surviving letters are ascribed to the Catholicos Babgen: The First and Second Letter of the Armenians to the Orthodox in Persia.¹⁹⁶ The author of these letters speaks about the unity of the Caucasian Christians in the denunciation of the "Nestorian" teaching.¹⁹⁷ In the first letter the Georgians and Albanians are mentioned, but there is no indication that Georgian and Armenian prelates were somehow below the Armenian Catholicos. The author of the letter implies that three Caucasian churches equal in rank reject the "Nestorian" doctrine.¹⁹⁸

The *Book of Letters* is a collection of the correspondence of Armenian prelates with other bishops.¹⁹⁹ Among others it also preserved the letters of Armenian prelates to the

¹⁹⁵ Aleksidze, *The Narrative of Caucasian Schism*, 103-116.

¹⁹⁶ Aleksidze, *The Narrative of Caucasian Schism*, 82.

¹⁹⁷ About these letters and their relation to the first council of Dvin see, Aleksidze, 82-84.

¹⁹⁸ [Zaza Aleksidze] ზაზა ალექსიძე, "მასალები დვინის 506 წლის საეკლესიო კრების ისტორიისათვის [Materials for the council of Dvin (506)]" in *Caucasus Christianus*, I. ed Dali Chitunashvili (Tbilisi: National Center for Manuscripts, 2010), 124-144.

¹⁹⁹ Garsoïan, *L'Eglise arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient*, 516-585; Leif Frivold, *The Incarnation: A Study of the Doctrine of the Book of Letters* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1981); Andrea

Georgian Catholicos, Kyrion I (ca. 590-613). These letters describe the emerging conflict between the Georgian and Armenian churches regarding doctrinal issues. The conflict started with the deposition of Bishop Moses of C'urtavi by Catholicos Kyrion. Moses appealed to Catholicos Moses and accused Kyrion of betraying the ancestral faith brought by St. Gregory the Illuminator. This conflict exposed an already existing rift between the Georgian and Armenian churches. In the correspondence, Armenian prelates demanded from Kyrion the rejection of Chalcedon. Kyrion rejected their demands which finally led to the schism between the Georgian and Armenian churches in 609.²⁰⁰

The Book of Letters was one of the major sources for medieval Armenian authors and also for twentieth-century scholars to claim the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Armenian church over the Georgian church, even though it does not contain any serious evidence for this claim whatsoever. First of all, this collection of letters must be treated with caution due to its ethnocentric bias. This does not mean that *The Book of Letters* is completely useless for the reconstruction of Armeno-Georgian ecclesiastical schism, but the Armenian bias is apparent in every aspect. It still does not provide any reliable information about a long-existing tradition of the consecration of Georgian bishops by the Armenian Catholicoi.²⁰¹

Schmidt. "Das armenische 'Buch der Briefe'. Seine Bedeutung als quellenkundliche Sammlung für die christologischen

Streitigkeiten in Armenien im 6.n. Jh." *Logos*. ed. H.C. Brennecke, E.L. Grasmuck und C. Marksches. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 67 (Berlin and New York, NY: De Gruyter, 1993): 511-533.

²⁰⁰ For the interpretation of primal sources of Armeno-Georgian schism by Uxtanes, see Aleksidze, *Narrative of Caucasian Schism*, 109-124. [Uxtanes] უხტანესი, *ისტორია გამოყოფის ქართველთა სომეხთაგან* [The history of the division of Georgians from the Armenians], ed. and tr. [Zaza Aleksidze] ზაზა ალექსიძე (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1975).

²⁰¹ Garsoïan, *L'Eglise arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient*, 319.

Another author who insists on the concept of Caucasus as one diocese under Armenian ecclesiastic jurisdiction (also known as the Catholicosate of Dvin) is the tenth-century Armenian Catholicos Uxtanes. He cites several sources of doubtful character, which allegedly confirmed his theory about the primacy of the Armenian church. Uxtanes claims that he possessed the letter of the patriarch of Constantinople Nicholas Mysticus in which the patriarch confirmed the primacy of Armenian prelates. According to Uxtanes, in this letter, the patriarch of Constantinople wrote to the Armenian prelate that Georgians and Albanians should be subjected to the Armenian Catholicos.²⁰² Besides this letter, Uxtanes also mentions another letter. He relates that during the investigation of the history of the ecclesiastical schism between Armenia and Georgia, he visited Tbilisi, where he met an Armenian priest who gave him the letter of Moses, the bishop of C'urtavi. In this letter, Moses scolded Catholicos Kyrion and blamed him for the betrayal of his Armenian patrons. Because Kyrion was consecrated by the Armenian Catholicos, according to this letter his betrayal was even worse.²⁰³ However, such sources allegedly found in the tenth century in the house of some Armenian priest are obviously useless for the reconstruction of the ecclesiastical history of the fifth and sixth centuries.

What is apparent from the Armenian sources is the ethnocentric perceptions of the common Caucasian past of their late antique and early medieval Armenian authors. Their recurring claim about the missionary activities of St. Gregory the Illuminator, and about the primacy of the Armenian Catholicosate are more informative about the medieval Armenian perceptions and ethnic identity than useful for the reconstruction of actual canonical relations between Caucasian churches during late antiquity and the early middle Ages.

²⁰² Aleksidze, *Narrative of Caucasian Schism*, 48-51.

²⁰³ Nikoloz Aleksidze, *Narrative of Caucasian Schism*, 104-105.

3.2. The Church of the East

There has been much ongoing discussion about the relationship between early Georgian Christianity and Syriac Christianity. Both Georgian and non-Georgian scholars have been dedicated to finding evidence for the tight connection of the Iberian church with Syriac churches during late antiquity.²⁰⁴ In the twentieth century, the theory about the dominant Semitic origins of the early Christian communities of Georgia became very popular.²⁰⁵ By “Semitic origins” I mean emphasizing the close link of early Georgian Christianity with Jerusalem, and the major role of Jewish community of Iberia in the spreading of Christianity in Georgia.²⁰⁶

As is evident from the various hagiographical sources, Georgians are known to have gone on pilgrimage to Syria as early as in the fifth century.²⁰⁷ They also became familiar with

²⁰⁴ Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism*, 52-84.

²⁰⁵ [Mgaloblishvili], *კლარჯული მრავალთავი*, 160-182.

²⁰⁶ Tamila Mgaloblishvili, “Introduction: Expeditions to the Holy Land by Georgian Scholars,” in *Georgians in the Holy Land: The Rediscovery of a Long-Lost Christian Legacy* (London: Bennet & Bloom, 2014), 15-20. According to various written and archeological sources, more than forty monasteries belonged to the Georgian community of the Holy Land during different periods, David Khoshtaria, Nikoloz Vacheishvili, “Building Activities of the Georgians in the Holy Land,” in *Georgians in the Holy Land*, 21. Georgian communities appeared in Palestine as early as in the first half of the fifth century, as it is noted in *The Life of Peter the Iberian*. Archeological excavations attest to the existence of the Georgian monasteries in Palestine from the fifth and sixth centuries onwards. Most ancient Georgian monasteries unearthed in Palestine are the monasteries of Umm Leisun and Bir el Qatt. John Seligman, “Excavations at the Georgian Monastery from the Byzantine Period in Umm Leisun, Near Jerusalem,” in *Georgians in the Holy Land*, 129-146; Yana Chekhanovets, “Early Georgian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land,” *Liber Annuus* 61 (2011): 453-457. For the literature see Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism*, 40-44.

²⁰⁷ [Tarnichsvili], *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 162-163.

Syriac literature and these literary contacts are confirmed by several translations made from Syriac into Georgian.²⁰⁸ These contacts are also revealed in ecclesiastical art.²⁰⁹

And finally, I now turn to the canonical dependence of the Iberian church upon the Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, which is the primary subject of my thesis. The Church of the East or the Persian church became a powerful Christian community in the Sasanian Empire and even beyond its territories.²¹⁰ Christianity made its way to Persia from the second and third century onwards. At the beginning of the fourth century, most of the Christian communities were reconciled under the authority of the bishop or Catholicos Patriarch of Seleucia Ctesiphon.²¹¹ The hierarchical structure of the Church followed the imperial administration.²¹² The Persian church stayed out of the theological controversies which took place in the Roman Empire. Not only the Christian communities of Persia were not affected by those dogmatic disputes taking place in the Roman Empire but they were also free from the jurisdiction of any major ecclesiastical center of the Roman Empire.²¹³ However, in the beginning of the fifth century several important synods were convened (in 410, 420 and 424). These synods accepted the doctrine of Nicaea-Constantinople and promulgated ecclesiastical canons.²¹⁴ The place of the Christian community in the Sasanian world is often imagined as a persecuted minority

²⁰⁸ [Kekelidze...], *ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია*, 11-12.

²⁰⁹ Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism*, 28-30.

²¹⁰ Often denoted as “Nestorian,” an inadequate and derogatory term. Sebastian Brock, “The Christology of the Church of the East in the Synods of the Fifth to Early Seventh Centuries,” in *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature, Theology* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992), 125-142; Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 7-32.

²¹¹ Geoffrey Herman, “The Syriac World in the Persian Empire,” in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London, New-York: Routledge, 2019), 134. Baum and W. Winkler, *The Church of the East*, 14-17.

²¹² Herman, “The Syriac World in the Persian Empire,” 135.

²¹³ Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East: Concise History*, 17.

²¹⁴ Herman, “The Syriac Word in the Persian Empire,” 135.

under the pressure of Zoroastrian religion but this is an oversimplification of historical reality. Christians were, in fact, an integral part of the Sasanian society and they played an important social, cultural and political role in Sasanian world throughout its existence.²¹⁵

Along with the Armenian and Albanian churches, the Georgian church also fell under the secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The Persian shah, Yazdegerd I (399-420), initiated a tolerant policy towards Christian communities, which certainly encompassed Caucasian Christians. In 410, a council was convened under Catholicos Mar Isaac and Bishop Marutha, which was followed by the councils of 420 and 424. The bishop of Iberia probably attended the council of the Persian church convened in 420.²¹⁶ Michael Tarchnischvili brought attention to this fact and suggested that the Persian church spread its ecclesiastical jurisdiction on the Iberian church.²¹⁷ Giorgi Mamulia also agrees with Tarchnischvili's argument. Surely, the bishops of Iberia were consecrated with the agreement of the Persian king and the confirmation of the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.²¹⁸

The 420s was the period of the reign of King Arčil I of Iberia who is well-known both from Armenian (*The Life of Mashtots*) and Syriac (*The Life of Peter the Iberian*) sources.²¹⁹ The account of the successors of Mirian III relates that during the reign of King Arčil four

²¹⁵ Herman, "The Syriac World in the Persian Empire," 135; Richard Payne, *Christians and Iranian Society ca. 500-700*, A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of Princeton University in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of philosophy (Princeton University, 2010), 1-26.

²¹⁶ J. Chabot, *Synodicon Orientale ou recueil de synods nestoriens* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 276; [Mamulia], *ქართლის ეკლესია V-VI საუკუნეებში*, 5

²¹⁷ Tarchnischvili, *საქართველოს ეკლესიის ისტორია*, 240.

²¹⁸ Davit Chikovani, "The Synod of Mar Yahbalaha (AD 419-420) and its Significance for the History of the Church of Kartli," *Pro Georgica* 30 (2020): 147-166; [Mamulia], *ქართლის ეკლესია V-VI საუკუნეებში*, 7-8.

²¹⁹ Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 72-74.

archbishops occupied the throne of the Catholicos. *The Conversion of Georgia* is silent about the names of the three out of four archbishops, but as noted above, their names—Gregory, Basil, and Mobidan—are found in the *Life of Georgia*:

In the time of Arc'il passed away the three bishops: Iona, Gregory, and Basil. After Basil Arc'il appointed a bishop named Mobidan. He was a Persian by race, and professed the orthodox faith. But (in fact) he was an impious magus and subverter of church order. However, King Arc'il and his son were unaware of Mobidan's impiety and thought he was a believer. He did not reveal the preaching of his religion out of fear of the king and the people; but secretly he wrote books of total deceit. After his time all his writings were burned by the true bishop Michael. who was deposed because of his presumption against King Vaxt'ang.²²⁰

The words of the Georgian chronicle that they were “subverters of church order” could mean two things: that they were adherents of some doctrine deemed by the later Georgian author as “heretical” and that they were installed uncanonically. It seems that both of these aspects could be implied here. After 387, when Iberia fell under Sasanian dominance again, and especially after the beginning of the fifth century, Persian oppression grew strong and Iberia's traditional contacts with Constantinople were disrupted. The context of the doctrinal controversies is also significant. As is known, the Persian church subscribed to the theological doctrine of the school of Antioch and honored the most influential theologians of this school, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus, as supreme authorities. It is known from various sources that the works of Theodore and Diodore spread in Armenia.²²¹ Considering this context, the archbishops of the Georgian church were installed by order of the Persian king and they preached the doctrine of the theological school of Antioch there. Also, the Georgian

²²⁰ Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 157. “Mobidan” is not a personal name but the title of the chief magus, Thomson, 157.

²²¹ Karekin Sarkissian, *The Council of Chalcedon and the Armenian Church* (New York: A Publication of the Armenian Church Prelacy, 1975), 131-135, 142.

chronicle's words about Mobidan that "secretly he wrote books of total deceit" could mean that Mobidan translated the works of Theodore and Diodore of Tarsus to Georgian.²²²

After Mobidan, a certain Glonok'or was installed as archbishop of the Iberian church, who also acquired secular power over the Iberian and Albania by the Persian head of the local Persian administration of Caucasus Barzabod.²²³ Glonok'or was succeeded by Bishop Jovel whose religious affiliation is unknown. But the growing Persian influence was met with strong resistance in the Georgian church. Evidently, some Georgian bishops wished to restore the relations with Constantinople. Upholding Cyrillian doctrine, they did not accept the teachings of Theodore and Diodore. This is apparent from the fact that one of the Georgian bishops, Jeremiah ("Ieremia Iberos partium Persidis"), went to Ephesus to attend the ecumenical council. However, he was intercepted in Constantinople with other anti-Nestorian bishops and could not reach Ephesus. he continued to be actively engaged in anti-Nestorian activities in Constantinople.²²⁴ Anti-Nestorian tendencies in the church of Iberia are also confirmed in Georgian sources. After the untimely death of Arčil's successor, Mirdat V (ca. 440-447), his wife Sagduxt who served as a queen regent during the minor years of his son, Vaxt'ang, summoned Bishop Michael from Byzantium. At the same time, the politics of the Persian kings towards the Christian communities changed to intolerance. As it seems, queen Sagduxt thought

²²² However, we do not have any direct evidence for this. There is no agreement about the faith of Mobidan in scholarship. In the twentieth century Ivane Javakhishvili's suggestion about his Manicheism was widely accepted, but the religious situation of Caucasus at that time makes it difficult to determine his religious affiliation, Tamila Mgaloblishvili, Stephen H. Rapp, Jr. "Manichaeism in Late Antique Georgia?" in *In Search of Truth. Augustine, Manichaeism and Other Gnosticism Studies for Joahannes van Oort at Sixty*, ed. Jacob Albert Berg, Annemare Kotze, Tobias Nicklas and Madeleine Scopello, Vol. 74 (2010), 276-278.

²²³ Rapp, *Sasanian Iran through Georgian Eyes*, 162. Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 155-160.

²²⁴ Paul Peeters, "Jérémie évêque de l'Ibérie perse (431)," *Anallecta Bollandiana* 51 (1933): 32-33.

that this was the right time for the liberation from Persian ecclesiastical dominance. Thus, Iberia turned towards Constantinople once again. The new bishop, Michael, was consecrated in Constantinople and when Michael insulted him, Vaxt'ang appealed to the patriarch of Constantinople.²²⁵

The hierarchical dependence of the Georgian Church on the Persian Church exposed itself in certain aspects of the fifth-century Georgian ecclesiastical hierarchy. The first surviving piece of late antique Georgian literature—*The Martyrdom of Šušanik*—relates the martyrdom of the Armeno-Georgian Queen Šušanik, daughter of the famous Armenian commander-in-chief Vardan Mamikonian. Šušanik was martyred by her apostate Georgian husband Varsk'en, a lord of the southern Georgian province known as Gugaret'i/Gugark'.²²⁶ In this masterpiece of Georgian hagiography we encounter one of the companions of Šušanik, Samuel, who is described as “a head of bishops” and a certain Apoc', a bishop of the house of lord Varsk'en.²²⁷ Traditionally, Samuel was associated with the Samuel mentioned in the *Life of Vaxt'ang Gorgasali* who became Catholicos after Catholicos Peter I.²²⁸ However, Tamila Mgaloblishvili argues that the *Martyrdom of Šušanik* is about a different Samuel. “The head of the bishops” did not mean Catholicos: these two high ecclesiastical offices were, in fact, different in the Persian Church. A head of bishops was the second most influential prelate in

²²⁵ [Mamulia], *ქართლის ეკლესია*, 14-16.

²²⁶ [Jacob of C'urtavi] *იაკობ ცურტაველი, მარტვილობა შუშანიკისი* [The Martyrdom of Šušanik], ed. Ilia Abuladze (Tbilisi: 1938) reprinted in 1978 (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba); Margit Bíró, “Shushanik's Georgian Vita,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 38, no. 1/2 (1984): 194; Paul Peeters, “Sainte Sousanik: Martyre en Armeno-Georgie, *Analecta Bollandiana* 53, no. 3-4 (1935): 245-307.

²²⁷ Jacob C'urtaveli, *The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik*, trans. Jumber Cholobargia, ed. by Katherin Vivian Ashton and Elguja Khintibidze (Tbilisi, 2006).

²²⁸ For the review of the scholarly literature see [Mgaloblishvili], *კლარჯული მრავალთავი*, 190-192.

the Church of the East.²²⁹ This specific feature of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of this region was evidently the result of strong Syriac influence. Fifth-century Georgian hierarchy mirrored the ecclesiastical organization of the Persian church.²³⁰ Considering the political and ecclesiastical situation of fifth-century Caucasus, and specifically Georgia, I argue that Mgaloblishvili's claim describes very well the actual situation and strong influence of the Persian Church in the fifth-century Georgian Church.

As shown above, the Church of Iberia was still under the influence of the Church of the East in the beginning of the sixth century when at least two Catholicoi of the Georgian church were of Persian (Syriac?) origin, and the Church of Iberia was headed by the married prelates during the seventh, and at the beginning of the eighth century, from Catholicos T'avp'ečag II (ca. 650s-60s) to Catholicos Peter (Petre) II (ca. 689-720). As it was also mentioned above, the fact that they were married is emphasized by medieval Georgian authors because the celibacy of the bishops was already a wider-spread practice in Greek and Roman Christianity.²³¹ In addition, the names of two Catholicoi (T'avp'ečag and Izid-Bozid) are clearly Iranian.²³² In my opinion, the rejection of celibacy and the Iranian origins of these prelates certainly indicate that the influence of the Church of the East prevailed in Iberia again.²³³ But the main question is

²²⁹ [Vasiliy V. Bolotov] Василий В. Болотов, *Лекций по истории древней церкви: история церкви в период вселенских соборов* [Lectures on the history of the ancient church: The history of the church during the ecumenical councils], vol. 3 (St. Petersburg: Tipografia M. Merkusheva, 1913), 192-193.

²³⁰ [Mgaloblishvili], *კლარჯული მრავალთავი*, 193-201.

²³¹ Peter L'Huillier, "Episcopal Celibacy in the Orthodox Tradition," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 35, no. 2-3 (1991): 271-300.

²³² Rapp, *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 264.

²³³ From the fifth century onwards, East Syriac bishops were allowed to marry. Celibacy was abolished at the council of Seleucia in 486 and at the councils held by Catholicos Babai in 498 and 499. Aubrey R. Vine, *The Nestorian Churches: A Concise History of Nestorian Christianity in Asia from the Persian Schism to the Modern Assyrians* (London: Independent Press, 1927), 50-52. However, the situation changed when celibacy was enforced in the sixth century by Catholicos Abraham. Celibacy was

how and why the Church of the East still managed to spread its influence to the Iberian church during the seventh century when the Sasanian power already had vanished under the Arab invasion? I think that this phenomenon could be explained by the fact that during the early stage of Islamic conquests and Christian-Muslim contacts Muslims favored the Church of East.²³⁴ Due to this trust, in all probability, Muslims installed the ‘Nestorian’ bishops as the heads of the church of Iberia.

The contacts between Syria and Georgia did not stop in the seventh century. Georgian monastic communities existed in the environs of Antioch. Georgians continued to have literary contacts with Syria through Syriac or Arabic. For example, a Georgian translation had preserved the *The Life of Timothy of Antioch*. This important document depicts the life of the Syriac Christians under Arab domination. It contains a rich material for the history of the Syriac Christianity under the early stages of Arab dominance.²³⁵

reaffirmed by Catholicos Timothy I (779-823), Vine, *The Nestorian Churches*, 74, 109. This means that in the seventh and eighth centuries, the practice of marriage among bishops became widespread, and patriarch Timothy had to reinforce celibacy among the high clergy.

²³⁴ Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First met Muslims: A Source-Book of the earliest Syriac Writings on Islam* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 10.

²³⁵ This hagiographical composition was created in the Chalcedonian cycles, Korneli Kekelidze [კორნელი კეკელიძე], “ტიმოთე ანტიოქიელი: უცნობი სირიელი მოღვაწე VIII საუკუნისა” [Timothy of Antioch: An unknown monastic ascetic of the eighth century], *აკად. ნიკო მარის სახელობის ენის, ისტორიისა და კულტურის ინსტიტუტის მოამბე* 7 (1940): 9-20.

Conclusion

The place of the newly founded Iberian Church in the ecclesiastical system of the eastern Christian world is an important issue of the Georgian ecclesiastical history. It helps us to understand more clearly what kind of relation the Georgian church had with other great ecclesiastical centers. From the end of the nineteenth century, scholars discuss the origins of Georgian Christianity. Which great ecclesiastical centers were responsible for the spread of Christianity in Georgia? Which local Christian traditions influenced the newly founded Georgian Church?

In the introduction of this work, I have already discussed the established and widely accepted picture of early Georgian Christianity. According to such influential authors as Nicholas Marr, Ivane Javakhishvili and Korneli Kekelidze, from the beginning of the fourth century, Georgian Christianity fell under the heavy influence of 'Eastern Christianity.' Under this term these scholars implied Syriac, Armenian and Palestinian Christianity. This influence lasted until the end of the eighth century when the Georgian church firmly chose the 'Byzantine way' and finally rejected the influence coming from the east. However, further investigation revealed that this kind of reconstruction of the history of early Georgian Christianity is a schematization of the historical reality.

However, the opinions about the canonical status of the Georgian church always were extremely diverse. The problem was (and still is) scarcity and controversial character of the sources regarding the canonical status of the Georgian church during late antiquity and the early medieval period. However, through critical research, the general picture of the canonical development of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Georgia could be established. The majority of

the accounts about the conversion of Georgia are Greek and Armenian. Georgian accounts are later and overwhelmingly legendary, while Armenian sources are dominated by an ethnocentric bias and cannot provide more or less authentic picture of the spread of Christianity in Caucasus. Greek sources are much more reliable in this regard.

An active investigation of the canonical issues of the Georgian ecclesiastical history begun at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the 1905 Russian Revolution, part of the Georgian clergy and public intellectuals demanded from the Russian Orthodox Church the restoration of autocephaly. This caused a brisk discussion about the various aspects of Georgian Church history. Russian theologians and church historians tried to refute arguments proposed by Georgian historians, while Georgians started to seek answers for the major questions in the various Georgian and non-Georgian sources.

Various claims appeared during this discussion. The majority of scholars tried to expose links of the Georgian Church with the major ecclesiastical centers of the Roman empire. The majority of specialists thought that the Iberian Church should have been under the jurisdiction of some of the great ecclesiastical centers. This caused various misleading assumptions. Several theories became dominant in the field of Georgian ecclesiastical history.

The most widespread among these theories became the notion of the jurisdiction of Antioch over the Iberian church. For the majority of the Georgian and non-Georgian specialists, this theory did not cause any serious doubts, despite the fact that this claim appears in later sources. Scholars very easily forgot about the strong bias of the Greek (Byzantine) sources. These sources had a clear agenda: the propagation of the Antiochian claim about this see's supreme ecclesiastical authority throughout the east. Later Greek theologians and church historians perceived the history of the Christian world through the lens of the Pentarchic theory. According to this theory, all the local churches should have been under the jurisdiction of the

five great ecclesiastical centers (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem). However, this theory was the result of a later development of the ecclesiastical system of the Roman/Byzantine empire and has remained controversial. A critical investigation of the Greek sources does not confirm that the Church of Iberia was ever under the jurisdiction of the church of Antioch.

Part of the scholars readily accepted the medieval Armenian tradition about the Armenian jurisdiction over the Iberian church. The acceptance of this claim without any critical evaluation is quite startling because the ethnocentric bias of the Armenian sources is obvious, even for a non-specialist. Beside this, we do not have any kind of contemporary evidence about this kind of canonical relation between the Iberian and Armenian churches. Both the letters of Armenian Catholicos Babgen and the correspondence between the Georgian Catholicos Kyrion and Armenian prelates reveals that Georgian and Armenian prelates were equals.

Greek sources insist that, after his conversion, the first Christian king of Iberia sent envoys to Constantinople to notify emperor Constantine about the conversion of the royal house and the entire country. And this mission also intended to receive clergy for the newly established Church. Twentieth-century scholarship paid more attention to the relation of the Church of Iberia to the Church of Antioch. The role of Constantinople was less studied. However, from the early fourth century Constantinople became the main promotor of Christianity in Georgia (both in Lazica and Iberia). We cannot full understand the ecclesiastical history of Georgia without a proper study of the role of Constantinople in the formation of early Georgian Christianity.

Scholars also paid less attention to the fact that the Church of Iberia had very close relations with the Persian Church. The restoration of the Sasanian dominance in Caucasus at the end of the fourth century followed by the strong influence of the Persian church over the

Christian Caucasian communities. At the end of the fourth and at the beginning of the fifth centuries, the nature of the ecclesiastical relation between the Church of Iberia and the Church of Persia is not clear, but the strong Persian influence is evident from the 420s. In acts of the council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (420), Persian Catholicos claims the authority over the Caucasian countries. It is not clear if the Georgian prelate attended the council. Also, we do not have direct evidence that the Catholicos of Persia directly consecrated Georgian bishops. Probably, it was more a secular jurisdiction than ecclesiastical (as in the case of Armenia), but at least the influence of Syriac Christianity grew during this period (the reign of three unknown bishops and Mobidan who wrote books lately condemned as heretical). At the middle of the fifth century, king Vaxt'ang Gorgasali freed the Church of Iberia from the Persian jurisdiction and implemented very important ecclesiastical reforms. He wished to acquire the honorary title of the Catholicos for the head of the Iberian Church. For this, he applied to Constantinople and Antioch. The prelates of the imperial Church consecrated the Catholicos and twelve bishops for the Church of Iberia. This meant that the Georgian church received an equal status among the eastern Churches. But the influence of the Syriac Church did not vanish. It reappeared during the sixth and seventh centuries when some of the bishops of the Iberian Church bearing the names with obviously Iranian or Syriac origins.

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