

VILLAGE GERI AND GERI ST. GIORGI'S CHURCH
სოფელი გერი და გერის წმინდა გიორგის ტაძარი

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Abstract

After the war in 2008, historically Georgian villages of Didi and Patara Liakhvi, Ksani and Prone gorges have been left beyond barbed-wire, Geri is one of the villages, the famous church of St. Giorgi is located in the village. The warshiping place was venerated by Georgians and Ossetians alike. Unfortunately, after Russian military aggression the way to St. Giorgi church of Geri is indeterminately closed for Georgian pilgrims. In this presented essey we have endeavoured to revive the past and the history of village Geri, the church of St. Giorgi and renowned Geristoba.

Village Geri is located in the headstream of Patara Liakhvi gorge, on the south sloap of Gudisi ringe, 1480m above sea level, the distance from the village to Tskhinvali is only 22km and was a unit of Tskhinvali Region until 1991, a little river: Geris Khevi, breanch of little Liakhvi passes the village, the source of the rever is Mountain called : „Mskhlebis Mta“. As Vakhushti Batonishvili discribes: From the west, Geris Khevi joins rever Liakhvi, which begins in the Mskhlebis Mta and continues to the south. Osetian people live here, called: Along with Vanati Savakhtango and Vanati, Satskhenisi and Beloti are joined by Potrisis ravine from above, deep, impenetrable and rocky place, the river flows between Geri and Shuatskhviri mountain. Ossetian people live in Shuatskhviri.

Keywords: Geri, Patara Likahvi gorge, Geri St. Giorgi church, Geristoba.

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გიორგი სოსიაშვილი

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აბსტრაქტი

2008 წლის აგვისტოს ომის შემდეგ დიდი და პატარა ლიახვის, ასევე ქსნის და ფრონეს ხეობების ისტორიულ ქართულ სოფელთან ერთად საოკუპაციო ძალების მიერ გავლებულ მავთულხლართს მიღმა გერიც მოექცა, სადაც სახელგანთქმული გერის წმინდა გიორგის ტაძარი მდებარეობს. მას განსაკუთრებული პატივისცემით ეპყრობოდნენ როგორც ქართველი, ისე ოსი მორწმუნეები. სამწუხაროდ, რუსეთის მიერ განხორციელებული აგრესიის შემდეგ ქართველი მლოცველებისთვის გერის წმინდა გიორგის ტაძარში მისასვლელი გზა გაურკვეველი ვადით ჩაიკეტა. წინამდებარე ნაშრომში შევეცადეთ კიდევ ერთხელ გაგვეცოცხლებინა სოფელ გერის წარსული, მკითხველისთვის წარმოგვეჩინა გერის წმინდა გიორგის ტაძრის ისტორია და ამ უძველეს სალოცავთან დაკავშირებული გერისთობის დღესასწაული.

სოფ. გერი მდ. პატარა ლიახვის ხეობის ზემო წელზე, გუდისის ქედის სამხრეთ კალთაზე, ზღვის დონიდან 1480 მ-ის სომალეზე, ცხინვალიდან კი 22 კმ-ის დაშორებით მდებარეობს. 1991 წლამდე იგი ცხინვალის რაიონში შედიოდა. გერს გვერდით პატარა ლიახვის ერთ-ერთი შენაკადი გერის ხევი ჩამოუდის, რომელიც მსხლების მთიდან იღებს სათავეს. ვახუშტი ბატონიშვილის აღწერით: „ხოლო ვანათს ერთვის დასავლეთიდამ ლიახვს ხევი გერისა, გამოსდის მსხლების მთას და დის სამხრით, ამას ზედა მსახლობელნი არიან ოსნი. უწოდებენ ვანათითურთ სავახტანგოს. ხოლო ვანათსა, საცხენისსა და ბელოთს ზეით ერთვის ფოტრისის ხევი, ღრმა კლდიანი ძნიად განსავალი, გამოსდის გერის და შუაცხვირის მთას, შუაცხვირს მსახლობელნი არიან ოსნი“. სავახტანგოს შესახებ ქართულ ისტორიოგრაფიაში აზრთა სხვადასხვაობაა.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: გერი, პატარა ლიახვის ხეობა, გერის წმ. გიორგის ტაძარი, გერისთობა.

Introduction

The location of village Geri

Village Geri is located in the headstream of Patara Liakhvi gorge, on the south sloap of Gudisi ringe, 1480m above sea level, the distance from the village to Tskhinvali is only 22km and was a unit of Tskhinvali Region until 1991, (Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia, 1978: p.98) a little river: Geris Khevi, breanch of little Liakhvi passes the village, the source of the rever is Mountain called : „Mskhlebis Mta“. As Vakhushti Batonishvili discrubes: From the west, Geris Khevi joines rever Liakhvi, which begins in the Mskhlebis Mta and continues to the south. Osetian people live here, called: Along with Vanati Savakhtango and Vanati, Satskhenisi and Beloti are joined by Potrisis ravine from above, deep, impenetrable and rocky place, the river flows between Geri and Shuatskhviri mountain. Ossetian people live in Shuatskhviri. (Batonishvili, 1953: p.363). Ioane Bagrationi includes Geri in the villages of Aragvi. Following villages are included in Liakhvi gorge as Aragvi villages (“Saarago”): k. Saarago Shindisi, population k, Tirdznisi population k, Vanati, population k, ossetian village Marileti, population k, Shuriuli, population k, Inauri, population k, Klartsvi, population k, Mepareti, population k, Geri, population – this village was owned by Yulon, but now Eristavs govern it.”. (Bagrationi, 1986:, p. 38). Ioane Batonishvili does not uses the word “Saarago” accidentally. As it seems, Aragvi dukes, - Eristavs governed Geri and couple of villages in middle ages.* Ioane Batonishvili states that, once Geri was owned by Yulon Batonishvili; later, Eristavs took over. It is well-known fact that, Erekle the second seized the lend of Giorgi Kularaghas, lord of Ksani, made the noble house of Ksani extinct and some part of the property, villages, located in upper part of Patara Liakhvi gorge, gave to Yulon Batonishvili. Yulon Batonishvili, son of Erekle the second, resided in village Beloti . (Sosiashvili, 2011: p. 139). As it seems, Geri might be passed on to him in the same period. Later, Eristavs retrieved the village back. According to 1804 Russian census, dukes of Ksani, Eristavs, owned serf - peasants of Beloti. (Central Historical Archive of Georgia, p. 12.)

Methods

The current research is mainly based on research methods tested in historical and political sciences: empirical analysis, comparative-historical method, causal-comparative analysis, synthesis, abstraction, content analysis, and system analysis.

* Ancestors of Dukes of Aragvi , came from upper part of Little Liakhvi, Vanni, near Geri. G.Sosiashvili, from the history of Georgian Noblemen, Tb. 2008, p.45-58.

Results

After the war in 2008, historically Georgian villages of Didi and Patara Liakhvi, Ksani and Prone gorges have been left beyond barbed-wire, Geri is one of the villages, the famous church of St. Giorgi is located in the village. The warshiping place was venerated by Georgians and Ossetians alike. Unfortunately, after Russian military aggression the way to St. Giorgi church of Geri is indeterminately closed for Georgian pilgrims. In this presented essey we have endeavoured to revive the past and the history of village Geri, the church of St. Giorgi and renowned Geristoba.

Discussion

Other documents of the first half of seventeenth century states the same that dukes of Aragvi - Eristavs, owned village Geri. The name of the village and its etymology is quite interesting. As scholar J. Gvasalia explains of the village's etymology, it is based on Zan language. "Toponyms of Little Liakhvi gorge might be explained based on Zan language. " Little Liakhvi is merged with tributary Geriskhevi , at the source of the river, one can find worshipping place, well-known in Kartli, Geri. Pilgrims prayed for the safety of their domestic animals, riddance from wolfs etc. Geri means "a wolf" in mingrelian language and Lomisa and Geri might have the same meaning, if we consider Lomi/lemi (Svan language) in Lomisa. Genetically, the same worshipping animal is a wolf (a dog). (Gvasalia, 1986: p. 165). Gvasalia also sees the resemblance between hydronim "Mejuda" and "Mejudi" (in zan language). He thinks that some of the toponims in Kartli might be derived from Svan language. E.g "isroli", root word is "isr", in Svan language means sedge etc. (Gvasalia, 1986: p. 165). The observations, Gvasalia made, should be considered as well-formulated. However, Liakhvi gorge toponyms indicate similarities to lexical unities of Dargwa languages. e.i. hydronim "Liakhvi" in Nakh language mean "Lia- snow, khu(khi) water". (Kharadze, 1992: p.113). Once, there was a village with the same name in Borjomi Gorge. Newspaper "Tsnobis purtseli" mentions the village among other villages concerning the road cleaning ("Tsnobis purtseli", 1899: p.1.) it is noted that, a village "Gergebili" (Guldenstedt, 1962: p. 101) is in Dagestan. We find it interesting that, "Ger" – rooted words as toponyms are widespread not only in Northern but also in southern Caucasus. e.i. in Russian description of the second half of the nineteenth century, "Gerapis", "Gerger" (Archive of statistical data on settlements in the Caucasus region, 1893: # 154) is mentioned, and in Elisabethpol (Ganja) province we find "Gerana", "Gerazliar", (Ibid) "Gerger", "Gergebil", and "Geri", similarities with "Gergeti" is quite noticeable. With the same root, "Germukha" a village once existed in Georgia, where Paleolithic monuments were discovered. (Gvasalia, 1986: p.48).

Makalatia explains that Ossetians call Geri "Jgerzuar", Georgian Geri and Jeran (Jger), (derived from Geri), are the same as Svan "Jgvvrag" and Mingrelian Jege (Jgege and Gege) and they mean St. Giorgi. (Makalatia, 1971: p.61) man name Geriso is quite familiar name in Kartli and we think it is connected to St. Giorgi church and origin of the name we might find in the legend of St. Giorgi church as a savior and protector of kids, who were infected with various infectious diseases. Churches of St. Giorgi in Kartli were built on the ruins of pagan temples. As Javakhishvili describes St. Giorgi replaced Georgian idol of the moon (Javakhishvili, 1960: p.50). As "Ger" is a same root for words, in different parts of

Caucasus and is the same toponym for region, it might be the same lexical unit for Caucasus ethnos and this matter requires linguist's attention.*

Geru in feudal era

We first encounter Geru in the seventeenth century documents. As it seems, dukes of Aragvi owned upper part of Patara Liakhvi. One of the documents says that, Nugzar Eristavi donated Geru with other villages to Svetitskhoveli. "K. ks.te. this book says...alive pillar, I, owner Nugzar (son on Baindur and G-ig) thus our **estate Geru and Geristavi** (underlining from the author) are offered to Svetitskhoveli... and Svetitskhoveli owned Arbo Sgenasmani and we offered Kordi, our land, three Bekniashvili Irema and others" (Sosiashvili, 2012: p. 31) document shows that, Geru and Geristavi were owned by Aragvi Eristavs. In document we read "Samkvidro", - a land owned by somebody, as it seems, some villages in little Liakhvi gorge, were owned by the ancestors of Nugzar Eristavi. His great grandfather was a nobleman from Vanati and from the years, when King Svimon ruled the country, owner of Vanati fortress retreated, he, as the king ordered, deceitfully seized the fortress, thus received land there from the king (Jordania, 1897: p 441). Historical documents do not say when Eristavs lost their land in Little Liakhvi Gorge. In Shida Kartli, Geru was well-known for its wonder making St. George church, but it seems interesting that, in the deed, Geru and Geristavi is mentioned, but not the miraculous St. Giorgi church. Chronicle of Geru Monastery names King Parsman (reigned in the sixth century) as the founder of Geru Church. In late feudal era, vineyard of Geru was owned by Kashueti St. George church, a rival of Vatopedi monastery, located near Geru, in Little Liakhvi Gorge. One document, drew up on August 30th, 1779 and maintained in private fund of Petre Karbelashvili, in Historical Archive, tells us an interesting fact" Verdict of his holiness of dikasteria (church court) His highness the king Irakli ordered Dicastery (Batonishvili, 1973: p.534) to clear up and elucidate the church and land of Annunciation, in Vatopedi monastery, Mtatsminda, as we should elucidate and make a ruling on the governance of Potori St. Giorgi church and name abbot Iosap from the Church of Annunciation, Vatopedi, as a supervisor, Dicastery investigated and explored and believed with our heart the truth: Kashueti Church of St. Giorgi was under the domain of Vatopedi church of Annunciation and the church was destroyed by the river Liakhvi and blessed queen Mariam had them built the other church on the other side of the river. This is the church, and icons, placed in dilapidated church, had been kept by Makhniashvili, from krtskhinvali and later replaced them in newly build church.

Queen Mariam granted Makhniashvili archpriesthood and catholicos - patriarch of all Georgia Ioane affirmed Makhniashvili as a deacon with special letter, and his holiness, catholicos - patriarch of all Georgia, prince Domenti, and his holiness, catholicos - patriarch of all Georgia, son of the king, Anton gave archpriesthood to Makhniashvili. Thus, we declare: dilapidated church of Potori or newly built church on the other side of Liakhvi, build by the order of queen Mariam and serfs and lands, dedicated to those churches, old and new, dedicated vineyard: half of vineyard, owner Eliashvili, vineyard near the church, owner Maisuradze, vineyard of Mujari Basilla, vineyard of Gula Geru, or a house, or a land, or a cemetery, everything belongs to Vatopedi church of Annunciation, everything

* On village Geru, see G. Sosiashvili, Geru and Geristoba, scientific conference, dedicated to the memory of Prof. Lela Meladze, GSTU, conference materials, 2012, G. Sosiashvili, Essays from the History of Liakhvi Gorge, Tb. 2011, G. Sosiashvili, village Geru and St. George of Geru, materials for the history of Georgian villages, II, Tb. 2021.

is governed and maintained by abbot Iosap and he is the owner and supervisor. And no men or no clergymen or noblemen have no right to those serfs, land or church except abbot Iosap, and from now on, if some hidden land or serfs or property is discovered, they, too, will be the property of Vatopedi monastery. Dicastery made this ruling on August 30, year 1779. Bishop of Tbilisi, Mikhail, unworthy archimandrite Stepane, unworthy deacon of Mtskheta Nikoloz, royal chancellor David. And we confirm this verdict. August 31, year 1779, Catholicos Anton” (Batonishvili, 1991: p.77).

The document is not clear about the donation of a vineyard. If it was donated by the royal family to Vatopedi monastery or by the Eristavi family. One can say that, Vatopedi monastery had lost the vineyard with other properties for two centuries and only Erekle II have them returned to rightful owners with the decision of dicastery. The information about Geri population is rather scanty in the document. According to the deed of Nugzar Eristavi, Geri consisted of two parts. One part was called Geri, the other one –Geristavi. Well-known to all Kartli, St. Giorgi church was located in Geristavi. Geristaoba (Geristoba) a famous holiday was called after the name of the village. In Late feudal era, “Ledger of Vilayet Tbilisi” created in 1728 gives us some information on Geri population. As it is described in Ottoman document, Geri was under the ownership of Givi Amilakhvari, who had fought against Ottomans for some time and later changed sides. In return, Ottomans rewarded him with Geri. (Dolidze, 1974: p.128). At this time, 11 households and 24 families lived in Geri. We even know the names of family heads: “ Babuna son of Ivane, Ivane brother of his Zurab brother of his Giorgi son of Shio Giorgi brother of his Zazir son of Zalika brother of his Giorgi son of his Alia brother of his Otara son of Chubina, Okrua son of Giorgi Adua brother of his Giorgi son of Datuna Chubina son of his Gikuka son of Tevdore Dimitri brother of his Chubina son of Bevika Tamaza brother of his Beri brother of his Geneba Son of Tevdore Giorgi brother of Ioseba son of Zakaria Onia brother of his Bira son of his”. (Sosiashvili, 2016: p. 62). Historical document does not give us information about ethnicity of the population. However, the names: Ivane, Zurabi, Giorgi, Shio, Zalika, Beri, Otara, Okrua, Datuna, Dimitri, Tamaza, Tevdore, Ioseba, Zakara tell us that it is obvious only Georgians lived in Geri. Some of the names are miswritten by the author of the leger. For example, Zaziri, Giguka, Geneba, Bira. Those names are not popular in Georgian onomasticon, however new last names were derived from them: from Onia- Oniashvili, (Jikia and Shengelaia, 2009: p. 408) from Chubina-Chubinashvili(Akhuashvili, 1991: p.486) from Adua- Aduashvili. (Jordania and Khantadze, 1967: p. 31). Taxes, that Geri peasants paid were: daily ownership of the lend 50 daily ownership of royal valley ownership 20 daily ownership of royal vineyard 3 one bowl of grain “Ispenjy“ (tax fee for Christians) a man 24*, akhcha 2640 (Turkish silver coin from the 14th century) wheat a jar 110 akhcha 2200 barley a jar 60 akhcha 900 rye jar 30 akhcha 450 millet jar 40 akhcha 600 tenth fee (called “ushra”)on vineyard, donum (40 sq. Feet) 50, for each 40, akhcha 2000, fee on shortening 250 fee on a hive 120 fee for arusane (bride-tax) 120 fee on sheep 290 deshtiban on the lend tapu fee 180 fee on a pig 120, water-mill 1, yearly tax 120 badihava, jurum jibayet, iava ve kackun, beiTalmal am eve khase, mali gaif mali mefkud 200 total 10090” as the document tells us, Geri population paid couple of fees for Ottomans such as: fee on sheep, bee, pig, farm products paid in grains: shortening, barley, rye, hay etc. there were other taxes. Such as: Bedihava, Jurum Jibayet, iava ve kachkun, beitalmal, ameve khase, mali, gaip mali*. In some scientists opinion, badihava tax included different kinds of fines: bridal fee,

* In Georgian system of taxation, mali was a capitation tax, see V. Gabashvili, feudal era in Georgia, Tb. 1958, p 199. As the scientist claims: “Satatro Mali” (Ottoman mali) was e tax for the invaders and it became widespread during their domination in Georgia” same, p.251, scientist thinks that “Mali” soon loses its origin and becomes one of the main royal fee... XVI-XVIII cc, it was not associated with Ottomans. P. 253.

land tapu etc. other scientists think that badihava tax was paid with money as a penalty by a guilty person, (I. Akhuashvili, the same theses, p 195) as N. Gorgodze claims “ Badihava is a name of all compound fees, based on badihava kanun-namees are given, in historical documents, Java, kachkun, mali gaip etc. are mentioned together. Thus, badihava included couple of tax fees and it was obligatory for the population to pay taxes” (Gorgodze, 2005: p. 426). other Ottoman taxes, described in the document (i.e. Jurum jibayet), might be a small fees. Jurum Jibayet might be a small tax for miscellanies items included in Badihava tax. Geri peasants paid royal taxes also. The document, written at the end of the XVIII century, includes a list of peasants, who lived in Mghvia gorge (one of the tributary of Patara Liakhvi river) villages and did not pay taxes. We read:” Gubeshvili in Sheleuri has an obligation to pay tax, Archil in Sheleuri has half obligation to pay tax, (the man had already paid first half of the tax) Kabilov in Maraleti has an obligation to pay tax, Mose Kabulashvili from Maraleti has to give away one sheep (as a tax), Chupilashvili from Klartsvi one third of the obligation has to pay, Badri Kulumbegashvili from the same village- one goat, Gochiashvili from the same village, one third of the obligation has to pay, Beda Tabuev from the same village- one goat, Tabuashvili Patsa- two sheep, he had in Eredvi. Chuchuri Bekoshvili from Geri on fourth of the obligation has to pay, Archoshvili from Tsiara, half of the obligation, there is a note that he, tax collector, from this man received one goat. Alborov has to pay one third of the obligation, Torniev and Gazaev from Chvrivi- two obligations, Sabanashvili from the same village one whole obligation, son of Khachika from the same village, half of the obligation has to pay” (Gorgodze, 2005: p. 426).

One of the tax name in the document seems quite interesting: “mepkud” es Gabashvili explains” some of the peasants were without a land and benaks, a taxfee, was gathered by mevkupche, Miri official from them” mepkud or mevkupche are similar terms and mepkud might have been a tax fee from the man without property.

Ioane Bagrationi, aforementioned, includes Geri in Aragvi villages and says that it was a populated area; however, we could not find any other documents, except the General Ledger with the same information. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Ossetians, who came down from north Caucasus settled in deserted villages in upper side of Little Liakhvi gorge. According to Vakhushti Batonishvili, Ossetians settled in upper side of Geriskhevi. “Whereas in Vannati, Liakhvis khevi is merged with ravine of Geri from the west, goes through “Mshkhlebi” mountain and flows to the south. Ossetians are settled here”. (National Center of Manuscripts, HD-# 5888, History of Ossetia in Documents and materials, 1962: p. 241). Settlers oppressed and raided native population. In 1808 Ossetians gave a book of promise to Davit Tarkhnishvili (Tarkhanov) which said that, they would not steal any more “ Year chkkh December b we give you a book of promise to you, David Tarkhnov, we Kokishvili Jivi and my relatives Arbilishvili Petre and Bekoshvili Khosro Begashvili Khughun doggie // and Gogichashvili Tatuchi and Chochishvili Kiko and we all together and united that we promise not to steal and if somebody does, we are responsible and give back stolen goods and pay fines or you make us pay. I, Anton Memandarbashov wrote this letter for them, Bejan, son of beilif Mirza wrote the letter and confirmed” (Batonishvili: p.362). Villages in Big and Little Liakhvi gorge, upper side, also bases of valley of Ksani got populated by Ossetians. The same happened to Geri. According to 1886 census, 80 Ossetian families lived in Geri, 344 men and 227 women. They used “sakhino” land.(HD-10.664 N.D .G SIEM, 8059, Davt I, P.45, Davt II, P.157).

We cannot agree with this opinion as we see that in Great Ledger Mali was named among other Ottoman taxes.

In 1886 Giorgi Liakhveli (Chochishvili) published a letter in “Mtskhemi” (herder) where he mentions that residents of Geri, Chvrivi and Otevi got together to discuss some issues:” day of October 12, a fine day for our history as this day shows us that, education may be a cause of Ossetians’ enlightenment and how useful they can be for their nation, for their homeland, for their successful sons, who studied and are influential people. Aforementioned day, people from two parishes gathered in Geri: Chvrivi and Otevi. To decide some issues concerning Irad (the author means Urvadi, when a man decided to marry, he had to give cattle or other commodities to the bride’s family as a dowry – G.S) and eradication of “Kharnagebi”. I call these issues remarkable as I can only imagine how those traditions are disastrous for Ossetians’ well-being. People started to think about those issues as they are about to be parted with those traditions so deeply rooted in those people’s minds. Thus, these two traditions were considered as holly. Organizers and leaders were: Praporshick Mr. Ega Kokoev and his son, respected priest M. Grigor Kokoev. (Archive of statistical data on the population of the Transcaucasian region, 1893: # 417). Ossetians in Geri gorge, taxes of Urvadi and funeral expenses cut down and with money, one Abazi (20 copeck) they would build a dwelling for a teacher in Vanati. (Liakhveli, 1886: p.5). later, parish school was opened in Geri, which would be useful for the residents of Geri and nearby villages, in newspaper “Tsnobis Purtseli” we read: “parish school in Geri, society of Ortevi, villages Dzicareti, Maraleti, Sheleuri, Klartsi, Geri, Guji, Jvrevi, Kimassi and Sadaleti had decided during the meeting to open one- class parish school, to support the school financially they had to come up with 200 maneti every year”(Ibid).

St. Giorgi church of Geri

Scientists consider that the church was built during high medieval period in Geri.” The church was built in high Middle Ages; later, it was restored. The hall church is perched at the top of the mountain, built with different sizes of carved stones. In some places, it is filled with flat, gray stones, laying is mixed, in blueprint it is set in a rectangular plan, with an inscribed semicircular apse on the east , the nave is covered with a high gable roof, in the north of the apse, there is an arched recess, and in the south- two rectangular ones. One is deeper, at the bottom of the recess, there is a communion table. A conch is a semi-dome and the dome over a crossing is resting on white- stone columns, an altar is raised by one step. The church has an ogee arch. On the north façade, large arched window is placed; some small recesses are placed on the south façade. The walls are plastered, the floor is made with rectangular stone tiles. Narthex is arched from inside and is architraved from the outside. The church has a divided, two hinged gate. Porch is wide and arched and connected to transept. The transept has an elongated rectangular shape with a window on the east. The window has a rectangular shape from the inside and is arched from the outside. The entrance of the transept is architraved and located on the south. West façade is adjoined with two -story bell tower. Arches of the tower are rested on round columns, which are topped with plain chapiters. On the east façade, above and left of the window, a curved cross is visible. Transept windows are framed with finely hewed tiles. Cornice is profiled and tin-roofed. Main Entrance of the church is from the east. Wide gate is rested on massive stones. Around the church, remnants of the fence are visible”. (“Tsnobis Purtseli”, 1899: p.1).

The fence of the church remained at its place until the 1970s. Sergi Makalatia writes:” Village Geri can be seen from the mountain, divided in 5 parts. Above the village, there is a high rock, where Geri church is located, church ground is small, surrounded by the fence. The gate of the fence is built with

finally curved stones, topped with lion heads. The church itself is built with schist, there had been an old tower, later razed to the ground and built a chapel for the church in 1979. To the west, there is a ball-tower; the church is a small-sized and empty hall. There are no other ancient monuments around the church. Only two shacks, where pilgrims stayed for a night. St. George is considered to have a healing power to the mentally ill people and they tend to bring the diseased there to ask St. Giorgi to heal the sick. Thus, the icon, is considered wonderworking. There is other legend which says: King of Kartli, Parsman (VI) married Khvarazma, a daughter of Abkhazian ruler, she had a son Varamadsadi. In dowry she had repousse icon of St. George with relic. The king was childless and gave the icon to his stepson. During Persian invasion, the king sent his stepson to mountains for safety, built the church there and placed the icon of St. George in the church. In Georgian “stepson” is “Geri” and that’s why they called the village Geri . Geri was the village in mountains, where the icon was placed, an Arbo- in plains. One other legend says: when the St. George was tortured his body was dismembered. His hand and head were buried in Geri and the place was called Tavgeri. George of Geri had brothers: Arbo cross, St. George of Atotsi and St. George of Sarke (in Khevsureti). Feast of Geri, “Gerisoba” starts on August 27 and lasts for 3 weeks: the first is Tavgeroba, the second is Shuageroba and the third-Gerisbolo. The last one used to take place in Arbo and pilgrims would go straight to another church to pray. Believers stayed overnight in Geri and perform some rituals: when somebody promised St. George, he/she would walk around the church kneeling, or dancing and singing, or walking three times with heavy iron chain “Dadianuri”. People would bring various offerings: man’s figurine made out of wax, they would dress in whites, offer jewelry etc. around dusk pilgrims would get ready for pernoctation: took care of farm animals, adorned houses ,lit candles in the church and listened to the “icon preacher”. (Shida Kartli,, 2002, pp.43-45). At the end of the XIX century, they added a cell to the church, according to I. Megrelidze, the scientist saw a cross, carved on the wall, above the cell door and dated in 1899 (Makalatia, 1971: p.59-62). There were small waiting houses for pilgrims near the church. (Megrelidze, 1997: p.41). The east wall of the church is 5m.high, whereas extension is 2.57m. high. Total of 7.57m. The south wall of the church is 8.66m high. As I. Megrelidze claims:” An old building is renovated; the window is added in 1899 to the north wall; on the east wall, there is an opening and above it there are curved stones, inside the church, there is one stone with cross, on the shelf, there are 45 small bells, offered to the saint in different times. (Megrelidze, 1997: p.42). As the scientist says, Geri church was sometimes called a monastery. (Megrelidze, 1997: p.42). However, there is no trace of monastery life. In rainy weather, it was hard for pilgrims to climb up to the steep mountain and stayed to the bottom of the hill and prayed in front of the shrine. At the bottom of Geri, a Russian scientist, G. Chursin saw two or three bells on a worshipping beech tree. If the pilgrims had not been able to go up, they would have had a place to pray near the holy place. (Megrelidze, 1997: p.40). As we mentioned before, chronicle of Geri ascribes foundation of Geri to King of Kartli Parsman. Writer of the chronicle is decon Iakob Lomouri, resident of Arbo, who was ministering at Geri church and wrote the chronicles there. He tells the tale of Geri church, history of village Geri and its traditions in the chronicles. Iakob Lomouri was an ancestor of well-known Georgian author Niko Lomouri.* in 1911, chronicle had gotten into the hands of bishop Kirion (the Catholicos- patriarch of all Georgia Kirion II) who donated the book to National Museum of Georgia. Nowadays, the manuscript is kept at National Center of Manuscripts. (Megrelidze, 1925:

* Building a domed church in Arbo in the second half of nineteenth century is related to the name of Iakob Lomouri and his brother Ioseb Lomouri. G. Sosiashvili, from the history of village Arbo, materials from the history of Georgian villages, V.1, p. 119-120.

p.203). An excerpt from the chronicle: Parsman the King, after King Bakur, married to Khvaramze, the daughter of Abkhaz lord Taktori, who had a son from her first marriage, called Varamis. She had the most valuable dowry but the one chased icon of St. George was the most precious of all, the icon was a gift from Cesar of new Greece as a token of loyalty, stepson became the heir of the king, as he was childless, and the king gave the icon with miracle making parts of St George in it, to his stepson and during Persian invasion, gave him the mountain and the gorge to keep the stepson safe, brought down Ossetians and got him the land, at the top of the mountain he built a church, not large but fine, and he called the village big Geri, and the church- Geristavi, later the Queen passed away, than the King and the place was called “ Sauplistsulo” (a place for the prince) until king Tamar. As the years came by in piece and quite for Kartli, the queen ordered to bring down the icon down in the valley and up to this day, the miraculous icon is placed there and keeps the kingdom and its kings out of harm” (Sidamonidze, 1962: p.3). Z. Chichinadze gives us the same information: as the scientist tells us when St. George was tortured, his head was buried at Geri, that’s why they called the village Geristavi. 363 St. George’s head is Geri Church, when they cut St. George’s body in 363 pieces, then they took his head to Geri, a slightly different name Giorgi’s head., the same goes with white St. George of Kakheti, the second wonder making church after Geri. Slight difference with alteration of a word. Not white Giorgi, but a finger of Giorgi, as Saint’s right hand finger is kept in that church. These two churches are the most famous among pilgrims in Caucasus region. One cannot find a person in Caucasus, who has never heard of the names of these two churches”(Ibid). According to chronicles of Geri Monastery, there was a repousse icon of St. George in Geri It seems interesting that, Vakhushti Batonishvili never mentions the church, well-known in Kartli. He describes St. Giorgi church in Sparsi “from the east of Kekhvi, a gorge joins to Liakhvi, between Sveri gorge and Kemerti, flows from the north and comes out from this and Geri mountain. At the top of the mountain, a church of St. Giorgi of Sparsi is located with large golden icon. The woody mountain from Sveri is extended to the north and where Liakhvi bends, the mountain also bends and goes to the east and ends up with Geri mountain”. (Chichinadze, 1913: pp. 184-185). The Sparsi church is located in Didi Liakhvi Gorge, to the north of village Dzartsemi, 3-4 km. far. (Batonishvili, 1953: p.77). It is interesting what the reason was of missing the Geri church by Vakhushti’s expedition. Is it possible he identified these two churches as the same? There used to be a big Geri cross in Geri church, which was relocated in St. Abbo, in Ikorta, by Ksani Eristavs in the XIX century. Marie Brosset, famous French orientalist, who specialized in Georgian studies, read the following inscription:” I, Tavkelashvili David, donate this cross for Geri St. George church, for salvation of our souls and for my son’s well-being. Whoever reads, seek forgiveness” (Megrelidze, 1997: pp. 78-80) as we mentioned before, according to Garsevanishvili’s notes, King Tamar relocated the icon from Geri to Arbo. At the beginning of the XIX century, deacon Andria Juruli, who fled to Mozdok, took relics with him, however the relics of St. George were returned to Ardo later. (Makalatia, 1971: P.41). Geri church was popular among Georgian and Geri gorge Ossetian pilgrims. Ossetians performed various rituals at Geri church. To venerate the Saint, they would slather the kettle, brew beer, extract honey and walked dancing and singing toward the church, they were greeted by deacons there. (Sosiashvili, 2013: pp. 46-57). In June, 1920 Geri became a shelter for rebellious Ossetians against Democratic Republic of Georgia, according to memoir of Valiko Jugheli, commander of the national army, on June 14, 1920, 10 in the morning, government forces occupied Geri and before the escape, rebellious Ossetians sacked the church of Geri. (“Tsnobis Purtseli”, 1898: p.61). After the 2008 war, village Geri and its church were left behind the occupation line. Occupants does not allow pilgrims and scientists to visit the church, thus it’s unclear what happened to this

ancient church. As the 2016-2017 annual report of State Agency for Religious Issues claims, Geri church is under renovation, they demolished the west bell tower and are going to renovate interior. (Jugheli, 1920, pp. 279-280). In our opinion, renovation process, done by non-professionals, might damage the authenticity of the church.

Conclusion

After the war in 2008, historically Georgian villages of Didi and Patara Liakhvi, Ksani and Prone gorges have been left beyond barbed-wire, Geri is one of the villages, the famous church of St. Giorgi is located in the village. The warshiping place was venerated by Georgians and Ossetians alike. Unfortunately, after Russian military aggression the way to St. Giorgi church of Geri is indeterminately closed for Georgian pilgrims. In this presented essey we have endeavoured to revive the past and the history of village Geri, the church of St. Giorgi and renowned Geristoba.

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