

# **Saint Shushanik of Georgia**

## **Women in Early Georgian Church**

*Lasha Tchantouridze*

### **Introduction**

The 5<sup>th</sup> century account of the martyrdom of Saint Shushanik, the oldest surviving Georgian language manuscript, describes the final years in the life of the queen of a Georgian principality. A daughter of a distinguished Armenian general, Saint Vartan Mamikonian, Shushanik was married to a Georgian feudal and viceroy of significant influence and power, Varsken. Christianity had been the official religion of Georgia since 326, and Varsken, a son of Christian parents, was nominally a Christian ruler as well, under a Christian king. Viceroy Varsken inherited the throne from his father, who distinguished himself by supporting the Church and protecting Christianity. However, in search of power and new alliances, Varsken betrayed his king and religion, and converted to a pagan religion of the neighbouring Persian Empire. Persians at that time were predominantly Zoroastrians, and so Varsken also became one – he pledged his allegiance to the Persian King, and even asked his daughter's hand.

Varsken's wife, Shushanik; however, refused to follow his husband into his new religion, and condemned his apostasy. She left the palace after learning of Varsken's betrayal, and just before his return from Persia, and went to a secluded dwelling to pray and grieve. Enraged at her defiance, Varsken tried to persuade his wife with all means at his disposal, including torture and abuse, but Shushanik's faith was very firm, and she traded martyrdom for the life in her husband's palace. St. Shushanik reposed in around 476, after enduring seven years of torture and punishment. Viceroy Varsken did not last long after the repose of St. Shushanik – in about 482 he was killed at the orders of the Georgian king he had betrayed, another Georgian saint, Vakhtang Gorgasali.

## The Book

We know of Queen Shushanik's passions from an eyewitness, Priest Jacob (or Iakob) of Tsurtavi.<sup>1</sup> Tsurtavi was the main city in Varsken's principality where Priest Jacob was Shushanik's spiritual father and confessor, and after the saint's repose he wrote a hagiographic book describing the events he had witnessed.

The book titled *The Martyrdom of St. Shushanik*<sup>2</sup> was composed between 476 and 482, and it is the oldest surviving book written in Georgian. The author wrote the book after the repose of St. Shushanik (476) as the book ends with the account of her final days, and he does not

---

<sup>1</sup> His name in Georgian is იაკობ ტურტაველი (iakob tsurtaveli).

<sup>2</sup> წამება წმინდასა შუშანიკისა, sometimes is translated as *The Passion of St Shushanik*. An authoritative Russian translation of the book is available at <<http://www.georgianweb.com/religion/ru/shushanikru.html>>. An English translation of parts of the book, a less precise but correctly translating the meaning, is available at <<http://www.georgianweb.com/religion/shushanik.html>> or <<http://www.angelfire.com/ga/Georgian/new.html>>. The original text is available at <<http://publish.dlf.ge/vaxtangvi/iakobcirtaveli/nawarmoebi.htm>>.

mention the ignominious death of her tormentor, Varsken (482).<sup>3</sup> St Shushanik has been glorified by both Georgian and Armenian churches.

Besides informing us of the life of a saint, the story of St. Shushanik is significant for a number of other reasons: it tells a story of power struggle in the Caucasus (between Georgia and Persia), in which two competing religions, Christianity and Zoroastrianism played decisive roles, describes social realities of the time, informs the reader of certain conditions in the 5<sup>th</sup> century Georgian Church, describes geographical features and climate of the region in question, and finally, informs us about relations between the sexes in society of the South Caucasus. Priest Jacob's account is remarkable for its literary style – the life of a saint is set in the context of everyday life and political struggle. The story, unlike other Georgian hagiographic accounts, is a chronological one, as the author conveys the image of a glorious spiritual ascent of St Shushanik, and equally dramatic fall of her husband, Varsken.

### **Women's Place in Society**

It is evident from Priest Jacob's book that Shushanik's disobedience was an extraordinary act, as women, especially queens, were expected to follow their husbands' decisions. In her case, the marriage with Varsken was also a political act designed to strengthened relations between Christian countries of Armenia and Georgia. However, by the 460s the Armenian kingdom was in decline after a historic loss in 451 at the Battle of Avarayr (also known as the Battle of Vartanantz).<sup>4</sup> It is likely that

---

<sup>3</sup> According to some historians, *The Passion of St. Shushanik* was written between 475 and 484. Elguja Khintibidze, *Georgian Literature in European Scholarship*, Chapter Three, <[www.nato.int/acad/fellow/94-96/elguja/03htm](http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/94-96/elguja/03htm)>

<sup>4</sup> The Armenian forces, led by St. Vartan Mamikonian, were primary composed of militia groups of ill-trained and equipped peasantry. They lost to Persian regular forces that vastly outnumbered the Armenians. Despite this dramatic loss, the Armenian resistance subsequently rebounded, and managed to achieve freedom to practice Christianity in the country.

Varsken abandoned Christianity and pledged his services to the Persian king as he started to look for new political allies and protectors. Obviously, his policies were directed against the interests of the king of Georgians, Vakhtang Gorgasali. Varsken's conversion to Zoroastrianism, thus, signified not only the rejection of Christianity, but it also undermined the unity of the Georgian kingdom. Saint Shushanik, the most vocal opponent to his husband's apostasy, defended Christianity, and at the same time, she emerged as a great patriotic figure opposed to her adoptive country's dismemberment.

From Priest Jacob's account we learn how various individuals linked with the court in Tsurtavi viewed Shushanik, her decisive steps, and struggle to stay with Christ. A Persian advisor to Varsken counsels caution in dealing with Shushanik, and urges the viceroy to be patient with his wife. "After all, women are always liable to be unreasonable," he says expecting Shushanik eventually to come around and embrace the new faith.<sup>5</sup> The viceroy himself demands his wife to obey him without any dissent, and ignores his advisor's call to be patient.

The churchmen take Shushanik's side. Priest Jacob points out that the viceroy's decision to pledge loyalty to the Persian King was made without consultations with his wife, and therefore, it was not lawful. Varsken's decision to take the second wife could not have been lawful for the church under any circumstances. It should be noted as well that Priest Jacob does not even mention in his account King of Georgia Vakhtang – even book is dated with references to the King of Persia – as a cleric Priest Jacob sees Varsken as a traitor to his faith and family.

There was a bishop attached to Varsken's court, Bishop Aphots, who tried to protect Queen Shushanik the best he could. Priest Jacob's account

---

<sup>5</sup> If translated literally, the Persian says: "the nature of women is narrow..."

also mentioned the ruling bishop of Kartli (Eastern Georgia), Archbishop Samuel, and Bishop John<sup>6</sup> among those who tried to protect Shushanik from her husband's wrath and cared for her. Nobility of the principality, including Varsken's own brother Jojik and his family also sympathized with the saint, but no one could do anything to save her from the viceroy, whose power primarily relied on Persian support and backing.

The text indicates that Shushanik, as Queen of Tsurtavi, had considerable influence in the court and among common people. She educated youth and cared about them, she was well known to her subjects. The Persian advisor's caution to the viceroy and his preference for more patience were in order as Persians were afraid that a family drama, a discord between husband and wife, could acquire national proportions and get out of control, which it eventually did.

### **Martyr's Faith**

Shushanik's faith gives her tremendous courage. She struggles to defend the true God, her family and people against the encroachments of a pagan religion, and a foreign power. She is most pointedly alone in this struggle, as people of influence around her, including the clergy, are unable to help her and/or are afraid to speak up. There are attempts by a bishop, and a priest and a deacon to protest Varsken's apostasy, but the viceroy silences the bishop with verbal abuse, he beats the priest, and the deacon cannot even manage to say a word, but runs away as Varsken's gives them a threatening look.

In Russian and English translations this deacon is referred to as "he," but it is not clear from the original text whether the deacon is male or female. Traditionally and historically it was assumed that the deacon

---

<sup>6</sup> In Georgian: იოანე (*Ioané*).

was male. However, the Church in Georgia historically had female deacons as well. The Georgian language is gender-neutral, and as it has no gender specific personal pronouns ("he" and "she"), and the deacon's name is not mentioned, it is impossible to decisively state one or the other.

Shushanik laments the fact that she is left alone, but does not curse either the clergy or society leaders for their cowardice or inability to protect the Church and her. Instead, she is thankful for whatever minor assistance they could give her. Shushanik does not desire suffering, but in fact, does regret that torture and suffering have influenced her looks and diminished her beauty, and that she is getting disfigured by continuous abuse. It is clear that she does not desire torture and death, but sees no other choice for her.

Shushanik's struggle lasts around seven years. It is significant to note, that in the beginning of her struggle, Shushanik is comforted by the clergy and well-wishers; while at the end of her passions it is she who comforts, blesses, and encourages the clergy, friends, and many ordinary people. In the beginning she seeks spiritual support from Priest Jacob and the court bishop, towards the end of her life the same priest and bishop seek spiritual advise, and support from her.

Priest Jacob, the author of the text, fully acknowledges his own weakness, and also that of other clergy to resist the viceroy. He is full of admiration of Shushanik's courage and endurance. He sees Shushanik as saint, and describes pilgrimages by people to her abode. Priest Jacob clearly views Shushanik as God's favourite, and he does mention a specific miracle ascribed to the saint.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Shushanik was visited by a distressed Persian woman, who suffered from leprosy. The saint urged her to become a follower of Christ, and travel to Jerusalem for her healing. The woman followed her counsel: she was baptized and left for Jerusalem. Upon her return, now jubilant, she once again visited Shushanik, and thanked the saint for her miraculous cure.

### **They Are Afraid of Shushanik**

Persians are afraid of a single woman's defiance, and urge her husband to treat her mercifully. They are afraid for a reason: the sufferings of the queen attract a lot of attention from ordinary people. Her jail is visited by multitudes, she becomes a subject of pilgrimage, and people see her as God's chosen. They seek Shushanik's blessings, her advice, and encouragement.

It was not in Persians' interests to provoke a popular rebellion against their dominance in the region, which is what happened few years after Shushanik's death. Viceroy's advisers are mindful of people's feelings, and they specifically advise Varsken to leave Shushanik alone during the Great Lent. Viceroy ignores this advice, and on a Monday of the Great Lent orders Shushanik to be beaten with 300 lashes of cane. By doing this he further he further deepens the rift between himself, and his subjects.

It is clear from the account that the Viceroy wants Christian Church to be weakened in his principality, but does not dare to use direct force against the clergy. It is very likely that he was forbidden to directly challenge the Church by his Persian masters. By this time, Persians had enough problems in Armenia – there people wanted to practice their faith, and were fighting for this right. Varsken mocks Shushanik and tells her: "you see now that the Church is cannot help you neither can your Christian supporters of their God." Instead of weakening the Church, the viceroy's actions and Shushanik's courage strengthen it. Shushanik's struggle also stressed the magnitude of Varsken's treason – it becomes so much more pronounced and obvious to all. That is one reason the King of Georgians treats his renegade viceroy so mercilessly – Varsken was captured and killed few years after Shushanik's repose. The Viceroy's

assassination was followed by a rebellion directed at the Persian rule in southern Georgia.

Vakhtang Gorgasali<sup>8</sup> was very keen on having both sovereign domain and autocephalous church – the Orthodox Church in Georgia received autocephaly from the Church in Antioch under his guidance and leadership. In the 460s, the Church of Kartli (eastern Georgia) was granted autocephaly, and the ruling hierarch was given the title of Catholicos.<sup>9</sup> King St. Vakhtang I, who in 502 was fatally wounded in a battle with Persians, became a legendary national hero. He founded Tbilisi, the current capital of Georgia, and in the 1960s his monument was erected there – the first monument dedicated to a monarch and a saint in the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to note that the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century was the period of great difficulties for the Church in both Georgia and Armenia, and not only because of the wars with Persia. This was a period after the 4<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council of 451, in Chalcedon. The council's definition of the two perfect natures of Christ, was followed by the first major break in the church – the Church in Armenia could not accept the definition as it was presented to them,<sup>11</sup> and subsequently schism fell between the Orthodox

---

<sup>8</sup> Gorgasali is a Georgian transliteration of Persian nickname 'gorg-aslan' or 'gorg-asar' meaning 'wolf-head' – the king was given this nickname after the shape of his helmet.

<sup>9</sup> The Church of Western Georgia (called Egrisi or Abkhazia) remained under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, with Constantinople recognizing autocephaly of the Church in Eastern Georgia. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century, its ruling hierarch is also known by the title of Catholicos. The two Georgian churches were united in the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century under the guidance of King St David the Builder, and Catholicos of Eastern Georgia was elected the ruling bishop of the united church with the title of Catholicos-Patriarch, and the Catholicos of Western Church recognized the primacy of the Eastern Catholicos. Constantinople; however, did not recognize autocephaly of the united Georgian church until 1990.

<sup>10</sup> A photo of the sculpture of Vakhtang Gorgasali by Mr. Elguja Amashukeli unveiled is available at <<http://www.parliament.ge/~lika/culture/geninfo/gorgasali.JPG>>

<sup>11</sup> The Church in Armenia had no representation at Chalcedon. As it is noted above, the 450s was a very troubled period in Armenian history – the Battle of Avarayr took, which ended with the massacre of Armenian nobility also took place in 451.

and the so-called Oriental Churches. The Church in Georgia somehow managed to stay in the middle and maintain good relations with both the churches in Armenia and Albania (Azerbaijan), and the Orthodox Patriarchates. The final break between Georgians and Orientals took place in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Monastic Life**

During the seven-year suffering at her husband's hands, Shushanik emerged as a saintly monastic figure, who being chained in her dungeon endured tremendous sufferings for Christ. Initially, when Shushanik learned about her husband's apostasy, she left the home and took residence close to a church building – she wanted to be left alone, but did not want to be far from church services. Subsequently, she was put in a dungeon by her estranged husband, where he hoped she would die soon. The dungeon itself was located in the most inhospitable and harsh area of the principality, where even free people did not leave long.<sup>12</sup> However, Shushanik endures for seven years, and the dungeon becomes her monastic abode, and the destination for pilgrims from all over the country.<sup>13</sup>

Much like Egyptian fathers before her, and many holy fathers and mothers after her, Shushanik in her hermitage was viewed a holy person suffering for her dedication to God. The Syrian fathers, who came to Georgia at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, are widely regarded as the founders of monasticism in Georgia. However,

---

<sup>12</sup> Priest Jacob's description of this part of the country is stark and dramatic. Literally, he writes of "harsh winds and harmful waters," and of inhabitants with swollen bodies, jaundice, diseased skin, etc.

<sup>13</sup> According to Priest Jacob: "her works became renowned throughout all Kartli. Men and women came for the fulfillment of their vows. Whatever they had need of was bestowed on them through the holy prayers of the blessed Shushanik – a child to the childless, healing to the sick, and to the blind, restoration of sight."

St. Shushanik's deeds clearly indicate her monastic dedication: according to Priest Jacob, she spent every waking hour in her cell praying, reading the Holy Scripture, and keeping vigil.<sup>14</sup>

### Women in the Church

St. Shushanik played a crucial role in the preservation of Christianity in the southern Georgia in the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> It seems to be a norm in the Orthodox Church that at a number of crucial times in history it was women's dedication that saved the Church. In the ancient Roman Empire during harsh pagan persecutions female deacons and women in general kept the Christian communities together. Female deacons would visit houses of the faithful, give them communion, visit the sick and needy, and thus maintain the links that were otherwise severed due to arrests and executions of many clerics and lay Christians. The pagan authorities of Rome mostly left women alone – either did not suspect them providing crucial services for the Church or did not see them as a threat.

In more recent times, in the Soviet Russia and Ukraine women literally saved the Orthodox Church. In many ways, it was mostly old women who preserved the Church and prevailed over the KGB. They sung in choirs, helped the priests, attended the services, maintained Tradition, and basically kept the Church alive. Much like their Roman counterparts, the Soviet authorities did not see women as threat to their regime – they would let women, especially the older women, *Babushkas*, attend church services, while they would arrest men or prevent them from entering church buildings.

---

<sup>14</sup> From the Scriptures, *The Martyrdom of St. Shushanik* makes references to the Gospels, the Psalms, and Epistles by St. Paul.

<sup>15</sup> It is unlikely that Varsken's death sentence or the anti-Persian rebellion was motivated solely by his treatment of St. Shushanik; however, it is also undeniable that his violent ways did not help his case with King Vakhtang, and caused popular resentment.

## **Spiritual Strength vs. Physical Force**

When Varsken, the viceroy of southern Georgia, abandons Christ, and threatens both the Christian church and the unity of his country, he does not expect such formidable defiance and opposition from his wife. Everyone else he can subdue with violence, but he cannot make his own wife comply with him. Varsken's visible physical violence is met with an invisible force of Shushanik's dedication and faith. The viceroy kills his wife, but in the end he and his supporters are defeated by Shushanik's deeds. Shushanik's martyrdom saves the church, puts priorities in order, rallies people, and eventually leads to Varsken's downfall, and the defeat and expulsion of the Persians.

Saints and martyrs have maintained and preserved Christianity in Georgia. Even in Shushanik's times saints and martyrs were much revered. According to *The Martyrdom of St. Shushanik*, she kept with her the Holy Gospels, and a "book of holy martyrs."<sup>16</sup> We learn from Priest Jacob's account that he and other faithful around him were convinced that they were in the presence of a living saint, especially when they converse with Shushanik on her deathbed. They ask for her intercession with God, to which she responds: "though I am but a worker of the 11<sup>th</sup> hour in the vineyard, if I have any merit, you shall all be blessed for ever and ever."

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it would be proper to note the fact that some of the most important saints in the Georgian Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries

---

<sup>16</sup> Cornelia Horn notes this passage as evidence of the presence of even older accounts of saints' lives in Georgia in her book on a fifth century Georgian saint *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 66.

were women. St. Nino, the Equal of the Apostles and Enlightener of Georgia, St. Nana, the Queen of Georgia who convinced her husband St. Mirian to proclaim Christianity the official religion of the land, and St. Shushanik. The lives of these saints depict them as leaders, guides, heroes, whose acts and deeds had tremendous influence over many generations of their countrymen. The Church of Georgia commemorates Saint Shushanik on the day of her repose, October 17.

*About the author:* Dn. Lasha Tchantouridze, PhD, teaches Church History for the St Arseny Orthodox Christian Theological Institute, in Winnipeg, MB.