The Murder at Mount Kangar: The Oral Narratives of the Caucasian 'Schism'

Nikoloz Aleksidze
Pembroke College, University of Oxford

The Schism narrative

A student of South Caucasian Studies, a field of inquiry that by tradition encompasses medieval Albanian, Armenian and Georgian history, will encounter a specific narrative framework in the historical discourse of Armenian and Georgian relations. According to this framework, before the early seventh century all South Caucasian Churches were ecclesiastically united. Starting with the introduction of Christianity in the region in the early fourth century, the three South Caucasian Churches developed synchronically and in accord, sharing faith as well as political and cultural aspirations. This union was strengthened by close cultural and political ties, by $ virtue of which a certain Caucasian cultural entity was formed. But this unity came to an end when the Church Schism took place in the early years of the seventh century. The 'catastrophe' occurred in the early seventh century during the rule of the Katholikoi Movsēs (574–604) and Abraham (607–615) in Armenia, and Katholikos Kyrion (*ca*. 599–614) in Iberia. The latter hierarch triggered a series of scandals by rejecting the common faith and adhering to the Chalcedonian teaching, which eventually culminated in a separation between the two brotherly Churches.[1] Since then, Armenian and Georgian Churches and cultures continued their lives independently, adhering to opposing theological and political stands, producing often antagonizing pieces of literature and developing hostile rhetoric, thus gradually deepening the cleavage between each other and forgetting the former times of brotherly union. In time, the Armenian Church chose an anti-Chalcedonian stand, whereas the Georgian adopted Chalcedonian definitions of faith and drifted towards the Byzantine cultural sphere. After centuries of oscillation and turbulence, Caucasian Albania ceased to exist as an independent entity or even cultural unit, having dissolved into Armenian, Georgian and Muslim cultural milieux.[2] The same narrative concludes that accordingly the history of late antique and medieval South Caucasian cultures ought to be divided into pre- and post-schismal periods.[3]

This early seventh century controversy, which is nowadays evaluated as the Caucasian Schism, is well illustrated in an intensive exchange of letters between the Armenian and Georgian hierarchs and preserved in the Armenian epistolary collection known as the *Book of Letters*.[4] The collection also includes other correspondence of the Armenian bishops with Greeks, Persians, Syrians and Albanians, but the Armeno-Georgian section is the central and by far the lengthiest component of the corpus.[5] In the tenth century, the Georgian section of the *Book of Letters* was edited by the Armenian Bishop Uxtanēs of Sebasteia (*ca*. 935–1000), who was commissioned to create a scholarly account of the Georgian 'apostasy.' Indeed, Uxtanēs did an impressive job by producing a

---

1 For some of the most important works on the Schism, see Zaza Aleksidze, "Kaukasien und der christlich Orient zwischen 451 und 780," *Georgika* 4 (1981): 34–6; S. Peter Cowe, "Generic and methodological developments in the theology in Caucasia from the fourth to eleventh centuries within an East Christian context," in *Il Caucaso: cerniera fra culture dal Mediterraneo alla Persia (secoli IV–XI). Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo* 43 (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1996), 647–83; Nina G. Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne et le Grand Schisme d'Orient* (CSCO 574) (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 283–355.

2 On the Church of Caucasian Albania in late antiquity, see Karen N. Yuzbachian, "Einige Bemerkungen über die Entwicklung der nationalen Bewusstseinsbildung im kaukasischen Albanien," in *Die Christianisierung des Kaukasus/The Christianization of Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia, Albania). Referate des Internationalen Symposions (Wien, 9.–12. Dezember, 1999)*, ed. Werner Seibt (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2002), 181–7; Marco Bais, *Albania caucasica: ethnos, storia, territorio attraverso le fonti greche, latine e armene* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001).

3 See Stephen Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts* (CSCO 601) (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 124.

4 For a French translation of selected letters and detailed commentary, see Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne*, 506–85; for an English translation of several letters and theological commentary, see Leif Frivold, *The Incarnation: A Study of the Doctrine of the Incarnation in the Armenian Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries according to the Book of Letters* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1981).

5 See Andrea B. Schmidt, "Das armenische 'Buch der Briefe.' Seine Bedeutung als quellenkundliche Sammlung für die christologischen Streitigkeiten in Armenien im 6./7. Jh.," in *Logos. Festschrift für Luise Abramowski zum 8. Juli 1993*, ed. Hanns Ch. Brennecke, Ernst L. Grasmück, Christoph Markschies (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1993), 511–33; see also the relevant chapter in Garsoïan, *L'Église arménienne*, 283–355. Translations of letters pertaining to the Armeno-Georgian correspondence can be found in the appendix to Gorun Babian, *The Relations between the Armenian and Georgian Churches according to the Armenian Sources, 300–610* (Antelias: Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, 2001).

'critical' edition of the *Book of Letters* with extensive historical commentary.[6] As a result, the Uxtanēsian presentation of the Schism, of its causes, the characterization of the protagonists and antagonists, and the results of the Schism remained as the ultimate authoritative interpretation of this seventh century drama. After Uxtanēs, the Schism was reminisced on all possible occasions by medieval Armenian writers, who often sought in this watershed event an explanation for their respective contemporary political status quo.

The Schism narrative became a cornerstone of a grand Armenian narrative of the formation of orthodoxy and of heterodoxy in the region. No medieval author who recounts the history of the region avoids reference to the Schism. Indeed, the Georgian Katholikos Kyrion of Mcxeta, who allegedly triggered the Schism, became a virtual scapegoat and was blamed for all the calamities that subsequently befell the Armenians and Georgians. The Armenian tradition eagerly claims that it was after the Schism that the Georgians forgot that they owe the very foundation of their Christianity to the Armenians, that the Georgian writing was created by a fifth-century Armenian scholar, and finally that formerly, before the Schism, the Georgian katholikoi and archbishops were ordained by the Armenian patriarchs. These were the allegations that reoccur regularly in the medieval Armenian corpus. Therefore, beginning from the early seventh century, remembering, reminding, and forgetting became crucial rhetorical tools in the Armeno-Georgian discourse. The appropriate remembrance of the Schism became particularly crucial, as it was presented as a watershed event that was supposed to explain both historical developments and the current political state of affairs in medieval Caucasus. Therefore, medieval Armenian intellectuals constantly reminded their Chalcedonian Georgian neighbors of the Schism, of their betrayal of the union and of a terrible offence they had committed. This is what medieval Armenian discourse claimed and the same is often read in contemporary scholarly literature.[7]

Even within contemporary scholarship, few scholars can avoid reference to this event, which is indeed supposed to explain a number of further political and cultural formations in the Caucasian region. The Armeno-Georgian discourse is strongly affected by a certain 'memory war' formed around the remembrance of the foundations of South Caucasian cultures. The past century has seen and the twenty-first century Caucasus still witnesses remarkable scholarly or less scholarly disputes over the foundation of the Christian Caucasian cultures.[8] In this discourse, the narrative of the Schism reemerged as a central interpretive schema. Whether political, ecclesiastical, liturgical, literary or architectural aspects of south Caucasian history, all are often studied through the narrative of the Schism. Some of the recent and finest studies published on the subject matter date several major Georgian and Armenian sources as either pre- or post-schismal, by attempting to slough off the pre- and post-schismal strata in the narrative sources.[9] The liturgical practices are also studied through the prism of the Schism narrative, with arguments that the divergence between the Armenian and Georgian traditions began immediately after the Schism; the same is true of theology and most importantly for the perception of ethnic, religious and linguistic identities in Armenian, Georgian and Byzantine borderlands. The Schism became the major interpretative tool to historically justify the ecclesiastical and territorial claims that either side had in the medieval or modern period. Rather implicitly than explicitly it has been often argued that the formation of the Georgian *self* was strongly determined by the Armenian *other*. Similarly, it is often claimed that Georgian 'national' Christianity is the result of the separation from the Armenians; that the Georgian pro-Byzantine aspirations were cultivated as a result of the rejection of the Armenian cultural influence; that in the Armeno-Georgian relations Georgian and Armenian ethnic self-identification was largely determined by their denominational stand; and even further that the Georgian historical narrative was created as a counter-narrative to the Armenian vision of the Caucasian past.[10] The problem is that in spite of, or maybe because of, such an abundance of sources, the exact nature and historical antecedents of the Schism remains extremely problematic.

Judging by the paramount importance the Schism occupied in medieval Armenian perception of regional history, one may expect that medieval Georgian tradition attributed a comparable significance to the

---

6 See Bishop Ukhtanes of Sebastia, *History of Armenia*, part II: *History of the Severance of the Georgians from the Armenians*, trans. Zaven Arzoumanian (Fort Lauderale: [s.n.], 1985).

7 See Babian, *Relations*, 183–251.

8 See, for example, the discussion about the creation of Caucasian alphabets or the Christianization of the region, in Babian, *Relations*, 47. For the controversy, see Jean-Pierre Mahé, "Die Bekehrung Transkaukasiens: eine Historiographie mit doppeltem Boden," in *Die Christianisierung des Kaukasus*, 107–125.

9 Rapp, *Studies*, 170. Korneli Kekelidze's entire conception of the medieval Georgian literature is also based on a pre- and post-schismal division. See Michael Tarchnišvili and Julius Assfalg, *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur, auf Grund des ersten Bandes der georgischen Literatur geschichte von K. Kekelidze* (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1955), 47–8. Earlier than this, Nikolay Marr upheld similar views, "Об единстве задач армяно-грузинской филологии" (On Common Problems of Armeno-Georgian Philology) *Kavkazskiy Vestnik* 3 (1902): 15–29.

10 I have studied these developments in my DPhil thesis, *Making, Remembering and Forgetting Late Antique Caucasus* (University of Oxford, 2013). A more thorough study, *The Schism: An Interpretive Schema of Caucasian History*, is currently under review for publication.

Caucasian Schism, to its commemoration and appropriate interpretation. The Georgian writers could at least have tried to promote their own version of the remembrance of the Schism by trying to fit the narrative of the Schism into a larger 'national' narrative in the circumstances of the ongoing Armeno-Georgian debates in the first three centuries of the second millennium, when a proper exercise of remembrance was of a paramount rhetorical importance. The Georgians did in fact produce an extensive corpus of anti-Armenian rhetoric, blaming Armenians of defiance, heterodoxy and other sins, but, curiously enough, reference to the Schism as a historical event that has contributed to the Armenian apostasy is almost entirely absent. No medieval Georgian chronicle or polemical work either mentions the Schism, or elaborates on the accompanying events. Above all, Katholikos Kyrion is equally absent from medieval Georgian corpus apart from several obscure instances.[11] There is only one single instance where Katholikos Kyrion dimly appears on the historical stage: the early eleventh-century Georgian Katholikos Arseni Sapareli explained the reasons behind the separation of Armenians and Georgians in a brief treatise *On the Separation of the Georgians and the Armenians.*[12] But even in this case, the textual analysis reveals that the only sources that the Georgian Katholikos possessed were Armenian and the very concept of the Schism is borrowed from the Armenian writing—no local and traditional knowledge of the Schism transpires in this narrative. Apparently and surprisingly, Kyrion, Arseni's distant predecessor, belongs to the Armenian tradition and not to the Georgian. Arseni merely inverts the protagonists, thus giving a pro-Chalcedonian spirit to the well-known story. Kyrion, the arch-nemesis of the Armenian Orthodoxy could have easily become a hero of the Georgian tradition and symbol of Georgian Orthodoxy, but this fails to transpire and, if one skims through the medieval Georgian literary corpus, one may find it difficult to discover reference to late antique theological polemic, or any reference to specific theological problems for that matter.

Similarly to medieval literature there is a tendency in contemporary Georgian ecclesiastical narrative to avoid reference to the Schism, in which Katholikos Kyrion too is disregarded and Georgian ecclesiastical scholarship avoids the period of the Schism altogether. This is in fact understandable, as contemporary ecclesiastical narrative does not accept a break in the uninterrupted Orthodox tradition and hence there is neither place nor need for Kyrion as a 'reformer.' Conversely, the situation is radically different in the 'secular' scholarship. Together with the publication of the Georgian translation and study of the *Book of Letters*, the Georgian Katholikos indeed became a secular saint of sorts in Georgian scholarship.[13] At one point, Georgian scholars even approached the Patriarchate to canonize Kyrion, a plea that was entirely ignored by the Church. Thus, while the national narrative likes to see Kyrion as the founder of Georgian 'national' Orthodoxy, a kind of a national hero, who set political orientation of the land, the initiator of series of 'national' revivals that echoes even in the late nineteenth century national movement, the ecclesiastical narrative does not want to accept any break in tradition.[14]

Therefore, the Armenian scholarly tradition—both medieval and modern —wishes to systematize the remembrance of the Schism and allocate it a distinct place in the Armenian cultural memory. The Schism, as a historical concept, acquired centrality in contemporary studies of late antique Caucasus. Conversely, the Georgian tradition provides no account of this supposedly paramount event and of the crucial figure of Georgian history and this is true for both medieval writing and contemporary ecclesiastic tradition. However, there is yet another source that requires consideration and illuminates the place that the Schism occupied in the cultural memory of the two South Caucasian peoples, and this is the oral tradition. Here again, similarly to the written narratives and chronicles, the Armenian and Georgian perceptions reveal radical differences.

The oral narratives

In order to demonstrate how criminal Kyrion's rule was and how perverse the defiant Georgians were, Armenian scholar Mxit'ar Goš (*ca*. 1130–1213) lamented:

> Kiwron [sic.] was envious of the priority of the thrones of Siwnians and Albanians over his throne and he separated from us during Abraham the Katholikos of the Armenians. He was

---

[11] See მოქცევაჲ ქართლისაჲ (*The Conversion of Georgia*), in *Monuments of Old Georgian Hagiographic Literature (5th–10th c.)*, ed. Ilia Abuladze (Tbilisi: Mecniereba, 1964), 81–163, at 97.

[12] See Arseni Sapareli, განყოფისათჳს ქართველთა და სომეხთა (On the Severance of the Georgians and Armenians), ed. Zaza Aleksidze (Tbilisi: Mecniereba, 1980); Zaza Aleksidze, Jean-Pierre Mahé, "Arsène Sapareli. Sur la séparation des Géorgiens et des Arméniens," *REArm* 32 (2010): 59–132.

[13] The turning point was Aleksidze's edition of *The Book of Letters* (Tbilisi: Mecniereba, 1968), after which the interest in Kyrion's figure and the history of the Schism grew particularly strong.

[14] Georgian historians who also happen to be hierarchs of the Georgian Orthodox Church often attempt to create a standard narrative of the Georgian Church history that would entirely ignore the Schism. See, for example, Anania Japaridze, საქართველოს სამოციქულო ეკლესიის ისტორია (History of the Georgian Apostolic Church), vol. 1 (Tbilisi: Merani, 1996), 325–438.

> summoned over and over again but he would not obey. Then [Abraham the Katholikos] sent his bishop Peter to depose Kiwron if he would still refuse to conform. Kiwron stripped his own garments willingly and handed them over [to Peter]. But then he secretly sent [assassins] after him for he craved to stone him to death. After this, he went to confess the heresy of the Council of Chalcedon. The evil mind mingled with an evil will and Peter was stoned together with two other believers at Mt. Kanguar [Kangar].[15]

Mxit'ar's account is in many ways typical and to a certain extent even canonical in medieval Armenian literature, often echoed by other authors. Just as almost the entire knowledge about the Schism, such an interpretation of the Schism also stems from Uxtanēs' account, who, in his own words, recorded two versions of "why and how the Georgians separated from us." In both cases the reason is the 'vanity' of the Georgian Katholikos who craved special honor and—having remained unsatisfied—rebelled.[16] Although the claim that the reason for the ecclesiastical separation was the Georgian hierarch's mere vanity is a common polemical *topos*, the account of violence that allegedly accompanied the Schism as known to Mxit'ar reveals a curious story that resonated in an oral tradition disseminated in the medieval Caucasian region.

There survive several written accounts that were originally spread orally in medieval Georgia and the traces of which still exist in modern Caucasian lore. These accounts narrate a story of a certain arch-heretic who peregrinated in the Caucasus and was stoned to death by 'pious' Georgians who refused to pay him due respect. None of these stories refer directly to the Schism but rather reflect the way Georgians remembered the formation of orthodoxy and of heresies in Late Antiquity and reveal the dramatic difference between the Armenian and Georgian perceptions of the history of Orthodoxy in the Caucasus. These oral accounts were also adopted in the Armenian tradition and incorporated in the Armenian narrative of the Schism as exemplified by Mxit'ar's remark. Therefore, one may assume that whereas the Georgian institutionalized memory repressed the memory of the Schism in order to sustain the narrative of its continuous Orthodoxy, the traces of the Schism persisted in the collective memory by thus betraying the actual existence of such an event. Curiously, this is not entirely true.

The earliest record of this supposedly original Georgian Schism story is not attested in the Georgian corpus but in an Armenian chronicle, and belongs to Uxtanēs of Sebasteia. In order to draw a full and 'objective' picture of the events and to collect the Georgian versions of what had happened, Uxtanēs travelled to Georgia and searched in the archives of Tbilisi for documents that could have shed additional light on the story. Regrettably, he could not find much there except for two letters exchanged between the Armenian Katholikoi Abraham and Movsēs and the Georgian Katholikos Kyrion. Otherwise, Georgian archives preserved no record of these events. Despite the rather unsuccessful quest, Uxtanēs succeeded in recording an oral story:

> This Peter was ordained a bishop and was assigned as the chancellor Bishop in residence during the pontificate of Katholikos Abraham of Armenia. He was a subtle, eloquent, fluent and skilful scholar. Following his letters, Abraham sent this man to Kyrion, accompanied with a number of *azatk'* [noblemen]. As this was Peter's second visit, the princes of Georgia threatened him and said: "Do not go back and forth to talk to us about the subject of our belief, otherwise you will be killed by our hand. Why are you attacking us like a wolf, coming to us with a written message in your hand?" The inhabitants of the country of Georgia still brag about these words, having learned them by way of oral tradition from father to son, that "our princes killed your Wolf Peter on the mountain which is called Kangark'."[17]

Thus, Uxtanēs recorded a curious piece of popular memory in Georgia, a tradition which was apparently still extant in the eighteenth century, as Georgian historian Vaxušt'i Bagrat'ioni (1696–1757) has also heard about it.[18] However, essentially this story had nothing to do with the Schism. The legend had it that the Georgians, guided by their katholikos (archbishop), stoned to death a certain Peter, who, as the Georgians had claimed, was the famous Antiochene Patriarch Peter the Fuller (471–488).[19] Naturally, the Georgian legend could not have had

---

15 Mxit'ar Vardapet Goš, "Թուղթ առ Վրացիսն՝ յաղագս ուղղափառութեան հաւատոյ" (Letter to the Georgians on the Orthodoxy of Faith), *Ganjasar* 6 (1996): 340–402, at 351–2. Anania Vardapet Sanahinec'i, "Վասն բաժանման Վրաց" (On the Separation of the Georgians), in ჩრდილო მხარეთა სომეხთა მოძღვარნი (The Teachers of Northern Armenia), ed. Leon Melikset-Beg (Tbilisi, 1928), 112–20, at 112, repeats the story almost verbatim.

16 Ukhtanes, *History of the Severance*, 118–23.

17 Ibid., 102–3.

18 Vaxušt'i Bat'onišvili, აღწერა სამეფოსა საქართველოსა (Description of the Kingdom of Georgia), in *Kartlis Cxovreba* IV, ed. S. Kaukhcishvili (Tbilisi: Saxelgami, 1973), 1–894, at 101 n. 1.

19 On Peter and his innovation, see Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, vol. 2/3: *Die Kirche von Antiochien und Jerusalem mit Armenien, Georgien und Persien im 6. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Herder, 2002), 295–303.

anything in common with the Schism, as the events described were seemingly from the fifth century and not the seventh. Aware of this contradiction, Uxtanēs rationalized the story and deduced that the Georgians were in all appearance confused and the person stoned to death was in reality Bishop Peter, the envoy of Katholikos Movsēs to Kyrion, who is relatively well known from the *Book of Letters* and whose own letters have also survived.[20] Uxtanēs further reflects:

> But we do not know the story the way they [Georgians] say it. The Greeks in fact call Peter of Antioch a Wolf, the one who ran away from the wicked Council of Chalcedon. Some, therefore, say that the two are the same person, because these people do not know the first [Peter] and others do not know this one. While Peter [of Antioch] lived in the days of the impious Marcian, this [Peter] lived during the Emperor Maurice's [reign]. They simply assume senselessly and say that they were the same, because from Marcian to Maurice have elapsed 150 years.[21]

Moreover, the name of the chief murderer was also absent in the story as heard by Uxtanēs, and the deduction that this must have been Kyrion belongs solely to this Armenian editor. Therefore, by adopting the Georgian anecdote and integrating it into the Schism narrative, Uxtanēs invented Bishop Peter as a symbol of mediation between the Georgians and Armenians. Allegedly murdered by the Georgians, Peter became a virtual martyr for a noble cause, and this despite the fact that the original letters and the entire *Book of Letters* mention nothing about this event.[22] At it seems, this is the very first introduction of the account of a certain Peter's stoning by the Georgians in Armenian literature, otherwise Uxtanēs would have mentioned any Armenian versions of the story. This is also where Mxit'ar's account takes its origin, that is to say, with the Uxtanēsian rationalization of a Georgian oral narrative. Since Uxtanēs, Armenian authors eagerly blamed the Georgians for defiance and homicide, and the murder at Mt. Kangar became a part of common knowledge and lore and, most importantly, a symbol of the Georgians' original sin.

Fortunately, Uxtanēs is not the only recorder of this story, and Peter's stoning became a popular motif in the Caucasian region and beyond. The Georgian version that Uxtanēs was referring to, or at least a similar one, is preserved in a tenth century text called *Narrative of Peter the Fuller and Alaǯ*.[23] This version adds a detail revealing the curious ways the story of orthodoxy and heterodoxy was remembered in the Caucasus. Here is a brief summary of the anecdote:

There once lived a very pious and holy patriarch called Peter who resided in Constantinople and during the liturgy both the emperor and empress were at his service. One day, as it was the custom, the empress was present at the service when accidentally her menses started. Miraculously, due to such an unheard impiety, Peter's bowl filled with blood. Shocked, the patriarch cursed the empress and all women. The empress objected that the Holy Mother of God was also a woman and everything natural to women was natural to her as well. To which Peter replied: And Mary too! The empress was outraged and she ordered to take the patriarch out of the Cathedral and cast him away. From that day on, Peter sought vengeance against the entire Christendom and all Churches. Therefore, he went to the land of the Armenians and preached against the Roman faith. There he was received and revered and was even venerated as a saint. As it happens, Peter was performing all kind of magic and ordered the Armenians to fast for five days before the Great Lent, while on Saturday and Sunday to consume eggs and dairy products. As for the bishops and monks, they could eat meat even on the weekdays, for—according to the Apostles—"meat is herb." Thus, Peter misled naive Armenians. Then Peter encountered a dog, trained him in a magical way, and called him Alaǯ. Once, Alaǯ was sent to Kurmux [in Georgia] to a priest's house. The dog was killed at the priest's order and thrown into a ravine. Peter went after Alaǯ but could not find him and therefore instituted a fast to commemorate his dog, a fast that was supposed to be observed from Monday to Friday. This is how the fast of Araǯawork' was instituted.[24]

---

20 *The Book of Letters*, ed. Aleksidze, 38–40.

21 Ukhtanes, *History of the Severance*, 103.

22 Ukhtanes, ისტორია გამოყოფისა ქართველთა სომეხთაგან (History of Separation of the Georgians from the Armenians), ed. and trans. Zaza Aleksidze (Tbilisi: Mecniereba, 1975), 22, 147.

23 For a detailed study of the tradition, see Melikset-Beg, "Грузинский извод сказания о посте Араджавор" (The Georgian Version of the Stories of the Fast of Aradjavor), *Xristianskiy Vostok* 5.2 (1917): 73–111.

24 For discussion on the fast of Araǯawork', see Charles Renoux, "Samuēl Kamǯajorec'i. Le traité sur l'Araǯawor (1ère partie)," in *From Byzantium to Iran. Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoïan*, ed. Jean-Pierre Mahé, Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta, GA: Scholars' Press, 1997), 379–96, at 379–82; Andrew Scharf, "Byzantine Orthodoxy and the 'Preliminary Fast' of the Armenians," in *Byzance: Hommage à André N. Stratos*, vol. 2, ed. Nia A. Stratos (Athens: N. A. Stratou, 1986), 649–72; Thomson, "Constantine and Trdat in Armenian tradition," *ActaOrHung* 50 (1997): 277–89, at 283; Michel van Esbroeck, "Le discours du Catholicos Sahak III

Another short narrative, titled *Story of Sargis, son of Subul* and published together with the former anecdote, provides a slightly different account where the victim is not merely the dog, but Peter himself:

> Then the bold one [Peter the Fuller] arrived in K‘angar and summoned blessed Michael the Katholikos of Kartli, to either join him in faith or, if he resists, to leave his throne … Michael left Mcxeta together with his bishops and priests and common believers and reached the land of K‘angar. There the angel appeared [to Michael] and ordered him and his companions to gather sharp stones from the nearby valley and to hide them in their hats … So Michael came to Peter and honored the office of Peter the Fuller. The latter held his sleeve out for [Michael] to embrace it, as it was the custom. But through the Lord’s order, Michael pulled his sleeve and threw him on the ground and tossed the stones at him that he had hidden in the hat. Thus, the ungodly bold one died and left his deadly illness behind. Then other bishops and companions also stoned him and thus the wolf was slain.[25]

It is in this narrative that the name of the Georgian Katholikos appears for the first time as Michael. The same anecdote is referred to in an eleventh century debate between an Armenian and a Georgian monk at the council of Ghrtila, convened by King Bagrat IV of Georgia (*d*. 1118/20).[26] Here again, the basic accusation against the Armenians is their allegiance to this arch-heretic Peter the Fuller, who was eventually stoned to death by the Georgians. The Georgian monk Ekvtime takes pride in a ‘legitimate’ homicidal violence that the Georgian Katholikos had committed against this Peter, the introducer of all kinds of evil heresies. Here too, the name of the Georgian Katholikos is Michael and not Kyrion, as Uxtanēs suggests.

The Greek version, attributed to a certain Armenian Sahak, narrates a similar story, while trying to explain the origin of the famous Fast of Araǰawork‘, also known as the Fast of the Catechumens, which is also one of the markers of Armenian heterodoxy from the Chalcedonian point of view.[27] In this version, the owner of the dog is not Peter but a certain Sargis (Sergios) and the fast was inaugurated as well by this Sargis as a commemoration of his slain dog. This account was spread in the Byzantine tradition, as well as in the Slavonic and of course in the Georgian milieux.[28]

The story of Sargis has been further preserved in oral narratives still extant in contemporary Caucasus, especially widely spread in ethnically mixed regions and also in traditionally multiethnic and multicultural Tbilisi. If one travels to Georgia in late February, particularly to Tbilisi, one may encounter a grumpy Georgian who is likely to explain their low spirits by the winds of *Su(r)psarkis* that often blow in this part of the Caucasian region in that time of the year. The lady may be rushing home to prepare special pies and to place them on her rooftop. This *Surpsarkis*, the patron of the newlywed and of the lovers, will then fly over the roofs and check that everyone has appropriately honored him with these pies, by meanwhile making sure that the people observe the fast of *Surpsarkis* only a few weeks before the Great Lent, otherwise the consequences will be grave. A tourist who knows basic Armenian might infer that what the Georgian is trying to convey by *Surpsarkis* is the wind of Surb Sargis, that is to say of St. Sergios, a highly venerated saint of the Armenian tradition.[29]

---

en 691,” in *The Council of Trullo Revisited*, ed. George Nedungatt and Michael Featherstone (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1995), 323–454, at 351–2.

[25] Meikset-Beg, *The Georgian Version*, 94–6.

[26] Van Esbroeck argues that the Council of Ghrtila must be a *terminus ante quem* for the creation of the story of Alaǰ, but such a correlation is not necessary. The story was already spread and known in Georgia.

[27] Several anti-Armenian pamphlets, *Orations against the Armenians*, erroneously attributed to a Chalcedonian Katholikos Sahak, who later allegedly became bishop of Nicaea, have survived against the Araǰawork‘, and were also popular in Georgia. According to this pseudo-Isaac, the Armenians did not remember exactly the origins of the fast and had various explanations for it. Some said that it was introduced in the memory of ‘their teacher’ Sargis, while others identify it with the Fast of Nineveh, and connect it to the expulsion of Adam from Eden; however, some others connect it to the conversion of the Armenians by Gregory the Illuminator or even to the baptism of Constantine the Great by Pope Sylvester. On this treatise, see Venance Grumel, “Les invectives contre les Arméniens du Catholicos Isaac,” *REB* 14 (1956): 174–94; Melikset-Bek, “К вопросу о датировке псевдо-исааковых памфлетов в греко-византийской литературе” (Towards the question of the dating of the Pseudo-Sahakian pamphlets), *VizVrem* 8 (1956): 208–22; Thomson, “The defence of Armenian Orthodoxy in Sebeos,” in *Aetos: Studies in Honour of Cyril Mango presented to him on April 14, 1998*, ed. Ihor Ševčenko and Irmgard Hutter (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1998), 329–41, at 337–40; van Esbroeck, “Le discours du Catholicos Sahak,” 323–454; see also *PG* 132, coll. 1197–1204, 1233, 1234.

[28] There is also a Slavonic version preserved in a sixteenth century manuscript that mentions this dog *as Artsevuriy*. See Melikset-Beg, *Narratives*, 80–1.

[29] On the cult of Sargis in the Armenian folk tradition, see Ervand Lalayants, “Սուրբ Սարգիս Տօնի նկարագիր խոսակցութիւնները Ախալքալաքի բարբառով” (Surb Sargis: description of the feast with notes on the Axalkalaki dialect), *HA* 1/12 (1894): 350–3.

If one proceeds south, towards the southern Georgian regions, or towards Armenia in the very same month, one may meet an Armenian peasant who will inhale the wind, look up piously and exclaim: "Surb Sargis is about to suffocate a Georgian," or "Surb Sargis is going to strangle a Horom (a Greek or a Chalcedonian)."[30] One will also observe a certain custom, a fast known in the Armenian tradition as the Fast of *Arajawork* or *Arajaworac*, that is to say the Preliminary Fast. The case of St. Sergios and of the Fast of Araǰawork' deserves a separate treatment but the questions remain, why was the symbol of Armenian anti-Chalcedonianism venerated and feared in the Georgian Chalcedonian tradition? Why is the saint so furious and why does he want to strangle the Georgians and Greeks and all Chalcedonians? The most plausible answer is that, being a fervent defender of the Christian faith, he was not accepted as a legitimate saint in the Greek and Georgian calendar; at least, this could be one of the explanations.

Therefore, the Georgian version 'deviates' from the Byzantine account and the person who owned the dog is Peter and it was Peter who was stoned to death. Apparently Sargis was only later introduced in the narrative and incorporated in the Schism discourse, as Uxtanēs and the earliest Georgian narratives know nothing about this person. However, it is noteworthy that a figure from the fourth century, who lived centuries before the breakout of the polemic, is transposed to an entirely different era. What matters the most is that the Armenian tradition persistently tries to connect the murder with the events of the Schism, by claiming that Katholikos Kyrion was the murderer and Bishop Peter the victim. The Georgian version prefers to see the victim as Patriarch Peter the Fuller and persistently claims that the organizer of the stoning was a certain "blessed Katholikos Michael." But the problem is that no account, chronicle or list of katholikoi mentions a Katholikos Michael either in the sixth or in the seventh centuries.[31] As a result, several questions arise: Which account is closer to the possible state of affairs both chronologically and factually? It is common for medieval literature to antedate the formation of Orthodoxy as much as possible, but is this the case here? That is to say, did medieval Georgians 'intentionally' transform an original late antique story and change the actors in order to antedate the formation of Georgian Orthodoxy to the very origins of the Chalcedonian controversy? If one strips the legend from the problematic details, one shall receive the following schematic narrative framework: violence committed by a certain local (Georgian) high Church hierarch (Michael) against an alien patriarch (Peter) who had arrived from Constantinople. Is it possible to discover an event or series of events in the Armenian or Georgian narrative sources that could have been constructed upon this framework, and what are the historical or quasi-historical events possibly hidden under the layers of oral distortions?

Vaxt'ang the Wolf-Head

It is only reasonable to suppose that the earliest stratum of the Georgian version of the story had nothing to do with either the Schism or the period of the Schism. Instead, it traces back to much earlier events that unfolded in the mid-fifth century, during the reign of Vaxt'ang I Gorgasal (the Wolf-Headed) (*d*. 502), Iberia's semi-legendary king. Vaxt'ang is one of those rare figures of Georgian history that, apart from occupying a central place in historical narratives, hold a comparable place in the oral tradition and in popular Georgian consciousness. Apart from other remarkable deeds, the Georgian tradition accredits him with the unification of the land, foundation of Tbilisi, albeit erroneously, as the new capital of Iberia, introduction of the office of Katholikos and foundation of the autonomous Georgian Church.[32] His ecclesiastical reforms are of particular interest for the present study, as they could possibly explain some of the inconsistencies described above.

According to two Georgian historical narratives, *The Life of Vaxt'ang* and *The Conversion of Georgia*,[33] in the mid-fifth century in Mcxeta, the capital of Iberia, there lived a certain Archbishop Michael who presided over the Iberian Church. This Michael was the last Archbishop of Mcxeta before the introduction of the office of Katholikos. Apart from being known for burning the writings of his predecessor Archbishop Mobidan, there is only one widely known anecdote associated with this Michael: King Vaxt'ang had decided to introduce the office of Katholikos and to thereby gain independence from the Greeks. He arrived in Mcxeta from one of his many campaigns and knelt in front of Michael to receive his blessing. Michael strongly disapproved of the king's plan to reorganize the Church and once the king knelt, he kicked his face and smashed the king's teeth.

---

30 On this legend, see Melikset-Bek, *The Georgian Version*, 109–11; Lalayants, "Surb Sargis."

31 For the list of katholikoi, see Constantine B. Lerner, *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography: The Early Medieval Chronicle The Conversion of K'art'li and The Life of Nino* (London: Bennett and Bloom, 2004), 150.

32 See, for instance, Bernadette Martin-Hisard, "Le roi géorgien Vaxt'ang Gorgasal dans l'histoire et dans la légende," in *Temps, mémoire, tradition au Moyen Âge* (Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1983), 205–42; Rapp, *Studies*, 197–242; van Esbroeck, "Vakhtang Gorgasali et l'évêque Mikael de Mtskheta," in *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium in Kartvelian Studies*, ed. Elguja Khintibidze (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press, 1999), 9–23. Even the Georgian royal flag was for some time known as the *Gorgasliani*.

33 The dating of both of these texts is highly controversial, ranging from the seventh to eleventh centuries.

Vaxt‘ang was appalled by such an unheard behavior and banished the archbishop from Iberia. Once he had ridden himself of the defiant hierarch, Vaxt‘ang sent envoys to Constantinople and requested from the emperor and the patriarch an archbishop-katholikos who would become the first Katholikos of Iberia. The candidate was first sent to Antioch to be anointed there, since, according to the Georgian tradition, the Georgian Church was under the Antiochene jurisdiction. The name of the first Katholikos sent from Constantinople via Antioch was Peter.[34]

Understandably, this short account is a widely studied topic of late antique Georgian history. Michel van Esbroeck, for example, saw residues of actual history in this account and believed that the Peter who was dispatched from Constantinople indeed must have been Peter the Fuller. Because of a glaring absence of any reference to doctrinal controversies and particularly to the Chalcedonian controversies in late antique and medieval Georgian writing, scholars often tried to discover echoes of this original controversy and to explain the antagonism between Vaxt‘ang and Archbishop Michael within a Chalcedonian/non-Chalcedonian context.[35] Ivane Javakhishvili has expressed a view that while Michael was Chalcedonian, Vaxt‘ang was adhering to Zeno’s *Henōtikon*, which was later adopted at the Council of Dwin of 506 by Armenian Katholikos Babgēn.[36] Other scholars, e.g. Zaza Aleksidze, have suggested that, on the contrary, Vaxt‘ang must have been Chalcedonian, whereas Michael non-Chalcedonian.[37]

Unlike other scholars who have treated this subject, I believe that attempts to identify Chalcedonian controversy in fifth century Iberia are anachronistic. It is unlikely that the Chalcedonian concern was so nuanced either in the fifth century Georgia, or even Armenia. It is equally unsustainable that the Council of 506 was convened by Katholikos Babgēn against Chalcedonians or for the purpose of accepting the *Henōtikon*, although Babgēn’s letters are indeed *Henōtikonean* in spirit. Therefore, a quest for specific theological controversies behind this legend is a futile enterprise. Despite this, in the tenth century, the popular memory has preserved the conflict between a certain Peter and a certain Michael indeed as a controversy over the natures of Christ. But this is a tenth century rationalization, when Armenian and Georgian antagonism was particularly ardent, and when centuries of religious history were persistently interpreted as a Chalcedonian controversy, rather than an actual state of affairs in the fifth century. In the fifth century, the immediate concerns were most likely radically different and were connected to the newly-emerging problems of ecclesiastical organization, as hinted by the *Conversion* and the *Life of Vaxt‘ang*. Just as the Armenians saw in this story a reflection of Georgian apostasy and ill nature, so have the Georgians ingrained in the legend the remembrance of their Orthodox history.

There are indeed very obscure moments in late antique Georgian history. In a considerable number of texts, whether historical chronicles or hagiographies of the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries, there are no accounts of any theological controversies. Chalcedonian issues are not referred to and, unlike the Armenian counterpart which likes to see its history as a long path towards the formation of Orthodoxy, the Georgian literature avoids any reference to doctrinal controversies. The information about archbishop Michael’s burning of his predecessor’s writings can be a remnant of existing controversies but not Chalcedonian. The narrative of Mt. Kangar can also be considered as such: a set of dramatic events and of violence was distilled in the popular remembrance as the stoning of a certain Patriarch Peter by an Archbishop Michael.

King Vaxt‘ang Gorgasal is one of the few Georgian kings who became a hero of a series of folk narratives. His reign was indeed perceived as a turning point in the Georgian history and even the remotest highland folklore has preserved the remembrance of his deeds. Therefore, the period of his rule as presented in medieval writing acted as a certain centrifuge that attracted series of disjoint events and developments. The reforms carried out by Vaxt‘ang were far from being a smooth process, which is even palpable in the rather sketchy accounts of Vaxt‘ang’s historian and in the chronicle of the *Conversion of Kartli*. A series of violence that accompanied these reforms and the establishing of closer ties with Constantinople were most probably distilled in this odd narrative of the murder at Mt. Kangar. The internal power struggle was retained in the popular Georgian memory as an act of defence of Orthodoxy from the non-Chalcedonian influx, symbolized in the image of a certain Peter who later became Peter the Fuller. The Armenian historiography, on the other hand, utilized this narrative to adduce extra drama to the seventh century Schism, thus creating an even more terrible image of Katholikos Kyrion. In a similar manner, modern popular remnants of the story, still known and told

---

[34] Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptations of Georgian Chronicles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 213–5. See also van Esbroeck, “Vakhtang Gorgasali”; idem, “Le discours du Catholicos Sahak,” 351–2.

[35] The controversy between Vaxt‘ang and Michael is traditionally seen as a controversy over the Chalcedonian definitions. For an overview of the scholarship, see van Esbroeck, “Vakhtang Gorgasali,” 9–12.

[36] Ivane Javakhishvili, ქართველი ერის ისტორია (The History of the Georgian Nation), vol. 1 (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press, 1979), 377–80.

[37] Aleksidze, “ვახტანგ გორგასალსა და მიქაელ მთავარეპისკოპოსს შორის კონფლიქტის გამო” (The Conflict between Vaxt‘ang Gorgasal and Archbishop Michael), in *Caucasus Christianus*, vol. 1: *Collected Works of Zaza Aleksidze*, ed. Dali Chitunashvili (Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2010), 190–8.

both in Armenia and Georgia, dismiss issues of Church hierarchy or theology and, as it happens, like to see a mere love affair in the entire history.

Conclusion

In their attempts to construct the narratives of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the Caucasian region, both medieval Armenians and Georgians applied certain interpretive tools in order to comprehend the formation of their respective nations and cultures, particularly of what later—whether justly or not—would be called Armenian Orthodoxy. While a quest for liminality and for a transitional event is an essential component of medieval historical thinking, both Armenians and Georgians have constructed such liminal and watershed events in their historical writing, which has also left their traces in oral accounts. The story of a certain man stoned to death at Mt. Kangar is a crossroad of sorts encapsulating very different narratives of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The story of Peter's stoning is a crossroad of two quasi-national narratives: Armenian and Georgian. These narratives are still persistent in contemporary Caucasian lore, albeit in forms that are hardly recognizable. In addition, the legend was also intertwined with the hostile Byzantine and Slavonic perception of the Armenian 'heretics.' In the Armenian discourse, the Schism bore a central interpretive function, a concept that was 'forged' by Bishop Uxtanēs and his contemporaries and reinvented and adapted multiple times in later Middle Ages. As an interpretive prism, the Schism was deemed to explain the cataclysmal developments in the Caucasus and was a lens through which the Armenians perceived their northern neighbors. Conversely, the Georgian memory did not preserve this Schism as of any particular relevance and no chronicles of the period refer to or reveal knowledge of this event, apart from the mentioned treatise by Arseni Sapareli that resorts to the Armenian sources. During the intensive medieval polemics, when antagonizing narratives clashed and intersected, the story of a stoned Peter was created in Armeno-Georgian discourse as a symbol of this scandalous period. Both Georgian and Armenian narratives included this story in their grand 'national' narrative. The Armenians were telling a seventh century story of the murder of their envoy Peter, which encapsulated in itself the alleged Georgian treachery. Meanwhile, in the Georgian account the very same anecdote echoed events that seemingly occurred in the distant past during the reign of King Vaxt'ang the Wolf-Head. While contrary to the Armenian tradition, the seventh century Schism was not perceived as a liminal event, the fifth century was indeed perceived as such and all pivotal events of Georgian imagined history was merged into the dramatic period of the rule of Vaxt'ang the Wolf-Head.