

**THE GEORGIAN MONASTERY OF ST. PHOCAS IN TREBIZOND**  
**(Information about it. The Request for the Monastery by the**  
**Byzantines. The Reasons for the Request)**

ტრაპიზონის წმ. ფოკას ქართული მონასტერი  
 (ცნობები მის შესახებ. მონასტრის გამოთხოვა ბიზანტიელთა მიერ. გამოთხოვის  
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**Abstract**

The article is devoted to a Georgian monastery that functioned in Trebizond in the 10th century. It was dedicated to St. Phocas and was under the ownership of the distinguished Georgian noble family of the Chordvanieli from Tao. Information concerning the monastery is preserved in a chrysobull (imperial gold-sealed charter) issued in 980 by the Byzantine emperor Basil II Porphyrogenitus. Later, in the 11th century, the information from this imperial chrysobull was repeated in an act of Leon the Judge.

In 980, an agreement was concluded between the Imperial Court and the Chordvanelis, the proprietors of this monastery in Trebizond as well as of another Georgian monastery of Iberis active in Constantinople. The emperor requested these two Georgian monasteries from the Georgians and, in exchange, granted them three others.

The Monastery of St. Phocas in Trebizond has not yet been identified, and its precise location remains unknown. Several related issues also continue to await clarification. The Georgian scholarly community has not yet addressed these questions, nor consequently the reasons for the monastery's

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request by the Byzantines. This is despite the fact that information regarding this 10th-century Georgian monastery in Trebizond has been accessible to the wider public since at least the 1870s.

The monastery has received limited attention in foreign scholarship—specifically, in two studies devoted to the churches of St. Phocas in Trebizond. It is worth noting that in one of these works the Georgian context is treated only superficially, one might even say in passing, while in the other it is not mentioned at all. These specific matters will be addressed in detail elsewhere. Accordingly, it should be observed that the question why and for what purpose Basil II requested the Monastery of St. Phocas from the Georgians (together with the Monastery of Iberises) has not, until now, been raised. The present study therefore aims, alongside renewing scholarly attention to the available evidence concerning this Georgian monastery in Trebizond, to examine, discuss, and present to the interested academic public the reasons behind its request by the imperial court of Constantinople. It is my view that the issue of the monastery's request – namely, the reason for this request – should be considered within the broader context of the complex political and ecclesiastical processes taking place at the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries.

**Keywords:** St. Phocas Monastery; Trebizond; Chaldia; Tao; Tornike Chordvaneli; David III Curopalates; Basil II.

## ბაკურ გოგობია

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## აბსტრაქტი

სტატია ეძღვნება X საუკუნეში ტრაპიზონში მოქმედ ქართულ მონასტერს. ის წმინდა ფოკას სახელობისა ყოფილა და მის მფლობელებად ტაოდან ჩორდვანელთა ცნობილი ქართული ფეოდალური საგვარეულო გვევლინება. ცნობები მონასტრის შესახებ დაცული ყოფილა ბიზანტიის იმპერატორ ბასილი II პორფიროგენეტის 980 წლის ოქრობეჭდიან სიგელში. მოგვიანებით XI საუკუნეში ამ საიმპერატორო ოქრობეჭდის ცნობა გამეორებულია ლეონ მოსამართლის აქტშიაც. 980 წელს საიმპერატორო კარსა და ამ ტრაპიზონული მონასტრისა და კონსტანტინოპოლში მოქმედი კიდევ ერთი ქართული მონასტრის (იბერიისს||ივერიისს) მფლობელ ჩორდვანელებს შორის შეთანხმება მიღწეულა. იმპერატორს ზემოხსენებული ორი ქართული მონასტერი გამოუთხოვია ქართველთაგან, ხოლო სანაცვლოდ სამი გადაუცია მათთვის.

წმ. ფოკას ტრაპიზონული მონასტერი იდენტიფიცირებული არაა. დაუდგენელია მისი მდებარეობა. დღემდე ღიად რჩება მასთან დაკავშირებული სხვა საკითხებიც. ეროვნული სამეცნიერო საზოგადოება მათ და, შესაბამისად, მონასტრის გამოთხოვის მიზეზების გარკვევასაც, არ შეხება. ეს მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ ცნობები ტრაპიზონის X საუკუნის ამ ქართული მონასტრის შესახებ ფართო საზოგადოებისთვის მინიმუმ 1870-იანი წლებიდან უკვე ხელმისაწვდომი იყო. ამ მონასტერს გარკვეული, მეტ-ნაკლები ყურადღება დაეთმო საზღვარგარეთელი მეცნიერების კვლევების იმ ნაწილში, რომლებიც ტრაპიზონში წმინდა ფოკას სახელობის ეკლესიებს ეძღვნება. ასეთი შემთხვევა სულ ორია. აღსანიშნავია, რომ მათგან ერთში ქართული კონტექსტი არასაკმარისად, შეიძლება ითქვას, გაკვრიტაა გათვალისწინებული, ხოლო მეორეში საერთოდ არაა ნახსენები. ამ კონკრეტულ საკითხებს სხვა დროს ვრცლად შევეხები. შესაბამისად, უნდა ითქვას, რომ აქამდე საკითხი, თუ რა მიზეზითა და მიზნებით გამოითხოვა ბასილი II-მ ქართველთაგან წმ. ფოკას მონასტერი (იბერიის მონასტერთან ერთად), არც დასმულა.

წინამდებარე კვლევით მიზნად დავისახე, ქართველთა ამ ტრაპიზონული მონასტრის შესახებ ცნობებისადმი სამეცნიერო საზოგადოების ყურადღების განახლებასთან ერთად, კონსტანტინოპოლის საიმპერატორო კარის მიერ მისი გამოთხოვის მიზეზების შესწავლა, განხილვა და დაინტერესებული საზოგადოებისთვის მიწოდება. მიმაჩნია, რომ ბიზანტიელთა მიერ მონასტრის გამოთხოვის საკითხი (მიზეზი გამოთხოვისა) განსახილველია იმხანად, X-XI საუკუნეთა გასაყარზე მიმდინარე რთული პროცესებთან ერთიან კონტექსტში.

**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** წმ. ფოკას მონასტერი; ტრაპიზონი; ქალდია; ტაო; თორნიკე ჩორდვანელი; დავით III კურაპალატი; ბასილი II.

## Introduction

To date, neither Georgian nor foreign scholarship has paid attention to the study of the reasons behind the imperial court of Constantinople's request, in 980, for two specific monasteries from the Georgians. Consequently, this question has not yet been raised in any scholarly context.

This existing gap gives rise to a significant sense of deficiency in the study and proper representation of Georgian ecclesiastical activities in Trebizond and, more broadly, in Lazistan – Chaldia – activities that are documentarily attested as early as the 10th century. Such a state of affairs, in turn, contributes to the persistence of a completely mistaken notion, once hastily and groundlessly proposed, according to which Georgian ecclesiastical activity in Lazistan was neither historically attested nor even likely. In contrast, forgotten, neglected, or, for various unfounded reasons, rejected sources make it possible to reconstruct a wholly different picture.

## Methods

In order to achieve the research objectives, the following methods have been employed: the method of analysis and processing of historical sources and literature; the method of processing archival materials; the method of secondary analysis; the historical-comparative method; the retrospective method and the complex-intensive method.

## Discussion

### Information about the Monastery. The Request for the Monastery by the Byzantines

In 976, following the death of the Byzantine emperor John I Tzimiskes (r. 969 – January 976), the young co-emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII faced a rebellion led by Bardas Skleros (d. 991). “Then arose the rebellion of Skleros; he seized all the lands, and the emperors and the empress were confined within the city, in great distress and hardship,” reports Giorgi Mtatzmindeli – George the Hagiorite in his work *The Vitae of Our Blessed Fathers John and Euthymius*. (მთაწმინდელი 1967: 45), describing the events of that time. Skleros aspired to ascend the throne himself. After securing the provinces of Asia, he successfully attacked Abydos (near Çanakkale) and Nicaea (İznik) and advanced toward the capital. With each victory, his prestige increased. The imperial court entrusted the suppression of the rebellion to Bardas Phokas (ca. 940–989), who was recalled from exile on Chios. In the confrontation between the two Bardases, the advantage initially leaned toward Skleros (Skylitzes 2010: 298–309). Alarmed by the success of the rebels, the imperial court appealed for help to King David III of Tao (r. 966–1001). As mediator and intermediary, they chose Tornike Chordvaneli – formerly a general of David III, now a monk named John – who was living on the Holy Mountain of Athos at the Lavra of Athanasius the Trapezuntine aka Athanasius the Athonite.

Letters of supplication addressed to Athanasius, to Tornike’s brother John-Varazvache, and to Tornike himself were sent through the sebastophoros, inviting Tornike to the imperial court. Considerable effort, and ultimately persuasion, were required from both Athanasius and John-Varazvache to convince Tornike – now withdrawn from worldly life – to go to Constantinople.

After receiving an audience at court and assessing the situation, John-Tornike’s initial refusal proved ineffective: Empress Theophano and the parakoimomenos Basil Lekapenos handed over letters of entreaty from the young emperors addressed to David III, asking Tornike to travel to Tao. According to George the Hagiorite, “Then the emperors granted those *Upper Lands*<sup>2</sup> of Byzantium to the Curopalates, that he might preserve his life thereby” (მთაწმინდელი, 1967: 46–48).

<sup>2</sup> According to Stephanos of Taron, also known as Asoghik (or Asolik), these Upper Lands are listed as follows: Khaltoy-Arichi with its Klisura (mountain pass district), Chormayri, Karini, Basiani, the fortress of Sevuk in Mardali, Hark and Apahunik (Տալոնացի 1885: 192; Tarōnec‘i 2017: 244, note 233).

David III received Tornike with joy. The king mobilized twelve thousand cavalrymen, appointed Tornike as their commander together with Jojik Eristavt-Eristavi (duke of dukes) of Tao (Tarōnec'i 2017: 245), and sent the army into Byzantium. The decisive battle between the forces of Bardas Skleros and the joint Georgian–Byzantine troops, commanded by Tornike Chordvani, Jojik Eristavt-Eristavi and Bardas Phokas, took place in 979 in the province of Charsianon, near the place called Sarvenisi (Aquae Saravenae, near modern Kırşehir), as reported by a direct participant of the battle, John Sulas-dze Chorchaneli, in the inscription of Zarzma Monastery (შოშვილი, 1980: 278–281).

After John-Tornike's return to Mount Athos, the Georgians gathered there decided to build their own monastery – an initiative prompted by the growing number of Georgians on the Holy Mountain. The construction of the monastery, financed with the spoils gained from the victory over the rebel Skleros and with their own means, was undertaken by Tornike himself and his brother, the above-mentioned John-Varazvache.

George the Hagiorite also relates that, in recognition of the crucial military service rendered at a decisive moment for the imperial court, the kings (i.e., the Byzantine emperors) confirmed by chrysobull various estates and villages for the Georgian monks of Athos, to ensure the establishment and expansion of their monastery: “And likewise the God-serving emperors, since these men rendered such service and accomplished great deeds, granted and confirmed by gold-sealed documents all the lands and villages they requested – many and excellent indeed, comparable to those of this world” (მაწმინდელი, 1967: 49).

It is precisely this latter case that is discussed by the Bishop of Chigirin, then Archimandrite, Porphyry Uspensky (1804–1885), who came here in 1845 to study the monasteries of Athos: «[...] в 980 году выпросилъ (referring to John-Varazvache – John the Hagiorite – John the Iberian; B.G.) у царя Василя монастыри, Леонти в Солунѣ, Иоанна Колову въ Ериссѣ и Климента на Аѳонѣ, въ замѣнъ двухъ грузинскихъ обителей, Иверской въ Константинополѣ и св. Фоки въ Трапезунтѣ, отъ которыхъ онъ отказался, выпросилъ же со всѣми имѣніями и доходами ихъ для поддержанія своего монастыря Аѳо и для созданія новой Лавры» (Успенский 1872: 399–400; Успенский 1877: 158; Успенский 1877a: 109).

Later, in his 1845–46 description of the Athonite monasteries, Uspensky provides information concerning the chrysobull of Basil II issued in 980: «Монастырь Иверскій образовался изъ Предтеченскаго монастыря Климента, подареннаго Иоанну Торникію, современнику Аѳанасія Аѳонскаго, Царемъ Василиемъ Порфиророднымъ, какъ это видно изъ хрисовула его, въ 980 г.» (Успенский 1848: 56).

Uspensky also cites a Greek account of this 980 chrysobull of Basil II, of a content-related nature, which he included in entry №35 of his *History of Athos* published in 1877. Alongside that report, I also cite here Simon Qaukhchishvili's Georgian translation of it:

«...Καὶ τοῦ παναοιδίμου βασιλέως Κυρ Βασιλείου τοῦ Πορφυρογεννήτου Χρυσόβουλλος γεγωνὸς κατὰ τὸ ,ςυπη (980) ἔτος τῷ μοναχῷ Ἰωάννῃ καὶ συγγέλλῳ τῷ Τορνικίῳ, κατὰ τρόπον ἀνταλλαγῆς ὑπαγορεύων αὐτῷ δωρηθῆναι τὴν μονὴν τὴν Λεοντίαν ἐν τῇ Θεσσαλονίκῃ, καὶ τὴν μονὴν τοῦ Κολοβοῦ ἐν Ἐρίσσῳ, πρὸς δὲ καὶ τὴν μονὴν τοῦ Κλήμεντος, ἣτις ἐπ’ ὀνόματι μὲν τοῦ τιμίου προδρόμου καὶ βαπτιστοῦ Ἰωάννου καθιδρύται, κατὰ δὲ τὸ ὄρος τὸν Ἄθωνα δίδκεται, ἀνθ’ ὧν παρητήσατο δύο μονῶν, τῆς τε μονῆς τῆς Ἰβήρων, τῆς ἐν τῇ βασιλίδι τῶν πόλεων τυγχανούσης, καὶ τῆς μονῆς τοῦ ἁγίου Φωκᾶ τῆς ἐν Τραπεζούντῃ διακειμένης...» (Успенский 1877a: 333).

„...და ნეტარხსენებული მეფის უფალ ბასილი პორფიროგენეტის მიერ 6488 (6488–5508=980) წელს იოანე ბერისა და თორნიკე სინგელოზისადმი გაცემული ქორობეჭედი (ქრისობული“), რომლითაც მეფე სანაცვლოდ აღუთქვამს მას, რომ ზომებული იქნება ლეონტიას მონასტერი თესალონიკში, და კოლობოს მონასტერი ერისოში, გარდა ამის კლემენტის მონასტერიც, რომელიც დაარსებულია პატიოსანი წინამორბედის და ნათლისმცემლის იაონეს სახელობაზე, ხოლო მოიპოვება ათონის მთაზე, რომელთა სანაცვლოდ გამოთხოვილია ორი მონასტერი: ერთი მონასტერი იბერისისა, რომელიც არის სამეფო ქალაქში და, მეორე წმინდა ფოკას მონასტერი, რომელიც მდებარეობს ტრაპეზუნტში...“<sup>3</sup> (ყაუხჩიშვილი 1963: 43).

This chrysobull granted by Basil II to the Georgians («Χρῖсов. Βασιλῖα Πορφυρογεννήτου ο προσοεινῖνεν κτῃ μ. Ιβερσκού οβιτελῖν : Λεοντία κτῃ Σολυνῖ, Ιοαννα Κολοκῃ κτῃ Ερισσῖ κτῃ Κλιμεντα κτῃ Αῶονῖ (6488)»), according to Uspensky, had been preserved on Athos at the Iviron (Iberon) Monastery (Успенский 1847: 17-18). Later, as reported by Dölger in 1952, this chrysobull, together with four other chrysobulls, disappeared from the Iviron Monastery (Dölger 1952: 6).

Extensive information about this chrysobull and the agreement it represents is included in the act drafted by Leon, judge of the Velum in Constantinople, patrikios, antipatos, imperial notary, and western anagrapheus, in either 1059 or 1074. Dölger also added the possible drafting year 1044. In this act, Leon the Judge confirms the Iviron Monastery on Athos in its earlier imperial privileges. According to the latest data, this document is preserved in the archive of the Iviron Monastery under №32. Dölger registered it in 1941 as Iber. 114 (Lefort, Oikonomidès, Papachryssanthou, Kravari, Métrévélī 1990: 80-85; Dölger 1952: 4-6).

The Greek text given in Uspensky’s aforementioned №35 entry essentially repeats the passage from Leon the Judge’s act that cites Basil II’s 980 chrysobull. However, minor differences, including those related to transcription, are easily noticeable. Moreover, the text in Leon’s act is somewhat more extensive than Uspensky’s. Below, I provide the full text of this excerpt from the 1990 edition by Jacques Lefort, Nicholas Oikonomidès and Denise Papachryssanthou, in collaboration with Vasiliki Kravari and Elene Métrévélī:

<sup>3</sup> In the publication by Qaukhchishvili, a technical error occurred in recording the year (ςυπη) in Uspensky’s Greek text.



«[...]καὶ τοῦ παναοιδίμου βασιλέως κυ(ροῦ) Βασιλείου τοῦ πορφυρογεννήτου γεγονὼς κατὰ τὸ ,ζυπη΄ ἔτος τῷ μοναχῷ Ἰωάννῃ (καὶ) συγγέλλῳ τῷ Τορνικίῳ, κατὰ τρόπον ἀνταλλαγ(ῆς) ὑπαγορεύων αὐτῷ δωρηθῆναι τὴν μονὴν τ(ῆς) Λεοντ(ίας) ἐν τῇ Θεσσαλονί(κῃ) (καὶ) τὴν μονὴν τοῦ Κολοβοῦ ἐν Ἐρίσῳ, πρὸς(ς) δὲ (καὶ) τὴν μονὴν τοῦ Κλήμεντος(ς), ἥτ(ις) ἐπ’ ὀνόμ(α)τ(ι) μὲν τοῦ τιμ(ίου) προδρόμ(ου) (καὶ) βαπτιστοῦ Ἰω(άννου) καθίδρυται, κατὰ δὲ τὸ ὄρο(ς) τὸν Ἄθων διάκειτ(αι), ἀνθ’ ὧν παρητήσατο δύο μονῶν, τῆς τε μονῆς τῆς Ἰβηρίσ(ης) τῆς ἐν τῇ βασιλίδι τῶν πόλεων τυγχανούσης καὶ τῆς μονῆς τοῦ Ἀγ(ίου) Φωκᾶ τῆς ἐν Τραπεζοῦντι διακειμένης, προσδιοριζόμενος(ς) ἐξουσεύεσθαι μὲν (καὶ) τοὺς ἐξήκοντα δημοσιάρχους οἴκους τοὺς δωρηθέντ(ας) τῷ (μον)αχ(ῶ) Ἰω(άννῃ) (καὶ) συγγέλλ(ω) πρώην δι’ ἐτέρ(ων) χρυσοβούλλ(ων), πρὸς(ς) τούτοις δὲ (καὶ) τοὺς μετὰ ταῦτα δωρηθέντ(ας) ἀτελεῖς τεσσαράκοντα παροίκους [...]» (Lefort, Oikonomidès, Papachryssanthou, Kravari, Métrévélis 1990: 85-86).

From the above-cited sources, it becomes clear that in 980 there was a Georgian monastery in Trebizond dedicated to St. Phocas. Together with the Georgian monastery of Iberises in Constantinople, it became, on the one hand, a matter of exchange between Basil II and, on the other hand, between the monk John and Tornike Syncellus – the emperor transferred the Monastery of Leontia in Thessalonica, Kolobus Monastery in Ierissos and John the Baptist Clement Monastery on Athos to the Georgians established on Athos, according to the rules of exchange, while in return he received from them the two aforementioned Georgian monasteries in Constantinople and Trebizond. Additionally, by another chrysobull, the emperor also granted John-Tornike 60 demosiarioi houses and 40 paroikoi.

The early Georgian sources themselves are strangely silent about these Trapezuntine and Constantinopolitan monasteries. Raymond Janin cites Tornike's contribution to the suppression of the Skleros' rebellion as the reason for the lack of mention of this monastery in Georgian sources. (Janin 1975: 293). On what basis he expressed this view is not explained. However, it should be noted that, not only for Trebizond but for all monasteries attested throughout Chaldia-Chaneti, among the written sources revealed today, the above-mentioned chrysobull of 980 (now considered lost) is the oldest that provides evidence of the existence of a monastery in this region. Notably, this monastery is Georgian. I contend that this fact strongly emphasizes the interest of Georgian ecclesiastical circles in Trebizond and, more broadly, in Chaldia at least as early as the 10th century.

### The Reasons for the Request

According to the text of Leon the Judge's act, or more precisely, the portion of it containing Basil II's 980 chrysobull, it appears that the Byzantines transferred three monasteries to the Georgians according to the rules of exchange. In return for the monasteries ceded, the emperor requested from them the Iberises Monastery in Constantinople and that of St. Phocas in Trebizond. Two aspects of this

agreement are particularly striking: first, the unequal ratio of the exchanged properties; second, the reasons why the emperor specifically demanded the Constantinopolitan and Trapezuntine monasteries. None of this should be regarded as coincidental.

What can be said about the first aspect? The agreement seems, on the face of it, more favorable to the Georgian side. They received three monasteries from the Byzantines while surrendering only two in return. This does not yet account for the additional 60 *demosiarioi* houses and 40 *paroikoi* later granted to the Georgians by another chrysobull. This fact underscores the special importance of these two Georgian monasteries for the Byzantine imperial court. The St. Phocas Monastery, in particular, was first highlighted in this context by Anthony Bryer and David Winfield in 1985 (Bryer, Winfield 1985: 320). Later, this was also noted by Pausanias Thanoglou (Θαννογλου 2020: 117), although he did not elaborate, as his study addressed a different topic. In truth, further expansion and clarification of the matter at this stage is not feasible – Leon the Judge's act offers no additional information on this point, and other sources do not mention the agreement or its subject. Accordingly, we must rely solely on the straightforward evidence that the St. Phocas Monastery in Trebizond, together with that of Iberises in Constantinople, was considerably more significant for the imperial court than the three monasteries ceded to the Georgians in exchange.

This observation naturally intersects with the second aspect, which Uspensky briefly noted. He merely stated in one sentence that the reason for the [Georgians'] refusal is unknown, and, in this context, he mentions only the Iberises Monastery (Успенский 1877a: 65).

What prompted Basil II to request the Iberises Monastery in Constantinople and the St. Phocas Monastery in Trebizond? I suspect the reason lies in the desire to curb the expansionist policies of David III of Tao, who was particularly authoritative and influential in the East. The possession of monasteries in Trebizond on the one hand, and in Constantinople on the other, by persons closely associated with David, afforded the Georgian king timely, direct, and reliable information regarding events in the imperial capital and the Theme of Chaldia adjacent to Tao. Beyond their religious and cultural significance, the functioning of these monasteries thus had a quasi-intelligence and diplomatic function. Their existence reinforced Taoan interests and facilitated connections with desired circles. Both monasteries were in the hands of particularly active Georgians, whose direct involvement and assistance would soon prove crucial for the Macedonian dynasty to maintain the throne in Constantinople, as noted above.

It is true that this latter case, as with many others enumerated below, was preceded by the well-known 980 agreement, which may lead some to question direct causal links between events due to chronological sequencing. However, we are dealing here with the extraordinarily complex machinery of the empire. In reality, it is evident that the imperial court in Constantinople pursued policies regarding David III and his circle based on a premeditated, comprehensive analysis and assessment.



What occurred post factum should be understood merely as the imperial administrative apparatus's chosen response to existing circumstances, deemed most appropriate under the conditions.

Regarding David III's policy more broadly, it should be noted that an essential component of it was vigorous support for ecclesiastical and cultural activity. The results were conspicuous: Tao reached a cultural zenith across Pontus and the Caucasus. Under David's rule and patronage, the magnificent churches of Oshki, Parkhali, and Khakhuli were built, and the Church of Otkhta Eklesia was significantly reconstructed (სურგულაძე 2018: 23). Taoan architecture flourished and the kingdom became a kind of *Kulturträger* in the region<sup>4</sup>.

The ecclesiastical expansion toward Trebizond under David III is also reflected in the establishment of monks from the Otkhta Eklesia – John Grdzilisdze and Arseni Bishop of Ninotzminda – in Pontus, as reported by George the Hagiorite: “[...] they went to certain desolated areas of Pontus and met with the head of the town there, who gladly received them and granted them a monastery in the midst of the wilderness, providing them sustenance and assistance as needed” (მთაწმინდელი 1967: 56-57).

Although Hagiorite attributes the movement of Georgian monks to Pontus solely to their desire for monastic seclusion, I would argue that David III's deliberate policy is more evident than mere ascetic motivation. This account also indicates that the local Pontic authorities were favorably disposed toward the Georgian monkhood and materially supported their monastic settlements and restoration efforts.

These monks belonged to the circle of high-ranking clerics who directed the ecclesiastical dimension of David III's policy. Notably, John Grdzilisdze and Arseni of Ninotzminda later moved from Pontus to Athos at the invitation of John-Varazvache and Euthymius the Hagiorite.

In Byzantium, particularly given the frequent instability along its eastern frontiers, David III actively sought to extend his domains along major trade routes, establishing direct control over certain sections. It appears that the royal court in Tao had a clear plan to this end.

Evidence for this is provided by the annexation of Manzikert (Manaskerti; Malazgirt) by the Georgians in 991/92, which David III took from the Marwanid Emirate following the death of Badh ibn Dustak. From this region, the Arabs were expelled by the king of Tao, and Georgians and Armenians were settled instead. The Marwanids attempted to reclaim Manzikert under Abu Ali Al-Hasan ibn Marwān in 998, but David III defeated them again (Adontz 1965: 304; Tarōnec'i 2017: 300–301).

In 997, David III advanced even further – he besieged the fortress of Chliat (Khlati; Ahlat) during winter, forcing the city to surrender through famine and sword. This campaign, however, was ultimately unsuccessful due to a rift that developed on ecclesiastical grounds between the Georgian and

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the presence of Taoan architectural features in Trebizond is noteworthy. However, this is a matter for another time and falls within a different field of study.

Armenian contingents as a result of David's imprudent actions in 998<sup>5</sup> (Տարոնացի 1885: 268–269; Tarōnec'i 2017: 302).

In the same year, 998, David faced another confrontation in the region of Lake Van, this time against Mamlan bin Abu'l-Hayja (r. 988–1000), the amir of the Rawadids, and his ally, the amir of Khurasan. David III was reinforced by the Georgian king Gurgen of Iberia (r. 994–1008) with a force of 6,000 cavalry under the command of Pheris Jojikis-dze<sup>6</sup>, the Armenian king of Ani, Gagik I (r. 989–1117) with 6,000 cavalry under the leadership of Vahram Grigolis-dze, Smbat Vahramis-dze, and Ashot Marzpan, and the king of Vanand, Abas (r. 984–1029). There were the famous Gamrekeli brothers from Meskheti as well. According to Tarōnec'i, the entire army of David was commanded by Gabriel Ochopintres-dze due to the king's old age. The battles took place in the Apahunik region, between Tzumbi and Archeshi (Erciş), and concluded with a victory for the Georgian-Armenian coalition (Tarōnec'i 2017: 303–306).

One branch of the major trade route locally passed through the Karin-Khlati (Erzurum-Ahlat) zone, while its other terminus was the Chaldian littoral at the port of Trebizond.

The economic aspect of David's policy is also well demonstrated by the issuance of his own coinage. As Vasili Kopaliani notes, it was “the first Georgian coin after Arab rule that is free of any Arab-Islamic mark or content” (კოპალიანი 1969: 45, note 113; კაპანაძე 1969: 61–62; დუნდუა, დუნდუა 2006: 188–190). This issuance was not only a marker of economic independence but also a political symbol – a declaration of David III's sovereignty.

It is noteworthy that along both the Karin and Lake Van axes, alongside the political annexation of territories, David III sought to consolidate his positions through ecclesiastical administration. In Karin, a Georgian monastery operated with a scriptorium where significant scholarly activity took place, including the involvement of John-Tornike himself – he was the scribe of a manuscript copied there in 981 (Its testament: СИН. Греч. 75; №80272) (სურგულაძე 2018: 101; ჩხიკვაძე 2018: 143–144; მეტრეველი 1996: 24–34, 68–69). Moreover, in Valashkert (modern Eleşkirt; alternatively Basiani-Pasinler, former Hasankale) in the 960s–970s, the Georgians even founded a new episcopal see (ჭეიშვილი 2015: 169–198). To the south – in regions that Byzantium considered its own, though effectively uncontrolled by them – the Georgian church administration extended its reach for the first time so far. Although this was done in strict accordance with the Canons of the Ecumenical Council,

<sup>5</sup> According to Tarōnec'i, David III converted the cathedral church of the Armenian bishop of Chliat and the monasteries of the Holy Cross and St. Gamaliel into his headquarters and encampments. Surprised by this action, the Muslims shouted from the city walls: “You Christians treat Christian holy sites in this way?” To which the Taoans replied, “We view the Armenian church and your mosques alike!” In the ensuing battle, Tornike's son (according to some corrections, his nephew) Bagrat Magistros was killed (Տարոնացի 1885: 268–269; Таронский 1864: 192–193, note 1; Tarōnec'i 2017: 302).

<sup>6</sup> David's loyal general, whose father Jojik had assisted the imperial forces with a 12 000-strong Georgian contingent in suppressing Skleros' uprising, was forcibly taken to Byzantium in 1001 by the “gracious” Basil II and, after being accused of treachery, executed by beheading (კოპალიანი 1969: 112–113; Cheynet 2003: 101).

Constantinople viewed it with little approval<sup>7</sup>. All of this indicates that David III and his court frequently exercised political influence through ecclesiastical forms – that is, by expanding religious and cultural space.

One manifestation of Byzantium’s attempts to curb David’s expansionist policy was the weakening and control of the ecclesiastical component of this policy. I argue that Basil II’s request for the Trapezuntine monastery, alongside Constantinopolitan, served precisely this purpose. This action highlights the role of monasteries as politically strategic points and reflects the diplomatic logic employed by the empire at that specific moment. The imperial court viewed the existence of these two monasteries in Georgian hands as so undesirable that in exchange they offered three monasteries and additionally granted 60 *demosiarion* houses and 40 *paroikoi*. At that time, the Georgian clerics prioritized consolidating power on Mount Athos and founding a separate monastery.

On the other hand, because of the 12 000-strong Georgian contingent’s decisive role in suppressing Skleros’ rebellion in 976/78–979, David III received the Upper Lands from Constantinople – not permanently, but only for his lifetime. After his death, these “Lands” were to revert. Basil II’s distrust of David is evident in the fact that he demanded the sons of Georgian *Aznaurni* (nobles) as hostages and took them to Constantinople in this case as well<sup>8</sup> (მთაწმინდელი 1967: 43; მატიაწე ქართლისაჲ 1955: 273).

Beyond self-protection, Basil II’s actions also reflect the imperial court’s carefully concealed and far-reaching plans: after David’s death, the temporarily granted Upper Lands would be reclaimed, and claims would be asserted over David’s entire estate. Recall, for example, the annexation of Taron by Constantinople immediately after the death of Ashot III Bagratuni in 967/968; the refusal of John-Senekerim Artzruni to take the throne of Vaspurakan in 1021 and the subsequent transfer of the kingdom to Basil II; and in 1022, Catholicos Petros I Getadardz brought the “will” of the Armenian king John-Smbat III, heirless and in dispute with his brother Ashot IV, to Basil II, who was encamped in Trebizond to campaign against King George I of Georgia (r. 1014–1027), stating that the kingdom would pass to Byzantium upon the John-Smbat’s death. Despite Georgian opposition, the Byzantines annexed Ani (Anisi) in 1045. Similarly, after 1064, King Gagik-Abas II of Vanand transferred his kingdom (what remained after Seljuk conquest) to Byzantium (Garsoïan 1997: 187–193; Скабаланович

<sup>7</sup> Notably, in 1022, during the military conflict with George I, the enraged Basil II forcibly removed the Georgian Bishop Zakaria of Valashkert (who had previously also held the title of Bishop of Bana) from his flock and resettled him in Constantinople. According to Lastivertsi, the emperor even ordered the tearing out of Zakaria’s tongue for the guards (Ластивертци 1968: 66). Here, Zakaria had served in a small Georgian monastery of Qovelta Tzmidata “All Saints” (same as Agiappantis) (მენაბდე 1980: 248).

<sup>8</sup> Among the hostages was Euthymius [the Hagiorite], the seven-year-old son of John-Varazvache Chordvaneli, co-founder of the Georgian monastery on Mt. Athos and participant in the 980 monastic agreements. He was selected as a hostage by John’s brothers-in-law. Distressed by this, John — then residing on Ulumbo (Olympus) Mountain — went to Constantinople and demanded his son’s release from the imperial court. In this matter, a “prolonged negotiation” ensued between John and his father-in-law Abu Harb, as Abu Harb “refused to release him” (Eythymius). Eventually, John returned to Ulumbo with his son (მთაწმიდელი 1967: 43–44; გაბიაშვილი 2015: 433).

2004: 335)<sup>9, 10</sup>. While the incorporation of these Armenian kingdoms into Byzantium was relatively straightforward, the dispute over David III's territories – including the Upper Lands – was far more complex. The Eristavi of Kartli and the future first king of a unified Georgia, the adopted son of David III, Bagrat III (r. 975/978–1114), together with his father Gurgen (r. 994–1008), endeavored in vain to obtain these Upper Lands (კოპალაძე 1969: 74–81), and during the reign of King George I, this dispute even escalated into war between Byzantium and Georgia in 1021–1023.

I will not dwell on the fact that the parents of those taken hostage could have been exploited in Tao according to the Constantinopolitan interests, while the young sons of the Georgian nobility, at least some of them, could have been likely raised in Constantinople with a pro-Byzantine mindset.

I have already mentioned Basil II's distrust. His so-called suspicions proved justified. The Upper Lands of David III, part of which he had conquered by his own forces, were not to be surrendered willingly.

Against Basil, Bardas Phocas rebelled in 987–989. According to Yahya of Antioch, when the supporters of Phocas, entrenched in the eastern provinces, were at the approaches to Constantinople, Emperor Basil II sent the magistros Gregory Taronites by sea to Trebizond. His task was to gather reinforcements there and carry out military operations in the direction of the Euphrates, striking Phocas in the rear. In response, Phocas sent his own son, Nikephoros the Barytrachelos, to Tao to request assistance from David III. David sided with the rebels. According to Yahya, to confront Taronites toward Trebizond, David deployed one of his servants with 1 000 cavalry and, with another 1 000 cavalry, two sons of a certain Bagrat – both unnamed – Patrikioi and Magistri of al-Khalidiyat. They defeated Gregory Taronites, sent by Basil II (Yahya 1932: 424). This took place in 988 (Dölger 2003: 184), likely somewhere between Karini (Erzurum) and Erzinka (Erzincan), in the region of Derchani (Tercan). David III's actions appear motivated by a desire both to retain the Upper Lands and to acquire additional territories.

<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that, as Nina Garsoïan observes, the Armenian Bagratuni and Artzruni dynasties resettled by the imperial court in Cappadocia soon disappeared — the fate of all their heirs remains unknown to this day (Garsoïan 1997: 193).

<sup>10</sup> The trend of sequential incorporation of Georgian and Armenian kingdoms and principalities into Byzantium in the East during the 10th–11th centuries can arguably be traced back earlier, to the time of Ashot Kiskasi (“The Swift” in Georgian; d. 939), the owner of Artanuji (Ardanuç). According to Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, under the orders of Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos (r. 920–944), the Patrikios Constans took advantage of local disputes to seize the fortress of Artanuji with a 300-man Chaldian contingent; this fortress was the key to Kartli, Abkhazia, and Meskheta, and he also requested additional forces from the Emperor. The desire of Ashot Kiskasi to cede Artanuji to the emperor was conveyed through a Byzantine monk named Aghapi of Kimena traveling through Iberia. The raising of the Byzantine flag at Artanuji incensed the Taoan and Klarjian Bagrationis. David II of Tao (r. 923–937; brother of Ashot Kiskasi) and Gurgen, Eristavi of Klarjeti (r. 918–941; brother-in-law of Ashot), wrote a stern letter to Romanos I, warning that if he allowed the capture of Artanuji and invaded their territories, they would unite with the Saracens and wage war even against Byzantium itself. Alarmed, the emperor revoked the orders given to Constans, attributed the incident to his Patrikios' recklessness, and, with insults and threats, forced him to return – together with Ashot Kiskasi, by the way (Porphyrogenitus 1993: 215–223).

Yahya further notes that, upon hearing of Bardas Phocas' defeat near Chrysopolis (Üsküdar), David's generals returned. It is unclear from his account whether all three returned. Those who did return apologized to David, stating that they had fulfilled his wish – to defeat Gregory Taronites – and therefore turned back (Yahya 1932: 424–425).

This episode is also reflected in John Lazaropoulos' (aka Metropolitan Joseph of Trebizond) *Synopsis*. During Phocas' rebellion, on Basil II's orders, grain-laden ships arrived from Trebizond and nearby regions to Constantinople. This was noticed by Phocas' supporter (Lazaropoulos says "his brother"), Delphinas, who could not stop the ships but sent an urgent message to Phocas, urging him to approach Trebizond and its surroundings. According to Lazaropoulos, Phocas informed his supporters and friends from "Persarmenia", Bagrat (Παγκράτιος, Pankratios) and Chordvanel (Τζουρβανέλης [Τζουρβανέλης], Tzourbaneles [Tzourbaleles]), to march on Trebizond. They set out, bypassed Baiburti (Bayburt), crossed mountains and valleys, and encamped near a so-called Narrow Pass. The defenders of Trebizond fortified the city and its villages. At this time, Saint Eugenius intervened. In a vision, he appeared to Bagrat and, upon hearing Bagrat's boast that he had marched against Trebizond under Emperor Phocas' orders, said him: "That evil man whom wrongfully you called emperor, has lost his life in an evil manner. Go back home, therefore, lest you suffer the same death as Phocas!" Terrified, Bagrat reported all these events to his army and withdrew (Lazaropoulos 1996: 252–253).

Bagrat's action was likely prompted by the news, reaching Trebizond, of Bardas Phocas' death on 13 April 989, during the confrontation with Basil II at Abydos. Chordvanel, by contrast, apparently continued his campaign, as noted by Stephanos Tarōnec'i. According to Tarōnec'i, some of the rebels, including the magistros Chordvanel (nephew of Tornike), remained with Phocas. This aligns with Lazaropoulos' account, which only mentions Bagrat's withdrawal, not Chordvanel's. Chordvanel exercised authority over Tercan and Taron. Against him, Basil dispatched the Patrikios Zan, called Portzes aka Jakrus aka John Chaldos. He fought two battles with Chordvanel, defeating and killing him in 990 in the Tercan region, on the plain of Bagarich (near contemporary Çadırkaya) (Tarōnec'i 2017: 289–290, note 488; Supnūugh 1885: 251).

Yahya seems to refer to the same events, noting that the Patrikios Jakrus, sent by Basil to punish David and his generals, killed the elder brother from the rulers of al-Khalidiyat and expelled the younger, two sons of a Bagrat (Yahya 1932: 429). From this, it appears that the Chordvanel mentioned by Lazaropoulos was the elder brother, and Bagrat the younger.

The accounts of Yahya, Tarōnec'i and Lazaropoulos seem to describe a single episode: at Bardas Phocas' request, David III dispatched a Georgian–Chaldian army against Basil II toward the Trebizond–Tercan axis. The fighting unfolded in several episodes. In the first clash, David's unnamed soldier and the two al-Khalidiyat brothers, Chordvanel and Bagrat, defeated Gregory Taronites. Meanwhile, news reached them of Phocas' defeat near Chrysopolis or his death at Abydos, and of new forces sent by Basil under the Patrikios John Chaldos – Zan Portzes – Patrikios Jakrus. For this reason, two of them

(including Bagrat) withdrew. David's other soldier – revealed to be Chordvanel, Bagrat's elder brother – continued the fight. The imperial forces under John Chaldos fought two heavy battles with him, ultimately, in the second engagement at Bagarich, killing Chordvanel (Yahya 1932: 429).

David then sought pardon from the emperor, and through the Catholicos of Kartli<sup>11</sup> and the nobles, promised that after the emperor's death he would transfer the territories. Basil received the Georgian nobles with honor, rewarded them, and granted David the title of *couropalates*, thereby concluding matters for the time being (Yahya 1932: 429–430).

Regarding the generals sent to capture Trebizond, Jan Olof Rosenqvist argues that, given the chronological and political context, the Tzourbaneles and Pankratios mentioned in the *Synopsis* may be equated with Georgian generals: the former with Chordvanel II Zoravar (son of John-Varazvache Chordvaneli), and the latter with Bagrat II Patrikios (Lazaropoulos 1996: 406–407, notes 113–114). This Tzourbaneles would indeed be the son of John-Varazvache Chordvaneli or perhaps another nephew of Tornike – Chordvanel Patrik[ios] son of Arsusha. Pankratios corresponds to Bagrat II Patrikios, Tornike's nephew Bagrat Patrik[ios] son of Arsusha (see also შარაშიძე 1954: 186–187; კეკელიძე 1945: 222; მეტრეველი 1996: 24; მენაბდე 1980: 190–193). This Bagrat Patrik is the same Bagrat Patrikios who was killed by the Arabs in 998 when David III campaigned against Ahlat.

It must be noted, however, that Kekelidze's identification of Chordvanel Patrik and Bagrat Patrik as sons of Arsusha is only one interpretation (კეკელიძე 1945: 222). It is unclear on what basis he relied. In any case, these men were nephews of Tornike, likely not the sons of Arsusha or Varaz-Vache, but the sons of another brother of Tornike – Bagrat. Indeed, according to Yahya, the father of the al-Khalidiyat rulers, whose sons were sent against Basil along with one of David's general, was named “Bagrat”. It seems unlikely that the sons of John-Varazvache, present in Byzantium and directly connected to Basil II, would have actively engaged militarily against the emperor; the probable reason was the safety of their father and brother (Euthymius) and to avoid interfering with their own affairs. Other members of the Chordvaneli family would have had greater freedom in this respect. The names of Arsusha's sons are unknown; it is unclear whether he even had children. Although the sources are silent regarding Bagrat's household, Yahya's account, when reconciled with Lazaropoulos and Tarōnec'i, supports the view that the father of the Magistri and Patrikioi of al-Khalidiyat was Bagrat Chordvaneli, Tornike's brother. Chronologically, this makes him Bagrat I. Accordingly, the Bagrat and Chordvanel mentioned by Lazaropoulos are his sons – Bagrat<sup>12</sup> and Chordvanel Patrikioi – while

<sup>11</sup> Let us recall, in this context, the later role of the Armenian Catholicos Petros I Getadardz in 1022, in the testamentary transfer of Ani to Byzantium.

<sup>12</sup> In terms of succession, he would be Bagrat II. Kekelidze, relying on Asoghik (also known as Taronetsi), identifies yet another Bagrat—Bagrat Magistros, son of John-Tornike (see *ibid.*). A son bearing this name also appears in Georgian sources: in a marginal note from *Samotkhe* (“Paradise”), dated 977, mentioning the deceased Bagrat Magistros (Menabde 1980: 192). Accordingly, following the numerical sequence, he would be Bagrat III Chordvaneli. Moreover, in identifying the Bagrat Magistros mentioned by the Armenian chronicler with the one appearing in the Georgian marginal note, Menabde justifiably expressed doubt, since the Bagrat Magistros of the Armenian account is said to have perished in 998, while the Georgian source records Bagrat Magistros as already deceased in 977 (see the



Tarōnec‘i’s Chordvanel is the elder of these brothers<sup>13</sup>. The only unresolved question in these events is the identity of the additional general sent with David III against Gregory Taronites along the Trebizond–Tercan line. Bagrat I Chordvaneli does not appear to have participated in these events; it is plausible he was then deceased or already elderly and removed from active military affairs.

Regarding al-Khalidiyat (variant reading: al-Khaldiyat), it is clearly nothing other than Chaldia, or Khaldia, a military-administrative unit centered on Trebizond in the coastal Chaneti-Chaldian territories of the Black Sea. There is no scholarly consensus on the precise extent or identification of al-Khalidiyat. Rosen sought it specifically in Taron (Розенъ 1883: 79–80), but no district, city, village, or fortress of this name is known there. Adontz renders al-Khalidiyat as “Chaldia”, but surprisingly associates it with the region of Khaltioarich and Chormayri (roughly modern Aşkale and Aziziye districts), not with Chaldia proper. He also considers the sons of a Bagrat, the rulers of al-Khalidiyat to be Tornike’s brothers, arguing they were called rulers of Chaldia because the name referred to proximity to Chaldia (Adontz 1965: 305). The first part *Khalt-* (or *Khaght-*) of this Armenian placename *Khaltioarich* aligns with the Kartvelian tribal name *Kaldi* or *Khaldi* (“Chaldian”)<sup>14</sup>, though neither Khaltioarich nor Chormayri belonged to the Theme of Chaldia proper. The rationale for using the name of another, even neighboring, district for the holders of a territory (or fortress) is unclear. This and, generally, the other identifications of Adontz of the Georgian Chordvanelis, the Tornikioi or Tornikes known in Byzantium, and the Taronian Bagratunis are inherently confusing and error-prone, yet have been repeatedly accepted by some recognized scholars (see briefly: Степаненко 1999: 130–148). For this reason, further discussion here seems unnecessary.

Werner Seibt suggests that al-Khalidiyat may correspond to the Greek Καλούδια, located below Melitene (Malatya) on the west bank of the Euphrates (Seibt 1976: 36). Kaludia, or Claudia, was a fortress, probably identical with Klaudiopolis. Arab sources refer to it as Kalaudhiyya, Ḳalawdhīya, Qalawdiya, Qalāwudiya, al-Qalūdi, Qalūdiya, Qilāwdi, Qlaudia, etc. (Anderson 1897: 30; Kunitzsch 1974: 127, 379; Mordtmann 2012). This alone seems sufficient to refute Seibt’s hypothesis.

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cited work, same page; cf. also Tarōnec‘i 2017: 303, note 568). This discrepancy must be attributed to the fact that, in Taronetsi, the Bagrat Magistros killed in the battle of Ahlat in 998 is indeed correctly identified but was apparently misrepresented as the *son* of Tornike the Monk (“Յայնմ փախստի մնաւ մաժիստոռնսն Բագրատ՝ որի թոռնկայ արեղայի:” — Տարոնացի 1885: 269). However, according to Nikita Emin’s conjecture, “son” (*vordi*) should be read as “nephew.” Although Emin adduces a rather uncertain argument — also noted by Stepan Malkhasyants (Таронский 1864: 193, მეფ. 1; Տարոնացի 1885: 269, 392, მეფ. 144) — the testimony of the aforementioned Georgian source, unknown to Emin, clarifies the issue. Indeed, Bagrat Magistros, son of Tornike, recorded as deceased in 977, could not have participated in the battle of 998. Consequently, the Bagrat Magistros who fell at Ahlat according to Tarōnec‘i must have been Tornike’s nephew, not his son.

<sup>13</sup> Note, that the name *Chordvaneli* (Georgian: ჩორდვანელი) was also used within the Chordvaneli family as a personal name.

<sup>14</sup> It is noteworthy that, even today, the inhabitants of the neighboring regions use the name *Halt* (ხალთი) to refer to the population of the present-day Gümüşhane and, in some cases, Bayburt provinces, sometimes with a somewhat pejorative connotation.

A detailed discussion of this issue could continue, demonstrating the errors in the aforementioned authors' arguments (and the circumstances they rely upon, which I do not reproduce in detail here for brevity). Dmitri Kosourov also addressed this matter, placing al-Khalidiyat in the southern part of Chaldia, bordering Tao-Klarjeti (Kosourov 2021: 9). Unfortunately, I am only familiar with this as a thesis and cannot comment further. Seeking al-Khalidiyat outside Chaldia seems to complicate the matter unnecessarily.

At Bardas Phokas' request for assistance, the deployment of Georgian forces precisely toward the Chaldian front can be explained by the fact that this Byzantine theme, inhabited by the Chaldians, a people of Georgian-Kartvelian origin and of exceptional strategic importance, had itself long been an object of interest for the restless David III. Before this region became a target of his military-political expansion, ties of the desired kind had already been established through ecclesiastical and cultural means – as is evident from the fact that the local Monastery of Saint Phokas was in the possession of the Chordvanieli family.

The dispatch of David's Taoan army toward Trebizond, parallel to Phokas' revolt, was hardly a matter of courtesy or a spontaneous decision. There must have been an understanding between Phokas and David as to what reward the Georgian king would receive in the event of Phokas' victory. The sources are silent on this point. Kopaliani has perceptively suggested that “the leader of the rebels, Bardas Phokas – who fought for the imperial throne of Byzantium – must have been more inclined to make concessions, or at least to promise more to the ruler of Tao, than the representatives of the Macedonian dynasty had granted him; and this must have been the principal motive behind Tao's participation on the side of the insurgents” (კოპალიანი 1969: 59).

Indeed, it seems plausible that between David Curopalates and Bardas Phokas there was an agreement – in exchange for David's support in Phokas' bid for the imperial throne – not only to leave the Upper Lands under his control, but also to cede to the Georgians the theme of Chaldia and the former principality of Taron. The army dispatched by David fought precisely in this direction. Yet at the time of Phokas' insurrection, it appears that both Trebizond and Taron were to be occupied directly by the Georgians themselves<sup>15</sup>. It should also be recalled that David III had been on friendly terms with Bardas Phokas since the time when the latter served as doux of Chaldia (Cedrenus 1839: 431; Skylitzes 2010: 309). If one may venture to interpret John Skylitzes' account, it is not impossible that during Bardas Skleros' attempted coup of 976/78–979, it was Phokas – rather than the imperial court – who sought assistance from David III through the mediation of John-Tornike.

That Chaldia, under the leadership of Bagrat I Chordvanieli's sons – the Patrikioi and Magistroi Chordvanieli and Bagrat II – had, by the years 988–990, slipped from Byzantine control and was subject to the Georgian King David III, is also apparent from the fact that Basil II was compelled to send first

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<sup>15</sup> This was analogous to what had occurred earlier with the territories ceded by Basil II as part of the transfer of the Upper Lands.

Gregory Taronites and subsequently John Chaldos in rapid succession to the region in order to restore authority. Their mission and purpose were to quell the sudden disorder that had arisen in Trebizond and to open an eastern front against Phokas. Otherwise, the emperor would scarcely have found it necessary to dispatch to Chaldia two of the most distinguished military commanders of the empire. In principle, Basil II ought to have received assistance from his local subordinates in Trebizond – namely the Chordvani brothers, Patrikioi Chordvanel and Bagrat – yet this was not the case. Taking advantage of the situation, they withdrew from Basil II's subordination and served instead the interests of David III. The emperor's decision to send John Chaldos against them was thus by no means accidental. The perceptive Basil likely calculated that the loyalties of the Chaldian forces would incline more readily toward a general of local origin than toward the Chordvani brothers.

In connection with the Georgian military campaign of 988–990 in the Trebizond–Tercan region, another matter – alongside Trebizond itself – deserves attention within the broader context of David III's expansionist policy: that of Taron. This Armenian principality, as briefly noted above, had been annexed by Byzantium in 967/968 (or even possibly in 966), immediately following the death of its ruler Ashot III. His heirs, Gregory and Bagrat Bagratuni, surrendered the principality to the emperor in exchange for Byzantine titles, relocated to the empire, and thus founded the Byzantine noble family of the *Taronitai* (Ταρωνῖται) (Kaldellis 2019: 165). That this cession had been neither voluntary nor joyful is suggested by the fact that, during the earlier revolt of Bardas Skleros, the Taronite brothers initially supported Skleros – at least in part, one must assume, out of a desire to recover Taron. Later, for reasons unknown, they again went over to the imperial camp (Adontz 1935: 542–543; Garsoian 1991: 2012; Kazhdan 1991: 2012–2013; Garsoian 1997: 189). It is reasonable to suppose that their decision was influenced by the mercilessly efficient policy pursued by the imperial court at that time against its adversaries – a policy which the Taronites themselves had witnessed and in which they had participated.

It was this very Gregory Taronites, bearing the Byzantine title of magistros, who must have been dispatched by Basil II to defend Trebizond, to ensure the provisioning of the capital with grain from the region, and to open an eastern front against Bardas Phokas from the rear. He was, however, defeated by three generals sent by David III. The existence of another Gregory Taronites at that time seems highly improbable: the Bagratuni-Taronite family had only recently entered Byzantine service, and it is difficult to imagine that two prominent officials of the same name could have arisen from that lineage simultaneously.

One of David's generals – the patrikios Chordvanel – took possession of Taron, the domain of Gregory Taronites's grandfather, which Byzantium had regarded as its own and annexed barely two decades earlier. As the sources indicate, it was in fact the King of Tao who stood behind this action of Bagrat Chordvani's son. All of this fits with remarkable precision into David's expansionist policy.

The complex, multifaceted, and in part obscure questions raised above could, of course, be discussed in much greater depth through more extensive citation of relevant sources and the abundant scholarly

literature, as well as through engagement with the diverse – and at times erroneous – interpretations that have been advanced on these matters. Yet, such detailed elucidation is not of decisive importance for the present study. Moreover, these issues are intertwined with other, voluminous problems that cannot be properly treated in isolation, nor could they possibly be contained within the scope of this single inquiry. For these reasons, I shall be content with the foregoing brief account of the events of the later 10th and early 11th centuries, which, I believe, suffices for the purposes of this research.

Returning, finally, to the question of the “request” for the Georgian monasteries, it may be concluded in brief that Basil II’s aim in reclaiming these establishments was to undermine the influence of David III’s powerful ecclesiastical network, particularly in Constantinople and Trebizond<sup>16</sup>. This move was intended to curtail Georgian political and strategic presence in both the imperial capital and in Chaldia. The emperor’s calculation formed only one element of his shrewd and complex policy, whose ultimate objective was the incorporation of the heirless David III Bagrationi’s dominion into the Byzantine Empire. For this purpose, the bait cast into David’s “waters” was both rich and enticing – yet wrapped in the guise of gratitude: The Upper Lands. The King of Tao, of course, perceived and understood this far more clearly than we can now discern through research; nevertheless, the circumstances then prevailing in and around Byzantium left him not without reasonable hope that he might resolve the pending issues in his favor – the odds, as it were, were even.

David III’s ecclesiastical undertakings, as an integral component of his policy, must thus be evaluated not merely as expressions of religious devotion but as strategic political instruments through which his kingdom sought to expand its influence across the Pontic–Caucasian world. The construction of churches, the founding of monasteries, and the patronage of monastic centers constituted the ecclesiastical dimension of a policy aimed at establishing and consolidating Tao’s cultural supremacy and spiritual authority in the frontier regions. In this context, the Monastery of St. Phokas at Trebizond, held by the Chordvani family, was not simply a religious institution but a frontier outpost of Taoan influence that strengthened Georgian

<sup>16</sup> It is particularly significant that, soon thereafter – already within the third generation of Georgian Athonites—the Greeks were animated by the desire to seize Iviron by force. In 1029, the abbot of the Georgian monastery, Giorgi I (known in secular life as Michael Varazvache’s son of the Chordvani family, according to Elene Metreveli), was accused of participating in a conspiracy against Emperor Romanos III Argyros (1028–1034), allegedly supporting the enthronement of Diogenes (Constantine Diogenes, the distinguished general of Basil II and Constantine VIII, father of Romanos IV Diogenes, †1032). The Greek monks, honored by Giorgi himself, deposed him, removed him from Iviron, and exiled him from Athos to the island of Monovate. During this time, the Greeks plundered the Georgian monastery three times: “The monastery and we all who were left at that time fell into great distress and devastation, for the monastery was thrice ravaged, and whatever beautiful possessions our fathers had acquired were utterly destroyed – treasures and precious objects alike. And since the Greeks found such a favorable occasion, they exerted themselves with all their might to expel the Georgians from this monastery. For this reason they showed great zeal, moved the whole mountain, and persuaded the nobles of Greece and the dignitaries of the palace, who brought much affliction, toil, and tribulation upon us.”

Subsequently, the Greeks who settled in the Georgian monastery appointed, in violation of its foundational rule, a certain George the *Uketuri* (“the Wicked”; so called by the Athonite Georgians) as abbot – himself a Georgian by origin but a supporter of the Greeks. In this case too, the influence of the imperial court is unmistakable: the aim was to transfer the monastery into the hands of pro-imperial Greek clergy. Through collective perseverance, however, the Georgian brotherhood managed to preserve their monastery. They assembled and composed a lengthy *Letter of Remembrance* for future generations. Giorgi Mtatsmindeli explains the motive for this document as follows: “For this reason – that such evil, which the Greeks brought upon us, might not be forgotten, and that those who come after us may also remember the tribulations that befell us” (მაჭმინდელი 1967: 93–94; მეტრეველი 1996: 37–40, 45, 56, 87–106; მენაბდე 1980: 205–208).

positions within the theme of Chaldia while simultaneously securing close diplomatic ties with Byzantium's eastern military-political elite. Accordingly, Basil II's "request" of this monastery must be viewed as a deliberate and well-calculated move to curb David's ecclesiastical expansion and to neutralize the political role of such monastic foundations.

In this prolonged confrontation, all ultimately ended fatally for David. In 1001 (according to some accounts, in 1000), during the liturgy of Holy Thursday, the king was poisoned and strangled. The trace of this crime, it is not difficult to surmise, leads directly to Basil II. He had won over and bribed certain Taoan *Aznaurni*, who were later, in turn, exterminated by the Kievan Rus' mercenaries at Basil's own instigation. Aristakes Lastivertsi describes the event thus: "[...] On Great Thursday, during the performance of the Divine Liturgy, they (the *Aznaurni*; B.G.) mixed deadly poison into his chalice and made him drink it. They extinguished the blessed man, for they were dissatisfied with his actions and trusted the promises made to them earlier by the emperor" (Ластивертци 1968: 56). Here one recalls the Georgian noble youths whom Basil had demanded as hostages in Constantinople in exchange for the administration of the Upper Lands. It is highly probable that the *Aznaurni* who killed David III were the very fathers of those hostages – bribed or coerced by Basil II. In this light, John-Varazvache's swift release of his son Euthymius from captivity as soon as the news reached him was hardly coincidental. The nobles' discontent, in turn, likely stemmed from David's own decision to send their sons as hostages to Basil. Upon receiving word of David's death – or more precisely, of his orchestrated assassination – "Basil, King of the Greeks, advanced toward Tao, and the fortresses were delivered to him by the nobles of this David, and King Basil took possession of the domain of David Curopalates" (სუმბატ დავისთის-ძე 1955: 382).

After the emperor's "assignment" had been fulfilled by the bribed Georgian nobles, conflict arose between Basil's Rus'-Varangian forces stationed in Tao and those same nobles – a clash which, it seems, had been foreseen, if not premeditated, by the Byzantines. Notably, during this confrontation, thirty of the very nobles bribed and won over by Basil were themselves killed (Ластивертци 1968: 56).

David's domains were annexed by Byzantium under the terms of the pledge he had been compelled to make (Yahya 1932: 429), and in their place the empire established a new administrative unit – the Theme of Iberia (θέμα Ἰβηρίας). This ensured, among other things, the protection of the economically and strategically vital regions of Trebizond and Chaldia from further Georgian expansion, while shifting the military and political center of gravity in the Georgian-Armenian East to the new theme. Kopaliani rightly observes that this frontier military-administrative district "would later become the headquarters of the forces employed by the Byzantine Empire in its campaigns for the subjugation of the Armenian political entities and in its struggle against Georgia" (კოპალიანი 1969: 85).

The imperial court of Constantinople saw clearly the solid foundations that had already been laid – political, ecclesiastical, and ideological – for the unification of the culturally and economically advanced Georgian states into a single kingdom. This framework had already been legally consolidated as well. Had the heirless David III's designs succeeded, his personal domain, together with the Upper Lands extending to Lake Van and Taron, Dercan and Chaldia with Trebizond – would have passed to his adopted son Bagrat, son of Gurgen – who, in the east, ruled the Eristaviate of Kartli and, at the same time, was the sole heir to

the royal thrones of *the Mingrelian Kingdom of Abkhazia*<sup>17</sup> in the west and of *the Kartvelian Kingdom* of Tao-Klarjeti in the south. For the forces governing Byzantium, such a grand-scale Georgian monarchy was utterly unacceptable. Consequently, Constantinople sought by every means – including ecclesiastical intervention – to thwart this project. In the end, though Constantinople failed to prevent it, the future unified Kingdom of Georgia suffered a significant loss through the detachment of the territories that David III had encompassed, not to mention the military and economic resources expended in the struggles of that process. The shortsighted and merciless policy pursued by the Macedonian dynasty against its neighboring Christian states soon turned back upon Byzantium itself – culminating in its disastrous defeat at Manzikert in 1071, fought on the very soil of the former Theme of Iberia.

Thus, through the foregoing historical excursus, I have sought – as concisely as possible – to illuminate the political context and motives behind the Byzantine imperial court’s “request” for the Georgian monasteries of Constantinople and Trebizond. It is beyond doubt that the secular authorities, both in Byzantium and in Tao, fully understood the role of large monasteries – feudal-ecclesiastical seigneuries – not only in the religious and cultural-educational life of the state but also in their strategic significance within political and economic relations, and, not infrequently, in military confrontations. For the opposing sides, the allegiance, influence, or control of such monasteries often proved decisive.

Alongside their purely ecclesiastical and liturgical functions, the contribution and labor of prominent and influential church fathers were immense in shaping, supporting, and disseminating state ideology. The distinguished Georgian feudal house of the Chordvanieli, surrounded by an elite circle and endowed with estates and monasteries – both secular and ecclesiastical – was, in this respect, exceptional. The harmony between the highest secular authority in Tao and the ambitions of the Chordvanieli circle created the foundations for a coherent, consistent, and clearly articulated foreign policy. Naturally, all this was well perceived, weighed, and assessed by the participants in international relations – in this case, by the imperial court of Constantinople. In such tense relations, every detail – each step and intention – was understood as part of a comprehensive political design and thereby acquired particular significance. Any local success attained by either side in one sphere was regarded as a step toward a broader political objective. It is within this context that we must interpret not only the Byzantine initiative to “request” the Monasteries of Iberises and Saint Phokas but also, later, the very desire to gain possession of Iviron itself, founded upon the monasteries once exchanged for them.

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<sup>17</sup> *მეგრელთა ავხაზეთისა სამეფო* – the name for the Kingdom of Abkhazia appears in the Georgian redactions of *the Vitae of Daniel the Stylite*, dated to the 10th–11th centuries (კეკელიძე 1961: 5–6; ჩიკვაძე 1984: 254).



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