



## St George in the Caucasus: politics, gender, mobility

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“There is also in the East another Christian people, who are very warlike and valiant in battle .... These men are called Georgians [*Georgiani nuncupatur*], because they especially revere and worship St. George, whom they make their patron and standard-bearer in their fight with the infidels, and they honour him above all other saints” (Jacques de Vitry, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem (*Historia orientalis*, c. 1180); transl. D. M. Lang, Lives and legends of the Georgian saints).

The association, commonly made by visitors from the West, that the land of Georgia and its people were named after St George goes back at least to the time of the Crusades. The etymology, of course, is a false one: Georgians call themselves *kartvel-ebi*, and the alloethnonym *Georgian* and its West-European equivalents are derived from Persian *Gurj-* (Khintibidze 2002). Although the premise of the second sentence in the passage from de Vitry is false, the conclusion is true: the figure of St George enjoyed exceptional popularity among Georgians, which is what made such an etymology plausible in the first place. The medieval Georgian military aristocracy revered St George as their "patron and standard-bearer", but the same could be said of the elites of many other nations, who likewise deployed the warrior saint as a symbol of state and military power. His image is featured on the arms of the city of Moscow (since the 14th century), as well as the present-day Russian Federation; and the red-and-white cross of St George appears on the flags of England and Denmark, and the war banner (*Reichsturmflagge*) of the Holy Roman Empire. What draws our attention here is the remarkable penetration of the saint's name and certain of his attributes into the popular belief systems of Georgia and neighboring regions of the Caucasus. In this paper, I will present an overview of the St George cult in the Caucasus, with a focus on those areas where Orthodox Christianity is, or once was, the dominant nominal religion. My presentation will begin with "elite" representations of the saint in iconography, hagiography and other media, followed by "folk" figures based on St George in the western Caucasus (Svaneti in particular), and the distinctive folk religion of the northeast Georgian highlands. Although the elite and folk cults of St George will be presented separately — in view of their distinct modes of representation, and the types of belief systems within which the figure of George has meaning — the influence of popular beliefs on elite representations, and vice-versa, will be discussed. The soldier-saint George, mounted on a white horse, running his enemy through with his lance, was adopted as the political symbol par excellence by feudal rulers and modern states, but his folk counterparts are endowed with meanings no less political within local contexts of gender relations, the exploitation of resources, and — as will be proposed later in this paper — the cosmological feudalism of the eastern Georgian mountaineers.

**1. St George as patron and icon in the Christian Caucasus.** Christianity may have appeared in Armenian territory as early as the 2nd century (Garsoïan, in Hovannisian 1997: 83). By the 4th century there is evidence of Christian communities along the eastern Black Sea coast, including the Abasgian city of Pityus/Pitsunda (in present-day Abkhazia), whose bishop Stratophilus is recorded as having attended the Council of Nicaea in 325; and the Pontic Greek colony of Anapa/Gorgippia, where inscriptional and archaeological evidence points to the presence of Christianity from the 4-5<sup>th</sup> cc., if not earlier (Novichikhin 2004, 2010).

The Christian religion was introduced to Iberia (eastern Georgia) via a separate inland route from Anatolia (Cappadocia) and Syria, via Armenia & Gogarene (Thierry 1985, 1991). This is more or less the path that tradition ascribes to Saint Nino the Enlightener, of Cappadocian origin, who entered Georgia from Armenia and converted King Mirian of Iberia and his wife to the new faith (Rapp 2007). The decisive moment in the conversion narrative came when the king was hunting: The sun went dark, and only after the king invoked “the God of Nino” did the light return. In all likelihood this legend was inspired by a total solar eclipse that passed over the central part of Georgia, including the mountain where the king was believed to have been at the time, on May 6, 319 (Gigolashvili et al. 2007; Sauter et al. 2015). Whether or not Mirian’s baptism was directly motivated by the eclipse, this astronomic event is an indication that the adoption of Christianity in Iberia was roughly contemporaneous with its implantation in the western Caucasus.

The earliest sites identified with St George were in the Levant, concentrated in the region from the vicinity of Jerusalem northward to Edessa and Melitene. Some have been dated as early as the 350s (Haubrichs 1980: 226), but Walter (1995: 316) considers dates earlier than the 5<sup>th</sup> century problematic. The westward spread of the St George cult was astonishingly rapid. At the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup>-century, a church dedicated to George was built by St Clothild, wife of Clovis I, and others soon followed throughout France and Germany (Delehaye 1909: 46-50; Haubrichs 1984: 382; Walter 1995; Fouracre & Gerberding 1996: 123; Dicke 2014). As for the Caucasus, the oldest reliably dated evidence of a cult of St George goes back to the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. This includes Armenian churches dedicated to the saint at Arjovit, K’arašamb and Garnahovit; a fresco depicting St George at Lmbatavank’ (J.-M. Thierry 1987, 2000, 2005); a relief of a dragon-slaying horseman on the Brdadzori stele in Georgia (dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> c. by Iamanidze 2014, 2016). An Armenian bishop bearing his name attended a church council in Constantinopolis in 553 (*Georgio reuerentissimo episcopo Iustinianopolitano Armeniae*; Garsoïan 1999 III: 279). Western and Eastern Christian churches celebrate the feast of St George on 23 April, and Orthodox churches commemorate the translation of his relics to the church dedicated to his

name in Lydda/Lod on 3 November. The Georgian Orthodox calendar, however, includes a second St George's Day (*Giorgoba*) on 10 November (= 23 Nov, NS), making St George one of a select handful of saints with multiple feast-days. This practice goes back at least to the 10<sup>th</sup> century: the Old Georgian Lectionary of Jerusalem refers to two feasts of St George and several other dates on which he is mentioned.<sup>1</sup> St George likewise enjoyed considerable prominence in early medieval Armenia and Caucasian Albania. His relics are mentioned twice in Movses Kalankatuaci's *History of the Albanians* (Book II, 6 & 50), and in Book III of the same chronicle, the 9<sup>th</sup>-century prince Sahl Smbatean is described riding into battle "having as his ally the great martyr George" (III: 21). In his *History of Armenia* (c 900), Hovhannes Drasxanakertci referred to the offering of a goat sacrifice at "the annual feast of the great martyr George", believed to have been founded upon the earlier Mazdean festival of Greater Mihragan (Calmard; Boyce 1983: 804-5).

**1.1. Representational valence: The early hagiographies and the valence change from victim to attacker to defender.** The original Vita of St George would have been composed no later than the 5<sup>th</sup> century, and possibly some decades earlier (Krumbacher 1911: 281-292, 301-2; Haubrichs 1980: 2xx). Already by the early 6<sup>th</sup> c., the life of St George was included in a catalogue, attributed to Pope Gelasius, of hagiographies "which appear to have been written by heretics" (*ab hereticis perhibentur compositæ*); and a glance at the sequence of episodes that comprise the oldest narratives that have come down to us makes the church authorities' rejection entirely understandable (*Acta Sanctorum* 23 April; Delehayé 1909; Krumbacher 1911).<sup>2</sup> After confessing his conversion to Christianity before his king (said to be a Persian named Dadianos/Datianus; in later versions the Roman emperor Diocletian), the soldier George is submitted to various forms of torture and put to death. Remarkably, he is executed not once but four times, due to the divine intervention of Christ and St Michael, who (rather sadistically, one would think) resuscitate George on three occasions, allowing his torments to go on a while longer. George also performs a series of impressive miracles, including the feats of bringing a dead ox and dead people back to life. Sharing his martyrdom are the magician Athanasius and the empress Alexandra, who accept Christianity and are straightway put to death.

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<sup>1</sup> Besides the two feastsdays still observed, the older Georgian calendars mentioned commemorations of St George on February 14; May 25; July 12, 13 and 25; September 28 and November 23 (Kekelidze 1912; Garitte 1958; Tarnichsvili 1959-1960); although it is uncertain whether the same saint named George was commemorated on each occasion.

<sup>2</sup> The Martyrdom of George was also declared apocryphal by the Byzantine Patriarch Nicephorus I in 810 (Dobschütz 1912: 273)

What is noteworthy in these early accounts is the relatively passive role of George, the focus being on the numerous and ingenious torments to which he is subjected (Riches 2002 notes numerous parallels with the hagiographies of female martyrs). As for the earliest known visual representations that can be linked to St George, the saint is portrayed either standing alone, or in an array of similar figures (such as the Xandisi stele, and the Vinica and Bawit images; Grotowski 2010: figs 7, 11). George also appears in sequences of images representing his life and martyrdom (e.g. the 11th-c cross from Mest'ia; Chubinashvili 1959 #270). Borrowing the concept of “valence” from chemistry, I will classify an image of a figure standing alone, or with a prop (such as a lance), as being of valence 0. An iconographic complex combining the image of a principal figure with another significant figure, such as the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus, is of valence 1; a principal figure with two “significant others”, would then be of valence 2.

**1.2. Valence 1: George as attacker.** At some point, perhaps as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a new image of St George emerges: that of the soldier mounted on a horse (typically white), spearing his adversary with a lance (Brdadzori & Xožori steles in Georgia; Iamanidze 2014).<sup>3</sup> The remarkable shift in representations of George as victim (Valence 0: *megalomartyros*; Delehay 50-76) to attacker (Valence 1: *tropaíophoros*, “bringer of victory” (Guilcher-Pellat 1998), has been commented on numerous times. Precedents include iconic and textual representations of the military saint Theodore slaying a dragon (Walter 1999: 173-174), and early accounts of martyrs — including some who were not characterized as soldiers — taking revenge on their persecutors (Walter 1999: 178-179).<sup>4</sup> Some historians link the change in imagery to the ideological climate engendered by conflicts with Islamic powers in the Near East, especially the Crusades (“on n’avait pas besoin d’un saint martyr, mais plutôt d’un saint actif, qui pouvait tuer des Sarrazins”; Agrigoroaei 2011). Others point to pre-Christian antecedents for components of warrior-saint imagery, such as amulets depicting Solomon on horseback spearing a female demon, images of Roman emperors trampling their enemies (Grotowski 2010: 75ff); and “late antique depictions of Syrian and Egyptian deities ... in full military equipment” (Kantorowicz 1961/1965: 21; Grotowski 2010:94).

It is worthy of note that in most of the early portrayals of George as attacker, he is paired with another warrior saint (sometimes more than one) engaged in the same activity. A terracotta relief from Vinica in Macedonia, dated to the 7th century or possibly earlier, shows Sts Christopher and George spearing serpents; in a fresco from Mavruca in Cappadocia, George is

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<sup>3</sup> A 7th-century fresco in the Armenian church at Lmbatavank’ depicts St George astride a horse holding a staff or lance. The target of his lance, if there was one, is no longer visible.

<sup>4</sup> For example, St Merkourios spearing Julian the Apostate in a 7th-8th c. Coptic icon (Grotowski 2010: 80).

paired with Theodore (Thierry 1972; Walter 1999, 2003: 125; Gjorgjievski 2012). It would appear that the characterization of George as a “soldier” paved the way for the appropriation of soldierly attributes into his iconography, such the stereotypical image of the soldier as armed aggressor. Symmetric arrays of George with another warrior saint would have further encouraged this iconographic diffusion; the representation of St Theodore as a dragon slayer appears to predate that of St George (Walter 1999).

No later than the early 10th century, a contrastive element emerges in twinned representations of George and other warrior saints. The contrast is situated at the business end of their weapons: Theodore is depicted as a dragon-slayer, whereas George’s spear is aimed at a man.<sup>5</sup> The earliest securely dated attestation is the celebrated relief on the façade of the Armenian church of the Holy Cross at Aghtamar/Aḡt’amar (built 915-921), featuring the iconographic triplet of George spearing a man-like figure with bound hands and feet, juxtaposed to Theodore spearing a dragon, and Sargis slaying a large feline. Several West Georgian churches, from the provinces of Svaneti and Racha, are adorned with images of George and Theodore, mounted on horses facing toward each other, on either side of the entrance. George is depicted attacking a man in royal garb with his lance, sometimes labelled as Diocletian. The Georgian scholars Giorgi Maisuradze (2007) and Paata Buxrashvili (2014) have observed that a significant number of representations of St George attacking an emperor appeared in the western Georgian highlands in the early 11th century. Examples include several icons from Svaneti; the paired images of George (spearing the emperor) and Theodore (killing a dragon) adorning the outer wall of the church at Nik’orc’minda in Rach’a; and frescoes in Upper Svanetian churches in Lat’ali and Ipari. In Maisuradze’s and Buxrashvili’s view, the sudden popularity of the George-vs-Diocletian motif might have been spurred by tensions between the newly-unified Georgian kingdom and an expansionist Byzantium in the southwestern Georgian borderlands, the figure of Diocletian disguising a reference to the Byzantine emperor Basil II.

**1.3. Valence 2: George as rescuer.** The widespread motif of a hero rescuing a maiden from a dragon, as in the myth of Perseus and Andromeda, and similar motifs from the Indo-Iranian world (Frye 1957: 84-5, 189-195; Guilcher-Pellat 1998; Skjærvø et al 2011),<sup>6</sup> seems to have

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<sup>5</sup> An icon in the collection of the St Catherine monastery of Sinai portrays Theodore killing a serpent and George spearing a white-bearded man. Weitzmann (1976: 71-73) dates the icon to the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c., and considers the possibility of Georgian origin or influence.

<sup>6</sup> Cp. representations of the motif of the dragon-slayer in Azerbaijani folklore, e.g. the tale “Melik-Mamed”, in which the protagonist performs the St-George-like feat of rescuing a maiden from a dragon (*aždaxa*, a local variant of the Iranian Aži-Dahak) who cut off the village’s access to water. Cf. also Kuehn 2011: 110: “The iconographic semantics of the equestrian dragon-fighter – from the greater Khurasan region to Asia Minor – in its heroic as well as saintly incarnation, thus owe much to ancient prototypes that germinated in the syncretistic melting pot of the great Near

emerged in association with St George in or near the Caucasus (Kuehn 2011: 110; Walter 1995; 2003: 140-1). The oldest known text, which corresponds in content to the better-known European versions from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and later, is preserved in an 11<sup>th</sup>-c. Georgian manuscript in Jerusalem (Privalova 1977: 71-76).<sup>7</sup> The earliest known visual representations are also from Georgia, including three frescoes from the late 11<sup>th</sup> to early 12<sup>th</sup> cc (Adiši, Svaneti (Volsk'aia 1969), Ik'vi, Kartli; Boč'orma, Kakheti); and two from the mid- to late 12<sup>th</sup> c. (Pavnisi, near Axalcixe; Vani, Imereti; Privalova 1977: 71-91). The wide geographic distribution within Georgia attests to the popularity of the legend at the time. Grotowski attributes the emergence of the princess-rescue motif, as well as that of St George rescuing a youth from Muslim captivity, to the insecurity generated by Seljuk Turkish incursions into the South Caucasus in the 11<sup>th</sup> century; these narratives and images served to “promote the saint as a guardian of Christians” (Grotowski 2003).

**1.4. The church, the aristocracy and the popularity of warrior saints.** Whatever the ultimate origins of valence-1 and valence-2 representations of St George might have been, the popularity of this imagery in the South Caucasus was linked to the fortunes of the nobility, that is, the sociopolitical caste which had the means to finance church-building and icon production, and which identified with the military saint George. In his mid-18<sup>th</sup> c. “Geographical description of the Kingdom of Georgia”, Vaxusht'i Bagrat'ioni declared that “there are no peaks or high hills upon which there have not been built churches to St George” (1973: 40). This can scarcely be deemed an exaggeration: out of a sampling of over two thousand Orthodox churches from all regions of Georgia, over a third were dedicated to St George. Only Mary, the Mother of God, has comparable popularity (the two of them together accounting for a majority of the church names recorded in my database).<sup>8</sup> The exceptional prominence of Mary as church patron is by no means limited to Georgia or Orthodox Christianity; in a sampling of church names from France, Ireland and England, 20 to 30% were dedicated to her. The equal or even greater popularity of St George can be ascribed to his special significance for those who sponsored the building of churches in medieval Georgia, most of whom were from the aristocracy. King David the Builder is depicted alongside St George, who is interceding for him to Christ, in a 12<sup>th</sup>-century icon at the St Catherine's monastery in Sinai (K'ldiashvili 1989; Ševčenko 1994);<sup>9</sup> and several Georgian

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Eastern religions. These were probably inspired to a large extent by ancient Iranian dualist notions”

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the narrative is set in the town *Lasia*, which might echo the southwest Caucasian toponym *Lazica* (Aufhauser 1911: 74-5).

<sup>8</sup> In the much shorter list of Georgian churches compiled by Brosset (1842: 484-7), George and Mary likewise make up the majority of patrons, although Mary outnumbers George (79 to 52, vs. 114 others).

<sup>9</sup> The saint is also said to have appeared to David the Builder at the Battle of Didgori in 1121 (*Kartlis cxovreba* I: 341).

royals, including Queen Tamar, are portrayed invoked the saint in a fresco at Betania (Eastmond 1998: 163).

The relationship between the traditional nobility and the warrior saints — St George in particular — is particularly evident in the case of Armenia. The fortunes of St George could be said to have risen and fallen along with those of the Armenian kingdom and the feudal houses. Numerous churches dedicated to the saint appear in the 7th century, and some of the best-known images and inscriptions referring to him date from the period stretching from the reign of Gagik Arcruni, builder of Aghtamar (908-943), to that of another Gagik, the king of Bagratid Armenia (989-1020), who dedicated a church to St George at Horomos.

Images of St George become rarer after the devastating series of Mongol and Turkic invasions beginning in the 1220s, which left the Armenian nobility depleted and scattered. The Armenian Apostolic Church continued to foster the production of religious art (Der Nersessian 1946), but on the whole it has avoided the production of images that are not subordinated to sacred texts. Scriptures and liturgical books are lavishly decorated with illuminated pictures of Christ and other Biblical figures, and some images are to be seen in Armenian churches (albeit far fewer than in the Orthodox churches of neighboring Georgia); whereas autonomous holy images, such as icons, are conspicuous by their absence. Images of Jesus and Mary are left as ex-votos in the unofficial shrines put up by Armenians in villages and alongside roads, but these are mostly hand-drawn pictures, or reproductions of well-known Western portraits.

**2. St George in Caucasian folk religion.** Figures based on St George have been described in folk festivals and rituals across Europe and the Near East. In many areas of Eastern Europe, the feastday of St George on 23 April was the occasion for songs and ritual intended to assure the safety of livestock against wolves — referred to in some Slavic lands as "St George's dogs"<sup>10</sup> — and witches (Frazer 1908, 1936; Mannhardt 1875: 313-317; Koleva 1974, 1977). Some aspects of rural St George's Day festivals are primarily associated with its calendar date, close to the spring equinox, when cattle are first let out to pasture. Also related to George is the supernatural figure variously known as Hizir, Hidrellez, Xentrelez, which also draws upon traits associated with the prophet Elijah and the Koranic character al-Khidr. The Khidr/Hizir/Hidrellez cult is widespread in Palestine, Anatolia and Syria, among Muslims as well as Christians (Miller 2014). He is commonly described as a horseman who comes to the aid of travellers in distress (Haddad

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, according to a legend recorded in Svaneti, wolves, the predators par excellence, are said to be descended from "St. George's dogs" (*šǵarēgi žeyær*; Shanidze et al 1978 #106).

1969; Boratav). The festival bearing his name is celebrated on 5-6 May (corresponding to St George's Day according to the Julian calendar), and is linked to fertility and the annual renewal of nature.

If the Transcaucasian military elites contributed significantly to the spread of the figure and iconography of St George, the saint — or at least his name and certain attributes associated with him — took root in the local belief systems of Georgia, Ossetia, Abkhazia and neighboring regions. Setting aside the Armenian-speaking territories, the local names of divine beings based on saint George seem to come from two distinct sources. In most of Georgia, he is called *Giorgi*, (*Givargi* in the dialect of Xevsureti), with a high vowel in the first syllable, as in Syriac *Giwargis*. In much of the West and Central Caucasus, however, the numerous local variants go back to a proto-form with /e/ in the first syllable, *\*Gerge* or perhaps *\*Gergi*, indicating a separate introduction of the saint's name from Greek-language Byzantium:

- (a) The Kartvelian languages Mingrelian (*ǰ(g)ege*, *ǰerge*, *ǰgere* < *\*gerge*; also *gergeba-tuta* = Geo. *giorgobistve* "November") and Svan (*ǰǰarǰǰ* < Mingr. *\*ǰǰerge*; *li-gǰǰǰi* "St George's Day" < *\*gerge*)<sup>11</sup>
- (b) Ossetic: Digor *Was-gergi*; Iron *Was-tyrǰi*
- (c) Abkhazian: *A-(j)erg<sup>j</sup>* < *\*A-gerge/i*
- (d) Adyghe: *Aus-Gergy/i* "bog voinov" (Nogma, Lavrov); *Dauš-ǰerǰi*, *ǰarǰ*, *Auša-ǰár*, *Auša-Gér* (Mižaeв)
- (e) Karachai-Balkarian *Bij Ašgergi*, *Uasgeri*, *Žeorgi*; (Kaloev 2004:354-55; Miller 1887, 1888).
- (f) Ingushetia: *Gerg*, *Gierg* (Sulejmanov 1978: 23)

The two probable sources for the "George" names in the Caucasus parallel quite closely the two principal trajectories by which Christianity itself came to the Caucasus: (1) an inland, eastern and southern Georgian center for *Giorgi*, and (2) a Black Sea coastal, western route for the Greek-derived *Gergi* variant. With respect to the latter, Abaev believed that early Mingrelian *\*gerge* was the immediate source of Ossetic *Gergi* (1958-1989 IV: 26-28, 55-56; 1949: 301). Mingrelian was at the time one of the principal languages spoken along the western Black Sea coast. The vectors of the eastward diffusion of the *Gergi/Gerge* name (and of the St George cult) were most probably the states of Abkhazia and Alania in the late 1<sup>st</sup> millennium. In the years 780 up to its dynastic union with the East Georgian kingdom in 1008, Abkhazia expanded its borders dramatically, to encompass most of what is now western Georgia. It was also through Abkhazia that Orthodoxy was implanted in Alania, a dynamic, multi-ethnic kingdom on its eastern border, that flourished from the 10<sup>th</sup> century to the Mongol invasions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Arzhantseva 2002). Among the various languages that would have been spoken in Alania, the ancestor of Ossetic had special importance, as attested by a handful of inscriptions (e.g. the

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<sup>11</sup> See also Abaev (1949: 596), who derives *ǰǰarǰǰ* from Mingrelian *ǰǰera Gege* "good George"; and Abakelia (1988).



Zelenchuk stele, c. 1000), as well as the borrowing of Old Ossetic vocabulary into Kabardian and other Circassian dialects, the Turkic Karachai-Balkar language, and also the Kartvelian Svan spoken to the south (Abaev 1949). Among these loanwords was Ossetic/Alanic *Was-Gergi*,<sup>12</sup> from which are derived the local names for St George in the adjacent Karachai-Balkarian and Circassian-speaking territories.<sup>13</sup> On the eastern fringe of the *Gergi/Gerge* diffusion zone is Ingusheti, where the cult of St George was described by mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century writers. Berzhe (1859: 84) described a shrine at Mat-xox [= Ingush Mæt-loam] named for St George, paired with shrines named “Mother of God” and “Mary”. This in all likelihood is *Gierg-Eargie*, which once stood near the village Falxan (Sulejmanov 1978: 23). Several other toponyms from the southern Ingush highlands contain the root *Gerg-/Görg-*, possibly denoting sites once associated with local cults of St George (Sulejmanov 1978: 53, 69, 97).<sup>14</sup>

The various figures named after George in the oral literature and rituals of the West and South Caucasus are best understood in the context of the systems of beliefs and practices observed in these regions in pre-Soviet times (and in some areas, more recently). These beliefs have been labelled “paganism” by some specialists, especially those who trace their origins back to pre-Christian times (Bardavelidze, Charachidzé 1968); where as others characterize them as a kind of folk Christianity (K’ik’nadze 1996, Tuite 1996). In my view, the ethnographic record contains features of widely different time-depths — many of which have wider distribution in Eurasia and elsewhere, some of which might have been introduced through external contact — which have, over the centuries, been integrated into the very different religious economies of the west and east Transcaucasian highland regions (Tuite 2000, 2002, 2004a/b, 2006, 2011).

With respect to the appropriation of St George into folk religion, I will divide the Caucasus into five regions, reflecting both the religious histories of these areas and their preservation in the ethnographic record.

1. (Most Kartvelian-speaking provinces, Abkhazia and Ossetia). Orthodox Christianity was implanted as the elite religion in the Middle Ages, accompanied by church building and the production of religious art. Coexisting with Orthodoxy are folk practices heavily influenced by it.

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<sup>12</sup> *was/wac* “parole sacrée” > “saint” (Dumézil 1978: 237-40); cf. Abaev 1949: 185-6; 1958-1989 IV: 26-8, 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> Largely overlapping with the range of Alanic cultural influence is the distribution of a distinctive type of North Caucasian architectural monument, the stepped-roof mausoleum or shrine. These are small stone buildings with a single entrance and a sloped or pyramid-shaped roof with rows of slate shingles. Some such buildings served as mausoleums (with shelves in the interior for placing the deceased), others were built as Christian churches or “pagan” shrines (as in the northeast Georgian district of Pshavi).

<sup>14</sup> In his account of an expedition to Ingusheti in 1848, Zisserman (1879: 170) observed that the Kistis (Ingushs) “honored St George”, despite being nominally Muslim.

Churches or their ruins are regarded as sacred sites, where families present offerings in the form of animal sacrifices, alcohol (usually wine), bread and candles at annual festivals. Lowland Georgian folk Christianity is on the whole a loose congeries of rituals and practices, as elsewhere in Europe. More complex folk religious systems have been described in the western regions of Abkhazia and Svaneti, including hereditary shrine priests or ritual specialists.

2. (Circassian, Karachay-Balkar and Chechen-Ingush regions). Sunni Islam, which spread in the northwestern and north-central Caucasus from the 16th to the early 19th century, covered over most traces of an earlier folk Orthodoxy (Kantaria 1982, Ryabtsev & Cherkasov 2011 on Circassians; Dalgat 1893 on Chechen-Ingush religion). Karachay-Balkar folk religion includes elements of Turkic and Central Asian origin (Karaketov 1995). Observances and legends linked to figures based on St George have been described in these areas.<sup>15</sup>

3. (Northeast Georgian highlands). The special case of the religious system of Pshavi, Xevsureti, Tusheti and adjacent districts will be discussed below. A similar system may once have existed in some parts of Ossetia, Chechnia and Ingushetia.

4. (Armenian territory). For the reasons mentioned earlier, the cult of St George did not take hold among the Armenians to the extent that it did among the nominally Orthodox Christians to their north.

5. (Dagestan and Azerbaijan). In the eastern Caucasian regions where Islam was implanted the earliest, from the 7th century onwards, the cults of Christian warrior saints such as George did not take root, even though the motif of the maiden-rescuing dragon-slayer is attested in Azerbaijani folklore

**2.1. Divinity and incorporeality.** On the basis of ethnographic data on folk religion collected in Abkhazia, Ossetia and peripheral regions of Georgia (Svaneti, Mingrelia, the eastern highlands), one can identify certain common elements, including a small number of supernatural beings, or groups of beings, with comparable features and some degree of hierarchicalization. At the head of this “pantheon” is a remote celestial god with few distinct attributes, invoked first in prayers and toasts. In most languages of the region, the high deity is designated by the same word used to denote the Christian God: Georgian *Ghmerti*, Svan *Gherbet*, Ossetic *Xucau*. The Caucasian high gods are rarely described in detail, are said to never have manifested themselves on earth, nor are shrines specifically dedicated to them. One has the impression of an invisible, incorporeal *deus otiosus*, for all intents and purposes inaccessible to human society.

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<sup>15</sup> Note also the Karachai name for Tuesday *Gürge kün*, “George’s day”. The naming of Tuesday after a warrior saint appears modeled upon its Roman name as “the day of Mars” (Golden 1995/2011: 383).

Invoked in second place after the high god is Svan *Targlezer* (“Archangel”), Pshav-Xevsurian *K’viria*, Ossetian *Xutsua Dzwar* and Abkhaz *Shashwy* (Š’ašwə) (Bardavelidze 1939: 66; 1940: 563; Adzhindzhal 1969: 235; Charachidzé 1987). Behind the diversity of names and attributes are recurrent functions: enforcement of oaths and continuity of the family. These deities are invoked for the birth of sons to perpetuate the lineage, and *Shashwy* is associated with the protective spirit of the hearth-chain, a symbol of household continuity throughout the Caucasus. The Pshavs and Xevsurians imagine *K’viria* as the intermediary between the invisible high god and the human community; he is said to dwell in a tent at God’s court.

**2.2. St George, patron of men.** The third invocation at shrine ceremonies in Xevsureti, and the third toast at banquets in Svaneti, after those addressed to God and his second-in-command, are directed to the Caucasian St. George: Georgian *Giorgi*, Svan *ǰǰəræǰ*, Abkhaz *Airg’* and Ossetic *Wastyrǰi*. The Christian patron saint of soldiers and aristocrats has been appropriated as the divine protector of men who leave the domesticated space of their communities for the sake of profit.<sup>16</sup> In this role he is the object of prayers and offerings presented by hunters, travellers, warriors, woodsmen, and even thieves and livestock rustlers (Bardavelidze 1953: 88; Charachidzé 1968: 478-486; Inal-Ipa 1965: 519; Chenciner 2008).<sup>17</sup>

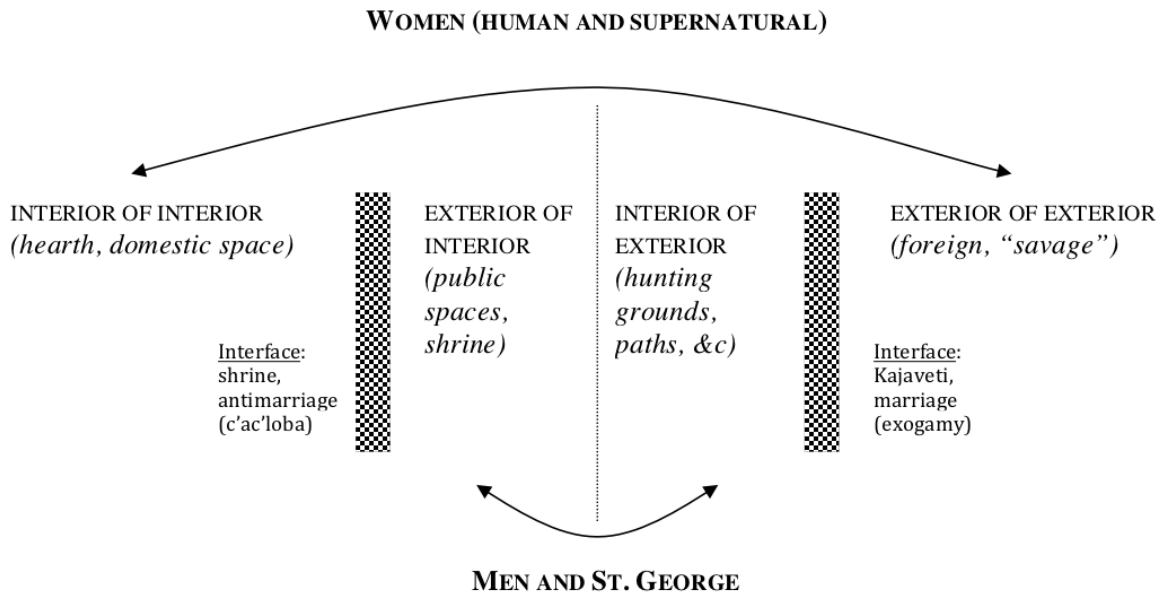
As the patron whose primary function is to “mettre les espaces naturels à la disposition des hommes” (Charachidzé 1986: 183), the folk St. George is contrasted with the spirits of the forces of nature and its resources. One such figure, often paired with George, is the god of lightning and thunderstorms. In Georgia and Ossetia, this divinity bears the name of the prophet Elijah (Georgian *Elia* or *Ilia*, Ossetic *Wacilla* [*wac* “saint” + *illa*]). Among Northwest Caucasian-speaking peoples, the lightning deity goes under different names (Kabardian *Shyble*, Abkhaz *Afə*), but the name *Ilia*/*Yeli* appears in the refrains of songs performed around victims of lightning strike (Colarusso 2002: 177). In the west Georgian district of Rach’a, *Elia* was invoked to send rain in times of drought, whereas George was asked to protect crops from hail. It was hoped that *Elia*, as storm god, would release one of the elements under his control for the benefit of the people. St. George’s role, by contrast, was a defensive one, warding off a natural element already released by its patron. In some contexts, the two divinities are essentially conflated as representations of force, either that of lightning or armed men.

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<sup>16</sup> Not uncommonly, Abkhaz and Ossetic texts make reference to St. George in the plural number (Ossetic *Wastyrǰy-tæ* “St Georges”). This practice probably stems from the multiple shrines dedicated to him, as well as the belief that divine beings, like humans, belong to clans (Dumézil 1978: 75-77). Georgian folk texts refer to the “three hundred three score and three” shrines said to be under the patronage of St. George, one for each day of the year.

<sup>17</sup> Cp. the medieval Georgian distinction between *kveq’ana* (‘land’), where people and domestic animals dwell; and *t’q’e-veli* (wilderness, lit. ‘forest and meadow’), inhabited by wild beasts (Surguladze 2003: 37).

**2.3. Gender attributes and trajectories.** As the patron of men, George is also juxtaposed to female counterparts, known under various names in Ossetia, Abkhazia and the Georgian provinces. In earlier work on traditional Caucasian belief systems, I have represented the attributes of female and male divine patrons, and also the typical life courses of women and men, as distinctive trajectories in real and symbolic social space (Tuite 2005: 171).



The societies of the western and southern Caucasus — essentially, all regions with the exception of Dagestan — are rigorously exogamous. Marriage is forbidden between a man and a woman known to have a common ancestor, or even suspected to have one (because they share the same last name, for example). These societies also prefer for the bride to take up residence in the husband's family home, rather than the reverse. A woman's trajectory, as seen from the vantage point of her clan of birth, therefore, takes her from the female space in the home around the hearth (the interior of the interior), to entry, via marriage, into an unrelated family in another village (the exterior of the exterior). From the point of view of the latter group, the trajectory is in the reverse direction: a woman from the exterior enters the central space of their home through marriage to one of their men. If the hearth and the innermost part of the house is women's space (Chartolani 1961), men dominate the public spaces in the village, especially on the occasions of religious festivals, political assemblies, and gatherings of elders and mediators to settle disputes. These public arenas constitute the "exterior of the interior", as shown in the diagram. It is also a recognized function of men, under the patronage of St. George, to go in search of profit, whether it be through hunting, warfare, commerce, or negotiation with another kingroup to obtain a bride. The exploitable spaces outside the community are what I call the "interior of the exterior".

In the northeast Georgian highlands, women of childbearing age once performed a complete circuit of their trajectory, from domestic to savage space and back again, on a monthly basis. At the onset of menstruation, they left the home to spend a period lasting from five to nine days, in the menstruation hut (*samrelo*) or stable.<sup>18</sup> As a space associated with impurity, potentially danger-bringing and off-limits to men, the *samrelo*, although situated in or near the village, is symbolically situated in the savage exterior. After their period of isolation, women wash and change clothes, return home, but remain outside the house until nightfall, whereupon they complete their reintegration into the household.

St George is the patron of men in their movements between public spaces and the exploitable exterior. In the oral literature of the Georgian highlanders of Pshavi and Xevsureti, the divine female patrons of women are represented with trajectories mirroring those of human women, even as St. George's trajectory parallels that of the menfolk. The Xevsurian divinity Samdzimari, to whom we will return shortly, is depicted as a female spirit of remote or even subterranean origins, who is called upon for aid in women's domestic affairs, such as the health of children and livestock, and the production of milk and cheese. One of the central shrines of Pshavi is dedicated to Tamar, a divinity based on a medieval Georgian queen of that name. This figure is invoked for the health of women and children, and for the well-being of the community, but is also imagined as dwelling far from human society, on a mountaintop or in the sky (Charachidzé 1968: 690-698). At the local level, within each commune of Pshavi, are sacred sites named after Mary, the Mother of God (*yvtismšobeli*), or a divinity named "the Place Mother" (*Adgilis-deda*). These figures as well are invoked for health, fertility, and aid in childbirth. In some areas of the Central Caucasus, where traditional religious practices take place at shrine complexes (rather than Orthodox churches or their ruins), sites named after Mary or the Place Mother are paired with shrines dedicated to St George. Women's rituals are performed at the former, and men's at the latter.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In the cultures of the Caucasus, as in those of many regions of the world, female blood flow during menstruation and childbirth is believed to contaminate or counteract the power or "purity" (Geo. *sic'minde*) attributed to men and the gods. In Abkhazia, Ossetia and most parts of Georgia, women of childbearing age were excluded from participation in certain religious ceremonies, or barred from approaching sacred sites. As recently as the 1930's and 40's, women in the northeast Georgian districts of Pshavi and Xevsureti spent their monthly periods in the stable or in specially-built menstrual huts. They gave birth in rude, unheated cabins even further from the village, which men refused to approach under any circumstances (Tedoradze 1930: 140-150, 167-180; Eristavi 1986: 171-2 and Gabliani 1925: 140 refer to a similar exclusion of women at times of blood flow among the Svans).

<sup>19</sup> Examples of complexes with paired George and Mary shrines include Rekom (Ossetia), Iaqsari (Pshavi), Xaxmati (Xevsureti), Mæt-tseli (Ingusheti, according to Berzhe, mentioned above).

**2.4. St George and his female counterparts.** It is worth emphasizing that the pairing of George with a female supernatural, as the patrons of men and women respectively, has little, if any, precedent in the hagiographical literature concerning St George. The only woman mentioned in the martyrdom narratives of St George who could be considered a female counterpart is the empress Alexandra. Impressed by George's courage in the face of torment, she converted to Christianity and was put to death by her enraged husband. Although canonized as St Alexandra of Rome, the martyred empress remains of minor importance in Transcaucasian Christianity.<sup>20</sup>

Another, more distant, association of St George with a woman of comparable attributes appears in the life of St Nino, the saint to whom tradition ascribes the introduction of Christianity to eastern Georgia in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. St George is mentioned prominently in her hagiographies. Both George and Nino came from Cappadocia; and Nino's father Zabilon is described as a "fellow-believer and friend (*tanaziari da megobari*) of the holy martyr"; and, in some ancient sources, as his cousin (Wardrop & Wardrop 1893: 7; Abakelia 2009).<sup>21</sup> After accepting Christianity, King Miriam ordered the building of a church to St George on the mountain Txoti, where he witnessed the miraculous loss and restoration of the sunlight described above. Like St George, St Nino is commemorated on two annual feastdays (14 January and 19 May). The immense popularity of the two saints is reflected most prominently in Georgian naming practices: According to a data-base compiled from voters' lists for the 2012 parliamentary elections, Giorgi (115,360 men) and Nino (81,036 women) are by far the most frequently-chosen male and female names respectively (*mashasada.me*). Despite her popularity as patron saint of Georgian women, though, Nino has not lent her name or any recognizable attributes to the diverse set of female characters in highland Georgian folk Christianity, to which we return.

**2.5. St. George, his human protégé, and the seductive goddess of exterior spaces.** The trajectory associated with women, encompassing the extremes of interior and exterior space, reflects the fundamental paradox of women in virilocal Caucasian societies, as periodically impure (and thus potentially dangerous) outsiders who are nonetheless essential for the continuity of the patrilineage. With respect to domestic space — the interior of the interior — female supernaturals are invoked for family health, prosperity and dairy production (for which women are responsible). The association of female divinities with outer spaces — the exterior of the exterior — manifests itself in diverse ways. Tamar and Samdzimari, as previously

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<sup>20</sup> Some historians, however, believe that Alexandra underlies the figure of the princess in the princess-rescue legend (Krefting 1937; Guilcher-Pellat 1998).

<sup>21</sup> The description of Zabilon shows interesting parallels to that of George. Like the latter, he was a Roman officer, who gave his wealth to the poor.

mentioned, are ascribed remote origins, celestial or chthonian. Doubtless the most captivating variations on this theme, however, are the patronesses of game animals.

The relation between St. George and the game patrons, whether represented as individuals or kingroups, finds particularly elaborate expression in the folklore of the Abkhazians and Svans, and — considerably transformed — in the oral literature of the Georgian mountaineers of Pshavi and Xevsureti. In Abkhazian traditional religion, the counterpart of Airg' (St. George) was *Až<sup>w</sup>eipšaa*, depicted as an old man, deaf and blind, with numerous beautiful, golden-haired daughters (Gulia 1928; Salakaia 1991).<sup>22</sup> The hunter's success depends not only on Airg', but also on *Až<sup>w</sup>eipšaa*, since the latter and his daughters must grant him an animal from their herds to kill. In the words of an Abkhazian folksong, the fortunate hunter is he "to whom Airg' first gave the stick, to whom *Až<sup>w</sup>eipšaa* first granted the liver" (Anshba 1982: 33); in other words, the hunter who is under the protection of Airg', and who is allowed to kill an animal by *Až<sup>w</sup>eipšaa*. Not only do the two deities cooperate in assuring a successful hunt, they are thought to be related through marriage according to some accounts: "the girls of the Airg' clan are the daughters-in-law of the *Až<sup>w</sup>eipšaa* clan" (*Airg'aa r-təpħa*, *Až<sup>w</sup>eipšaa r-taca*; Inal-Ipa 1965: 517; Anshba 1982: 27).<sup>23</sup> The female game spirits, such as the daughters of *Až<sup>w</sup>eipšaa*, are depicted as seductively beautiful. They are reputed to have taken legendary hunters as lovers, in return for assuring extraordinary success at the hunt (cp. also the Chechen and Ingush forest spirits known as *almaz* (Dalgat 1893), and the Mingrelian *t'q'ašmapa* (Canava 1990: 60-71).<sup>24</sup>

The Svan deity *Dæl*, golden-haired and bewitchingly beautiful, bestows her affections — as well as hunting success — on the men she favors, but should they have sexual contact with a human woman, or slaughter too many animals, she can also bring about their ruin or even death (Tuite 2006). Svan folklore commonly represents the relation between *Jgeræg* and *Dæl* as one of rivalry rather than collaboration (Virsaladze 1976: 138-140). The latter imposes strict limits on the number of beasts a hunter can kill, and only favors those hunters who respect norms of

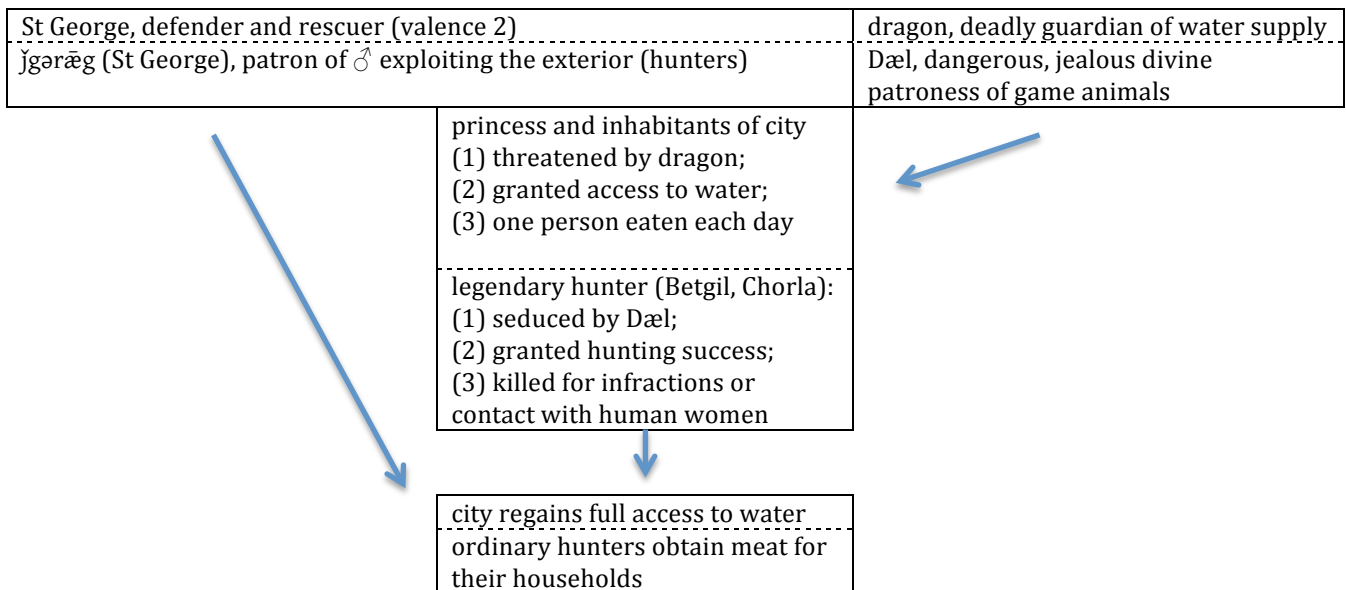
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<sup>22</sup> Accounts from the western Caucasus also mention the male-gendered game-animal patron *Afsati* (Ossetic), *Apsât* (Svan) or *Afsaty* (Kar.-Balkar), whose name stems from that of the Christian saint Eustathe, according to Arzhantseva & Albegova (cp. the less convincing etymology reported by Abaev 1958 I: 109). The distinctive iconography of this saint portrays him as a mounted hunter taking aim at a deer, within whose horns the figure of Christ appears. The Eustathe cult, introduced from Georgia, was very popular in Alania, as attested by church frescoes and the remarkable petroglyphs on a "hunter's stone" near Kiafar, seat of the rulers of western Alania in the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c. (Arzhantseva 2012; see also Thierry 1985, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> The collective plural suffix *-aa* is added to ethnic and clan names to denote the membership of a group, especially a kingroup (Hewitt 1979: 151). Note also the 3<sup>rd</sup>-plural possessive prefix *r-*. It is likely that this collective marker appears in *Až<sup>w</sup>eipšaa* as well, although no satisfactory etymology has been proposed for the putative root *\*ž<sup>w</sup>eipš-*.

<sup>24</sup> Mingrelian folklore also mentions an aquatic counterpart, *c'q'arišmapa*, "queen of the waters", similar to *Dali* in many respects, although she prefers to seduce fishermen (Virsaladze 1976: 120-1).

purity and ritual preparation.<sup>25</sup> St. George on the other hand is the patron of exploiters of nature, even those who pillage its riches without restraint. A popular ballad recounts how the legendary Svan hunter Chorla, having slaughtered more than his quota of ibexes, incited the wrath of Dæl and her sisters — like the daughters of Až<sup>W</sup>eipšaa, Dæl is sometimes represented as one of a group of game patronesses with similar properties. They caused him to slip, and left him hanging for dear life from a cliff by one hand and one foot. St. George interceded for Chorla, threatening to bring a source of pollution into the mountains unless the game spirits released Chorla (Chikovani 1972: 228; Charachidzé 1986: 185).



As potentially lethal guardians of a coveted resource, the west Caucasian game patronesses (especially Dæl) play a role paralleling that of the dragon in the princess-rescue legend,<sup>26</sup> which blocked access to sources of water.<sup>27</sup> The hunter would thus occupy the place of the princess, or

<sup>25</sup> Svan men would only go up to the mountains to hunt after abstaining from sexual contact, and assuring that no women in their households were having their menstrual periods.

<sup>26</sup> In some west and central Caucasian regions, the St George figure is represented as coupling with a supernatural female from the subaquatic realm, which might well be distinct transformation of the dragon figure. In these variants, the resources obtained through the figure are the children she bears: In Kabardian oral literature, Ауцджэрдж (< Ossetic Wasgergi), invoked in ballads as “our father”, is said to be the husband of the water goddess Псытхэ гуацэ, “our mother”, with whom he fathered 7 sons & 3 daughters living at the bottom of the sea [Kokov & Kokova 2011]. Doubtless the strangest variant, especially from the standpoint of contemporary Western sensibilities, is the Ossetic tale of the post-mortem birth of Satana, the matriarch of the legendary Narts, from the nocturnal union of Wastyrji (St George) and the corpse of Dzerassæ, daughter of the water god Don Bettyr (Dumézil 1965: 34-35; Abaev 1949: 242, 304-5). A similar account was recorded in late 19<sup>th</sup>-c. Ingusheti (Dalgat 1893: 122-123). The post-mortem birth motif also occurs in the Svanetian legend of the birth of the god-challenging hero Amiran (Tuite 1998).

<sup>27</sup> Each year in mid-winter, the Svans of the commune Lat’ali commemorate the legendary hero K’axan, who is said to have died fighting a dragon who cut off the village’s water supply. The resemblance to the classical dragon-



perhaps that of her city as a whole, in that the patronage of St George assures access to the ibex and chamois guarded by Dæl, as long as they do not violate her conditions.

**3. The Pxovian Reformation and the refunctionalization of St George.** The rare mentions of the northeast Georgian highlands in medieval chronicles describe the inhabitants as unruly and bestial idol-worshippers, stubbornly resistant to attempts at conversion to the true faith, despite repeated campaigns of pacification by royal armies, accompanied by the destruction of villages and shrines (*Kartlis Cxovreba* §80: 5-25). A handful of Christian churches were built in Pxovi, the medieval district encompassing the present-day provinces of Xevsureti and Pshavi, but far fewer in proportion to the size of the territory than elsewhere in Georgia. Although the Pxovian mountaineers resisted the encroachment of Orthodox Christianity and Georgian feudalism, they learned enough about both institutions to synthesize their structural principles and symbols with an ancestral belief system similar to those that are believed to have existed in the central and western Caucasus. The result of this thoroughgoing restructuration, or reformation — which was probably carried out several centuries ago, with ritual specialists playing a leading role — is a complex, sophisticated and elegantly structured cosmology quite unlike anything in the Caucasus ethnographic record.

Among the key innovations of the Pxovian Reformation are (1) the reconceptualization of the relations between the human and divine worlds in accordance with feudal principles of hierarchy, dependance and land tenure (Bardavelidze 1960, 1974; Charachidzé 1968; Tuite 2002, 2004); and (2) professionalization and masculinization of the functions of establishing contact with the supernatural realm through the presentation of offerings and spiritual possession. In other regions, these functions were carried out by heads of household and possessed persons of both sexes. In Pxovi, the role of sacrificer came to be the exclusive privilege of shrine priests (*qevisberi* or *xucesi*), selected from specific lineages in each community. The function of divine spokesperson was appropriated by authorized oracles known as *kadagi* (Ochiauri 1954; Charachidzé 1968: 113-133), whereas occurrences of possession in women were ascribed to demons (Charachidzé 1968: 167).

**3.1. St George and Pxovian theopolitics.** Similar in many respects, Pshavi and Xevsureti contrast in ways that have drawn the attention of local and outside observers alike (Tedoradze 1930; Tuite 2008). Mirroring to some degree Tedoradze's rather biased stereotypes of "phlegmatic-sanguine" Pshavians and "choleric" Xevsurs are interesting differences of socio-

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slaying motif is very close, although there is no mention of K'axan rescuing a maiden or princess in the versions I heard while doing fieldwork in Upper Svaneti.

political organization. The religious system of Pshavi is relatively consistent, transparent, well-ordered, and similar from one commune to the next. One has the impression of a system of socio-politico-religious administration thoroughly worked out by generations of shrine officials, and relatively free of conflicts and internal dissension. The central shrines of Lashari and Tamar-Ghele, where the leaders of the Pshavian communities meet in council, are not situated on the territory of any commune, but on land of their own in the center of the main valley of Pshavi. (One is reminded of the extraterritorial status of the national capitals of Australia and the USA). The chief shrines of Xevsureti, by contrast, are under the control of the three so-called founding clans — Arabuli, Gogoč'uri and Č'inč'arauli —, who occupy most of the settlements along the main river of lower Xevsureti, whereas the other clans inhabit the peripheral valleys, or the northern territories "on the other side" (*p'irikit*) of the main chain of the Caucasus. Paralleling the asymmetry of status between the founding clans and the others is a conflictual and expansionist theological politics that differs radically from that of neighboring Pshavi. The divine patrons of the main shrines, especially the central sanctuary of Gudanis-Jvari, are represented in oral literature demanding tribute from peripheral communes, as though they were subjugated territories.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the main Xevsurian shrines have satellite sanctuaries in the neighboring province of Tusheti (where one still finds holy sites bearing the names of Gudani, Xaxmat'i and K'arat'e in nearly every village), and once had them in Chechnia and Ingusheti as well. In earlier times, Xevsur shrine officials made annual visits to their affiliated sanctuaries in Tusheti, performed blessings and invocations, and received a portion of each sacrificed animal (Mak'alatia 1933: 208-209).

Serving as charter myths for the distinct sociopolitical regimes of Pshavi and Xevsureti are the foundation narratives known as *andrezi*, which describe how the shrine patron chose the site where his sanctuary now stands. The *andrezebi* of most of the eleven ancient communes of Pshavi describe how the territory where the local community is now situated was once inhabited by powerful, man-eating ogres (*devebi*). A human hero (St. George himself, or one of his doubles K'op'ala, Iaqsar or P'irkush) killed the ogres off, freeing the land for human habitation, and as recompense for his service, God granted him divine status and lordship over the commune. The divine overlords of the remaining communes came down from the sky as "angels" (i.e. they were created divine).

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<sup>28</sup> The divine patron of Gudanis-Jvari, for example, is said to have ordered through the mouth of an oracle that his vassals were to "levy a tribute on the people of Arxot'i (a community 'on the other side'), take a sheep from each household" (Mak'alatia 1935: 79-80).

What sets the Xevsur *andrezi* narratives apart from those of Pshavi is the element of movement. Whereas the founders of Pshavian shrines either already lived on the spot, or descended from heaven, those of nearly all of the Xevsur shrines came from somewhere else. The typical narrative describes how St George, or another deity residing at a holy site at lower altitude (usually to the south or southeast), took flight because the members of the local community did not perform the rituals correctly, or brought impure animals (such as pigs) too close to the shrine. The deity, in the form of a luminous bird-like flying object, fled toward higher ground, and eventually made his way to the site of its present-day sanctuary. In most narratives of this kind, the deity was accompanied by a human, often of foreign origin — from Armenia or Persia. Once he arrived at his chosen site, the travelling companion instructed the local residents to build a shrine on the spot, and the glowing deity disappeared from sight.<sup>29</sup>

**3.2. St George, his oracle, and the mediating role of Samdzimari.** The motif of movement is also central to a second type of Xevsurian narrative. Whereas in the shrine-foundation *andrezi* he follows a one-way route from the lowlands to the highlands, the second type of texts ascribes a round-trip trajectory to St George, or another shrine patron with similar attributes, from which he returns with wealth, tribute or cross-border contacts. The deity also has a human companion, known as *mk'adre* (“one who dares”, i.e. dares come in close proximity to a deity). These are legendary oracles with exceptional powers, and the prototypes of the shrine oracles (*kadagi*) who continued to serve as authorized spokesmen of their divine patrons until very recently (the last Xevsur *kadagi* died in the 1980s).

The foundational myth of this second type of narrative is set in Kajaveti, the subterranean land of the Kajes, a race of demonic blacksmiths with magical powers. As recounted in numerous Xevsurian legends and ballads, St George led his divine army on a raid in Kajaveti.<sup>30</sup> George was accompanied by his *mk'adre* Gaxua Megrelauri. More precisely, George brought Gaxua's souls along,<sup>31</sup> but not his body, which was left behind and began decaying. After their return from the land of the Kajes, St George restored to the souls to Gaxua's body, which came back to life. After defeating the Kajes, George brought back as war booty a herd of cattle, a collection of cups and metal-working tools, and three women of Kajaveti: the lovely Samdzimari and her companions

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<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, similar narratives have been collected in Chechnia and Ingusheti, which appear to be secularized versions of the Xevsurian *andrezebi*: the bird is just a bird, and the man led upland to the spot chosen by the bird founds a clan or community, not a shrine (Nichols 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Several variants of this legend are reprinted in K'ik'nadze's collection of *Andrezebi* (2011: 41-47).

<sup>31</sup> The Xevsur texts refer to "souls" in the plural (*suln uridebian*). On the concept of multiple souls in northeast Georgian traditional religion, see Bardavelidze 1949.

Mzekala (“Sun-woman”) and Ashekala.<sup>32</sup> George “baptized” them, and granted them residence at the powerful shrine complex at Xaxmat’i, situated near the pass leading from southern Xevsureti toward the main road to the North Caucasus.

Worshipped alongside George at the “believer-unbeliever” shrine of Xaxmatis-Jvari, Samdzimari is invoked as the helper of women, especially during childbirth, and for the health and productivity of dairy cattle. In addition to her tasks as the Xevsurian equivalent of the female-gendered divinities known throughout Georgia and adjoining regions under the names of Mary, Mother of God, or the Place Mother (*Adgilis-deda*), Samdzimari also appears in Xevsurian ballads as the supernatural lover (in a sense) of a series of oracles. The first of these was Gaxua Megrelauri himself. Samdzimari, having taken the form of a human woman, cohabited with him, but without sexually consummating the relationship. During this time Gaxua was not allowed to take a human wife (Kiknadze 2011: 87). St. George and the other divine patrons appeared to him in the form of doves, and took him along on voyages to holy sites (such as Gerget’i, in the district of Xevi to the west of Xevsureti, and Targame in Ingushetia; Kiknadze 2011: 63-66).

Spun off from the myth of St George, Samdzimari and the *mk’adre* Gaxua, are a series of narratives linked to particular shrine complexes. Some of these are located along the frontiers with Chechnia and Ingushetia (Anatoris-Jvari, Saneba in Uk’an-Qadu); others possess satellite shrines in Tusheti (the complexes at Gudani, Xaxmat’i and K’arat’e, mentioned in the previous section). What these sites had in common were active relations with communities outside of Xevsureti. Paralleling the cross-border circulation of people and goods on the ground were narratives of travelling shrine patrons and their *mk’adre* companions. In these texts, the divine patrons of the above-mentioned shrines replace St George, various legendary *mk’adres* take the place of Gaxua, and actual sites in the North Caucasus or Tusheti replace Kajaveti. One constant in all variants of the *mk’adre* narratives is Samdzimari. The *mk’adre* Pshavela Peraulidze of Xaxmatis-Jvari, and three men of the Abuletauri clan of K’ist’ani were believed to have lived in quasi-couplehood with Samdzimari, as had Gaxua (Kiknadze 2011: 50; Kiknadze/Makhauri 2010: 27-28; Chikovani 1972: 105-7, 246; Fähnrich 1999: 68, 131, 241, 264).

As was discussed earlier in this paper, divine and human women are associated with the extremes of exterior and interior space. They not only circulate between these spaces but also

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<sup>32</sup> K’ik’nadze surmised that the Xevsurian motif of St George bringing Samdzimari back from Kajaveti finds its ultimate source in the narrative of St George rescuing the princess (1996: 120). I believe he might well be right, but the motif may not have travelled as far from its point of origin as he had imagined, and the historical connection between the hagiographical and Xevsurian variants might be less linear.

bind them together: through her transfer from one kingroup to another via marriage, a woman forges a social link between the two groups, opening up new possibilities for mobility, hospitality and mutual support. Samdzimari, moving from the underworld of the Kajes to partnership with St George, is also attributed a special capacity for opening contact between the divine and human worlds. Through their relationship with Samdzimari, Gaxua and the other *mk'adres*, were granted close access to their shrine patrons, whom they alone could see and converse with. As soon as they violated the vow of celibacy that Samdzimari imposed on them, however, both Samdzimari and the shrine patron deserted them and disappeared from view. Bach'uat Axala, for example, was abandoned by the patron of Sanebis Jvari after he felt attraction for a beautiful Chechen woman (Ochiauri 1954: 105-8).

SHRINE	TRAVELS OF ST GEORGE OR SHRINE PATRON	TRAVELLING COMPANION (MK'ADRE)
<b>Xaxmatis-Jvari</b>	(1) George leads raid in underworld realm of Kajis (2) collecting tribute in Tusheti; visits to Targame (Ingusheti)	Gaxua Megrelauri (bound to celibacy; "relationship" with Samdzimari)
<b>Gudanis-Jvari</b>	(1) took part in raid in underworld realm of Kajis (2) collects tribute throughout Xevsureti, also in Tusheti	Totia Gaidauri (double of Gaxua Megrelauri)
<b>K'arat'es-Jvari (Likok'i Valley)</b>	Collecting tribute in Tusheti	crippled male oracles
<b>Anatoris-Jvari</b>	Travels in Xevsureti, Tusheti, Chechnia (Jarego)	Saghira (old, crippled; tried to nail "icon" down with golden spike)
<b>Saneba (Uk'an-Qadu)</b>	Travels in Ingusheti (Assa Valley): Xamxi, Netxa (Nelx?)	Bach'ua (saw deity until he felt sexual attraction to Kisti woman)

The Xevsurian triad of St George, his "sworn sister" Samdzimari, and their *mk'adre* companions, shows a striking homology to the Svanetian triad of St George (*ǰǰarǣǰ*), Dǣl, and the legendary hunters protected by the former and seduced by the latter (Betgil, Chorla, Mepsay). Seen in this light, the *mk'adres*, through their privileged companionship with St George and his avatars (such as the travelling deities of Gudani, Anatori, K'arat'e and Saneba), paved the way — in a more literal sense — for the shrine priests who until recently travelled regularly to affiliated holy sites outside of Xevsureti, and for cross-border voyagers in general. The comparison of the Svanetian and Xevsurian materials would lead one to conclude, as well, that regional and interethnic connections were conceived as a resource, just as ibex meat was for Svan hunters. From the standpoint of the shrines, crossborder traffic was a source of revenue (offerings and sacrifices brought from outside Xevsureti), and in return the Chechens, Ingush and Tushetians received the protection of powerful Xevsurian shrines and their patron deities.

	<i>St George: patron of men exploiting exterior spaces</i>	<i>Female supernatural: (1) seductive, (2) grants access to resources (3) dangerous, jealous</i>	<i>legendary human protégé: (1) seduced, (2) obtains resources, (3) punished for sexual / purity infraction</i>	<i>men circulating in exterior for benefit of community</i>
SVANETI	Jgyræg	Dæl, divine guardian of alpine game animals	hunter (Betgil, Chorla): (1) seduced by Dæl; (2) granted hunting success (3) punished for infractions or contact with human women	ordinary hunters obtaining meat for their households
XEVSU-RETI	George of Xaxmati, Gudanis Jvari, other travelling shrine patrons (Anatori, Saneba, K'arat'e)	Samdzimari: brought from Kajaveti, underworld source of metal objects, tools, cattle and women	<i>mk'adre</i> (legendary oracle) (1) cohabits with Samdzimari; (2) has close contact with deity (3) lusts after woman, is deserted by deity	shrine officials and others, travelling in Chechnia, Ingushetia, Tusheti; priests of K'arat'e rescuing souls of avalanche victims

Viewing the Caucasus through the lens of St George, one detects at first an extensive zone in the south and west, within which a female counterpart emerged from what was originally an entirely masculine hagiography. The female protagonist appears in a rather passive role in the 10<sup>th</sup>-century princess-rescue narrative, but the ethnographic data from lowland Georgia and the Central Caucasus point to a more active, indeed complementary figure. A further elaboration of the gender contrast, in the form of the resource-acquisition charter myth of George, his human protégé and the seductive patroness of game animals, is found on the western and eastern fringes of the Central Caucasus. This myth, in turn, underwent reformulation in the context of Xevsurian regional theo-politics.

Also worthy of note is the non-overlap between the cultural regions and divisions revealed by this investigation, and the boundaries that seem so important nowadays. The principal demarcations are between the eastern and western Caucasus, and within the latter, between the Black Sea coastal area and the southern borderlands. The west and central Caucasian “Gerge” cluster, and its associated cultural traits, includes speech communities representing four language families (West and South Caucasian, Indo-European and Turkic), and two official religions — possibly even three, if, as recounted in a 10<sup>th</sup>-c. document, a segment of the Alanian elite converted to Judaism under the influence of the Khazars to their immediate north (Golb & Pricak 1997: 132). The division between the North and South Caucasus, which since 1991 has been reinforced by an increasingly hardened international frontier (Mühlfried 2014), had little impact on the diffusion of the St George cult. One hopes that in the present-day context of security fears and militarized borders, mobility will once again be considered a resource rather than a problem.

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Jacques de Vitry, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem (*Historia orientalis*, c. 1180):

- “There is also in the East another Christian people, who are very warlike and valiant in battle .... These men are called Georgians [*Georgiani nuncupatur*], because they especially revere and worship St. George, whom they make their patron and standard-bearer in their fight with the infidels, and they honour him above all other saints” (transl. D. Lang, *Lives and legends of the Georgian saints*)

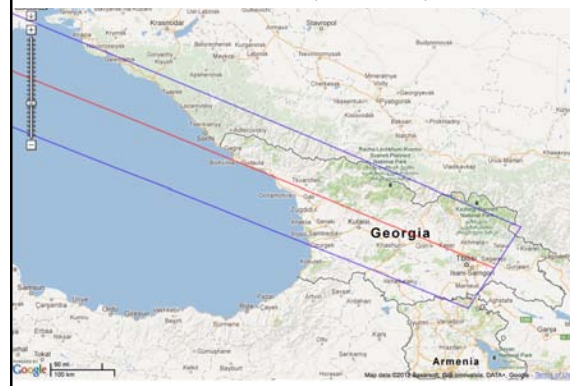
### The cult of St George in the Caucasus

- i. "Elite" representations of St George in the Christian Caucasus.
- ii. The penetration of St George into local belief systems and practices.
- iii. The pairing of localized George figures with a female supernatural counterpart
- iv. The role of this pairing in traditional beliefs about (male) mobility for the purpose of obtaining resources
- v. St George and the theopolitics of the northeast Georgian highlands

### The introduction of Christianity to the Caucasus

- **Eastern Black Sea coast:** Lazica, Abasgia, Gorgippia/Anapa [Stratophilus, Bishop of Pityus/Pitsunda, attended Council of Nicaea in 325 as one of three bishops from *Pontus Polemoniacus*]
- **Southern, southeastern Transcaucasia:** Armenia, Gogarene, Iberia (Eastern Georgia). Christianity adopted by Armenian, Iberian monarchs in early 4<sup>th</sup> century. Some indications of Christian presence in eastern Georgia in 3<sup>rd</sup> c.

Path of total solar eclipse of 6 May 319




Early images of St George in the Caucasus:  
Lmbatavank, Xozhori  
(6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c.)



### St George *megalomartyros* (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cc.)

1. Soldier George acknowledges Christ before king Datian
2. George is tortured; Christ appears to him and strengthens him
3. George wins competition with magician, who converts & is beheaded
4. George is killed; but is resuscitated by God and St Michael
5. George is cut in two, but once again revived by God
6. George raises dead ox and dead people back to life; heals son of widow
7. George is killed & resuscitated a third time
8. Empress Alexandra converts, and is martyred
9. George destroys false idols
10. George is killed by the sword and dies (for the final time).

### The polyvalence of St George



- Valence 0: figure standing alone, or with prop
- Valence 1: figure + 1 significant other
- Valence 2: figure + 2 significant others

### Possible precursors to the iconography of military saints

- myth of Perseus & Andromeda,
- amulets depicting Solomon on horseback spearing a female demon,
- images of Roman emperors trampling their enemies
- Egyptian god Horus spearing crocodile




Fig. 2. Solomon spearing a demon with a lance, 6th or 7th century amulet (after Maguire).

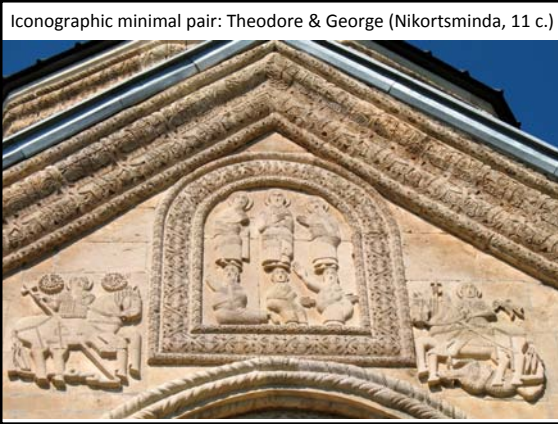



### Valence 1: George *Tropaiophoros*


- Saints Theodore (spearing dragon) and George (spearing man), Aftamar Church of the Holy Cross; 915-921




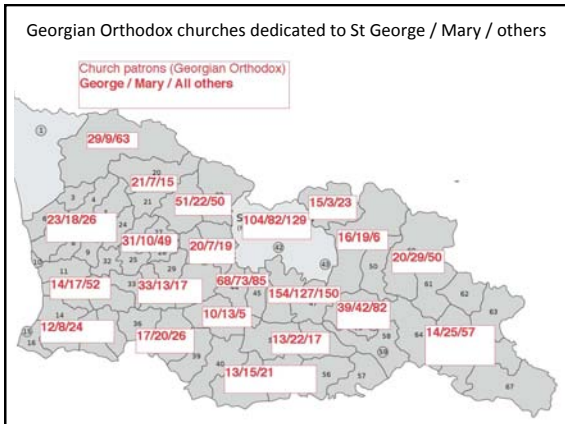
### Iconographic minimal pair: Theodore & George (Nikortsinda, 11 c.)



### Valence 2: St George, the princess and the dragon (Hadishi Jgəræg, Svaneti, early 12<sup>th</sup> c.)



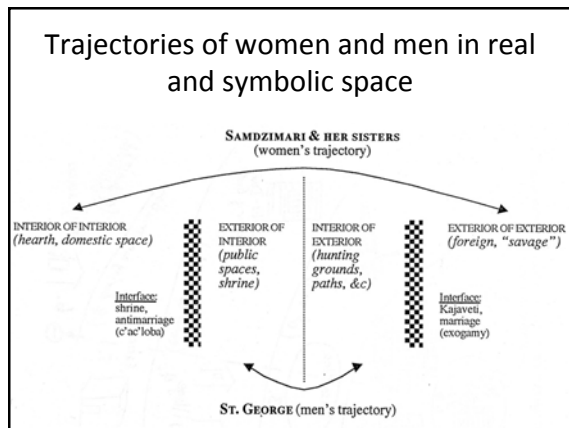
- Outer wall: George spearing emperor, paired with another warrior saint



- ### Folk religion in the Caucasus
- 1. Most Kartvelian-speaking provinces, Abkhazia and Ossetia.
  - 2. Circassian, Karachay-Balkar and Chechen-Ingush regions.
  - 3. Northeast Georgian highlands ("Pxovi").
  - 4. Armenian territory.
  - 5. Dagestan and Azerbaijan.

- ### Caucasian folk religion: "pantheon"
- i. High God (celestial, remote)
  - ii. Intermediary between God and others: Archangel, K'viria, Shashvy
  - iii. George, patron of men (*Giorgi*, Svan *ჭგარაგ*, Abkhaz *Airg'*, Ossetic *Wastyrji*.)
  - iv. Divine patroness of women



### Dael — divine patroness of mountain game animals

**დალის მფრინობა**

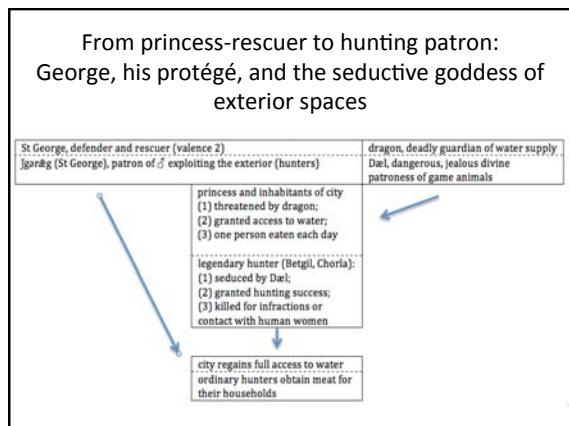
კლდეებში დალი იყო, თორემ ნაკლდეობში ქალაქი უფოდა. სამშველეს რაც უფოდა იქ იქონის ჭვადი-წინ თორემ იქონის რომ ჭვადი-წინ. ზედა წილიც ეს იყო იქ. სადარს ბერი ძეგლი და კუთხე-ბოლოებზე იმარტლებს - სადაღობ რა გაქვენი საკლდეები?

იქნა რომ წვედომდენ, სადც იყო ვიხვითი. იქ ვიხვითი ერთი დანამწელი ვიხვი. ნახვითი სინაფორიო თითხვდანი. დალი იყო ტყვენი, თითხვდანი.

სულანმა ნახვდანი ძალი და დანამწელი ვიხვი დანამწელი ეს იხვი დალი და დანამწელი. დალიცა ქალაქი მამან. ამას აქვე თოვლი არ ადებულა. ქვედად იხვიცა. მან წვედომ არ იხვიცა. ახლა იქნა რომ იქონის ვიხვიცა. მამანწელი. იქით და იქით მსახილად იხვიცა. აქვე - წვედომად.

ნახვითი ქ. სინაფორიოს მთი, 1945 წელს ს. სვანიძის მიხედვით ზეინ სამხანის

**ქიქლი ქიხვის ახაკი**



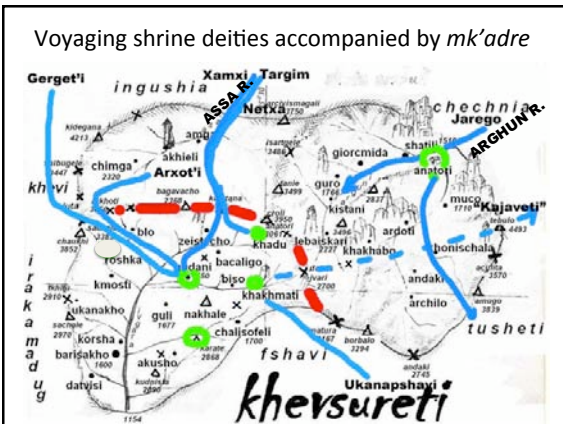


### The P'xovian Reformation

- (1) Reconceptualization of the relations between the human and divine worlds, in accordance with feudal principles of hierarchy, dependance and land tenure;
- (2) Professionalization and masculinization of the functions of establishing contact with the supernatural realm through the presentation of offerings and spiritual possession:
- PRIEST/SACRIFICER: *qevisberi* (Pshavi), *xucesi* (Xevs.)
- ORACLE: *kadagi*
- (legendary) TRAVELLING COMPANION OF SHRINE PATRON: *mk'adre* ("one who dares")

St George, his companion Gaxua, and Samdzimari (Xevsureti)

- St George decided to lead his divine army on a raid in the subterranean land of the Kajes, a race of demonic blacksmiths with magical powers.
- In order to bring his *mk'adre* Gaxua Megrelauri along, George extracted Gaxua's souls from his body, causing the latter to begin decaying.
- After defeating the Kajes, George brought back as war booty a herd of cattle, a collection of cups and metal-working tools, and the Kaj women Samdzimari, Mzekala ("Sun-woman") and Ashekala. He restored the souls to Gaxua's body and brought him back to life.
- George "baptized" the Kaj women, and granted them residence at the Xaxmati sanctuary complex, where a tower to Samdzimari is still to be seen.
- Worshipped alongside George at the "believer-unbeliever" shrine of Xaxmatis-Jvari, Samdzimari is invoked as the helper of women, especially during childbirth, and the health and productivity of dairy cattle.
- Samdzimari also appears in Xevsur ballads as the supernatural lover (without consummating the relationship) of a series of *mk'adres*.



Xevsur shrines linked to legendary <i>mk'adre</i>		
SHRINE	TRAVELS OF ST GEORGE OR SHRINE PATRON	TRAVELLING COMPANION (MK'ADRE)
Xaxmatis-Jvari	(1) George leads raid in underworld realm of Kajis (2) collecting tribute in Tusheti; visits to Targame (Ingusheti)	Gaxua Megrelauri (bound to celibacy; "relationship" with Samdzimari)
Gudanis-Jvari	(1) took part in raid in underworld realm of Kajis (2) collects tribute throughout Xevsureti, also in Tusheti	Totia Gaidauri (double of Gaxua Megrelauri)
K'arat'es-Jvari (Likoki Valley)	Collecting tribute in Tusheti	crippled male oracles
Anatoris-Jvari	Travels in Xevsureti, Tusheti, Chechnia (Jarego)	Saghira (old, crippled; tried to nail "icon" down with golden spike)
Saneba (Uk'an-Qadu)	Travels in Ingusheti (Assa Valley); Xamxi, Netxa (Nels?)	Bach'ua (saw deity until he felt sexual attraction to Kisti woman)

Mobility and access to resources: St George, female supernatural & human protégé				
	St George: patron of men exploiting exterior spaces	Female supernatural: (1) seductive, (2) grants access to resources (3) dangerous, jealous	legendary human protégé: (1) seduced, (2) obtains resources, (3) punished	men circulating in exterior for benefit of community
SVANETI	Jgyræg	Dæl, divine guardian of alpine game animals	hunter (Betgil, Chorla): (1) seduced by Dæl; (2) granted hunting success (3) punished for infractions or contact with human women	ordinary hunters obtaining meat for their households
XEVSURETI	George of Xaxmati, Gudanis Jvari, other travelling shrine patrons (Anatori, Saneba, K'arat'e)	Samdzimari: brought from Kajaveti, underworld source of metal objects, tools, cattle and women	<i>mk'adre</i> (legendary oracle) (1) cohabits with Samdzimari; (2) has close contact with deity (3) lusts after woman, is deserted by deity	shrine officials and others, travelling in Chechnia, Ingushetia, Tusheti; priests of K'arat'e rescuing souls of avalanche victims