

Leont’i Mroveli’s Hybrid Presentation of King Mirian

The initial cycle of *Kartlis tskhovreba* (ქართლის ცხოვრება) – the “Georgian Chronicles” – has attracted considerable attention, and rightly so.¹ Its tale of ethnogenesis and state formation down to the Christianization of the eastern Georgian monarchy is a riveting mix of history and legend. This multi-text cycle has captivated some of the brightest luminaries of Kartvelology (Georgian Studies), including I. Javakhishvili, N. Marr, K’. K’ek’elidze, G. Melikishvili, C. Toumanoff, and Z. Alekṣidze. Numerous others have applied their talents to these sources. G. Mamulia, N. Shoshiashvili, R. Baramidze, G. Akhvlediani, G. Arakhamia, E. Khosht’aria-Brosse, L. P’at’aridze, N. Doborjginidze, N. J. Preud’homme and F. Schleicher are among those who have affected my own interpretations.² Despite the scrutiny, questions linger. This essay is animated by one of them: the abrupt shift of tone and content within the account of Mirian, the first Georgian king to embrace Christianity.

As is well known, the oldest surviving Georgian redaction of *Kartlis tskhovreba* is transmitted in the Anaseuli (A) manuscript copied in 1479-1495 (Tbilisi, National Center of Manuscripts [NCM], Qd, 795). However, many of its initial leaves are missing.³ The earliest Georgian-language manuscript completely preserving the corpus – including its initial cycle – is the Mariamiseuli redaction of 1633-1645/1646 (NCM, Sd, 30).⁴ There is a yet earlier witness: a manuscript of corpus’ Armenian-language adaptation copied sometime between 1274 and 1311 (Erevan, Matenadaran, 1902).⁵ This Armenian version is titled *Patmutiwn Vrats* (Պատմութիւն Վրաց),

¹ Literal translation: *Life of Georgia*. For the names applied to the corpus, see Rapp Jr., “Making of *K’art’lis c’xovreba*”. On *Kartlis tskhovreba* and its constituent texts, see Idem, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*. The initial version of this essay was presented at the Fourth International Kartvelological Congress held at the Georgian Academy of Sciences in September 2024. I wish to thank the organizers as well as the staff and reviewers of “Chronos”.

² In addition to works cited below, I should mention ახლედიანი, “ქართლის ცხოვრების” ფოლკლორული წყაროები; Preud’homme, *À la porte des mondes*; and Schleicher, *Iberia Caucasia*.

³ Diplomatic edition: ქართლის ცხოვრება: ახა დედოფლისეული ნუსხა, ს. ყაუხჩიშვილის რედაქციით. For the start of Anaseuli in the standard critical edition, see ქართლის ცხოვრება, ს. ყაუხჩიშვილის რედაქციით, p. 35₃).

⁴ Diplomatic edition: ქართლის ცხოვრება: მარიამ დედოფლის ვარიანტი.

⁵ For commentary and translation of the Georgian and dependent Armenian versions, see Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*. See also Rapp, *Studies*, pp. 17-35.

*History of the Georgians.*¹ In surviving Georgian manuscripts, *Kartlis tskhovreba*'s initial cycle launches with the title *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepetasa da p'irveltaganta mamata da natesavta* (ცხორება ქართველთა მეფეთასა და პირველთაგანთა მამათა და ნათესავთა), “Life of the Kartvelian/Georgian Kings, Forefathers, and Ancestors”.² Technically, however, this name applies only to the first text of the cycle.

So as to limit confusion, the following convention is deployed in this essay: the transliterated *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* pertains to the entire cycle while translated titles in English, like *The Life of the Kings*, are used for its three component texts.

Across much of the twentieth century, the multi-text cycle known as *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* has been credited to the eleventh-century archbishop Leont'i Mroveli – Leont'i “of Ruisi”.³ Mroveli was undoubtedly a real person. He is independently attested in a contemporaneous inscription carved inside the Trekhvi cave⁴ and again in a Georgian manuscript copied in the eleventh/twelfth century at the Iveron monastery on Mt. Athos.⁵ With regards to Mroveli's supposed authorship, it must be stressed that *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* consists of multiple texts. Narratively smoothed in the medieval and early modern periods by at least three major editorial interventions,⁶ I accept the view that *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* consists of three discrete texts. These were stitched together to address Georgian history from legendary ethnogenesis down to the early Christian kings of Kartli, members of the Chosroid dynasty.⁷ But was Mroveli the principal author of the whole cycle or any of its three texts?

¹ Critical edition: ქართლის ცხოვრების ძველი სომხური თარგმანი, გამომცემელი: ო. აბულაძე.

² Critical Georgian text: ქართლის ცხოვრება, ს. ყაუხჩიშვილის რედაქციით, pp. 3-138; English translation: Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History*, pp. 2-153. For a lexicon of this composite text, see „ქართლის ცხოვრების“ სიმფონია-ლექსიკონი, შემდგენლები: მ. კვაჭაძე (და სხვა). See also ქართლის ცხოვრება, მთავარი რედაქტორი: რ. მეტრეველი, pp. 25-149 and translation edited by modern historian S. Jones, pp. 13-75.

³ E.g.: ჯავახიშვილი, ისტორიის მიზანი, წყაროები და მეთოდები, s.v. ლეონტი მროველი, pp. 176-188; and კეკელიძე, ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია, s.v. 34. ლეონტი მროველი, pp. 236-243.

⁴ Tarchnishvili, *La découverte d'une inscription géorgienne de l'an 1066*, and გაფრინდაშვილი, ლეონტი მროველის 1066 წ. სამშენებლო ნარჩენა. On Mroveli, see: ხოშტარია-ბროსე, ლეონტი მროველი; and Rapp Jr., *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, pp. 157-168.

⁵ Iveron Geo. 61: Mapp, *Агиографические материалы по грузинским рукописям Ивера*. See also Toumanoff, *Medieval Georgian Historical Literature*, p. 166.

⁶ I.e. ca. 800, the eleventh century by Mroveli, and ca. 1700 by the King Vakht'ang VI commission. For the work of the last, see გრიგოლია, ახალი ქართლის ცხოვრება.

⁷ Another perspective is articulated in პატარიძე, პოლიტიკური და კულტურული იდენტობანი. Among influential older studies is Melikishvili, *К истории древней Грузии*.

Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta's medieval assembly, distinctive components, and each of the texts' original authors are complex and contested matters.¹ Efforts to resolve these issues rest heavily upon contextualization, comparative methodologies, and internal criteria. The cycle's first component text addresses the Georgians' (especially eastern Georgians') ethnogenesis and pre-Christian royal history. Its received condition was attained sometime in the period ca. 790 to 813. The second text of *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* has long been recognized as a recension of the anonymous *Life of Nino*, a hagiographical narrative from the ninth/tenth century better known from its transmission in the independent ecclesiastical corpus devoted to Georgia's fourth-century conversion, *Moktsevay kartlisay* (მოქცევის ქართლისა).² It has proven especially challenging to determine the provenance of *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta*'s concluding text, which treats the dynastic successors of the first Christian king Mirian. At present, we can only say that it derives from sometime between ca. 800 and the eleventh century. I have proposed calling this untitled narrative *The Life of the Successors of Mirian*.³

I am convinced that at least two of the three texts of *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* predate the eleventh century and hence Leont'i Mroveli.⁴ This hypothesis in no way tarnishes Mroveli's literary skill and achievements. At a minimum, Mroveli was responsible for substantially (re-)editing the three texts. Into the received first text devoted to pre-Christian times, it was probably the archbishop Mroveli who injected occasional biblical synchronisms, including references to Moses (before the formation of the kingdom of Kartli) and to Christ during the reign of King Aderk'.⁵ This initial text's received "preface", a Georgianized version of the biblical *tabula popolorum*,⁶ may belong to Mroveli's hand. And it may have been Mroveli who first gathered the story of Georgian ethnogenesis and state formation, the existing *Life of Nino*, and the

¹ Among which is the vague passage attached to the other hagiographical tract incorporated into *Kartlis tskhovreba*'s *Passion of Archil*. To Mroveli is credited Archil's passion, *The Life of the Kings* (*Mepeta tskhovreba*), and *The Conversion of Kartli by Nino* (*Ninos [mier] kartlis moktseva*). This Mroveli Passage appears in the Anaseuli redaction of the corpus: NCM, Qd, 795, pp. 262-263, for which see ქართლის ცხოვრება: ანა დედოფლისეული ნუსხა, ს. ყაუხჩიშვილის რედაქციით, p. 156_{4,5}. The passage is almost certainly a later (medieval) insertion: Rapp Jr., *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, pp. 159-163.

² For *Moktsevay kartlisay*, see now *La conversion*, Mahé trans. On early Georgian hagiography, see Martin-Hisard, *Georgian Hagiography*.

³ Another possible title is *Life of the Early Chosroid Kings*.

⁴ See Rapp, *Studies*, esp. ch. 1, *Beginnings: C'xorebay k'art'velt'a mep'et'a*, pp. 101-168. See also ხომალია-ბროსე, ლეონტი მროველი.

⁵ *Life of the Kings*, in ქართლის ცხოვრება, ს. ყაუხჩიშვილის რედაქციით, pp. 14 and 35; and *Rewriting Caucasian History*, Thomson trans., pp. 18 and 49.

⁶ Ultimately based on the Armenian adaptation of the *Chronicle of Hippolytus of Rome*: Տօնածե, ուժուությ բռմացլու յիշույթո; Кекелидзе, *Идея братства закавказских народов* and *Chronique d'Hippolyte*. See also: Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, pp. 125-134; and Doborjginidze, *Medieval Georgian Projection*.

account of Mirian's Christian successors to create the cycle we know as *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta*. Further, it is conceivable that our eleventh-century archbishop was responsible for assembling the first version of the entire corpus, *Kartlis tskhovreba*. At any rate, I am confident that Mroveli was not the original author of the first two texts of *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta*. He may not have written its concluding installment either. Mroveli was chiefly an editor. And a brilliant editor he was.

Despite Mroveli's editorial labors, *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* is interrupted by two abrupt shifts in tone and coverage that go back to at least his time. The most striking instance is the sudden end to the treatment of the "pagan" Mirian and the wholesale insertion of *The Life of Nino* for the Christian phase of his reign. This well-known *vita* – which by Mroveli's *floruit* already existed in the independent corpus *Moktsevay kartlisay* – presents the ecclesiastically-sanctioned story of Mirian's ca. 326 conversion through the intervention of the holy woman Nino. Written in the ninth and/or tenth century, *The Life of Nino* is a creative hagiographical extension of the seventh-century *Conversion of Kartli*, transmitted exclusively in *Moktsevay kartlisay* and lending its name to the whole corpus.¹ While both sources celebrate the conversion of King Mirian, their prime focus is the foreign holy woman Nino. In *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta*, *The Life of Nino* is followed by another rough transition to a brief treatment of Mirian's Christian successors. *The Life of the Successors of Mirian* does not match the narrative richness of the account of pre-Christian monarchs found in *The Life of the Kings*. The two must have been composed by different authors.

To summarize: three distinctive texts were conjoined editorially in the early medieval era to form the cycle *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta*:

1. *The Life of the Kings*, for which the entire cycle is named;²
2. *The Life of Nino*, but a recension unique to *Kartlis tskhovreba*; and
3. *The Life of the Successors of Mirian* (proposed title).

This merger might have transpired as early as the ninth/tenth century, when Nino's *vita* was composed – and before Leont'i Mroveli. The *terminus ad quem* of *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta*'s assembly is the mid-eleventh century or so, when the archbishop Mroveli made his editorial intervention.

In all likelihood, the creation of *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* was coterminous with the merging of the next two texts in *Kartlis tskhovreba* into a separate cycle. *The Life of Vakht'ang Gorgasali* and its continuation attributed to Juansher Juansherian were combined into a distinct multi-text suite *Tskhorebay vakht'ang gorgaslisa* (ცხორებად ვახტანგ გორგასლისა), named for its core text devoted to the late antique

¹ There are alternate views about the dates of these conversion stories. Both extant texts are certainly based on earlier traditions. For the "primary version" of *Conversion of Kartli* as a fifth-century monument, see ჩხარტიშვილი, ქართული ეთნიკ რელიგიური მოქცევის განვითარება, p. 163.

² A convention encountered in other Georgian corpora, notably *Moktsevay kartlisay* named for its component *The Conversion of Kartli*. Another example revolves around the title *Life of Vakht'ang*, for which see further.

King Vakht’ang I (d. early 500s AD).¹ In *Kartlis tskhovreba*’s received manuscripts, the two cycles appear sequentially, without intervening texts or passages. Not only were *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* and *Tskhorebay vakht’ang gorgaslisa* both fashioned around the year 800, but, in my view, their combination belonged to the first iteration of *Kartlis tskhovreba* as we know it. The title *Kartlis tskhovreba* probably belongs to this time.

A broader literary context must be considered. The late eighth to early ninth century was an age of historiographical exploration across the so-called Christian East. For example, just south of Caucasia, Syriac Christians were revisiting written histories. Specially investigated by P. Wood, Syriac historians such as the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch, Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē, adapted Islamic models for about a century beginning around 750.² Across the Caucasus isthmus, Christians also took a renewed interest in their history and place in the world. The Armenian Ghewond thus engages Islamic history and core Middle Eastern lands.³ Contemporaneous Georgian texts do not approach Ghewond’s level of engagement with Islamic historiography.⁴ In the twilight of late antiquity, a common Christian historiographical strategy was to delve into the past, long before the Prophet Muhammad and even Jesus and the apostles. To this antiquarian outburst belong the Georgian *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* and the Armenian history of Movses Khorenatsi.⁵ Among Caucasian Albanians, an analogous interest in long-term history would come somewhat later with the tenth-century narrative ascribed to Movses Daskhurantsi (or Kaghankatuatsi). However, Daskhurantsi is dependent upon earlier sources – especially Armenian ones but also, it would seem, a lost seventh-century text about Albania’s history.⁶ The principal model for early Georgian historians was the Iranic/Iranian epic tradition, which itself was a fusion of epic and history.⁷ This circumstance is to be expected given Caucasia’s long-term participation in the cross-cultural Iranic world.⁸

There were other factors behind the Georgian historiographical efflorescence starting in the late eighth century. Internal and external pressures upon the eastern Georgian monarchy led to its abolition by the Sasanians ca. 580. The suppression of the Armenian crown in 428 thus was replicated, though in the Georgian case it was post-

¹ Rapp Jr., *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, esp. pp. 271-351, and Idem, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*.

² Wood, *Imam of the Christians*.

³ See the excellent translation and commentary in Ghewond, La Porta and Vacca trans.

⁴ In view of A. Vacca, *Arabic and the Public Performance of Power in Armenia*, the degree of proficiency in Arabic among Armenians does not seem to have been matched by the Georgians.

⁵ Movses Khorenatsi, *History of the Armenians*, Thomson trans.

⁶ See Movses Daskhurantsi, *The History of the Caucasian Albanians*, Dowsett trans.

⁷ Rapp Jr., *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, and Idem, *Caucasian Historiographical Literature, the Iranian Epic, and the Diversity of Late Antiquity*.

⁸ For the Iranian world in late antiquity, see e.g. Payne, *State of Mixture* and Canepa, *Iranian Expanse*.

poned by more than a century. In the monarchical vacuum, the competing Sasanian and Roman Empires propped up a series of “presiding princes”, some of whom were drawn from the displaced Chosroid dynasty. Not long after Heraclius’ victory in Iran/Persia (he had marched through Georgian and Armenian lands to strike his target), Arabs fighting under the banner of Islam seized upon Sasanian and Roman vulnerability.¹ Much of southern Caucasia, including Armenia and eastern Georgia, fell under Muslim control. Some eastern Georgian elites permanently migrated to the southwest, to lands they called T’ao, K’larjeti, and Shavsheti, where they established a new Kartli.² The thriving of this neo-Kartli, to which the surge of Georgian historiography belongs, was led especially by the Georgian Church’s monastic elements, which achieved unprecedented heights. The monk Grigol Khandzteli was instrumental in this regard. His own *vita*, composed by Grigol Merchule, is a seamless mix of hagiography and historiography.³ More gradually, Georgian political life was rejuvenated under the up-and-coming Georgian Bagratids, who took control of the presiding principate in 813. The uncertainty, transition, and hope of eighth and ninth centuries is the environment in which Georgians took a renewed interest in their written history. This was not only an act of gathering and preserving historical traditions. It was also a deliberate effort to sculpt a useable past, one that explained the present and justified a desired future.⁴

With this framework in mind, we may now return to our central question: the blunt shift in tone and content between the “pagan” and Christianizing Mirian *within* the premiere written tradition of Georgian ethnogenesis and state formation, *The Life of the Kings*.

As is obvious from its title, *The Life of the Kings* – the first text of the suite *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* – focuses chiefly on dynastic monarchs. Starting with Parnavaz, the first monarch of Kartli from the house of Kartlos (the legendary eponymous forefather of the Kartvelians who achieved royal status at the collapse of the Achaemenid Empire), the anonymous historian presents a long, mostly unbroken sequence of dynastic kings down to Mirian, the first of eastern Georgia’s rulers to embrace Christianity. Despite intermittent editorial interventions (such as the aforementioned allusions to Moses, the birth of Jesus, and perhaps the biblically-inspired *tabula populorum*), the text is remarkably consistent in tone, content, and vocabulary.⁵ It depicts legitimate, effective, and worthy pre-Christian Kartvelian rulers as hero-kings (*gmiris*, “heroes”, and *goliatis*, “giants”) endowed with glory (*didebay*) and good fortune (*sue*). They relished the opportunity to engage in single combat with other such warriors, called *bumberazis*.⁶ Kings were perched atop a political order resting upon

¹ See now Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam*.

² For “neo-Kartli”, see Rapp Jr., *Imagining History at the Crossroads*.

³ See especially ინგოროვა, ვიორგი მერჩულაძე.

⁴ Rapp Jr., *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*.

⁵ One exception is the odd silence about Arsacid Empire and its rulers.

⁶ For these concepts, see Rapp Jr., *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, pp. 227-240.

great noble houses and their estates. Within *The Life of the Kings*, the basic and consistent historical context is Iran/Parthia/Persia and not the Graeco-Roman/Hellenistic Mediterranean. Allusions to mythical and semi-mythical kings of ancient Iran/Persia are evidence of this.¹ Further, the onomasticon to which their names and nicknames principally belong is neither Greek nor Latin but Middle Iranian.² From a wider vantage, Old and Middle Georgian – like Armenian and presumably Caucasian Albanian – contain many parallels with and loans from Middle Iranian. On this subject, M. Andronik’ashvili’s pathfinding catalog remains a fundamental resource.³

The Life of the Kings’ depiction of pre-Christian monarchs is consistently Iranian or, more precisely, Iranic or Persianate, though the last of which is usually associated with the Islamic age.⁴ As depicted by late antique and medieval Georgian historians, the pre-Christian kings of Kartli were rulers whose royal image belonged to the expansive Iranic world anchored in Iran/Persia and stretching from Central Asia to Caucasia and Anatolia. Like others who were not strictly Iranians/Persians/Parthians, Georgians could exercise considerable agency in the Iranic enterprise.

The final paragraphs of the received *Life of the Kings* are devoted to the pre-conversion of Mirian. In this text, his “pagan” depiction is consistent with the polytheistic kings of Kartli preceding him. Mirian is imagined as the illegitimate son of an unnamed Sasanian emperor, but the narrative’s vague and muddled chronology does not support the claim.⁵ All this masks a different reality. Mirian migrated to eastern Georgia, probably as a member of the Parthian house of Mihrān, as hinted by his name. At the very least, the young Mirian was an outsider⁶ from Iran/Persia/Parthia (Sp’arseti), a fact expressly acknowledged in *The Life of the Kings*. Upon his resettlement, Mirian acculturated to the Georgian environment, became proficient in Georgian, and embraced Georgian culture and local Zoroastrianism, whose focus was Armaz, the local manifestation of Ahura Mazda.⁷ When his father died in Iran, Mirian attempted to assume his rightful place as *shahanshah* but was brushed aside because of his bastard status. Or so we are told.

¹ Rapp Jr., *Iranian Heritage of Georgia*, esp. pp. 654-656.

² Rapp Jr., *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, pp. 220-227. Cf. ჩხარტიშვილი, ქართული ეთნიური რელიგიური მოქცევის ეპოქაში, pp. 165-166.

³ ანდრონიკაშვილი, ნარკვევები ირანულ-ქართული ენობრივი ურთიერთობიდან. See also (e.g.) Gippert, *Iranica Armeno-Iberica*.

⁴ On Georgia’s Iranian/Ianic dimensions, see (e.g.) Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*. And for Armenia, see (e.g.) the essays collected in Garsoian, *Church and Culture in Early Medieval Armenia*.

⁵ *Life of the Kings*, in ქართლის ცხოვრება, ს. ყაუხჩიშვილის რედაქციით, pp. 63-67; *Rewriting Caucasian History*, Thomson trans., pp. 74-78. See also Rapp Jr., *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, pp. 249-258.

⁶ Outsiders (“strangers”) encountered with some frequency in early Georgian literature. See, e.g., Alekisdze, *Sanctity, Gender, and Authority in Medieval Caucasia*, pp. 74-80, 173-179, *et seqq.*

⁷ See e.g. Shenkar, *Intangible Spirits*, pp. 22-26.

The received text terminates brusquely within Mirian's reign with the arrival of news of Constantine's Christianization in the Roman Empire.¹ It is likely that these last paragraphs, which also claim an alliance between Mirian and the Christianizing Constantine and Trdat of Armenia, were added later – perhaps by the archbishop Mroveli in the eleventh century. After this, a recension of the hagiographical *Life of Nino* has been inserted wholesale into all known versions of *Kartlis tskhovreba*. The *vita*'s purpose is to address the Christianizing phase of Mirian's adulthood.² Mroveli is the most plausible culprit for the textual substitution.

But what might have motivated the complete replacement of the original account? Despite some historiographical qualities, Nino's *vita* was not purposefully written for *Kartlis tshovreba* or *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta*: it was already featured in the ecclesiastical corpus *Moktsevay kartlisay*. Moreover, how might we explain the jarring narrative shift *within* Mirian's reign, where *The Life of Nino* has been inserted? There are, I think, two viable possibilities.

Explanation #1

Perhaps the received initial cycle of *Kartlis tskhovreba* accurately reflects what was originally written. In this scenario, the author of *The Life of the Kings* deliberately terminated his narrative on the eve of Mirian's Christianization. The textual abruptness was meant to make clear the dramatic change of religious affiliation. For Mirian's conversion to Christianity and baptism, the author – or, more likely, a later editor – stripped away *The Life of the Kings*' original treatment of the Christianizing Mirian, replacing it with the entire *Life of Nino*. But the abnormally rough transition between the two sections argues against this prospect. Nevertheless, if this explanation is accepted, *The Life of the Kings* must postdate the ninth-/tenth-century *Life of Nino*. This might confirm Leont'i Mroveli as the principal author of all three components of the cycle *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* in the eleventh century.

Explanation #2

But what if *The Life of the Kings* predates *The Life of Nino*? A host of internal criteria, including allusions to the kingdom that Georgians called Apkhazeti, on the Black Sea littoral, suggest an earlier date for the former: between ca. 790 and the 813, dates respectively marking the establishment of the realm of Apkhazeti and the ascension of

¹ But this is not the Romano-Byzantine tradition of the supposed miracles at Milvian Bridge conveyed by Lactantius and Eusebius.

² The break between texts occurs at *Life of the Kings*, in ქართლის ცხოვრება, ს. ესუნებიშვილის რედაქციით, p. 72; *Rewriting Caucasian History*, Thomson trans., p. 84.

the Bagratid Ashot to the presiding principate.¹ A pre-Mrovelian *Life of the Kings* probably did not terminate within Mirian's reign but would have addressed all of it – and perhaps the reigns of his immediate Christian successors, the Chosroids. If correct, we must inquire about the fate of the original account. What might it have said?

The key is to scrutinize the surviving core of *The Life of the Kings*. As noted, its portrayal of eastern Georgian monarchs as Iranic hero-kings is remarkably consistent. Such royal imagery spills into the next cycle with *The Life of Vakht'ang Gorgasali*, a celebration of a Christian – and intrinsically Iranic – Kartvelian monarch reigning in the second half of the fifth and into the sixth century.² In terms of its basic conception, why should Mirian's original description as a Christian monarch have been any different from Vakht'ang's? For the former, it can be argued that an even more robust engagement of Iranic images of kingship was required since Mirian was an outsider: he was probably a Parthian who migrated to eastern Georgia in the late third century. He and his family lacked an existing royal claim. If *The Life of the Kings* is to be believed on this point, he was but a boy. Legitimacy would have been a cardinal concern. This is precisely why *The Life of the Kings* plunges deeply – and creatively – into the waters of exaggeration by representing Mirian not only a Sasanian but the first-born, albeit bastard, son of the *shahanshah*! The text's nebulous references to Sasanian chronology are muddled at best. This skewed image reveals how subsequent Chosroid kings conceived of their power: they envisioned themselves as legitimate monarchs within the Iranic/Iranian world while embellishing their pedigree to make themselves full-blown Sasanians. This explains their Georgian dynastic name *Khosrovanni*, “descended from Khusrō” – the imagined royal ancestor of the Sasanians and all royal Iranians of the pre-Islamic age.³ *Khosrovanni* is anglicized as Chosroids.

Presuming *The Life of the Kings* once featured an Iranic presentation of Mirian, as I am confident it did, what happened to the original account? Some later ecclesiastics would have been appalled by the strongly Iranic description of the first Christian king of eastern Georgia. By the time *The Life of the Kings* attained its received form ca. 800, such a depiction might also have been associated with Islamic political culture. Other distaste for things Iranian, Iranic, and Islamic may have arisen from the “Byzantine” turn of Georgian religious and political life, which accelerated with the monastic activity in T'ao-K'larjeti, the ascension of the Bagratids (and their restoration of the monarchy in 888), and the flourishing of “Graecophile” Georgian monastic centers abroad, including Iveron and the Black Mountain in Syria. In Leont'i Mroveli's era, the Bagratid monarchs – in reality, emperors – laid claim to a second Byzantium. An

¹ Examined in Rapp Jr., *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, pp. 101-168, extending and refining Idem, *Imagining History at the Crossroads*, pp. 55-111.

² But the received start of *The Life of Vakht'ang* might be a later addition: Rapp Jr., *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, pp. 197-207.

³ Cf. the use in Greek of the generic name/title “Chosroes” for Sasanian *shahanshahs*, thus paralleling the Greek (and Georgian) term “Caesar” for Romano-Byzantine emperors.

icon from St. Catherine’s monastery on Mt. Sinai boldly styles Davit II/IV *aghmashe-nebeli* as *basileus*, the Byzantine Greek term for “emperor”.¹ At its height, the mighty Bagratid Empire stretched across Caucasia into northern Iran and eastern Anatolia.

An Iranic Mirian was not compatible with the “Byzantinizing” Bagratid polity and Georgian Church of the eleventh century. The original account of the Christian Mirian, which must have been profoundly Iranic, was stripped away. This calculated literary pruning may have been carried out by Mroveli, a Bagratid-aligned archbishop and someone heavily invested in *Kartlis tskhovreba*. In the place of excised manuscript leaves, Mroveli would have inserted the complete *Life of Nino* – the account of Georgia’s conversion embraced by his beloved Georgian Church. He was literally re-shaping the historiographical tradition about Mirian.

By means of a conclusion, it should be noted that our solution has parallels elsewhere in Christian Caucasia. A well-known example is the Armenian conversion story credited to Agatangeghos (Agathangelus). It was substantially reworked not only in Armenian but numerous other languages, including Greek, Syriac, Arabic, and Georgian.² Another Armenian example better resembles the rough shift between the “pagan” and Christianizing Mirian in *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta*. The anonymous *Buzandaran patmutiwnk* (Բուզանդարան պատմութիւնք), *The Epic Histories*, is a particularly rich literary source for early-Christian Caucasia. It is often but erroneously attributed to a certain Faustus Buzand (Faustus “of Byzantium”). All extant manuscripts of *The Epic Histories* commence abruptly with the start of its third book.³ Completely missing are the initial two books, whose treatment must have included the first Christian Armenian monarch Trdat and his immediate Christian successors. Like the Georgian suites *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* and *Tskhorebay vakht’ang gorgaslisa*, the Armenian *Buzandaran patmutiwnk* attests a fundamentally Iranic Caucasian society, even in its Christianizing phase. Might *Buzandaran patmutiwnk*’s original depiction of Trdat have been too Iranic for later religious Armenian tastes? This is, I think, precisely the answer.

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¹ K’ldiashvili, *L’icône de Saint Georges*.

² Thomson, *Lives of Saint Gregory*; and Winkler, *Our Present Knowledge of the History of Agat’angelos*.

³ *Epic Histories*, Garsoian trans., p. 63.

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Stephen H. Rapp Jr.

Leont’i Mroveli’s Hybrid Presentation of King Mirian

Summary

The cycle of histories at the start of *Kartlis tskhovreba* has long attracted the attention of scholars. Traditionally credited to the eleventh-century archbishop Leont’i Mroveli, many historians now understand the story of Georgian ethnogenesis as a compendium of as many as three distinctive texts. The provenance of at least two of the components of *Tskhorebay kartvelta mepeta* belongs to a time well before Mroveli. These days, an eighth- or ninth-century date for the compendium’s initial section is not unusual. This section of the text undoubtedly rests on yet older oral and perhaps written traditions; it claims to reveal the very beginnings of the Georgians within the context of Caucasian history, the origins of their monarchy, and dynastic kings up to Mirian. At the same time, it prioritizes the eastern region of Kartli.

Within its account of Mirian, the text abruptly cuts off and a complete version of the hagiographical *Life of Nino* ensues. This *vita* is immediately followed by a brief narrative of the early Christian kings after Mirian. The tonal shift between the presentation of the pre-Christian and Christianizing Mirian is remarkable.

Why should this be the case? In this article, I shall suggest an explanation as to why an entire hagiographical text – which survives independently in the corpus *Moktsevay kartlisay* – has been incorporated into the historiographical *Kartlis tskhovreba*. Further, we must consider why the initial account of Mirian terminates abruptly, on the eve of his Christianization. In *Kartlis tskhovreba*, the remainder of Mirian’s reign is treated exclusively by *The Life of Nino*. The answer is not simply the royal adoption of Christianity. Instead, the key lies in the original but lost versions of Georgian historiographical sources as well as Caucasia’s integration within the Iranic world in late antiquity.

**მეფე მირიანის ჰიბრიდული
პრეზენტაცია ლეონტი მროველთან**

რეზიუმე

„ქართლის ცხოვრების“ თხზულებათა დასაწყისი ნაწილი დიდი ხანია, რაც მკვლევართა ყურადღებას იქცევს. ქართველთა ეთნოგენეზის ისტორიას, რომელიც ტრადიციულად მეთერთმეტე საუკუნის ეპისკოპოსს, ლეონტი მროველს მიენერებოდა, დღეისათვის ისტორიკოსთა დიდი ნაწილი სამი განსხვავებული ტექსტის კომპენდიუმად მიიჩნევს. „ცხოვრება ქართველთა მეფეთა“-ს სულ მცირე ორი კომპონენტი მროველის მოღვაწეობამდე დიდი ხნით ადრეა შექმნილი. კომპენდიუმის თავდაპირველი ნაწილის მერვე ან მეცხრე საუკუნით დათარიღებაც აღარ არის უჩვეულო. ტექსტის ეს ნაწილი, უეჭველია, ემყარება უფრო აღრინდელ ზეპირ და შესაძლებელია, წერილობით ტრადიციასაც; მას პრეტენზია აქვს, წარმოაჩინოს ქართველთა სათავეები კავკასიის ისტორიის კონტექსტში, მათი სამეფოს წარმოქმნა, მეფეთა დინასტია მირიანამდე. იმავდროულად, მისი თხრობა, უპირატესად, აღმოსავლეთ მხარეს, ქართლს ეხება.

მირიანზე თხრობისას, ტექსტი უეცრად წყდება; მას აგრძელებს ჰაგიოგრაფიული თხზულების „ნინოს ცხოვრების“ სრული ვერსია. „ცხოვრებას“ უშუალოდ მოსდევს მირიანის მომდევნო პირველი ქრისტიანი მეფეების მოკლე ისტორია. ნიშანდობლივია წარმართი და გაქრისტიანებული მირიანის პრეზენტაციებს შორის ტონალობის ცვლილებაც.

რა უნდა ყოფილიყო ამის მიზეზი? სტატიაში წარმოდგენილია მოსაზრებები, თუ რატომ შეიტანეს მთლიანი ჰაგიოგრაფიული ტექსტი, რომელიც დამოუკიდებელი თხზულების სახით „მოქცევა ქართლისას“ კორპუსმა შემოინახა, ისტორიოგრაფიულ „ქართლის ცხოვრებაში“. გარდა ამისა, უნდა ვუპასუხო იმ კითხვასაც, თუ რატომ წყდება უეცრად დასაწყისი თხრობა მირიანის შესახებ მაინცდამაინც მისი გაქრისტიანების მომენტისთვის. „ქართლის ცხოვრებაში“ მირიანის დანარჩენი მეფობა განხილულია მხოლოდ და მხოლოდ „ნინოს ცხოვრებაში“. მეფის მიერ ქრისტიანობაზე მოქცევა მეტად გამარტივებული პასუხი იქნებოდა. ახსნის პოვნა შესაძლებელი უნდა იყოს ქართული ისტორიოგრაფიული წყაროების ორიგინალურ, მაგრამ დაკარგულ ვერსიებში, ისევე როგორც კავკასიის ინტეგრაციაში ირანულ („Iranic“) სამყაროში გვიანანტიკურ ხანაში.