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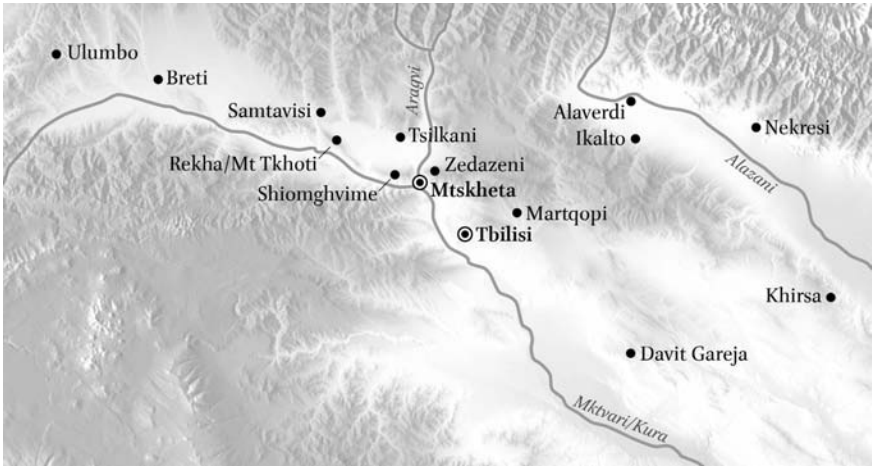
Syrians, Assyrians, Orthodox, Chalcedonians and Monophysites or Non-Chalcedonians: The Problems of Identifying the Thirteen Fathers

Syrian or Assyrian? The Difficulty of Precise Definition

In May 2013 at Bodbe, at the convent that houses the tomb of St. Nino, the legendary evangelist of Georgia, I bought a modern icon of the Thirteen Fathers that is labelled in Georgian characters *Asureli Mamebi*, which in English is translated as the Assyrian Fathers rather than the Syrian Fathers. Throughout Georgia there are references to these somewhat enigmatic figures in churches, historical and literary sources and in popular culture. The Thirteen Fathers who came to the country in the sixth century are credited with bringing Christian monasticism and consolidating the process of Christianization begun by St. Nino in the fourth century. Each of these figures is associated with a particular location (Map 2), and in some cases more than one place, in the ancient kingdom of Kartli.¹ Known in antiquity as Iberia by the Romans, Kartli was the name chosen by its inhabitants for the region that now makes up central and eastern Georgia. It is notable that none of these Fathers has been linked with a site in Colchis, Egrisi or Lazica, the ancient names for contemporary Western Georgia, which also includes Abkhazia, and which was more firmly under Byzantine influence than the eastern regions of the country that is now known as Georgia by foreigners.²

Despite their pivotal role in Georgian national consciousness, concrete facts about these figures are extremely difficult to establish and they remain for the most part shadowy characters shrouded in legend rather than clearly demonstrable historical figures. To begin with perhaps the most obvious point, we have the question of their origins; they are referred to almost interchangeably

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- 1 For further information and visual illustration of the spread of these sites please refer to the website that accompanies this research <http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk>. Choose the 'map' tag and then in the drop-down menu apply the filter that highlights the sites associated with these figures.
 - 2 'Georgia' is derived from 'Gurji' which was the appellation for the people of the region in various languages including Persian, Arabic and Turkish. Georgians refer to their country as 'Sakartvelo' or 'Land of the Karts'.



MAP 2 The Locations associated with the Thirteen (As) Syrian Fathers in Georgia today

as the ‘Syrian’ or ‘Assyrian Fathers’ but there has been little systematic attempt to discuss what either of these nationalities meant to the people of late antique Kartli or indeed how these ethnicities are defined by contemporary Georgian scholars.

Doctrinal Identity and Contemporary Usage of the Terms ‘Syrian’ and ‘Assyrian’

If there is little consensus as to the ethnic origin of these figures, then there is even more confusion as to which doctrinal beliefs they may have held. Whereas most scholarship has traditionally taken the break between the Armenian and Georgian Catholicoi in the first decade of the seventh century as an indication that the Georgians followed the anti-Chalcedonian doctrine favoured by the Armenians until this point, this assumption has now been questioned by the work of scholars such as Tamila Mgaloblishvili. Mgaloblishvili has convincingly demonstrated that a significant proportion of the Georgian clergy accepted the *Henoticon* of the Emperor Zeno (r. 474–475, 476–491) thereby incurring the wrath of both sides of the Chalcedonian debate.³ In fact her suggestion

3 p. 20, Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, ‘Georgia in the Times of St. Maximus the Confessor’, in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Khoperia, Lela (eds.), *Maximus the Confessor and Georgia*, Bennett and Bloom; London, 2009, pp. 17–24.

that there were people of both sides of the Chalcedonian divide present in Kartli in the fifth and sixth centuries and that this division was obscured by Vakhtang Gorgasali's willingness to uphold the *Henoticon*⁴ mirrors the work done by Volker Menze on the emergence of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the sixth century. Menze claims that Zeno's compromise was in effect the sticking plaster that delayed the decisive final split between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian clergy throughout the Patriarchate of Antioch.⁵

Returning to the situation in Georgia,⁶ if Georgian ecclesiastical society was prepared, at least in some quarters, to accept the *Henoticon* then this suggests that there was a measure of disunity amongst the doctrinal beliefs held by Georgian Christians of this period and they were neither as staunchly miaphysite as many historians have previously inferred from their closeness to the Armenian Church, but nor were they as (Chalcedonian) Orthodox as many Eastern Orthodox historians have sought to assert. This suggestion that Georgia had a patchwork of confessional identities across the country is, in retrospect, a far more feasible suggestion than that Georgian Christianity took a single, mono-confessional and culturally cohesive form from its very inception. However this is a view that is strongly disputed by Georgian Orthodox historians within the country today, who maintain that the country has had an unbroken line of Eastern Orthodox obedience to the Patriarchs of Antioch and Constantinople and who fiercely refute the more nuanced statements of scholars like Mgaloblishvili.⁷

Exploring the question of the origins of these Thirteen Fathers may elucidate some answers, or at least allow the development of a series of plausible hypotheses, relating to this posited diversity. The obvious place to start is with the stories that have grown up around these figures and this brings us back, once again, to the question of their collective name. The terms 'Syrian' and 'Assyrian' are fraught with loaded meanings in Oriental Christian society today⁸

4 Mgaloblishvili, pers. comm.

5 p. 57, Menze, Volker L., *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2008.

6 When referring to 'Georgia' in a late antique context this means *both* Lazica and Kartli. When referring to a movement that only affected the east or west of the country I shall use the names Lazica (West) and Kartli (East) to reflect the fact that these regions were two separate political entities throughout the period referred to in this monograph.

7 See for example Matitashvili, Shota, 'Kartuli bermonazvnoba VI–VIII saukuneebshi: Sireli Mamebi', *Sami Saunje* 2 (2012), pp. 216–230 for a recent survey article considering the arguments as to the origins and doctrinal beliefs of these figures and why, on balance, they appear to have been diophysites.

8 Oriental Christian in this context refers to the Oriental Orthodox Church family. This includes

and have become divorced from their older, simpler significance as words simply denoting a group of people from a particular region. Whilst the Assyrian Empire covered the majority of the Middle East at its height and lasted for around 1,500 years, by the Roman period 'Syrian' and 'Assyrian' had come to mean the inhabitants of two clearly delineated regions; Syrians were people from the Roman province of Syria that encompassed a region including modern Syria, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine, as well as land that is now part of contemporary Jordan and Turkey. Assyrians were associated with Mesopotamia, meaning both the Roman province of this name and a wider section of parts of Turkey, Syria and Iraq as well.

In late antiquity the people of Osrhoene, the Roman province of that name having become a kingdom centred on Edessa (now Şanlıurfa in south eastern Turkey), fell between the 'Syrians' and 'Assyrians' as their province/kingdom was to the north of the Roman provinces of Syria and Mesopotamia. Osrhoene encompassed the upper reaches of the River Euphrates and was the epicentre of a notable indigenous cultural and literary heritage. It is unclear when Old Syriac became the dominant language of the region, and there are only around 100 inscriptions in this language yet discovered.⁹ The earliest of these to be clearly dated was written in 6 CE and was discovered at Birecik on the Turkish Euphrates.¹⁰ Old Syriac is the name applied to the Aramaic dialect in use around Edessa and which reached maturity as the literary language of Aramaic-speaking Christians from the second century CE onwards.¹¹ Whereas initially the language covered a narrow area and was found only east of the Euphrates, by the fourth century it had spread further west than the river and by the sixth century it was extremely well established in northern Syria.¹²

As Syriac evolved and spread, as with other languages, variations occurred. In this case the issue that most concerns the current discussion is the fact that

the miaphysite, non-Chalcedonian Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches. They are called the Oriental Orthodox Church family to distinguish them from the Eastern Orthodox Churches who follow a Chalcedonian doctrine. Therefore the word Oriental is used in a specific technical sense and is in no way intended to be a pejorative term.

9 p. 289, Brock, Sebastian, 'Edessene Syriac inscriptions in late antique Syria', in Cotton, Hannah M., Hoyland, Robert G., Price, Jonathan J. & Wasserstein, David J. (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 2009, pp. 289–303.

10 Ibid.

11 p. 290, op. cit.

12 p. 291, op. cit.

after the Council of Ephesus in 431 those who maintained that the Virgin was the *Christotokos* rather than the *Theotokos* had been so roundly condemned and persecuted that many fled eastwards towards the Sassanian Empire. Here they were largely tolerated because, although Christian, they were no lovers of the Imperial court in Constantinople. It was this group who became derogatively known by their enemies as the Nestorian Church and who are today the Church of the East (who self-identify as Assyrian Christians).

From 410 onwards the leader of the church in Sassanian lands had been seated in the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon and in the aftermath of the Council of Ephesus this became the centre for what eventually became the Church of the East. As time passed geographical and political distance between the Syriac-speakers in the Sassanian Empire and those who lived to the west in the Byzantine Empire meant that the language evolved along slightly differing paths and Syriac split into Eastern and Western dialects that, although not mutually unintelligible developed differing schools of script and diacritical notations as well as variant words and accents.

Georgian Understanding of the Word 'Arameuli' (Aramaic)

Naturally this is all basic information to scholars of Syriac and Oriental Christianity and the literature in the field is clear in explaining the differences between the different Syriac-speaking theological positions, but when trying to explore these doctrinal schisms through the lens of Georgian theological and historical writings the task becomes considerably more difficult. In writing about Georgian attitudes to the Sassanian Empire, Rapp points out that:

The geographical scope of late antique and early medieval Georgian texts tends to be heavily restricted, even within the Caucasian arena. Not surprisingly, early Georgian hagiographical literature offers limited and vague toponymical data for Iran. The *vitae* ... make indistinct references to the Iranian seat of government, though neither specifies its name or location.¹³

If the ancient Georgian sources are this indistinct when writing of an empire that ruled their territories for long periods of time it should come as no sur-

13 Rapp Jr, Stephen H., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature*, Ashgate; Farnham, 2014, pp. 94–95.

prise to us that they are even vaguer when making reference to peoples who are even further away and who had even less direct impact on their culture. However if this lack of knowledge about the geography, history and religious movements of Syria is understandable with regard to the chroniclers of early medieval Georgia, what is puzzling (and in many ways deeply disturbing) is the fact that this ignorance persists in much of the historical discourse of Georgian scholars even to the present day. The following excerpt is typical of contemporary Georgian terminology when discussing the (As)Syrian Fathers:

Against this sort of historiographical “harmony”, Iv. Javakhishvili introduced a note of dissension. Although he distrusts the descriptions of the Assyrian Fathers’ *lives*, he accepts the Georgian ecclesiastical tradition concerning the first desert Assyrian monks living in the wilderness in Georgia as well as Armenia and sees Assyria as the source for these hermitages (the Armenian evidence for monasticism is the word “Abegha/Abela” which the scientist explained “was an Assyrian word that initially meant “sorrow” but later was used for monks or nuns”).¹⁴

Whilst the Syriac word *abilā* meaning ‘mourner’ was used in the Syrian tradition to denote monks and nuns, the terminology ‘Assyrian’ is incorrect when discussing the language used. Assyrian refers to the ancient Akkadian language or the contemporary Neo-Aramaic language used by Christians in Iraq and Iran and their communities in the worldwide diaspora. This term is not used for a language that existed in the sixth century. Unfortunately Georgians often use the term ‘Assyrian’ to describe the language of these legendary visitors or employs the term *Arameuli* meaning Aramaic. Whilst technically correct as Syriac is an Aramaic dialect, in this case it is not the correct name for the language presumably spoken by these holy figures. The Christians of Syria and

14 საკითხის მიმართ თავისებურ ისტორიოგრაფიულ „პარმონიაწი, ერთგვარი დისონანსი თავის დროზე ივ. ჯავახიშვილმა შემიტანა. იმისდა მიუხედავად, რომ იგი უნდობლად ეკიდება ასურელ მამათა ცხოვრებათა აღწერილობებს, თითქოსდა ეთანხმება საეკლესიო გადმოცემას საქათველოში პირველ მეუღაბნოებად ასურელი ბერების წარმოჩენის შესახებ და საქართველოში, ისევე როგორც სომხეთში, მეუღაბნოეობის გარცელების წყაროდ ასურეთს ვარაუდობს (ამის დასტურად ესახება მონაზონის სომხური მნიშვნელობა „აბელა,“აბელა“, რაც, მეცნიერისავე განმარტებით, „ასურული სიტყვაა და თავდაპირველად აღნიშნავდა „მწუხარეს“, ხოლო შემდეგ მონაზონს ეძახდნენ). Merkviladze, Davit, ‘Asureli mamebi da samonastro organizatsia sakartveloshi’, *Amirani* XVI (2006), pp. 55–75, p. 59 (translation by the author).

Mesopotamia spoke Syriac, which as explained above, was a distinct Aramaic dialect that evolved in Christian Edessa before spreading with the influence of the Christian school based in that city both to the south into northern and central Syria and the east into Mesopotamia. Whilst this insistence on correct linguistic terminology has been greeted in some quarters with protestations that it is mere pedantry¹⁵ it is symptomatic of a more serious problem; namely the failure to clearly conceive of 'Syria' and 'Assyria' as two distinct territorial entities and as subtly different cultures in the period under discussion.

On exploring the Georgian language sources on the subject it was disconcerting for a reader coming from a background of Syriac Studies to encounter the 'Syrian Fathers' (*Sirieli Mamebi*) and the 'Assyrian Fathers' (*Asirieli Mamebi*) being invoked in an arbitrarily interchangeable manner even in the work of highly regarded Soviet-era scholars such as Korneli Kekelidze.¹⁶ It is common for articles on the subject to change from one term to the other without any rhyme or reason and, when this fact was pointed out to a variety of academic friends,¹⁷ there was general bewilderment that this presented any sort of problem. In fact more than once the response was 'Syria, Assyria—what does it matter? It is the same place!' Attempts to clarify that this was not in fact the case were floundering until this argument was countered with a Caucasian comparative;¹⁸ if those who do not know the Caucasus well used the words 'Georgian' and 'Armenian' without a clear distinction how would Georgians and Armenians feel about this? Obviously this encounters a strong response and it is only necessary to say that eliding Syria and Assyria is like suggesting today that Syria and Iraq are all one country.

15 The author attended public lectures at both Tbilisi State University and the Chubinashvili Institute of Art in 2013 where overseas scholars gave presentations that referred to the Syriac language. In both cases there were complications when 'Syriac' was translated as *Aramaewuli* and there was a widespread perception that the two meant the same thing. On both occasions the only scholars who clearly understood the confusion were lecturers in Semitic languages but their attempts to clarify the relationship of Syriac to Aramaic largely fell on deaf ears after being dismissed as philological pedantry.

16 See for example Kekelidze, Korneli, 'Sakitkhi sirieli moghvatseta kartulshi moslvis she-sakheb', *Tplisis universitetis moambe* 6 (1925), pp. 82–107.

17 These scholars included Art Historians, Ecclesiastical Historians and curatorial staff at the National Museum.

18 For which the author must thank her husband—when she overheard him explaining to a librarian friend just why his wife was getting so frustrated and saw how indignant the reaction was to his analogy, she stole it and has used it to clarify her point ever since ...

An Argument from Silence? The Evidence (or Not) for Iberians in Syriac Sources

Nevertheless, the situation remains that this imprecise terminology leaves scholars with a mountain to climb if they wish to parse Georgian scholarship for information on the (As)Syrian Fathers. It is of course clear that any research into this area must seriously engage with the Georgian literature, not least because there is practically no mention of Georgians, identified in the late antique sources as Iberians, in the Syriac literature at all. There is also absolutely no Syriac or Arabic literary tradition relating to a group of (As)Syrian monks travelling northwards, which is perhaps in some ways to be expected if they headed north and never returned to their native land(s), but it is still surprising that there is no mention of such figures in any other linguistic tradition as echoes of stories from Kartli have appeared in a number of other ancient texts. For example Rufinus' *Ecclesiastical History* makes reference to the conversion of Iberia by an unnamed 'captive woman'¹⁹ well before the *Life of Nino* was written about the illuminatrice of Georgia. This offers us an earlier reference from outside the Georgian literary world to support the claim that the country was evangelised by a woman in the fourth century. Given that these events in Iberia were written by Rufinus at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries, and the fact that there is a substantial amount of near contemporary literary evidence on the life and mission of Peter the Iberian (c. 417–491 CE) from his early life as an Iberian noble via his experiences as a hostage at the court of Constantinople, through to his Christian ministry in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine, we do have early testimonies of Iberian holy men extant in Syriac and Greek sources.²⁰ In addition Procopius mentions a number of events in the Caucasus in his accounts of the sixth century Persian Wars and the cumulative effect of these sources makes it clear that Kartli was not viewed entirely as *terra incognita* by outsiders and this makes the literary silence on the subject of a group of outstanding ascetics arriving in the country to found monasteries even more puzzling. One might expect to find some echoes of their arrival

19 pp. 20–22, Rufinus of Aquileia, Trans. Amidon, Philip R., s.J., *The Church History of Rufinus of Aquileia, Books 10 and 11*, Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1997.

20 For more on Peter the Iberian see John Rufus, Trans. & Ed. Horn, Cornelia B. & Phenix Jr, Robert R., *The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem and the Monk Romanus*, Society of Biblical Literature; Atlanta, 2008 and Cornelia B. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian*, Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2006.

reflected in the literary traditions of neighbouring Christian cultures, but on this they are silent.

Without collaborative sources available in other traditions the researcher is faced with the sole literary evidence referring to these monks originating in Georgian hagiographical literature. These texts were written down several centuries after the events they purport to record and mystifyingly, a number of the names of these figures are clearly of non-(As)Syrian origin—in fact nobody has yet studied the etymology of some of the more unusual names at all.²¹ In this case it seems prudent to widen the means of enquiry to an interdisciplinary exploration of the issue in order to ascertain whether or not there is evidence in the archaeological and architectural record of substantial (As)Syrian influence not only on the locations associated directly with these ‘Thirteen Fathers’ but also at the various early churches that have been described by Georgian art historians as being influenced by the art and architecture of northern Syria.

Practical Factors That Have Hindered the Comparative Study of Late Antique Syria and Georgia

Whilst there have been discussions of this in the past, for much of the twentieth century Georgian scholars working on ecclesiastical architecture were prevented from travelling to Syria and the surrounding countries by the Soviet Iron Curtain. Since the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991 no Georgian scholar has undertaken fieldwork in the region probably largely as a result of the financial hardships and funding shortages caused first by the civil war of the early 1990s and since then by a chronic under-investment by successive governments in the Georgian University and Museum network—perhaps understandable in light of the severe economic pressures on the state, but nevertheless a severe impediment to Georgian scholarship. This means that contemporary art historians largely rely on the judgements of Giorgi Chubinashvili (1885–1973) who is regarded as the founding father of Georgian art history. Although his work on Georgian art and architecture remains in many ways unsurpassed, living as he did in the Soviet Union, he never visited Syria and so had to rely on floorplans and photographs of well-known monuments as the basis for his argument and this has led to a number of mistakes in his interpretations.²²

21 For more on this see chapter 7.

22 For more on this see chapters 2 and 6.

Conversely on the other side, similar issues have affected the study of the past in Syria. As was alluded to earlier in this volume²³ there has also been an institutional weakness in the study of the past in Syria—in this case caused by a privileging of applied and practical sciences over those disciplines seen not to yield immediate tangible societal benefits. In addition a general lack of funding has hampered the ability of scholars to access expensive foreign-published monographs and journals and opportunities for travel have been limited by the relative political isolation Syria experienced through most of the reign of Hafez al-Assad.²⁴ However, unlike in Georgia, where academic interaction was limited to relationships with other Soviet countries, during the second half of the twentieth century Syria stood at an anomalous point in which lines of communication remained open with the country's former colonial ruler, France, as well as having a tradition of sending some students to Russia to further their studies. As the country began to open up towards the end of Hafez al-Assad's reign and this process accelerated after Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000, more scholarships were offered to a wider range of countries so that Syrian students could travel to the west as well as to Russia and Iran and other traditional ally states.²⁵ This meant that Syrian scholars were exposed to a wider spectrum of academic approaches and also that there was more linguistic diversity amongst the languages employed by institutions such as the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) who officially function in Arabic and French but who also have staff fluent in English, Italian, Spanish and German having worked alongside a wide variety of international colleagues over a period of many years.

One problem for anyone engaged with the historical aspects of Syrian studies is related to the situation discussed above; where are the boundaries of Syria? Are we talking about the modern country that bears that name or are we referring to some greater historical entity? If we are referring to a past conception of Syria do we mean the Roman Province mentioned above, the great medieval entity known as the *Bilad al-Sham* or are we thinking about the area known as Syria under Ottoman overlords? The answer of course depends on the period of time being examined, but these shifting territorial boundaries can appear complex and opaque to non-specialists and perhaps this is particu-

23 See the preface to this volume.

24 See Philips, Christopher, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press; New Haven & London, 2016 for a discussion of Syria's interactions with the rest of the world both before and during the civil war.

25 Based on personal communications with a variety of colleagues and friends.

larly the case if this situation is alien to the culture of someone seeking to make sense of these boundaries.

Georgia has a clearly defined sense of geographical territory both past and present with the current borders of the country (if we accept for the moment that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are Georgian) roughly encompassing all Georgian historical territories with the notable exceptions of the ancient provinces of Tao and Klarjeti, that are now in eastern Turkey. Whilst it is relatively easy to understand the territorial boundaries of Georgia as both an historical and as a contemporary sovereign state, with Syria we are dealing with a situation where the current state is the rump of a series of larger historical entities. Perhaps for this reason, there has been a more outward-facing attitude of Syrian scholars and a widespread acknowledgement that their work has needed to address the wider contextual issues that have shaped the Levant as a region. Particularly among prehistorians, there has been an understanding that the cultures of the Fertile Crescent best make sense when looked at in their entirety, an approach that takes little note of the false distinctions imposed by modern territorial boundaries. On the other hand it is perhaps because of the relatively unchanging nature of the territories making up the modern country of Georgia that makes it difficult for some scholars there to comprehend the fluidity of labels such as 'Syrian' or 'Assyrian' one and a half thousand years ago when Georgia, *Sakartvelo*, has not changed its territorial integrity in such a dramatic way in the intervening period.

Ethnicity is another point of departure between the two societies. The Syrian civil war has thrown into sharp relief the mosaic of minority religions and ethnicities across the modern state of Syria with Kurds, Turkmen, Armenians and Syrian Orthodox Christians who have migrated south from territories today in Turkey over the course of the twentieth century all co-existing alongside the majority Arab population which is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, but also includes various Shi'a groups and Arab Christians. In Syria these various groups, with the possible exception of the Kurds, had until the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 almost unanimously self-identified first and foremost as Syrians, with issues of faith and ethnicity coming second to this sense of Syrian identity.²⁶

26 One apparently spontaneous manifestation of this Syrian nationalism witnessed by the author was the shouting of nationalist and pro-government slogans in *al-Abbasīyin* stadium, Damascus, on May 7th 2001 ahead of a Pontifical Mass conducted by Pope John Paul II. The mixing of pro-Syrian and pro-Papal chants ahead of the appearance of the Pontiff appeared unplanned and was participated in enthusiastically. Asked why this was happening, many present replied that they were grateful to live in Syria where Christians could worship so freely and have their religious leaders treated with such respect—unlike

However whereas Syrian society is made up of different groups and its modern history has to some extent been shaped by the fact that the *Ba'ath* party under the Assad family (from 1971 onwards) has depended on concentrating power in minority hands to control a Sunni Muslim majority, in Georgia the situation is sharply different.

Language and National Identity: The Literary Languages of Sakartvelo before the Advent of a Georgian Alphabet

The Georgian name for their country *Sakartvelo* means 'Land of the Karts' and the territory of the modern state coincides, with the exception of Laz speakers in eastern Turkey, with the area where Kartvelian (sometimes called South Caucasian) languages are spoken.²⁷ The linguistic isolation of the Kartvelians and the fact that their languages do not appear to closely relate to other linguistic family trees is a factor that has helped foster a strong sense of national identity, in a way that an Arabic-speaking or English-speaking society would find difficult to understand.²⁸ However the linguistic picture becomes clearer in the period under discussion with the advent of the Georgian alphabet at some point in the fifth century CE.²⁹ The new script was closely identified with

many other countries in the wider Middle East. Because of the apparent deference shown to Christian leaders by the regime, many Syrian Christians invested more heavily in the concept of a strong Syrian national identity of a secular state with all religions (with the notable exception of Judaism) protected by the *Ba'ath* party. See Christopher Philips, *The Battle for Syria*, pp. 51 ff. on the concept of 'buy ins' and how they can be used to create a situation where groups are encouraged to invest heavily in society and create a strong nationalist, political identity that binds disparate groups to a regime.

27 The Kartvelian language family includes Georgian, Laz, Mingrelian and Svan.

28 The complexities of linguistic theory concerning proto-Kartvelian are extremely difficult for a non-linguist such as the author to understand, but perhaps unsurprisingly there is much speculation as to how Proto-Kartvelian and Indo-European languages relate to each other (if indeed there is a relationship). Of particular interest for this work is the fact that so far there has been no widely accepted agreement between archaeologists and linguists as to how the early linguistic and archaeological cultures in the South Caucasus and the territories south of it related to each other. This disparity between archaeology and linguistics is touched upon by Hayward in her review of the work of Gamkrelidze and Ivanov. See p. 76, Hayward, K.M., 'The Indo-European Language and the History of its Speakers: The Theories of Gamkrelidze and Ivanov', *Lingua* 78 (1989), pp. 37–86.

29 The first securely dated inscriptions in Georgian were discovered at Bir el Qutt between

the relatively recent adoption of the Christian faith in Kartli and it appears to have spread rapidly within Kartvelian territory. The first literary text in this new written form of the language is widely accepted as the *Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik*³⁰ that was composed at some point in the fifth century.

Naturally this raises the question as to what scripts were utilised in Kartvelian-speaking lands before the fifth century and the answer lies to a large extent with the dominant neighbouring cultures that bordered the South Caucasus region. In the west it is perhaps unsurprising that Greek inscriptions dominated, given the presence of Greek colonies along the coast of the Black Sea. This interaction occurred over many centuries and the growth of studies exploring the concept of the 'other' in antiquity³¹ have also begun to explore the wider implications of two-way cultural transmissions in the last few years. The study of networks has become more widespread and network theory has been increasingly employed by scholars in various fields of the humanities rather than being seen solely the preserve of information scientists and related fields.³² An understanding that an increased knowledge of neighbouring societies may help inform our interpretation of Classical culture has encouraged scholars to re-examine familiar material with new eyes—a case in point being the work of Mayor, Colarruso and Saunders who persuasively argue that the 'gibberish' painted on Athenian vases can, in a number of cases, be associated with a variety of Caucasian languages crudely transliterated into Greek by artisans seeking to add an 'exotic' element to their work.³³

Bethlehem and Jerusalem in 1952. Two inscriptions excavated there are dated 430 CE and a third is dated 432 CE. These remain the earliest securely dated texts in the Georgian alphabet. Within the territory of Georgia itself the earliest securely dated inscription is from the church of Bolnisi Sioni, in Kvemo Kartli in the south of the country. The Bolnisi inscription dates to 494 CE.

- 30 p. 42, Rayfield, Donald, *The Literature of Georgia. A History*, Curzon Caucasus World, Curzon Press (2nd Ed.); Richmond, 2000.
- 31 See for example Gruen, Erich S., *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*, Princeton University Press; Princeton N.J., 2011.
- 32 A relatively recent example in late antique studies is the work of Adam Schor. See Schor, Adam M., 'Theodoret on the "School of Antioch": A Network Approach', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15:4 (2007), pp. 517–562 and his book *Theodoret's People. Social Networks and Religious Conflicts in Late Roman Syria*, University of California Press; Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 2011.
- 33 Mayor, Adrienne, Colaruso, John & Saunders, David, 'Making Sense of Nonsense Inscriptions Associated with Amazons and Scythians on Athenian Vases', *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 83:3 (2014), pp. 447–493.

If the primacy of Greek was well established in Lazica/Egrisi then the same cannot be said to have been the case further east in Kartli.³⁴ Some Greek inscriptions have been found in Kartli, but they are often recorded in a bilingual context alongside Aramaic or Armazian texts. Early literary culture in east Georgia (Kartli) is believed by linguists to have been conducted in “Official or State Aramaic”³⁵ but this supposition rests only on two third—to second-century BCE fragmentary inscriptions discovered at Uplistsikhe on the basis that the Aramaic orthography is seen to differ from the later ‘Armazian’ script.³⁶ ‘Armazian’ is named for the district of Mskheta, the ancient Georgian capital, in which this script was first discovered and is taken as being the written language of Kartli from the first century BCE until the fourth century CE, after which it was supplanted by the new alphabet formulated especially to express the Georgian language in a written form.

As will be clear from the preceding paragraph, before the development of the Georgian alphabet, in Kartli official documents appear to have been recorded in a form of Aramaic often on its own, but sometimes in conjunction with a parallel or paraphrased Greek version of the text. However given the relative paucity of material discovered thus far, it is unclear how far this written form of

34 The discussion that follows will adhere to widely accepted archaeological and linguistic interpretations of the development of different scripts in Georgia as a whole, and Kartli in particular. Therefore this work will not be considering the ongoing claims by Vakhtang Licheli that he has discovered a ‘paleo-Kartvelian’ script dating from the seventh century BCE at Grakliani in Shida Kartli. See https://www.academia.edu/20216774/Paleo-Georgian_Kartli_script_of_7th_c_BC (accessed 01.02.2017) for Licheli’s account of his findings. Licheli’s claims are not, at the time of writing, accepted by the wider Georgian archaeological community and are instead viewed as part of a wider nationalist movement to use language to argue for the antiquity of “Georgian Statehood.” See <http://www.georgianjournal.ge/discover-georgia/30010-discoveries-at-grakliani-hill-will-change-history.html> (accessed 01.02.2017) for an interview with Licheli where he advances his hypothesis. This is also tied to a debate concerning the antiquity of Georgian language inscriptions excavated at Nekresi in Kakheti. Despite the publications of Levan Chilashvili arguing that the the Nekresi evidence suggests that the Georgian alphabet was formulated as early as the first century CE, the majority of Georgian archaeologists and linguists (including the excavator of Nekresi, Professor Nodar Bakhtadze) believe these inscriptions to date from within the accepted horizon known for the Georgian script, i.e. they are artefacts of the fifth century CE or later.

35 p. 253, Giorgadze, Grigol, ‘The Armazian Script’ in Furtwängler, A., Gagoshidze, I., Löhr, H. & Ludwig, N. (eds.), *Iberia and Rome: The Excavations of the Palace at Dedoplist Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*, Beier & Beran; Langenweißbach, 2008, pp. 253–255.

36 Ibid.

Aramaic had been permeated by the native Kartvelian language. One small clue to this evolution may come from a series of bone gaming plates discovered at Dedopolis Gora in Shida Kartli. These plates are believed to come from five different sets probably dating from the first century CE³⁷ and Giorgadze observes that in the longest of the Armazian texts inscribed on these objects (also the only one yet deciphered) the sentence begins with a predicate and then proceeds to use the verb ‘to be’ in the infinitive which are both common elements of Georgian, rather than Aramaic, usage.³⁸ Needless to say in the absence of a substantial body of evidence, given the small number of these inscriptions yet discovered and the even smaller proportion that have been deciphered so far, such conclusions can only be tentative but so far the epigraphical data does overwhelmingly point to a predominantly Aramaic literary culture in Kartli before the fifth century CE.

Whereas “State Aramaic” and Armazi scripts are believed by archaeologists and linguists to have been used as the tools of a literate culture in a Kartvelian-speaking society, there is also a certain amount of evidence to suggest that from the first century BCE onwards there were Jewish communities present at Urbnisi and Mtskheta³⁹ who were also writing in Aramaic as well as in Hebrew. Their presence is recorded in the hagiographical literature with both the *Conversion of Kartli* and *Life of St. Nino* making reference to the Jewish residents of these towns and the archaeological record also indicates that their presence continued into the Christian era in both these settlements.⁴⁰

Given the fact that at least some sectors of east Georgian society were familiar with written forms of Aramaic and would also have been aware of Hebrew usage amongst their Jewish neighbours, we cannot argue that Semitic languages and people were unknown in Kartli prior to the advent of Christianity in the country. On the contrary all the evidence gathered so far points to a vibrant Jewish or Judaeo-Christian community who appear to have played at least a supporting role in the evangelisation of Kartli. Bearing this in mind one has to ask why there appears to be such a sudden break in continuity and why this well-documented Semitic strand of Kartvelian society appears to disappear

37 p. 93, Gagoshidze, Iulon, ‘Bone Objects’ in Furtwängler, A. et al, *Iberia and Rome*, pp. 87–115.

38 p. 255, Giorgadze, Grigol, op. cit.

39 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Gagoshidze, Iulon, ‘The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia’, in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila (ed.), *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, Curzon; Richmond, 1998, pp. 39–58.

40 Nikolaishvili, Vakhtang, ‘The Archaeological Context of the Hebrew Inscriptions Discovered in Eastern Georgia’, *Iberia-Colchis* 5 (2009), pp. 153–158.

from view at some point towards the end of the late antique period. In order to answer this question we must turn to the east and address the third point of the triangle of cultural, linguistic and political influences entering Kartli.

The geographical location of Georgia in the south Caucasus means that it is relatively easily approached from the west, with a coastline that has many places suitable for landing anything from small fishing craft to large ships. This had led to the founding of a series of Greek colonies along the coast in the Classical era and this colonial presence was retained, as far as they were able, by the Byzantine heirs of the Graeco-Roman Empire.⁴¹ To the north the Greater Caucasus Mountains although not impermeable, did impede larger-scale movements of people. It is clear from the archaeological record and from ethnographic studies that there has always been interaction between the mountains on both sides of the range leading eventually to the Christianisation of some of these northern neighbours,⁴² but north of Georgia there was a variety of different tribal peoples rather than one unified empire acting in concert. To the south was Asia Minor and Armenia and beyond them were the territories of Syria and Mesopotamia, the focus of this study, but the key to the Semitic linguistic heritage of Kartli lies to the east with the other great empire of the time; a world power that was constantly engaged in a struggle for supremacy with the Graeco-Roman, later Byzantine, Empire to the west—the Persian Empire.

In 247 BCE the Parthians took power from the heirs of Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, and in taking charge of this vast territory they also inherited an enormous bureaucratic apparatus. Whilst Iran was not home to a native Aramaic-speaking population, the Persian Empire encompassed regions that did speak the language and it was adopted by the Achaemenids as the official administrative language throughout their territories, a situation that appears to have remained unchanged in the succeeding Seleucid era.⁴³ Therefore the Parthians in turn utilised these existing structures to consolidate their control of the empire when they in turn took power. Their rule endured until 224 CE and therefore the overwhelming majority of texts discovered in Kartli in Aramaic fall within their epoch. This epigraphic evidence from archaeological sources accords with the numismatic evidence for a strong Parthian presence in Kartli

41 The story of the Byzantine struggle to retain Lazica is documented by Procopius in his *Wars*, Book 1, x onwards.

42 See for example Arzhantseva, Irina, ‘The Christianization of North Caucasus (Religious Dualism among the Alans)’, *Die Christianisierung Des Kaukasus*, Verlag Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften; Wien, 2002, pp. 17–36.

43 p. 276, Gzella, Holger, *A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam*, Brill; Leiden and Boston, 2015.

at this time⁴⁴ as well as with the echoes of Iranian influence that have been discerned in medieval Georgian literature. When this evidence is taken in its entirety Rapp argues that:

Numerous independent lines of evidence are witnesses to eastern Georgia's enduring encounter with and inclusion within the Iranian Commonwealth since Achaemenid times. Because Georgian became a written language only in the late fourth/early fifth century AD, the earliest specimen of original Georgian literature being composed towards the end of the fifth century, ancient Georgian narrative evidence for the Achaemenid, Parthian and much of the Sasanid periods is lacking. However, Iranian inscriptions, Graeco-Roman sources, and the invaluable (medieval) geographical treatise by the Armenian scholar Anania Shirakac'i associate eastern Georgia and the whole of Caucasia with the Iranian Commonwealth.⁴⁵

This Iranian influence in eastern Georgia continued into the Sassanian epoch after the Parthian Dynasty was defeated in 224 CE. Therefore in this formative period of Georgian history that saw the evangelisation of the country and the formulation of a national alphabet, the territory was a constituent part of the Iranian Commonwealth.

Towards an Understanding of the Georgian Concept of 'Arameuli'

Considering this it perhaps becomes both more and less understandable that there is currently such confusion amongst many contemporary Georgian scholars concerning the differences between Syria and Assyria and a certain vagueness concerning the relationship between different variants of Aramaic. The fact that Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire over a period of centuries and remained so despite a series of changes of dynasty, demonstrates that it was a linguistic sign of stability to the late antique inhabitants of Kartli. It is interesting to consider how those who employed this official Aramaic for bureaucratic purposes or used it because they were part of a rul-

44 Sherozia, Medea, 'Monetary Circulation in Iberia in the 1st Century B.C.–1st Century A.D.', in Furtwängler, A. et al, *Iberia and Rome*, pp. 235–251.

45 p. 657, Rapp, Jr., Stephen H., 'The Iranian Heritage of Georgia: Breathing New Life into the Pre-Bagratid Historiographical Tradition', *Iranica Antiqua* 44 (2009), pp. 645–692.

ing elite, would have viewed the incoming Jewish population who settled in Urbnisi and Mtskheta speaking a language closely affiliated to the one they associated with privilege and their Iranian overlords. On the other side of the equation it is equally possible that these towns were an attractive destination for Jewish settlers precisely because they were aware of the fact that they could conduct trade and develop relationships with the local population in a language related to their own tongue.

By tracing the use of Aramaic back to the Persian Empire from the Achaemenids onwards, the association of the language with the Assyrians becomes more comprehensible—it was indeed initially the language of the Assyrian Empire, which in its turn was swallowed by its Persian neighbour. The clear Iranian influences Rapp has discerned in medieval Georgian literature⁴⁶ would indicate that there was likely to have been some awareness of the interplay of Assyria and Persia in the minds of Kartvelian nobles in the pre-Christian history of Kartli. This historical memory may well have continued through into the Christian era with the weaving together of a mythical historical past that forms the section of the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (*Life of Kartli*) known as *The Life of the Kings* and which Rapp places amongst the earliest contributions to the corpus making up the chronicle suggesting that it was written down c. 800,⁴⁷ even if it is believed that the original tales existed in an oral form at an earlier period.

What of course this linguistic and historical evidence tells us is that the most significant influences on pre-Christian Kartli came from the east—from the territory of the Iranian Commonwealth and, just as the area that ultimately became western Georgia took its lead culturally and in literary terms from the Greeks, the eastern Georgians looked east for ideas of literature, culture and governance. It is clear that southerners do make an appearance—there were the clearly documented Jewish colonies at Urbnisi and Mtskheta and, of course the enduring issue of Caucasian studies, there was constant rivalry, broken by periods of rapprochement with their Armenian neighbours to the south—but their influence was not all pervasive in Kartvelian society on the eve of conver-

46 See for example Rapp Jr, Stephen H., 'The Iranian Heritage of Georgia: Breathing New Life into the Pre-Bagratid Historiographical Tradition', *Iranica Antiqua* 44 (2009), pp. 645–692, 'New Perspectives on "The Land of Heroes and Giants": The Georgian Sources for Sasanian History', *e-Sasanika* 13 (2014) <http://www.sasanika.org/esasanika/new-perspectives-land-heroes-giants-georgian-sources-sasanian-history/> (accessed 02.02.2017) and Rapp Jr, Stephen H., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature*, Ashgate; Farnham, 2014.

47 p. 651, Rapp Jr, Stephen H., 'The Iranian Heritage of Georgia'.

sion. If there *was* a significant Syrian influence on Kartvelian society then this must have occurred in late antiquity during the process of the Christianisation of east Georgia.

Given the paucity of epigraphical evidence in both Aramaic/Armazian up until the fourth century CE and the fact that the Bolnisi inscription of 494 CE is the first securely dated Georgian inscription found in Georgia, it is clear that the question of Syrian or Mesopotamian influence on early Christian Kartli cannot be answered by contemporary epigraphic or literary data. It is at this point that we must turn our attention elsewhere and interrogate the archaeological and art historical data so see if any concrete link between these two societies existed at this formative period for the spread of Christianity.