

FOR COMPREHENSIVE RESEARCH OF TRUSO VALLEY

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Abstract. Mountainous Truso valley represents a border region with Russia, which in times past, belonged to Dvaleti, historical-ethnographic region of Georgia and was inhabited by Georgian ethnic group – Dvalis. Some part of Dvali population became assimilated into Ossetian population migrated in the XVII-XVIII centuries, while the remaining segment was forcibly relocated to other historical regions of Georgia. Ossetians, settled in the Truso Valley, in turn, adopted many traditions of local Georgian population, as evidenced by synthetic architecture, ritual rules, oral patterns, etc. All told, with its historical past, socio-economic and political significance, population lifestyle, material or spiritual cultural development, Truso Valley appears to be a quite rich and diverse land of the country.

Georgian narrative, documentary and epigraphic literary monuments contain important information for the overall study of historical-geographical side of Truso: (Dzegli Eristavta – Chronicle of Princes (ძეგლი ერისთავთა); “Chronicle of Gergeti” (გერგეთის სულთა მატთანე), Introduction Book on faulty acts of Samtavisi Flock („სამთავისის სამწყსოს დრამისა და შესავლის წიგნი“), findings by Vakhushti Batonishvili, Papuna Orbeliani, etc), archival material, XVIII century census data, certificates issued by royal government, information provided by XVIII-XIX-century-foreign-travelers (Guldenstedt, Aikhwald, Rainex, etc.), Georgian scientific literature (N. Berdzenishvili, V. Gamrekeli, B. Gamkrelidze, G. Chikovani, V. Itonishvili, R. Topchishvili, etc). The materials kept in “Ossetian Theological Commission” (1774-1861) and “Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus” (1863-1917), as well as in “Georgian Exarchate Chancellery Fund” are important sources for studying the religious situation in the Truso valley in the 19th century. The existing sources provide diverse basis for interdisciplinary research of the history of Truso Valley and expose main problems and specifics of historical-geographical, political, cultural (architecture, small stone reliefs, epigraphic monuments and other artefacts) study of the valley.

Based on complex analysis of historical sources and scientific literature, the paper presents key issues faced in the course of exploring the region: historical geography and borders of Truso, interrelationship between Georgian and foreign written sources, historical-cultural narrative of Truso secular architecture (fortified towers) basic features of written culture, religious situation in Truso Valley, collective cultural identity issues, etc.

Key words: Truso, Dvaleti, fiefdom of Princes of Aragvi, Georgian and foreign sources, architecture, written culture, religious situation and cultural identity.

Introduction. Truso valley is situated on the northern slope of the main ridge of the Caucasus, at the head of the Tergi river and is part of Kazbegi municipality, in Mtskheta-Mtianeti region. To the north, it is bordered by the Republic of North Ossetia - Alania, which is the part of the Russian federation; To the south-east it is bordered by Dusheti municipality; to the south-west and west – by Akhgori and Java regions, occupied by Russia.

The arrival of Ossetians in the region from the North Caucasus must have started around the 17th century, and already in the 18th century, it became widespread, as their entry and settlement were also facilitated by the Georgian royal government.

Since the old times, together with Khevi (Kazbegi), Truso used to be the main highway, connecting Georgia and North Caucasus. The first information about this road and Truso is found in the references of Greek writer and geographer - Strabo (BC 64, AD 25) (Kaukhchishvili, 1957:129), , as well as, in old Georgian historical writings, historical documents and foreign written monuments. For centuries, Georgia has been visited by numerous European travelers, diplomats and merchants. The history of Truso, seen through the eyes of a foreign traveler, is particularly interesting. Their records represent important and interesting source documents for studying the historical reality and life of the people of that time. Of particular importance among the written sources is the epigraphic material of the region, which was only Georgian until the 1970s. These monuments are of special importance among the ancient artefacts of Truso and Mna valleys. Their complex research and study from a cultural-historical standpoint, contributes to the development of written culture in the region, clarification of problems, related to cultural identity of the population and exploration of many other interesting issues.

Since the ancient times, Truso has always been an important military-strategic part of Georgia, therefore, our ancestors have taken care of fortifying this historical-ethnographical region with defensive structures. The abovementioned is evidenced by numerous military-architectural buildings, characteristic of Georgian traditional construction culture having survived to this date.

Over the centuries, the interests of many countries collided for the dominance in the Caucasus. In this regard, it is not surprising that Russia was one of the countries, seeking to gain political and economic influence over the Caucasus. The mentioned countries frequently used missionaries or clerical commissions to conceal their own goals. In this regard, the Ossetian Theological Commission, established in 1743 under the leadership of the Georgian clergy, was no exception.

For centuries, the authority of the Georgian clergy among the mountaineers, their experience in missionary work, and good neighborly relations or kinship with the Caucasus mountaineers were widely known. The Georgian clergy became actively involved in missionary work and made every effort to convert mountaineers, once Christians, to Orthodoxy and to promote Georgian culture among them. The work of the "Ossetian Theological Commission" (1743-1861) and the "Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus" (1863-1917) in the Truso valley is of even greater interest.

It's a rewarding work to objectively present the ethno-cultural peculiarities of the population of Georgia, namely, Truso valley.

Methodology. The presented scientific paper is based on the following research methods: historical-comparative method, causal-comparative analysis, synthesis, systemic analysis, field-scientific research and observation.

Outcomes. To accomplish the purpose, we have processed Georgian narrative and documentary sources, foreign travelers' references and archival materials – and the documents

kept in the fund of Ossetian Theological Commission (1743-1861), Society for the Restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus (1863-1917) and Georgian Exarchate. The Truso valley is described in the records of many foreign scholars of XVIII-XIX centuries. They took interest and described ethnic composition of the local inhabitants, settled areas, access roads, geographic location and natural conditions, agricultural and living traditions of the population. Considering the lack of historical sources, these very recording of foreigners to a greater or lesser extent provide us with scientific ideas for studying the ethnic-cultural heritage of Truso valley.

The written cultural monuments, secular and church architectural artworks, various small-size artifacts, studied by our research team during the field-scientific expedition, represent an important acquisition, in terms of cultural heritage. Based on systematic analysis of the aforementioned material, numerous problems faced during the comprehensive study of Truso Valley have been identified. Among them, the local version of a stone calligraphic school, presented in the written culture of the region, is noteworthy from paleographic point of view, typical of the mountainous parts of Georgia.

Among the oldest secular architectural complexes of the valley, our attention was caught by fortified towers (defensive towers). The integrated study of historical narrative sources, modern scientific literature and field expeditions showed that the genesis of defensive towers takes roots in the Georgian system of thinking. The comparison of the defensive towers of Truso and Khada valleys made it clear that they are identical in terms of architectural features, thus confirming the same defensive fortification construction traditions in the Shida Kartli highlands. All this is one of the valuable historical facts among various existing and scientifically substantiated facts, still reviving the historical truth on the territory of Truso and its neighboring North Ossetia, according to which since ancient times, the state, ethnic and natural border of Georgia had always been located more to the north.

The eighteenth-nineteenth-century materials processed by us are noteworthy as they present the information that sheds light on cultural and religious situation in Truso Valley, revealing the difficulties faced by the clergy during their activities in the valley.

1. Based on the study of the available historical sources and field materials about Truso Valley, the following issues were identified: Truso Valley has been a northern gateway and an important strategic point on borderline, first, of the Kingdom of Kartli, then of the United Kingdom of Georgia; 2. In Truso, as well as in Shida Kartli highlands, construction traditions of the region's defensive and strategic monuments were similar; The written culture of the medieval Truso Valley was Georgian, as was the population; 3. Ecclesiastically, the clergy of the region were subject to the Diocese of Nikozi; 4. Later, from the 17th century, Truso Valley has been inhabited by Orthodox Georgians living together with Christian Ossetians. 4. In the XIX century, the services in the churches of Truso Valley, were mainly conducted by Georgian clergymen, nevertheless, the correlation of the written culture begins in the second half of the XIX-centuries; The lack of clergy and the deplorable condition of churches were observed in the parishes of the valley; 6. The situation was tough also in terms of education; There were

no schools where ecclesiastical education could be obtained, and the people of the valley and the clergy suffered from a lack of ecclesiastical books; Due to climatic conditions and economic hardship, the clergy often left their parishes; 7. Ossetians, newly converted to Christianity, needed a church and clergy to meet their religious needs.

As it can be seen, the issues raised as a result of the study of the existing materials about Truso Valley are diverse, which unequivocally confirms the need to continue a comprehensive study of the region.

Discussion. Territorial boundaries of Truso- „...There is a valley to the north of Mtiuleti (highlands). The road crosses the valley ... and to the the valley is joined by the river Khevi and it is called the descent ...Above this descent, there is Truso located in the form of three valleys. To the east, it is neighbored by Khevi, to the west – by Zakha and Maghran-Dvaleti, to the south – by Mtiuleti, to the north – by Kurtauli and it is surrounded by Caucasus, from the Gorge itself. (VakhushtiBatonishvili, 1973: 356-357).As its clear from this quote, VakhushtiBatonishvili, when talking about the historical-geographical part - Khevi, also describes Truso. But the scientist does not indicate the boundaries of the mentioned region. "...

G. Chikovani was the first to study the boundaries of Truso area by reconciling the data of the field ethnographical material and scientific literature. He found that the Truso area includes the section of the valley of Tergi river from its headwaters to the narrowest point of the valley - Kashara / Kasra, which in the past must have been the border gate of residential area of Dvalis and then, later, of Ossetians, having been settled here (Chikovani, 1985:116). Prior to that, some Georgian scholars considered the Kobi basin and the historical-geographical area Mna to be part of the Truso Valley (Makalatia S., Zakaraia P., Itonishvili V., etc.). **Etymology of Truso** - Before discussing the etymology of the mentioned toponym, we would like to point out that the **Truso Valley** appears with this name in XIX-century-documents, while in the written sources of XIV-XVIII centuries it is mentioned only as Truso.

The mentioned territorial unit is referred to as "Trusui" "Trusu" "Trusuit" "Trusu" in the oldest Georgian written sources (Chronicle of Princes/DzegliEristavta) "Truso" (Introduction book on faulty acts of Samtavisi flock), "Turuso" (XVIII century document, Museum of Literature, 16610), and the local population is called "Trusuelni" (Chronicle of Princes /DzegliEristavta)) and "Trusoveltaitsa" (Chronicle of the Gergeti), "Tursi" (XVIII century, Papuna Orbeliani). Famous Georgian historian and geographer Vakhushti Batonishvili refers to this historical-geographical area as "Truso". Over time, the name underwent a phonetic change and was established as "**Truso**". Today it is referred to as the **Truso Valley**.

G. Chikovani was the first to pay attention to the toponym Truso, and declare that the word "Turs" was mentioned by Sul Khan-Saba in the form of geographic title. (Chikovani, 1985: 106).

The toponym Truso was studied even more thoroughly by Vakhtang Itonishvili - Georgian **Druso** is the most valuable in explaining "Truso" ("High, well-built tower of towers" - Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani, Georgian Dictionary, I, p. 292;) ("grindstone used for scytheblade"),

with the help of which the search name can be easily deciphered as a **tallfence, made of stones; ridge; notch** or be understood as a toponym derived from **local terms denoting the stone species**. At the same time, it should be noted that such an explanation of "Truso" finds full support from the landscape, onomastic or ethnographic realities of the interesting section of the Tergi gorge (Itonishvili, 2016: 216).

Georgian written sources represent the key historical material in complex research of Truso, according to which this historical region was part, first of the Kingdom of Kartli, and later, of the United Kingdom of Georgia, and was inhabited by the Georgian ethnic tribe - Dvalis. Truso has been a royal domain, but on the verge of XIII-XIV centuries, due to difficult political situation in the Georgian royal court, it was raided several times as a result of the confrontation between Georgian kings David VIII and his half-brother Vakhtang III.

At the time when King Vakhtang and his loyal eristavi (feudal lord) Shalva Kvenipneveli were accompanying the Mongols to the Horde, King David plundered Kvenifneveli's estate - Tskhrazmiskhevi. Returning from the Horde, Kvenifneveli and Vakhtang III invaded Mtiuleti, Khevi and Dvaleti, which were the supporters of David VIII: "Then they burned and killed all the herdsmen of Dvaleti and destroyed and broke them and all the fortresses from **Trusu** to Achabeti" (Dolidze, 1965:106). As a sign of loyalty, King Vakhtang III awarded Shalva and "gave him **Trusui**, Ghuda, Gagasdzeni, Mlete, Arachueti, Khando, Kanchaeti, Abazasdze land, Dzagnakornan, Diguami, Gavazi": 106) Thus, from the beginning of XIV century, the Eristavs (feudal lords) of Ksani took the possession of Truso. At the beginning of the XVII century, when Zurab Eristavi (feudal lord of Aragvi) conquered Khevi, in 1628, from this time onward, Truso became a part of Aragvi fiefdom. After the abolition of Aragvi Saeristavo (Aragvi fiefdom) in 1743, Saeristavo (fiefdom) was proclaimed an imperial land and was handed over to the sons of Erekle II along with Truso.

During the reign of the prince, the princes had their servant - Mouravi and his substitutes in Truso. Their duties included census taking, tax collection and mobilization of warriors in the event of war.

Compliant to the ecclesiastical administrative division, Truso belonged to Samtavisi flock according to XV-century document (Dolidze, 1970: 198), however, the Truso population also had a certain obligation to Gergeteli Sakdrishvilis - the status "Mokidebuli" (according to the document of 1439), which was easier to perform compared to that of Khevi villages, but it was still a form of certain commitments (Sharashidze, 1954: 247).

From the beginning of the 17th century (when it became part of Aragvi Kingdom) until 1811 - it must have been included in Tsilkani Episcopate. After the restoration of the autocephaly of the Georgian Church in 1917, Truso and Khevi population were again subject to the episcopate of Tsilkani.

In Georgian written documents until the 1930s, we can not find any information about the existence of non-Georgian population in Truso. The information about Ossetians living in Truso are not kept in the earliest documents such as "Dzegli Eristavta) (XIV-XV centuries), the Chronicle of Gergeti souls 1439), and the Book of Drama and Introduction to the Samtavisi Flock (XV c.),

According to Vakhushti, Truso's "inhabitants are Ossetians, Dvalis" i.e. in the first half of the XVIII century there was already a mixed population: locals - Dvali and settlers - Ossetians.

After conversion of "Saeristavo" (fiefdom) into a sovereign estate, there appear some documents related to Ossetian population in Truso, allowing to create a partial idea about it.

In the second half of the XVIII century, mass migration of Ossetians must have taken place on the territory of Georgia, including Truso. According to the 1780 census, there were 11 Ossetian villages in Truso (Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Center of Manuscripts Hd-3906); 8 villages are indicated by Ioane Batonishvili, while Ossetians are mentioned as the population (Ioane Bagrationi, 1986: 35).

According to the documents, the royal court of Georgia allowed the Tagauri Ossetians to relocate and settle on the territory of the Aragvi Saeristavo (fiefdom). Documentary material of late XVIII century provides information on an organized relocation of large groups of Ossetians from the North Caucasus to Kartli.

In 1799, George XII wrote to the Ossetians from Tagauri: "Ossetians from Tagauri, who are going to migrate here, be noted that, as you want to move in here, we are sending our nobleman Gabashvili Ninia and he will convey our message to you. You too act respectfully and we will be even more merciful than the admirable king, father of ours used to be and keep an eye on you. You will be the serf of our dominion and no one else will have anything to do with you, we will provide you with good housing and place, will settle you in such an area to make you feel comfortable for a long stay. First you'll have to come down to Digomi again and stand there and as soon as we've chosen a good place that will be to your liking, will put you there and build a fortress for you." "Before you start plowing and sowing, we will provide you with grain crops for survival..." (Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Center of Manuscripts Qd-1617)

In 1790, Ioane the Housekeeper instructs the foremen of Gori to provide the Ossetians living in Aragvi with bread, wine and cheese (Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Center of Manuscripts Hd-12580).

The Ossetians themselves saw the Georgian royal government taking care of them. After the annexation of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti by Russia in 1801, several anti-colonial and anti-slavery uprisings took place in Georgia, including the Mtiuleti uprising of 1804. In the 1804 uprising, the Truso dwellers also fought against Russians and sympathized with the rebels.

After the abolition of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti by Russia, there was created a province of Georgia. According to territorial-administrative division, Truso and Khevi were both included in the composition of Tbilisi province, which was part of Dusheti district (uyezd) in 1802-1803 ((uyezd) – administrative unit in USSR), part of Ananuri (uyezd) from 1803 – and in 1821-1929, it still became a part of Dusheti district (uyezd). In 1840, Dusheti district (uyezd) was reorganized – divided into administrative-territorial units - Khevi and Truso valley became the parts of the mountain region. In 1930, Dusheti district (uyezd) was abolished and three districts were created on the territory of the uyezd - Kazbegi, Dusheti and Mtskheta.

Truso valley and Khevi were part of Kazbegi region. It has been registered in Kazbegi municipality since 2005 to this date.

In addition to Georgian narrative and documentary sources, it is interesting to see Truso through the eyes of foreigners - information preserved in the records of foreign travelers and researchers, in which we find a diverse layer of the history of the region. Among the foreign scholars and travelers interested in the multifaceted study of Georgian and Caucasian peoples, a prominent place was occupied by German scholar, physician and naturalist, member of the Imperial Academy of Russia, I. Guldenstedt. He traveled to the Caucasus in 1770-1773, touring the Kizlaro region, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ossetia and Georgia (Itonishvili, 2006: 4) Guldenstedt describes in detail the route of his journey, names the mountainous settlements of Eastern Georgia, including the distance and the elders of local communities - "On October 4 ,we walked[walk] from Kobi to Sioni, for 2 hours, and to Achkhota – for ½ hour. Here we first [crossed] Tergi river and then headed to Stepantsminda, which is the last Georgian village and is the seat of a Georgian nobleman, watching over the border villages and been awarded with the title of Kazbegi by the king "(Guldenstedt, 1962: 179).

Guldenstedt points to the natural resources of Truso Valley - "One can find lead veins upstream of Tergi river, in a Georgian land, in the ravine, near the Dariali Old Fortress. In this area, near Stepantsminda, marcasite and sulfur-ore are often found in the form of bands in shale "(Guldenstedt, 1962: 33).

When speaking about Truso Valley, Guldenstedt names the villages inhabited by **Georgians and Ossetians** (Resi, Siveraout, Gimara, Tsotsolta, Burmasek, Khudzani or Karatkau, Valandebdze, Dalagdenze, Barsi, Suatisi, Abano, Ketris). **According to him, this part of the country was under the ownership of the Prince (Eristavi) of Aragvi, however, after the abolition of the strong fiefdom, that used to be disobedient to the king, they surrendered to the king of Kartli-Kakheti, Erekle II. In the past, Truso region always recognized the power of Georgian kings and were obedient to Khevi Rulers, appointed by the king.** The author draws attention to the similarities of agricultural activities and everyday culture between Georgians living in the valley and Ossetians settling here later. Guldenstedt provides a noteworthy account of the meeting near Truso in 1769 between King Erekle of Kartli-Kakheti and Totleben, a general sent by Russia, to fight the Ottomans.

In 1891, the German traveler and geographer Gottfried Merzbacher organized an expedition to the Caucasus, and in 1901 he published a two-volume work, "From the Mountainous Regions of the Caucasus." Numerous references and researches about the Caucasus are presented in the paper, accompanied by descriptions of the trip, conclusions, cartography and illustrations (drawings, sketches) of the bypassed regions, including especially important photographs of the ethnographic life of Truso Valley inhabitants. Merzbacher writes, based on various documents, that the Circassians forced part of the Ossetians from their places of residence to relocate to the southern slopes of the Caucasus, including the Truso Valley (Gelashvili, 2016: 101-102; Mamisimedashvili, 2012: 431-452).

Nineteenth-century French painter Blanchard traveled to the Trusso Valley and described its natural environment and architectural monuments, defense structures and

systems; - "The valley widens a few versts from the station, Tergi is gushing in its wide bed, covered with rock fragments brought by its own waters, but soon it falls between two rocks and narrows; Old Georgian castles are erected on the tops of these rocks (Blanchard, 1858: 141-145).

Information about Truso Valley was also provided by French scholar Frederick de Beauvoir (1798-1850) (Montpellier, 1840: 172). He presented valuable data on important settlements of the Truso Valley (Kobi, Mna, Okrokana, Noa-kau), on temples (Kobi) located in the valley (Oukhaté-don) having been destroyed by now, Christian shrines, watchtowers and fortresses (Okrokana, Kobi), hunting places and agricultural traditions. According to him, the population used to grow barley on the Truso Valley, which was the only grain crop spread here.

German scholar-traveler August Hauxthausen visited the Caucasus in 1843. Huxthausen references are very diverse. They refer to every aspect of life - political, economic, social, ethnographic; He characterizes the population, their types of housing, social strata, workshop formation, the establishment of the Russian military force (Haxthausen, 2011: 17). Huxthausen is not satisfied with simply stating the facts - he offers his conclusion. The reliability of Huxthausen's information can be verified by the data of other travelers-authors of the same period (Karl Koch, Maurice Wagner, Kotsebu, etc.), who have also provided detailed descriptions of Georgia and, in particular, the Truso Valley.

Porter points out that in addition to the common defense system, each settlement represented a hard-to-reach fortification - "We noticed numerous villages with square-base and pyramidal-roofed towers surrounded by walls. These towers were the local fortresses of the distant period, when different tribes living in the mountains fought against each other" (Laiel, 1825: 469).

The German encyclopedist, geographer and naturalist also points out to the development of the fort system in the valley and the readiness of the local population for military activities - "Almost every village can be called fortified. The courtyards are surrounded by high stone walls, from which rises a tower, which is usually narrow in shape. In ancient times, locals fled to these forts for shelter... Between the Caucasus Mountains, as well as in the neighboring lowlands and south of Georgia, all people are armed when they leave their homes. Even boys are armed with daggers and swords" (Lyal, 1825: 140).

The German historian, ethnographer and philologist Dietrich Christoph von Romel (1781-1859) in his work "Peoples of the Caucasus" refers to the agricultural culture, development and architecture of the local villages - "We went to the plateau (elevated plain), which consisted almost entirely of cultivated fields. On the opposite side of the gorge we saw a number of Georgian and Ossetian villages, and on the left, on the top of a rock, we noticed the ruins of an old nunnery guarded by a strong fortress. The name of this place is Zion. At the foot of the mountain we saw mineral springs flowing down into the nearby meadow ... Kobi, which is the last station and is located on the north side of the Caucasus High Pass, consists only of barracks intended for soldiers, Cossacks ..." (Melikishvili, 2011: 503).

The German linguist-orientalist Claprot (1783-1835) provides important information about the Truso Valley. While traveling, he visited hard-to-reach places - from the bottom of

the Khokhi peak (so-called Istir-Khoghi, or High Khokhi) to the existing villages of Siveraut, where small streams form the Tergi and Resi rivers. The inhabitants of these and other highland villages are referred to by Claprot as Ossetians and attributes them to their Ossetian tribe Tirtz. According to the researcher, it is from this tribal name that Georgians call the valley "Turso" or "Truso" (the same, Tirtsi gorge) (Gelashvili, 2012: 275).

Claprot describes in detail the other villages in the valley and the route he has taken. These villages are: Siveraut, Resi, Tirzi, Kalagate-Kau, Burmasigkau (or Yellow Tower-village), Kshetrish Koaite-Kau, Noakh-Kau (New-Village), Khutsuri (same as Karat-Kau) and Ketuete-Kau (Ketrisi?) - The last two settlements are referred to by the traveler as large villages where many defensive and watchtowers stood. Describing the village of Abano (Abano-Kau), Claprot indicates that 40 households lived here. The village was surrounded by a forest considered to be a sacred place. People from neighboring, quite remote villages also came here to pray to St. Elijah and offer sacrifices to him (sheep, rarely bulls). The slaughter (sacrifice) of the sheep was followed by a small procession, while the skins were hung on the trees as a sign of respect to the saint. The locals believed that those who cut down a tree in the forest would be blinded and would regain their sight only after sacrificing a bull (Gelashvili, 2012: 276).

when comprehensively studying the Truso, one cannot ignore the cultural monuments, including the epigraphic monuments preserved in the region. They haven't been compiled together, researched and studied from cultural-historical point of view until recently. Although Truso is quite actively presented in Georgian narrative writings, historical documents, records of foreign travelers, folklore and other written materials, the region somehow was left beyond the attention of Georgian paleontographers and epigraphists.

Truso's epigraphy first attracted attention in 1957, when the Truso stela was discovered at the confluence of the Tergi and Suat rivers, and was immediately relocated to Orjonikidze, now the capital of the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic, called Validakvaz. Today the mentioned stela is kept in the Vladikavkaz State Museum and is presented at the exhibition. In 1960, an extensive work was dedicated to Truso Stela by Russian linguist Giorgi Turchaninov, who considered the monument to be an Ossetian text, written in the Syriac-Nestorian alphabet.

While the Georgian alphabet „Mkhedruli” is clearly read on the stela, which is marked by local variations and is characteristic of stone calligraphic schools of the mountainous regions of Georgia. It is noteworthy that Giorgi Turchaninov showed a similar "observation" and a kind of scientific "weakness" when he declared the signs on the artifact found in Maykop as the oldest Abkhazian alphabet in the world, and Abkhazians as the oldest nation of the creators of the alphabetic culture (Турчанинов, 1965; -98). Giorgi Turchaninov "strengthened the views" published in 1960 and 1965 with new "arguments" in the publications of the following years and repeated them in a relatively wide format: "Monuments of Literature and Language of the Peoples of the Caucasus and Eastern Europe". Where he set out the hypothesis of proto-caucasian writing (Turchaninov, 1971).

After the death of Giorgi Turchaninov, from 1989, when the Republic of Georgia decided to be detached from the Soviet Union and form an independent state and the relations

with Abkhazia and the so-called Autonomous republic of south Ossetia were artificially aggravated, the Turchaninov's views on "Abkhazian as the most ancient alphabet of the world" and Truso stela, as the monument of Alan-Ossetian cultural heritage, provided solid grounds for the separatist governments of both regions. Obviously, this hypothesis was publicized several times. For example, after the death of G. Turchaninov, a work "Ancient Monuments of Ossetian Writing and Language" was published in 1990, where the author repeats his view, expressed in 1960 about the Truso stela and concludes, that this is the monument of Ossetian-Alan culture and he dated it by XIV century.

C. Turchaninov's theories about the Abkhazian and Ossetian scripts were revived 10 years after his death in a book published in Moscow in 1999: *The Discovery and Decipherment of the Ancient Alphabet of the Caucasus (mid-3rd-4th-5th centuries BC)*. " (Turchaninov :1999). The scientific editor and publisher of the book is I.B. Basaria - Ankvab, while the reviewers are Russian academics M.A. Korostovtsev et al. Kononov, who had been dead for 15 and 20 years before the time of publication of the book. The fact is that the revival of Turchaninov's theory did not serve the development of science, instead it was intended for other purposes. The book presents the monuments of Ashu (Old Abkhazian-Abaza-Ubykh) writing and language separately. According to the author, in the III millennium BC. the country of Ashu stretched from the Black Sea in the south to the present-day Maikop in the north, extending north-west to the Kuban River and south-east to Phasis (Rioni). The earliest archeological realities of the Ashu civilization were the Maikop, Mtkvari-Araks, Dolmen, and Colchian cultures. The author, here again refers to the Truso Stela as a monument of Alanian culture. Although these views of Giorgi Turchaninov are not shared in scientific circles, in 2013 his work "Ossetian Syriac-Nestorian Inscription of the First Half of the 14th Century (reading attempts and the Characteristics of Discovery)" was published again, which is a collective monograph - "Alan-Ossetian Written Monuments". One of the publications (Turchaninov2013: 168-191).

Trushaninov's reading and analysis of Truso stela cannot withstand criticism, about which we will speak more extensively some other time. As for the problem of studying the written monuments of Truso, since the discovery of 1957, no epigraphic expeditions have been carried out in the region, therefore only dry information about its inscriptions is presented in separate publications, which are part of the archeological research of the region, or it is related to the study of architectural monuments. In this regard, it is necessary to mention the expeditions of archaeologist Giorgi Gogochuri and art critic Giorgi Bagrationi to Truso and Mni valleys (Bagrationi, Matsaberidze, 2004a: 462; Bagrationi, Matsaberidze, 2004, b: 466).

Epigraphic monuments of Truso were first assembled, described, measured, photographed and illustrated by art expert Giorgi Gagoshidze, after arriving twice in Truso, in 2018-2020. The researcher first collected and published 21 Georgian inscriptions in the collective monograph "Truso-Historical and Ethnocultural Problems" (Topchishvili et al. 2021: 2021: 129-141) with the relevant archeographic description. The author included the above-mentioned Truso stela inscription in the catalog of Georgian inscriptions and quite rightly criticized Giorgi Turchaninov's entire reading of the inscription.

In September, 2021, as part of the Truso Expedition, we surveyed the epigraphic monuments of the region and carried out the related work. Based on previous studies and analysis of material collected during our expedition, a number of issues and problems have been identified in the study of Truso's written monuments.

The general description of Truso's epigraphic monuments emphasizes the fact that only Georgian inscriptions and Russian-language tombstone epitaphs are found in the region. The lower chronological limit of Georgian inscriptions is the X century and most of the inscriptions are tombstone epitaphs, which are mainly dated to the XIX or early XX century. The oldest Georgian epigraphic monument is carved on the south façade of the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the very first stone from the foundation. The inscription dates back to the construction period of the temple - X - XI centuries and tells the history of the construction of the temple. In the material, found during the expedition, we have monuments in both “Asomtavruli” and “Mkhedruli” scripts. Although medieval Georgian inscriptions are in small numbers, we emphasize that no other written culture of this era is read in the epigraphy of the region. There are many more Georgian inscriptions in the form of 19th century tombstone epitaphs. The given material unequivocally indicates that Truso was the area of spread of Georgian written culture. Moreover, from a palaeographic point of view, Truso, as a separate historical-geographical region, created a local version of a stone calligraphic school, which is typical for the mountainous regions of Georgia. This local variant is echoed by the Mkhedruli inscription of Truso stela and all the inscriptions made in the “Mkhedruli” alphabet of the following period in the valleys of Truso and Mani.

The written culture of the Truso and Mani valleys in the Middle Ages is Georgian, and the existing small number of inscriptions are convincing arguments for that. In the Middle Ages, in the XIX century, the Georgian written culture still dominates here, but since the 80s of the 19th century, the situation has been slowly changing, Georgian inscriptions are preserved here and there, but the Georgian script gradually loses its function and gives way to a foreign script. Which has played a dominant role in the twentieth century, especially since the establishment of the Soviet rule.

Most of the Russian inscriptions are epitaphs of the XX tombstone, rarely, but still found a few epitaphs dating to the 70s of the XIX century and the following years. The inscriptions in Russian are mainly from the Soviet era. And because the Georgian language predominates in the 19th century tombstone inscriptions, it suggests that the Russian Empire has not yet been able to foster the full cultural emancipation of the region.

The study of Truso's written monuments revealed the following problems:

- The need to create a complete catalog of the epigraphic monuments of the Truso Valley, clearly showing the picture of gradual correlation and change of the written culture in the region.
- The creation of a catalog will facilitate the expansion of toponymic, onomastic and other types of historical-source studies presented in epigraphic monuments,
- The study of the old artefacts of Truso and Mni valleys should be continued on the basis of archeological excavations and the region should become the object of intensive

archeological research. We think this work will reveal much more epigraphic monuments. First of all, archeological works should be carried out in churches and on sites of ruined churches.

- It is necessary to study the old cemetery, especially the cemetery in front of the Virgin of Mni, as well as the old cemetery on the hill at the confluence of the Tergi river and Swatis in the Truso valley. Here are both twentieth-century and medieval tombs, the archaeological study of which will shed some light on many interesting issues.

Fortified towers occupy one of the most important places among the materials obtained during the field expedition, having a significant concept in the secular architecture of the region. Since ancient times Truso has been a part of historical Dvaleti, within the boundaries of Georgia, where ethnic Georgian Dvalis, mentioned many times in Georgian, Armenian and ancient sources, lived (Chikovani, 1985: 109). The Georgian kings paid great attention to the fortification of the Georgian state on the lower reaches of Tergi River valley and on the southern slope of the main watershed of the Caucasus, according to XI century Georgian historian Juansher. According to him, in the 5th century, King Vakhtang Gorgasali of Georgia built fortresses in Dariali (Tergi river gorge) and established local Georgian mountaineers under their protection, where foreign tribes living in the North Caucasus could not pass without the king's permission (Juansher, 1955: 156).

Except the lower part of Tergi river, Georgian kings had also fortified the area of modern North Ossetia, north of the head of the Tergi river (Truso), in particular the narrowest part of the Ardon valley, Kasri gorge (historical Dvaleti) with fortresses to prevent Ossetians having settled in the North Caucasus from entering the territory of Georgia (Batonishvili Vakhushiti, 1973: 644-645).

The Kasri Gate in the late Middle Ages had the function of the northern border of the Kingdom of Kartli. The Ossetians call the Kasri gorge "Kasara", which means "gate" in the Ossetian language. According to Ossetian scientist V. Abayev, the mentioned term should be derived from Georgian, in particular from the word in Rachian dialect - "Karseli". G. Chikovani does not agree with F. Abayev's opinion and says that: the similar narrow places, blocking the gorge, are called "kari" (gate) in Rachian (and not Karseli). C. Chikovani, based on the old Georgian language dictionary, published by I. Abuladze, expresses the opinion that the mentioned toponym should be derived from *Kasri*. In ancient Georgian, the term Kasri was used to refer to a fortress tower (which we also agree with G. K.) (Chikovani, 1985: 111).

From the presented information it is obvious, that the royal government of Georgia paid great attention to the fortification of territories of the Tergi gorge and the areas located to the north of it. As we have already said, the geographical area of the valleys that collect the headwaters of the river Tergi, the same Truso, is quite rich with old Georgian architectural monuments. Unfortunately, today, due to deliberate political goals, by completely distorting the historical truth, Russian and Ossetian scholars are perverting the ethno-history of the Georgian population of Truso and attempting to attribute the monuments of Georgian material cultural heritage to Ossetian culture.

From the numerous architectural monuments in Truso, this time our attention is drawn to the fortified towers, the silence of which echoes the cry of historical truth.

This type of towers are not found on all over the territory of Georgia, but only in historical Shida Kartli (Truso is located in the mountains of Shida Kartli). Here is the area of its origin and spread, most of them are located in Aragvi gorge, followed by Ksani, Tergi, Rekhula, Mejuda and PataraLiakhvi valleys (Zakaria, 1962: 49).

Georgian architect and art critic Parmen Zakaria considers the V-VI centuries to be the time of the origin of the fortified towers. According to his research, fortified towers in Georgia were mostly built by the end of the 10th century, although they were erected in the late feudal era, but rarely. After the first half of the 17th century, towers of this style were no longer known at all (Zakaria, 1962: 82).

According to the research of Jondo Gvasalia, the study of the fortifications of the valleys in Eastern Georgia - Aragvi, Ksani, Lekhura, Mejuda, Liakhvi and Tergi - shows that they represent an integrated defense system. An essential element of these buildings is the fortified tower. The area of its distribution is limited. To the north, the extreme boundary of backtower is Gergeti village. Apart from Georgia, this type of building is not found in any other nation of Caucasia. (Gvasalia, 1976: 147).

J. Gvasalia also explains that: observing the fortifications of the Aragvi, Ksani, Lekhuri, Mejudi, Liakhvi and Tergi valleys, we came to the conclusion that they were a unified defense system constructed in the pre-feudal era. An essential element of these buildings was the fortified tower or Georgian tower. This defensive system was used against both the Arabs and the northern tribes (Gvasalia, 1983: 60).

In September, 2021, with the support of the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation, during a field-scientific expedition to Truso, we observed two fortified towers in Mna (Truso). Mna water joins Tergi river from the left. Both fortified towers are located on the left bank of the Mna water. From the junction of the Mna water with the Tergi river, the first tower is conventionally called the first tower, and the one above it is called the second tower.

Both fortified towers are built with fairly large boulders. Both are badly damaged. The upper floors have been torn down. The first tower with a straight wall is directed towards the Mna water, its remaining lower part is completely filled with soil, but it creates an impression that the lower remaining part was deaf from the beginning and floors were above it, which are completely ruined. The straight wall of the mentioned tower is 5.80 m long; The length of its sides is 8 meters on average; Distance between the initial side walls of the back is 4.70 m; The total circumference of the outer arch of the curtain wall equals to 6.40 m; The distance between the straight line of the initial walls of the back and the center of the back is 1.90 m; back height from the ground 1.30 m; height of the front flat wall is 5.30 m; the height of the South side wall 4.75 m, while the height of the north side wall is 3.75 m.

On the back side of the tower is a separate pile of huge stones embedded in the ground. We do not rule out that the boulders buried in the ground had a cult-religious purpose in their time, like the cult stones with syncretic prayers in Pshavi-Khevsureti and Tusheti, with which the locals still perform folk-Christian religious rituals.

As already mentioned, the second tower is also located on the left bank of the Mna water. It is built on an elevated conical slope. It has a small ravine coming from the southeast. Later, a basilica-style church was built next to it. The tower is built of rather large rough-hewn boulders. One third of the surviving straight wall has been demolished almost to the ground. Dimensions: the length of straight wall - 5.60 m; Length of side walls - 6.10 m; Width of walls on average - 1.80 m; Distance between the ends of the lateral straight walls facing the back is 4.50 m; The back is thrust out from the line of endings of the walls by 1.90 m.

The tower is quite damaged, but among the survived back towers, it is unique in its architectural features. Its uniqueness lies in its special content. The surviving lower part of this tower is not deaf, ie it has a square-shaped gap in the middle (dimensions: 1.12 m). As a result of the landslide on the south-east side of the tower, a very narrow square corridor enters the wall of the tower, which joins the vertical gap in the middle of the tower. In turn, difficult, but still noticeable, there is a hollow running horizontally into the ground, which must have connected the tower with the dilapidated buildings nearby, as well as with a small ravine that runs a little farther away.

If the ground had not collapsed, the corridor inside the wall next to the tower would not have appeared, and over time the vertical gap in the middle of it would have been filled with rubble, and we or another researcher would have considered the remaining lower part of the tower deaf. Therefore, the surviving part of the tower is really unique, through which, with more or less accuracy, we are given information about the architectural features of the back towers of the early period.

If we compare the back towers described by us with the Midelauri of the villages of Khada gorge (Mtiuleti) and the back towers of Rostians, we will clearly see the identity between them, for example: in external proportions, stone processing techniques and dimensions, which in turn indicates that in pre-feudal times, there were the same architectural traditions of building back towers in the mountains of Georgia.

Khada Valley is distinguished by the abundance of fortified towers. But, the fortified towers of the Midelauri and Rostiano villages, mentioned, are different from the rest of the towers. The fortified towers of these two villages are preserved only with the lower deaf part, they have no entrance inside and the middle part is massive. Architecturally, these towers are more similar to the first back tower of Truso. According to our observations and assumptions, these two backed towers of Khada Valley are more archaic than the others, their archaism is indicated by the massive thickness of the walls and the relatively large and roughly processed stones unlike the others.

As we have already mentioned, both of the fortified towers of Truso, with their proportions and architectural features, are very close to the towers of Midelauri and Rostiani. Considering the structure of the second tower of Truso, it is not excluded that the first tower and the Midelauri and Rostiani towers of Khada villages also had underground communication systems in their time, it is impossible to clarify this issue without archeological intervention.

As we have mentioned, according to Ilia Abuladze's research, Guldam Chikovani believes that the toponym "Kasris Khevi" in the territory of modern North Ossetia, which is part of the

Russian Federation, is derived from the old Georgian word "Kasri", which in turn meant a fortress-tower in old Georgian.

Therefore we can say that the Kasri ravine refers to a ravine that dates back to the first millennium BC, the Georgian royal government fortified it with castle towers, or in ancient Georgian, Kasri gorge means ravine of castle towers, and we suggest that these towers should have barrel-like backs, which are known today as back towers.

Nor is it excluded that from the ancient times round-shaped towers were spread in the mountains of Georgia, which is why, presumably, they were named as barrels. Over time, for example: from the IV-V centuries A.D. the architectural shape was changed and we got a fortified tower, in which the old architectural mark was reflected in only one wall, the other three sides were turned into a straight wall, which was preserved until the end of the X century, and after the tenth century new four-strait-wall towers were built.

The variety of historical material we have studied provides reliable information about the religious situation in the Truso Valley. Our attention was especially drawn to the history of the XIX century, when the annexation of Georgia by Russia in 1801 led to the abolition of the autocephaly of the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church in 1811. As a result of the reorganization of Georgian church in Russian way, the institution of patriarchy was abolished, the Exarchate of Georgia was created, which directly subordinated to the Most Holy and Correct Synod of the Russian Church, and its management was entrusted to the Exarch of Georgia.

The policy of the Russian Empire, the desire to expand the borders, subjugate and russify the neighboring peoples, required a special intensification of missionary activities. In 1815, by decision of the Russian emperor, the "Ossetian Theological Commission" was restored, the main goal of which was to convert Caucasians, especially Ossetians, to Orthodoxy.

This time, the activity of the "Commission" was directed from the southern slopes of the Caucasus to the north. Thus, Georgia, already been annexed by Russia, was chosen for supporting the activity of the "Ossetian Theological Commission".

This time, the "Commission" began the Christianization process of Ossetians from Georgia. A number of Georgian clergymen were actively involved in the work of the Ossetian Theological Commission, preaching under most difficult and unsafe conditions in the mountainous valleys of Shida Kartli, in Ossetian-populated villages (Kokrashvili, 2010: 452-453). Churches were in direct contact with the local population, each family, each person, and thus the documents and information provided by them provide the noteworthy material for the reconstruction of historical reality.

The subject of our paper is not the assessment of the work of the Ossetian Theological Commission or the Society for the Restoration of Christianity in the Caucasus, but our purpose is to determine, based on archival materials: what was the religious situation in Truso Valley, what problems did the clergy face, what was the condition of the churches, and what did the people of the Truso valley demand...

We found number of documents, in particular, the texts of the official memo of Archimandrite Nikiphore, the preacher of the "Ossetian Theological Commission", which he presented to the Georgian Exarch Theophilacte in 1817-1818. They contain valuable information about the situation in the Truso Valley. In a letter sent to the Exarch of Georgia, Theophilacte Rusanov in 1817, Archimandrite Nikifore informed the Exarch about the situation in the villages of the Aragvi Valley, namely: newly baptized Ossetians live in the villages of Gimar, Abano, Keteris, Okrokana, located in the middle of Aragvi valley. Thirty 30 households, 215 souls, are statesmen, the construction of a church is planned here as well, it is 1 verst away from Tbilissi.

In Aragvi gorge, in the villages of Mna, Korp, Ukhat, Khurt, there live newly baptized Ossetians, their number is forty. They have a priest, and there are many others who are to be baptized. "(Central Historical Archive of the National Archives of Georgia, Fund # 488, Description # 1, Case # 93, Sheet 8). The same document discusses the need to build a church in the Truso Valley: "it is not difficult and is easy to build a church here, on the river Aragvi in the Truso valley, with cut stones bought and fallen material, thrown on all sides" (Central Historical Archive of the National Archives of Georgia, Fund # 488, Description # 1, Case # 93, Sheet 13).

Another document sent by Archimandrite Nikifor in 1818 to the Georgian Exarch Theophylact Rusanov, states that in the mountains, the population newly converted to Christianity, needs clergy and a church. "(Central Historical Archive of the National Archives of Georgia, Fund # 488, Description # 1, Case # 137, Sheet 1).

The need for clergy is mentioned in a letter sent in 1846 by the priest Andria Gurgენidze, requesting the Exarch of Georgia Isidore (1844-1858) to send a clergyman to the parish of Abano. The document informs that there was no priest in the parish of Abano at that time. For this reason, it was difficult to meet Christian needs of the parish. At the same time, Andria Gurgენidze himself offers the candidacy of a clergyman to be appointed to the parish of Abano: "I urge and address you, the lordship, that we would be grateful if you could appoint one of the priests to Abano Parish and recommend the priest Ivane Induashvili, who will be useful not only for the congregation of Abano, But also for me, because in winter due to heavy snow and avalanches it is very difficult for me to get to Kobe. Because of this, the parish would be deprived not only of the priest but also of the Christian needs. (Central Historical Archive of the National Archives of Georgia, Fund # 488, Description # 1, Case # 11489, Sheet 6).

Numerous archival documents point to the need for clergy, stating that a parishioner needed a priest to meet his religious needs.

From the document submitted by the priest Andria Gurgენidze in 1852 to the exarch of Georgia Isidore (Nikolski - GB) it is clear how many people were baptized that year in the parish of Kobi and Abano. Namely: in 1852, 82 Ossetian men and 34 women were baptized in the Kobi parish; In the parish of Abano, 40 men and 10 women were baptized in the same year. The same number was added to the number of confessors (Central Historical Archive of the Georgian National Archives, Fund # 488, Description # 1, Case # 16229, Sheet 3).

There are plenty of letters found in the Fund of the Chancellery of the Exarch of Georgia sent by priest Andria Gurgeniidze. In a letter dated 1851, Andria Gurgeniidze requested the Exarch of Georgia to build stone houses for the priests of the parishes of Kobi and Abano. For this, 500 silver rubles were allocated, which were to be divided in the middle: for the houses of the priests of Kobi and Abano churches. Priest Andria Gurgeniidze presented a book on income and expenses regarding this issue. The income and expenditure book also reveals the identities of the workers who participated in the construction of the clergy houses, including both Georgian and Ossetian workers, most of them locals: Kokashvilis, Gudievs, Buchukuris, Agaevs, Tsabulovs, Karashvilis, Bedoshvilis. (Central Historical Archive of the National Archives of Georgia, Fund # 488, Description # 1, Case # 15546, Page 9).

According to a document dated 1852, the priest Andria Gurgeniidze again addressed a request to the Exarch of Georgia, this time because of the Church of St. George in Kobi. Andria Gurgeniidze reports that the roof of St. George Church in Kobi is on the verge of collapse and needs to be repaired. Material help is needed to repair the temple. It seems that the problem of St. George Church in Kobi could not be solved in those years, as the document dated 1858 still discusses this issue.

It seems that the deplorable condition of the churches in the Truso Valley, the lack of material resources, the housing problem of the clergy were characteristic of the following years as well. In 1859, Ivan Bidzianov, the priest of the Kobi Church, addressed the exarch and announced that the house for priests in the Kobi parish was in a deplorable condition, with four of the four rooms in need of repair. To do this, he asks to allocate 40 rubles and 500 kopecks of silver money to repair the house. According to the archival document, Ivane Bidzianov, a clergyman working in the Kobi parish, received 225 rubles of silver rubles allocated by the Exarch of Georgia to repair the house of the clergy in Kobani at the Pasanauri post office. In addition, Ivan Bidzianov informed the exarch that he would definitely submit a book of income and expenditure for the construction of the church house (Central Historical Archive of the Georgian National Archives, Fund # 488, Description # 1, Case # 18681, Pages 4-5).

Many archival materials of this nature are preserved in the fund of the Chancellery of the Exarchate of Georgia. The archival documents helped us to get acquainted with the clergymen who were working in the Truso Valley at that time, to identify the problems they had to deal with. From the studied materials we can boldly conclude that from 1817 to 1862 the clergymen working in the Truso Valley were Georgians who performed liturgy and other church services in Georgian.

The complex study and systematic analysis of the above-mentioned variety of materials, Georgian and foreign narratives, as well as documentary written sources, epigraphic monuments and ancient artefacts sheds light on many interesting pages of the mysterious history of the Truso Valley.

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The research was conducted within the framework of the project "Demographics of the Truso Valley and Cultural Identities of the Population" funded by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation.

Grant Agreement № FR-19-7379