

MOTHER OF GOD PROTECTOR AND INTERCESSOR  
OF GEORGIA AND GEORGIANS' MENTALITY

ღვთისმშობლისადმი წილხვდომილობა და  
ქართველთა მსოფლმხედველობა

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**Abstract**

Worship of the Virgin Mary holds a special place in Georgian people's religious beliefs. She is one of the most distinguished, popular and venerated among other saints. Georgian and foreign historical sources, ecclesiastical narratives, ethnographic materials and relevant scholarly literature show how the idea of to be allocated to Virgin Mary was introduced into the national consciousness of Georgian people during centuries and what forms the worship of St. Mary acquired in Georgian people's faith. Special patronage of the Virgin Mary for the Georgians contributed to St. Mary's solid and one of the most distinguished places in the Georgian Christian worldview; becoming one of the most important characteristics of their collective consciousness and identity. In today's Georgia social and political conditions have helped to advance this idea of St. Mary's patronage. This idea is a part of the Georgians' ethnicity, which can contribute to the consolidation of the Georgian population regardless of their faith or nationality. Thus, the newly established holiday dedicated to the Virgin Mary's patronage, introduction of which is conditioned by the country's socio-political circumstances, is organic for the Georgian nation and can be considered as one of the means for the consolidation of Georgian state.

The article is based on Georgian and foreign historical sources, ecclesiastical narratives, Georgian ethnographic materials and relevant scholarly literature.

**Key words:** the Virgin Merry, be allocated, ethnicity, identity.

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### აბსტრაქტი

ქართველი ხალხის რელიგიურ რწმენა-წარმოდგენებში ღვთისმშობლის თაყვანისცემას განსაკუთრებული ადგილი უკავია. იგი ერთ-ერთი ყველაზე გამორჩეული და პოპულარული წმინდანია. ქართული და უცხოური საისტორიო წყაროები, საეკლესიო გადმოცემები, ეთნოგრაფიული მასალა და სათანადო სამეცნიერო ლიტერატურა გვიჩვენებს თუ საუკუნეების მანძილზე ქართველი ხალხის ეროვნულ თვითშეგნებაში როგორ მკვიდრდებოდა ღვთისმშობლისადმი წილხვდომილობის იდეა და რა ფორმები მიიღო ქართველთა რწმენა-წარმოდგენებში წმ. მარიამისადმი თაყვანისცემამ. ქართველებისთვის ღვთისმშობლის განსაკუთრებული მფარველობამ მყარი და ერთ-ერთი გამორჩეული ადგილი დაუმკვიდრა წმ. მარიამს ქართულ ქრისტიანულ მსოფლმხედველობაში; გახდა მისი კოლექტიური ცნობიერების, იდენტობის ერთ-ერთი უმნიშვნელოვანესი მახასიათებელი ნიშანი. დღევანდელ საქართველოში წილხვდომილობის იდეის წინ წამოწევას სოციალურმა თუ პოლიტიკურმა პირობებმა შეუწყვეს ხელი. მოცემული იდეა ქართველთა ეთნიკურობის შემადგენელი ნაწილია, რომელსაც მიუხედავად სარწმუნოებისა და ეროვნებისა, შეუძლია საკუთარი წვლილი შეიტანოს საქართველოს მოსახლეობის კონსოლიდაციის საქმეში. ამდენად, ღვთისმშობლის წილხვდომილობისადმი მიძღვნილი ახლად დადგენილი დღესასწაული, რომელის შემოღება განპირობებულია ქვეყანაში შექმნილი სოციო-პოლიტიკური გარემოებებით, ორგანულია ქართველი ერისთვის და ქართული სახელმწიფოსთვის კონსოლიდაციის ერთ-ერთ საშუალებადაც შეიძლება იყოს მიჩნეული.

სტატია ეყრდნობა ქართულ და უცხოურ საისტორიო წყაროებს, საეკლესიო გადმოცემებს, ქართულ ეთნოგრაფიულ მასალასა და სათანადო სამეცნიერო ლიტერატურას.

**საძიებო სიტყვები:** ღვთისმშობელი, წილხვდომილობა, ეთნიკურობა, იდენტობა

The worship of the Virgin Mary and devotion to her holds particular place in Georgian people's religious beliefs. It can be said that along with St. George, she is one of the most distinguished and popular saints all over Georgia, in both highland and lowland regions of the country. The fact that Georgia is the country under the Virgin's patronage is evidenced not only by Georgian historical sources and oral tradition. The earliest surviving source where Georgia is

referred to as the country under the Virgin Mary's patronage is the work of Byzantine writer Stephen the Athonite "Paradise of the Thought", translated from Greek into Russian ("Рай мысленный"), which reads, that "The apostles cast lots in which country they should preach. The Holy Virgin said: "I wish I could cast lots with you so that I would not be left without my share of the land, which the Lord wills to tell me" (Bubulashvili, 2007: 130). Basing on Stephen the Athonite's narrative, famous Russian clergyman Dimitry of Rostov notes that the information about Georgia's be allocated to the Holy Virgin is encountered not only in the Iberian Church, but also throughout the Eastern Orthodox Church (Chelidze, 2014: 60).

"And after the ascension of the Lord, when the apostles cast lots, the Holy Virgin was favored to convert Georgia to Christianity" - we read in the Georgian Chronicles (Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955: 38). However, according to popular narratives, when Jesus told her that she would soon pass away and that she could not leave Jerusalem, St. Mary called Andrew the First Called, handed him her icon made by putting a desk on her face and ordered him to preach in Georgia. She told him that for Jesus he would always be a helper and a protector of his chosen people (Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955: 38). However second edition of St. Nino's life dating back to the fourteenth century writes that together with Jacob the High Priest, John the Theologian, and Dani, "her servant", the Virgin went to preach "in the country under her patronage" i.e. Georgia. When they arrived in Joppa, they had revelation of Jesus, who called on the Virgin to return to Jerusalem to encourage the parish after his crucifixion. "And do not worry about Georgia – the country under your patronage, I will take care of it (dzveli kartuli agiografiuli literaturis dzeglebi, 1968: 131-132). Jesus Christ also promised St. Mary that Iveria would be converted and that she would reign there.

When studying the issue of Georgia's be allocated to the Holy Virgin, Eldar Bubulashvili revised proper Georgian editions (Leonti Mroveli's Kartlis Tskhovreba ("The Georgian Chronicles"), two editions of St. Nino's Life (eleventh, fourteenth centuries), Keimenon (tenth century) and Swinaxar (twelfth century) editions of Ilarion the Georgian's life, Nikoloz Gulaberidze's writing (twelfth century) and foreign sources (Stephen the Athonite's "Paradise of the Thought", Russian readings). Basing of the revision he opinioned that the sources did not confirm the widespread assumption that the Virgin had to stay in Jerusalem because of her passing; but to encourage the apostles and congregation left without Jesus Christ (Bubulashvili, 2007: 127-130).

Georgia's be allocated to the Holy Virgin is also confirmed by one of the narratives from the Mount Athos. Once, when together with John the Apostle the Virgin Mary went to visit St. Lazarus, who was Bishop of Cyprus, the ship stopped at Mount Athos (according to Athonian narration Monastery of Iviron was built exactly where the Virgin's ship stopped). The Virgin liked Mount Athos and asked Jesus to give her this place. Following the request the voice was heard from the Heaven: "May this place be your inheritance and your garden, and paradise and heaven for those who seek salvation!" (Kiknadze, 2009: 87-89, 91-92; Радуйся, 1997: 8, 12). Thus, the Virgin Mary is considered to be the hegumena, protector of the whole Mount Athos. And, no other woman is allowed to step on the island. The foremost sanctity of Mount Athos is the icon of Panaghea Portaitissa or of Iviron Theotocos located at Iviron or Monastery of the Georgians. It was the icon's desire to be housed in this monastery by a Georgian monk. Also, according to the narrative, at the time of the Second Advent the Virgin will leave the Mount Athos and will come to Georgia, the country under her patronage.

Georgia's greatest relic, Christ's robe, which is said to have been rested at Svetitskhoveli, is considered to be knitted by the Virgin. Even the Virgin's robe, another greatest Christian relic, is housed in Georgia. Great sanctity of the Virgin's garment, her waistband, was also in Georgia. Basing on various sources, Nana Khazaradze, who studied the issue, notes that in the Holy Land,

along with other names the Georgians were also referred to as "belt Christians". From the writings of French traveler Gilles le Bouvier we learn that in Georgia all the priests' belts had touched the Virgin's waistband preserved in the country. Clergyman would wrap this belt around the infant before baptism, and baptize him in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Virgin. It was because of this belt that the Georgians were called "belt Christians". According to the book published in 1903 at St. Panteleimon Monastery in Athos, a part of the Virgin's girdle was preserved at Vatopedi Monastery, another part – at Trier Monastery in Germany and yet another part at Zugdidi Cathedral (Khazaradze, Mindadze, 2008: 7,9-10, 17). Even though it is unknown where this great relic is today, according to Eldar Bubulashvili, a part of the girdle has survived on the icon of the Vlachern Virgin Mary at Amiranashvili State Museum of Art (Historical sources note that the Virgin Mary's girdle was preserved together with the Vlachern icon). Eldar Bubulashvili notes that, on the damaged icon of Vlachern, right below the spot where there used to be the image of the Virgin there is a convex-shaped metal grid... Its upper and lower transverse sections are open, dark reddish-brown, cherry-colored fabric can be observed in them.... In our opinion, the convex metal grid should be the rest-spot of the Virgin's girdle... We also believe that the fabric inside should be the Virgin's girdle" (Bubulashvili, 2007: 168). It should also be noted that according to sources, the Virgin's girdle was attached to the Vlachern icon.

Also noteworthy is that according to legend a white-stone spindle preserved at Mokvi church belonged to the Virgin herself (Bubulashvili, 2007: 132). In Georgia the relics related to the Virgin Mary were as follows: the Virgin's tooth, hair, box, made of the gold that the Magi offered Jesus Christ at his birth, a piece of mantle, a piece of the kerchief, ring and "the Virgin's sweat" [This is indicated by one epigraphic inscription] (Bubulashvili, 2007: 132, 149).

According to ecclesiastical teaching, the apostolic activity, preaching and dissemination of Christianity was intended not only for the pagans but for Christians as well in order to strengthen their faith or to return them to Christianity. Proceeding from the chief three moments of the Savior's apostolic activity, the apostolic activity is also characterized by three key moments. As Edisher Chelidze notes, one is the mission for conversion, another is pedagogical or educational mission, the third is the mission for perfection..." (Chelidze, 2005: 19). The Georgian Church passed all three of these aforementioned stages of Christianity. These stages coincide with all the processes that the world Church went through in spreading Christianity. Basing on Georgian historical sources, we believe that at each of these stages, dissemination of Christianity in Georgia was spiritually led by the Holy Virgin Mary. That is, we believe that for many centuries she carried out her mission and spiritually guided her nation in the conversion to and strengthening of Christianity (Ghambashidze, 2017: 22).

Georgia passed all three of the aforementioned stages of conversion, in which the Virgin herself was said to have participated spiritually; moreover, she herself headed all three of them. On the first stage, the Virgin selects Christ's first-called disciple St. Andrew, gives instructions and sends him to Georgia to preach Christianity instead of her. St. Andrew the First Called preached mainly in southern, western and eastern Georgia (Berdzenishvili, 2009: 125-139). His and other apostles' activity in Georgia in the first century is the mission for conversion. Also, at the direction of the Virgin St. Nino comes to Georgia in the fourth century. Arsen Ikaltoeli's metaphrastic St. Nino's Life reads that while living in Jerusalem, Nino prayed day and night in front of the Virgin icon. On one occasion, when she was praying at Zion's mother Church, in front of the Virgin's cell, the Holy Virgin appeared to her telling to go to the northern country under her patronage and preach. "Go to the northern country under my patronage, to the nation of Georgians and teach them the truth boldly and fearlessly!" "But I am a stranger, uneducated woman! – Nino responded. Then the Virgin Mary cut the vine plant growing on her grave, made a cross, gave it to Nino and said "with this you will overcome any wickedness, defeat evil, your

preaching will be successful; I will assist and never forsake you”. Here is what Soso Makharashvili writes about it: “This is how St. Nino's cross - the Cross of the Vine, became the foremost symbol of the Georgian Church, the sign and miracle of Georgian Orthodoxy”. It simultaneously implies the Son – Jesus Christ, his mother – St. Mary (cross as the symbol of the Savior, vine as the symbol of the Virgin Mary). Thus the vine cross linked St. Nino, Virgin Mary and Kartli – the country under her patronage” (Makharashvili, 2009: 218-219).

St. Nino's activity is both converting and educational. She was raised as a religion teacher (Lilienfeld, manuscript: 10). She must have also been a deaconess and finally, as a result of St. Nino's sermons, the church was established institutionally in Georgia.

These three missions are clearly observed in the activity of the Holy Assyrian Fathers. The Assyrian fathers convert and teach; they have many followers and disciples. They also carry out the mission of establishing monasteries. They enlisted their “disciples in the grace of ecclesiastical perfection” i.e. “made them the clergy” (Chelidze, 2005: 19), they initiated monastic life in Georgia. According to the source, the Virgin Mary also heads Assyrian fathers’ activity in Georgia. When in the sixth century Ioane Zedazneli (John of Zedazeni) decided to travel to and preach in Georgia, the Virgin appeared to him and convinced him to choose 12 of his disciples and take them on a trip together with him. After performing prayers and liturgy, the angel selected John’s 12 disciples to preach in Georgia (Sabinin, 1882: 223-224).

According to the sources, the Virgin is clearly involved and is the spiritual leader of the mission for spreading Christianity in Georgia in these three major periods. In this regard, the role of the Virgin in the coming centuries is the subject of future research.

In this context, the role of the Georgians in spreading Christianity in the Caucasus cannot be underestimated. Even though the issue is beyond the scope of this article, we would like to focus on one important occurrence. The icon of the Virgin of Mozdok is one of the greatest sanctities of Christian and not only Christian Caucasus. King Tamar ordered the iconographer of the royal court to make a copy of the Icon of the Virgin of Iveria (Ivion Theotocos). As the legend tells the icon-painter was preparing to “write”(paint) the icon with forty-day fasting and prayers. The icon had a Georgian inscription on the back. Tamar gave the icon to the Ossetians as a gift. It was lost during the October 1917 revolution. Today the icon copy is in Mozdok. Famous Russian clergyman Ignatius Brianchaninov, who served in the Diocese of the Caucasus and the Black Sea, wrote: “The Virgin of Mozdok is the new "Unburnt Blackberry" [Implied is the icon of the Virgin “Unburnt Blackberry”], which reminds the North Caucasians of old, lost values. We think such sanctities, recognized not only by the Christians, can play a positive role in establishing peace and unity in the Caucasus (Ghambashidze, 2018: 415-416).

The feast of the most holy sanctities of Christian Georgia, the first Georgian original Cathedral, Mtskheta Jvari Monastery, the feast of the Georgian Orthodox Church, was accompanied by the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary in May (8/15May), which was also a great holiday. August 14/28 is still a common, general public holiday in Georgia's highland and lowland regions. There is hardly any part of the country without a church or a shrine dedicated to her. Among the powerful and celebrated sacred places are Vardzia, Zugdidi, Gurjaani, Tsilkani, Tbilisi Sioni, Bichvinta, Ushguli, etc. Moreover, the shrines, churches dedicated to the Virgin are found in almost every village and if there are no such shrines and churches today, it is mostly because they have been destroyed and the holiday associated with them has disappeared.

Georgian people had a great affection for the Virgin Mary from olden times. She was considered to be the guardian and protector primarily of pregnant and lactating women, children and women in general. She was prayed for the problems related to the yield of milking and harvest; for the abundance of the goods and crops in general. She is also known as the “icon of cows”. According to folk narratives, the Virgin is a strict, but helper and protector deity. Often in

East Georgian highland regions the Virgin is regarded as the mother of the place, and is referred to as the “Virgin of the place” (Bardavelidze, 2007: 53, 140, 154; Jalabadze, Melikishvili, 2014: 12; Mindadze, 2014: 190, 192, 193-194).

Noteworthy is one of the most powerful traditions surviving to this day – at the end of the party, for both joy and sad reasons, a toast was uttered to the Mother of God as a sign of a request for mercy, which may indicate to the liturgical roots of Georgian traditional feast (Ghambashidze, Gotsiridze, 2007: 190-202).

Lastly, probably the sense of the Virgin Mary’s patronage and the hope for her assistance made Ilia Chavchavadze say the following in the second half of the nineteenth century:

“Mother of God! You are the intercessor of this country...  
Do not deprive these suffering people of your assistance;  
Take the blood that was shed by these people as a sacrifice,  
You, hope of the oppressed, do not deprive them of your mercy!”

Therefore, according to oral and written sources, both Georgian and foreign, the Virgin is intercessor of Georgia. This tradition has its adversaries and has been the subject of discussion for years. But it should be considered that this knowledge was instilled in Georgian people for centuries, which has been reflected in Georgian people’s church practice, folk beliefs and rituals, in their great worship of the Virgin. Interestingly, all the important missionary activities (St. Andrew’s, St. Nino’s, Holy Assyrian Fathers’) were carried out with the Virgin Mary’s blessing and under her patronage, which is confirmed by Georgian historical sources.

Particular protection of the Virgin Mary is not strange for the Georgians. This in its turn, laid strong foundation to St. Mary’s solid and one of the most distinguished places in Georgian Christian worldview; it became one of the most important features of its collective consciousness, identity.

It is well known, that ethnic identity is an integral part of a person's social identity and implies an awareness of belonging to a certain ethnic group. It is the feeling of identity with one ethnicity, and of difference and separation from others. Ethnic identity is conditioned by cultural factors. Cultural identification is a person's self-sentiment in a particular culture. This is why Georgian traditions represent a unified circle. A human seeks to identify himself and tries to express himself directly through the system of rituals, stereotypes. One always identifies himself with a group, an ethnicity, which is included in unified culture. The centuries-old sense of the Virgin’s patronage is precisely one of the most important constituents of this unified culture. This is why the newly established holiday dedicated to the Virgin Mary is organic for the Georgian nation and can also be used as a means for the consolidation of Georgian state.

Special patronage of the Virgin Mary for the Georgians contributed to St. Mary’s solid and one of the distinguished places in the Georgian Christian worldview; becoming one of the most important characteristics of their collective consciousness and identity.

Identity is a necessary need of a person and society. American philosopher Erich Fromm is the author of the most successful typology of people's needs. He notes that communication between people is the first need. A socially excluded, isolated person loses social habits and standards elaborated in culture. Second need is creativity that one needs to change the world and gain freedom. The third is the need to feel "deep-roots", which allows an individual to identify himself as a certain part of the human society. The fourth is the quest for cognition of the universe. Fifth is aspiration to worship an object. An individual finds it difficult to perceive the world independently, to understand the essence and purpose of his surroundings. He needs an orientation system. This is why one needs an identity that plays a big role in his formation as subject of culture (Fromm, 1986: 206). All five requirements of the orientation system in the

universe can be considered in the phenomenon of intercession: human relations, creativity, a sense of "roots", a desire for cognition, and aspiration to worship an object.

Many studies of ethnicity, citizenship, religion, sex, class, gender, political status and other issues indicate that people's identities are diverse. One identity is important in one situation and it becomes dominant, in the second case, another one occupies dominant position. Religion holds a special place in the hierarchy of identity.

Religious identity is an integral part of a person's social identity and implies the awareness of belonging to a certain religious unity. It is a feeling of identity with one religious unity and separation from others. Religious identity is the top priority for many nations and in some cases even precedes national identity. It can be said that in Georgia national and religious identities hold an equal place; one without the other is unthinkable. Moreover, it is precisely the combination of these two features that creates the feeling of being Georgian. It is also noteworthy that national self-awareness generally prevails over religion in ethnocultural identity, but for example the existence of saints in Georgia, overlaps Georgian people's belonging to various religions (Christianity, Islam). Religious personification (St. George, St. Mary, etc.) is acceptable to the followers of different faiths and can be said to show their belonging to a certain identity, country in this case. In many ethnic groups living in Georgia (Christians, Muslims, etc.) identity is more focused on nationality, on historical homeland.

Why is ethnicity a characteristic feature, in one case, and religiousness, in the other, or is the presence of both, a sign of identity? Despite numerous studies common criteria for this issue have not been theoretically ascertained. In our opinion, the reason for this is to be sought for in the history of certain ethnic groups, which is full of problems. In our case, it is conditioned by the current state of Georgia (Russian assaults, the plans to rebuild Great Armenia, attempts for the Albanization of Azerbaijan) fears for the loss of territories and globalization.

This is why the issue of intercession has been hyperbolized by the Georgians. Atheism, presented as a social norm in the Soviet Union, quickly disappeared. There was consolidation around united Georgia. Features of identity are loaded with different symbols. The symbols were hyperbolized and brought to the highest level, as this gives a powerful feeling of being different from others and allows to occupy its own clearly defined niche. Because there is a knowledge that this land belongs to them, they are autochthonous people who have lost many territories throughout history. Hyperbolization of being allocated to the Holy Virgin and etc (e.g. St. George, St. Nino ....) allows them to confirm their attachment to the land that has been marked under intercession, patronage. Some believe that the issue is mythologized. It even was the subject of humor and jester in a television program or various newspaper publications. Everyone has the right to his own opinion. But what about the information preserved in historical documents?! If we take this issue right, we will see that it will be more difficult to prove that this occurrence did not exist than vice versa.

Thus, ethnic identity is an integral part of a person's social identity and implies awareness of belonging to a certain ethnic group. It is a sense of identity with one ethnicity, and of a difference and separation from others. Ethnic identity is conditioned by cultural factors. Cultural identification is a person's self-awareness in particular culture. This is why Georgian traditions are one whole. A human seeks to identify himself and tries to express himself directly through a system of rituals, stereotypes. One always identifies himself with a group, an ethnicity, which is conceived in a unified culture. The centuries-old sense of the Virgin's intercession, patronage is one of the most important parts of this unified culture.

This is why the newly-established holiday dedicated to the Virgin Mary is organic for Georgian nation and can also be considered one of the means for the consolidation of Georgian state.

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