Stephen, the First Martyr, and Georgian Christian Culture

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Stephen the First Martyr is one of the most popular saints of the Christian church. The first data about him are found in *The Acts of the Apostles* [5]. St. Stephen was the first of the seven chosen deacons whom the Apostles themselves ordained for the service of deacons. St. Stephen was appointed the Archdeacon. His name is associated with the first martyrdom in the history of Christianity. *The Acts of the Apostles* contains the last words the saint martyr uttered before death. There is also a description of the saint martyr's vision that has been often reflected in Christian art.

According to the Syriac *Menaion* dating from the IV Century the commemoration date of the saint is indicated as December 26, the day after Christmas. The same situation is observed in Latin and Armenian sources too. As is seen, the initial date of the martyr's commemoration was December 26. Later in the Orthodox Church his commemoration date was established on December 27. Along with this, the Christian church commemorates the discovery of the relics of St. Stephen (September 15), reburial (August 2) and 70 Apostles, including commemoration of Stephen archbishop (January 4).

The church fathers have revealed special interest in St. Stephen since the IV Century. His commemoration is found in the works of the 4th Century Syriac writer – Aphrahat and his younger contemporary - Ephraim the Syrian to whom belong commentaries on the *Acts of the Apostles*. According to some of the scholars, Ephraim the Syrian was familiar with such renderings about St. Stephen which are not included into canonical text of the Bible.

The commentaries on *The Acts of the Apostles* were compiled by the 4th Century Alexandrian theologian Didymus the Blind. Approximately in the same period two homilies dedicated to Stephen the First Martyr were created by Gregory of Nyssa. John Chrysostom wrote *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*. Since the IV Century there has been also preserved *Prize to Saint Stephen* by Evsuhy of Jerusalem. Thus, along with the growth of interest in *The Acts of the Apostles*, the interest in Stephen the First Martyr also increases.

Lots of churches were built in honor of Stephen the First Martyr over the course of centuries. Numerous frescoes, artistic paintings (including masterpieces), hymns and homilies were dedicated to him.

This distinguished saint was also especially venerated in Georgia, though his place in the history of Georgian church and Georgian culture has not been studied so far.

Among several churches erected in honor of St. Stephen there is a church, which is one of the oldest in Mtskheta, built on the spot where the Georgian nation was baptized, at the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers. According to *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (*Life of Kartli*), it was built as a sign of gratitude after the exile of Persians by King Archil – the great-grandson of King Mirian and grandfather of King Vakhtang Gorgasali. The church dates to 4th-5th Centuries. The architect of the church was a Greek artist Averlois Aqolios. His name has been kept in a Greek inscription inserted in the church threshold [4, p. 233-234].

The Urbnisi Sioni church named after St. Stephen is a three-nave basilica dating back to the turn of the 5th-6th Centuries according to stylistic signs and on the basis of paleographic exploration of an inscription on the northern facade made in the Asomtavruli script.

The Urbnisi Sioni (initially, Stephen the First Martyr cathedral church was called Sioni) belongs to the group of large basilicas of the earlier feudal age [1]. Its importance is underlined by the foundation of the episcopacy here and construction of a large Christian cathedral named after Stephan the First Martyr by one of the Assyrian Fathers – Tadeoz Stepantsmindeli at the turn of the 5th-6th Centuries. The Urbnisi St. Stephen church is a place where King David Aghmashenebeli (David the Builder) convened the Ruis-Urbnisi ecclesiastic council. David Aghmashenebeli's father Giorgi II was crowned within the walls of this church and David Aghmashenebeli himself was baptized there. A large icon with the relics of St.Stephen, currently preserved in the Georgian State Museum, was placed in Urbnisi.

The Khirsi church founded by one of the Assyrian Fathers – Stefane Khirseli (Stephen of Khirsa)(6th C.) is named after Stephen the First Martyr.

Thus, the veneration of St. Stephen in Georgia began in IV-V Centuries, and from the 6th Century was strengthened and established which must have been associated with the missionary activities of the Assyrian Fathers.

It is interesting to note that Stephanoz Eristavi is a builder of the Mtskheta Large Cross church (586-604/5). This name seems already to have been attested in VI Century Georgian onomastikon.

Fresco representations of St. Stephen are found in abundance in Georgian churches. According to Professor A. Okropiridze's observations, his images can be most frequently found in the altar, Episcopes cycle; that is natural because St. Stephen is not only the protomartyr. He is the first also due to the fact that he is "the head of the deacons". His representations are found in the churches of the Ateni Sioni, Betania and Tsromi amongst others. In the Ateni Sioni his image is displayed separately, in the window. In the church of Tsromi St. Stephen's image is found at the dome. Three scenes from *The Life of St. Stephen* are described on the gate of the main church of Vardzia.

Of particular interest is St. Stephen's image in Nakipari which reflects the story described in *The Life of St. Nino* – St. Stephen embraces the Rhipsimian nuns and censers them (see about this below).

St. Stephen is inseparably linked with the composition widely spread in Christian art "Glory to God". This is determined by the fact that the saint, before death, had a vision of paradise and Savior. This vision is described in the *Life* of the saint and in the homilies and hymns based on it.

Also, it is worth noting that the known toponym "Stepantsminda" is associated with the name of Stephen the First Martyr.

Thus, special veneration of Stephen the First Martyr in Georgian Christian culture has multifaceted manifestations.

So the question arises as to how things are in this respect with Georgian written monuments?

Stephen the First Martyr has been mentioned in the Georgian church and old Georgian literature since the ancient times. He is well known in Georgian hagiography, hymnography, liturgy and homiletics. Commemoration of Stephen the First Martyr is found in *Jerusalemite Lectionary* that is a unique monument containing archaic Divine Liturgy [2]. The commemoration of St. Stephen is established on December 27. After this there is indicated the beginning of several hymns dedicated to St. Stephen. The service dedicated to St. Stephen in the *Lectionary* is not complete. Its final part has been lost.

The commemoration of St. Stephen is included in *The Oldest Iadgari (Tropologion)* which contains numerous specimens of hymnography, including archaic ones [10]. *The Oldest Iadgari* represents a poetic supplement to the *Jerusalemite Lectionary* [10, p. 684]. Really, 3 hymns dedicated to St. Stephen indicated in *Lectionary* as beginnings are also found in *Iadgari*. Of them, one is in full text (*warrior of heaven, St. Stephen*). Other hymns are also included in *The Oldest Iadgari*. Today it is difficult to say whether these "other" hymns are derived from *Lectionary* or supplemented by the compilers of *The Oldest Iadgari*. One thing is certain - the commemoration of St. Stephen is included in the oldest liturgical books preserved in the Georgian language – *Jerusalemite Lectionary* and *The Oldest Iadgari*.

In these hymns St. Stephen is referred to as a predecessor of martyrs that had become a tradition. There is also St. Stephen's vision before his death. The refrain repeated in this hymn leaves an impression of archaism. The meter of these hymns is also archaic.

As is known, the name "Stephen" is derived from the Greek language meaning "crown". This is also one of the reasons that the hymns dedicated to the saint frequently emphasize that he received a martyr's crown from Christ.

Because the prototype of *The Oldest Iadgari* is lost, it is difficult now to say with certainty as to which of the hymns entering this collection are translated and which are original. Presumably, as well as the main part of an extensive repertoire entering *The Oldest Iadgari*, the hymns dedicated to St. Stephen must have been translated from Greek.

At present, these hymns preserved in *The Oldest Iadgari*, have not been found in the *December Menaion* published in Greek and Slavonic languages and in this respect they are unique.

As is seen, *The Martyrdom of St. Stephen* was also translated into Georgian earlier. Along with other readings, *The Sinai Polycephalon* of 864, also includes *The Martyrdom of St. Stephen* and *The Discovery of the Saint's Relics* [6].

Special interest in St. Stephen is revealed by the 10th Century Georgian writer – Stephane Sananoisdze-Chkondideli who is one of the famous representatives of "Mekhelni".

Stephane Sananoisdze is an author of a small-size hymn dedicated to St. Stephen which is included in Michael Modrekili's collection *Iadgari* (978-988). The hymn is rhymed and distinct for artistic perfection [9]. The dedication of the hymn to St. Stephen by Stephane Sananoisdze first of all must be explained by the distinguished

importance of this saint in the Georgian church and culture. Along with this, St. Stephen could be considered as the patron saint to the author of the hymn who bears the same name.

As it turns out, the author of the hymn is well acquainted with the *Life* of St. Stephen taking it as a basis when describing the death of the saint. The same can be said about the St. Stephen's vision with which Stephane Sananoisdze's hymn begins.

Stephane Sananoisdze's special interest in this saint is evidenced by the fact that he translated from Greek *The Praise to St. Stephen the First Martyr* by Gregory of Nyssa, the text of which we are preparing for publication.

Gregory of Nyssa, one of the pillars of the Christian church and a distinguished authority, is an author of two homilies dedicated to St. Stephen. Of these two homilies the authorship of the second one is considered doubtful. The version of *The Praise to St. Stephen* which definitely belongs to Gregory of Nyssa is translated into Georgian [3].

As is known this *Homily* by Gregory of Nyssa was translated earlier into Georgian. This is also indicated by the fact that a short fragment of a sermon is included in the oldest *Polycephaleon* [3, p. 362].

Two more versions of this homily are available in the Georgian language. The translator of the first of them is Stephane Sananoisdze-Chkondideli and the second translation belongs to George the Athonite.

It can be said without exaggeration that in both cases we have remarkable Georgian translations of the homily of the venerable Church Father Gregory of Nyssa, made by two outstanding representatives of Georgian culture – the bishop of Chkondidi – Stephane Sananoisdze and great authority of the Georgian church – George the Athonite.

This composition created by Gregory of Nyssa is referred to as a "homily" and as "praise". The "praise" commonly means "hymn". We consider that in this homily of the saint Father those trends of "poetical prose" characteristic for hymnography are already contoured. It should be noted that Georgian translation of the homily made by Stephane Sananoisidze in the 10th Century has certain signs of rhythmical division. This fact requires special study.

The data about Stephen the First Martyr, his relics and the oldest church related to the saint have been preserved in original Georgian hagiography too.

The reference to one of the oldest church constructed in honor of St. Stephen is found in *The Life of St. Nino*, namely, in Sinaitic and Shatberdi–Chelishian redactions. Here King Archil and Archbishop Iona are mentioned during the life and activities of whom the church of Stephen the First Martyr was built in Georgia in the first years of spreading Christianity – even then, when magi still performed a ritual of fire worship in the same spot, in Mtskheta [7, III]. According to this record, St. Stephen is one of the first saints whose veneration was established in Christian Georgia.

In Leonti Mroveli's redaction of *The Life of St. Nino* we read that St. Nino, before the death of the Rhipsimian nuns, had a vision of Stephen the first deacon, wearing the stole of light, with a censer in his hand and the fragrance coming out of it covered the sky. St.Stephen was accompanied by a group of heavenly forces to whom joined the souls of the saint martyrs [7, III]. The image of St. Stephen in the church of Nakipari is based just upon this vision from *The Life of St. Nino*.

The mention of Stephen the First Martyr is found in Ioane Sabanisdze's *The Martyrdom of Abo* (786-790). After the dialogue with the judge, St. Abo was imprisoned

and Stephen the First Martyr appeared in one of the key moments of the saint's life. The author states that this happened on December 27, the day of commemoration of St. Stephen, the Christ's apostle, the first deacon, the first martyr and leader of all martyrs. In Ioane Sabanisdze's opinion, this should have happened in this way so that Stephen the First Martyr – the hope of the martyrs, "labored for him" [7, I].

The name of St. Stephen is also found in *The Lives of Athonite Fathers*.

In *The Life of George the Athonite* it is described how St. George reburied the wrist of Ekvtime the Athonite and placed in the reliquary the relics of other saints among which the relics of St. Stephen are mentioned in first place.

Thus, it becomes clear, that the leader of the saints and chief warrior – St. Stephen has established a proper place in Georgian Christian culture. We believe that further study will reveal more examples of it.

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