

## FROM NOBLES TO SERVANTS: WOMEN'S ROLES IN GEORGIAN MONOGAMY - A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS THROUGH LITERARY SOURCES

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**Abstract.** The earliest Georgian literary works, traditionally categorized as "hagiography," chronicle the lives and martyrdoms of notable figures from the early Christian era (5<sup>th</sup> -9<sup>th</sup> centuries). In addition to religious themes, these narratives reveal the actions of real individuals who, while advocating for their faith, also asserted their right to act independently, even in the face of aggression and opposition from those in power.

This article delves into the roles of women in positions of authority, as well as women from lower social strata, who, according to medieval Georgian and Armenian sources, made significant contributions to the state despite their modest beginnings. The period following Persian, Arabian, and Turkish invasions in Georgia witnessed the introduction of "maidens" and "servants" into the monogamous culture, prompting questions about the purpose of this institution. It remains uncertain whether these foreign women were assigned to monarchs and noble leaders for specific, and possibly ambiguous, reasons. Consequently, both Georgian men and women across social classes grappled with the introduction of this institution, which was never formally endorsed. Unfortunately, servant women often bore the label of being loyal to their masters, further casting suspicion on them as potential "spies" within the royal court. The responsibility of challenging practices like polygamy or moral laxity often fell on the shoulders of accomplished women. Thus, the adage "Behind every successful man, there stands a strong woman" resonates in the portrayal of Georgian women throughout the centuries, continuing into modern times.

In the presented article, there is an attempt to show the actions of women in power as well as women of low class who would carry out the idea of service to the state in spite of their social origin, according to Georgian and Armenian medieval sources.

**Keywords:** Georgian literature; Women in power; Social dynamics; Medieval Georgia; Political influence; Gender roles; Cultural transformation.

### Introduction

In Georgia, the role of women as political leaders has been significant, especially in the pre-Christian era, a prominence that only strengthened after Georgia's conversion to Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Wardrop, 2004, pp. 38–41). Notably, it was a woman who initially preached Christianity. The 10<sup>th</sup> -century text, "The Life of St. Nino," incorporates original passages from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (siradze, 2008). This text provides "10 commandments" that lay the foundation for understanding the role of a Georgian citizen.

These commandments were:

1. Whenever the gospel is preached, let the message be delivered by both men and women.
2. In the context of faith, there is no distinction between male and female; you are all unified.
3. Go and make disciples of all pagans, illuminating them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
4. Let the light shine among the Gentiles for the glory of your nation, Israel.
5. In every village where the gospel is proclaimed within the kingdom, let it be known.

6. Whoever hears you and shows mercy, shows mercy to me. And whoever shows mercy to me, shows mercy to my messenger.

7. The Lord cherished Mary for her unwavering devotion to His truth.

8. Fear not those who can harm your physical form, but rather those who can harm your soul.

9. Jesus instructed Mary Magdalene, saying, "Go forth, both men and women, and share my words with your sisters and brothers, bringing them joy."

10. Proclaim the message in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, wherever you go.

Four out of these Ten Commandments (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup>) specifically address women, emphasizing their vital role in the state known as "Iberia" or "Georgia." While some of these theses originate from Biblical citations, others are interpretations by the author (khitarishvili, 2006, pp. 19-20). Alongside their missionary intent, these commandments could also serve as a basis for the religious and moral education of Christians (siradze, 2008, p. 192).

Significantly, each of these commandments encapsulates a single thought or phrase from the Gospel. These "Ten Words" primarily draw from the New Testament, including passages from four different chapters, while one verse is sourced from the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians. Some are paraphrased, while others remain unchanged. Consequently, the Ninoan "Ten Words" find their foundation in the New Testament, embodying Christian grace. This book was "written in Roman," signifying it was composed in Greek, which was also referred to as "Roman" (siradze, 2008, p. 192). Notably, the Old Testament is not presented independently from the New Testament, as there's an indication that these "ten words" or "Decalogue" were inscribed "as it were on the first plank of stone," reminiscent of the Lord's commandments to Moses.

To grasp the essence and significance of the Decalogue, one must consider the broader context of the Holy Scripture from which each article is drawn. When examining the interpretations of the Holy Fathers, we gain insight into how these admonitions relate to the actions of Saint Nino and the apocalyptic "Sealed Book."

The first commandment, "Wherever the gospel is preached, should be said of the mother," finds its roots in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark (Matthew, 26:13 and Mark 14:9). In Bethany, within the house of Simon the Leper, a woman known to be a harlot anointed Jesus with precious ointment, using her own hair to dry his feet. Here, the Savior disclosed a hidden truth: "This is mine to be buried" (Matthew, 26:12). Through this act, the woman expressed her intention to anoint the Lord's body for burial. According to John Chrysostom (Chrysostom, 1996, pp. 357-358), Christ commended this woman for displaying her faith and turning her life around. The Lord declared that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, this woman's virtuous deed should be remembered. This way, the Savior brought attention to Mary's faith, recognizing her fervent devotion, humble spirit, and contrite heart. The power of the Lord's word disseminated this news far and wide, reaching people across different regions. Mentioning this woman holds significance because it inspired Judas in his betrayal of the Lord. When an outsider, a harlot, extended such profound respect to the Lord, it led his disciple to betray him. Saint Nino's contributions, akin to those of the woman mentioned in the Gospel, hold immeasurable value. The name of the enlightener of Georgians echoes through various parts of the country, wherever the word of Christ is spread.

The commandment, "There is neither male nor female, but you are all one" (Galatians 3:28), raises the question: Why was Georgia converted to Christianity by a woman? Nikoloz Gulaberidze, a notable theologian of the second half of the 12th century, explored this concept in his work *Readings about Sveti Tskhoveli (The Living Pillar), Kvarti Saufloi (Lord's Holy Garment), and the Catholic Church*. K. Kekelidze noted that this topic represented a fresh theme in Georgian theology. "According to Nikoloz Gulaberidze, the rationale behind the conversion of the Georgian nation by a woman is that "Georgia was a share of Lord's Holy Mother"; she herself desired to go and preach Christianity in Georgia, but "the Son Himself deterred her from undertaking this mission," and instead, He sent a woman. In essence, since Georgia was a share of the Mother of God, it was more fitting for a woman to effect its conversion. Another reason was the wild nature of Georgians at that time. Hence, God did not select a robust and unyielding man to demonstrate His might, but rather a frail woman" (K. Kekelidze. History of Ancient Georgian Literature. Vol. 1. Vol. 1980. pp. 319-320).

The third reason highlights God's elevation of women. After all, the resurrection of the Savior was initially proclaimed by a woman, spreading joy to others through her testimony (Theophylact of

Bulgaria, 1989, p. 89). The blessed Theophylact expounds: “*Simeon the Mimric named the Revelation to the birth of the Savior. He prepared this salvation for all people because the Lord came to the world to save humanity and to announce its realization to everyone. This salvation was 'a bright light unto the Gentiles,' illuminating the benighted, and glorifying Israel. For Christ is truly the glory of Israel, arising from its midst, and in Him, the truly righteous find their magnificence*” (Булгарский, 2000, p. 40).

The introduction of Hagiography, a distinct Georgian literary genre, can be traced back to the earliest stages of the Christian era. This genre comprises documented descriptions of martyrdoms or the devout lives of eminent Christians. At the forefront of these hagiographical texts stands St. Nino, the pivotal figure behind Georgia's conversion to Christianity in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. A 14-year-old girl who ventured to Georgia, she left an indelible mark on King Mirian and Queen Nana, leading to their conversion. According to St. Nino herself, in her account to Saloema of Ujarma, she received the "Ten Commandments" from an unknown man "who was not tall and half bald," near Paravani Lake in Javakheti. These commandments, she conveyed to King Mirian, thereby setting the model for "Rightful Citizenship."

This light, epitomized by the phrase "I am the light of the village" in the Lord's words, guided St. Nino to Kartli, reflecting her role as an enlightener. King Mirian proclaimed in his will: "Thus, has darkness been transformed into light, and death into our life" (dzveli kartuli agiograpiuli lit'erat'uris dzeglebi, 1963, p. 162).

### **Understanding the Role of Women in medieval Georgia**

The tenets were regarded by the populace as the guiding principles for citizenship over the ensuing centuries and are still held as a paradigm of proper citizenship. Throughout history, women, spanning all social strata from queens to servants, played active roles in the political life of the Georgian State.

Following Persian, Arabian, and Turkish incursions into Georgia, the introduction of "maidens" and "servants" into the monogamous culture posed challenges for Georgians in determining the purpose of such an institution. It remains uncertain whether these foreign women were assigned to monarchs and noble leaders for an ambiguous intent. Consequently, Georgians from all walks of life grappled with the introduction of this institution, which never received legal validation. Servant women were perceived as loyal to their masters, often leading them to be branded as "spies" within the royal court—a stigma they carried. The onus of combatting practices like polygamy or moral laxity often fell on the shoulders of distinguished women. Hence, the adage "Behind every successful man, there stands a strong woman" rings especially true and has been emblematic of Georgian women throughout the centuries, continuing into modern time

### **How the Women's Role is described in Medieval Georgian Sources**

In the second-oldest text, "Martyrdom of St. Shushanik," the queen of Georgia's southeastern province, Hereti, boldly resisted her husband. She refused to accept his second wife, the daughter of the Persian king Peroz I, and she steadfastly held onto her Christian faith. Through her unwavering stance, the nation retained its dignity even under forced submission to Persia. In one of her dialogues with a priest, she cites the 2nd thesis from the "Ten Commandments of the Georgian Nation": "There is neither male nor female, but you are all one (Gal. 3:28)." As the second-ranking figure in the state, she felt responsible for her husband's actions, even though he had betrayed her religion, family, and homeland. In response, she donned the royal garb, known as the "Antiochian Palekart," and led a resistance, enduring torment at the hands of her husband. As the author notes, King Peroz I of Persia insisted on the marriage only if his "rightful" wife consented to polygamy. Since the queen never embraced the "Persian lifestyle," this union never materialized (khutsesi, 2012, pp. 30-37). This raises the question: why would the powerful King Peroz I concern himself with the opinion of Shushanik, the queen of Hereti, a remote province in Georgia? One plausible explanation is that, although Peroz I was not from a monogamous culture, he, along with the civilized world of that era, recognized the rights of free women in legitimate unions. He agreed to the marriage solely to have a representative of

his interests within the royal household of Hereti. Unlike Christian Georgia, the Persian princess was seen not as a free individual, but rather as a political tool in the schemes of her father.

In the 10<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian text "Life of St. Grigori of Khandzta," two passages pertain to the sanctity of family. The first narrates how King Ashot (786–809 AD) falls in love with a slave woman (merchule, 2015, pp. 123–134). This text seems to be the earliest instance in Georgian literature where a slave woman is mentioned. This intriguing character disrupts the state and becomes a source of strife within the royal family. "At that time, Ashot Kurapalatos conquered many countries and built the castle of Artanuji as the residence for his lawful wife, the queen. And he lived well in his house for many years. And the enemy of mankind tempted him, and he brought a woman of harlotry to his castle, with whom he was committing adultery because the devil was greatly enraged. He himself at first did not have such a habit but was forced by the sin of the wicked." (Merchule, 2015, p. 123).

In the 8<sup>th</sup>-century text "Life of Khalifs" by the Armenian historian Lewond (Arsoumanian, 1982), we learn that "Patricius Ashot, after winning a battle against the Huns alongside Arabian khalif Merwan, brought back a large number of captives and booty. Merwan divided the spoils into five parts and gave one-fifth, including servants and maids, to Ashot." (Arsoumanian, 1982, pp. 39 and 115). It may be assumed that one of those maidens could be St. Grigol, who withdrew from the royal castle. Thus, St. Gregory's discontent with allowing the maiden to serve as a "treasury keeper" in the royal family can be explained by her role in the royal court as an outsider who will always remain loyal to her former patron. Here is the passage from the text describing St. Grigori's actions:

*"Blessed Gregory waited for the right moment. One day, when Kurapalat was away from Artanuj, he left with Shatberd and went to the lower part of the royal palace. He sent a messenger to the woman, requesting a meal. She was overjoyed and gave many gifts to the saint and his disciples. At dawn, she followed a man to see him, but St. Gregory did not bless her with the cross and ordered her to sit apart. The disciples and servants of the woman also stood still, as the fear of the holy one had spread over everyone. St. Gregory then asked the woman, "Why did you dare to stand among the husband and his wife?" She wept and replied, "Holy Father, I am not free myself because Kurapalat has an overflowing love for me, and I do not know what to do because the command of your words shook me greatly." The saint comforted her and said, "Daughter, be completely obedient to my words, and I will make you obedient to Christ so that he himself will forgive all your faults." She agreed, and St. Gregory blessed her, covered her with grace, and gave her his own shoebelt to wear as a belt. He then ordered the guards to escort them to the convent, telling the woman to go ahead and stand before them. In the custom of the fathers of the leaders of his time, they cooperated with Mother Phebronia in all their deeds. While they were talking, one of the nuns went close to them and heard only one word but could not hear anything else. St. Gregory asked the blessed Phebronia, "What did the angel say to you? For God was among them." (merchule, 2015, pp. 124–125).*

As the given passage shows, the maiden gains independence and starts acting on her own; she is going ahead and thus expresses her free will to condemn adultery.

In Christian families, especially royal ones, women played a crucial role in upholding the sanctity of the family in its broadest sense. According to the feudal model of governance, the heads of the royal family were viewed as the father and mother of the nation, appointed by the Lord. This was distinct from the ancient Greek tradition where noblemen were considered superior to any other individuals they possessed. In the Christian world, anyone, regardless of gender, was seen as a messenger of the Lord's word, as affirmed in the "Ten Commandments of the Georgian Nation" mentioned earlier.

Presumably, the Arab conqueror sought to exert influence over King Ashot by bestowing his favor and gifting maidens. Above all, this contradicted the customs of Christian life and represented a form of control over the royal family. Another notable character from the same text, Mother Phebronia, warrants attention in this context: as per the text, she is the defender of family purity. St. Grigol brings the woman to her, and later, when King Ashot comes to the convent to take the woman back with him, none other than Mother Phebronia resists him. She admonishes him with the powerful words: "As the causes of the causes of the sins of men, who commit iniquity." Hence, one might surmise that St. Grigol's inquiry, "what did the angel tell you," can be interpreted not only in theological terms but also as a very "earthly" political intrigue. It suggests that the king himself dispatched an "angel"—a messenger—to communicate his will to Mother Phebronia. Otherwise, it would be quite astonishing to think that the king held less authority than the abbess of the convent (merchule, 2015, p. 133).

### Understanding the Role of Women in Royal Court

In this context, the concept of virginity adds a deeper dimension to understanding the role of women in Christianity. This perspective was recognized not only in pre-Islamic cultures but also in later Islamic societies in the Middle East. Mother Phebronia, an esteemed figure in the clergy and abbess of Mere Monastery, dedicated herself to celibacy. She is still revered as the "mother of those who have faith in her." Known for her miracles, she was beloved by all. Guided by the Holy Spirit, she left Samtskhe to reside in Mere's convent, where her dignity and spiritual healing knew no bounds. She and Father Grigol formed a deeply blessed and intimate friendship through their shared devotion to God. (merchule, 2015, p. 94)

The author further narrates a similar story involving King Ashot's son, Adarnerse, who divorces his lawful wife, Bevreli (Anastasia), due to his involvement with a lover. He desires to marry this woman (merchule, 2015, pp. 134–153): "But the enemy sent an even greater passion to Adarnerse, the son of Ashot Kurapatat. The woman with whom he was committing adultery slandered his lawful wife, and he unjustly divorced his faithful wife with false accusations of immorality, sending her to Abkhazia, her place of origin. As a result of these false accusations, a young nobleman (whose name remains unknown) was accused and sentenced to death." The maiden or slave woman associated with Adarnerse instigated Queen Bevreli's (later known as Anastasia in her monastic life) departure from the royal palace by falsely accusing her of betraying the family. This led to the tragic death of a young man who was wrongfully accused of being the queen's lover (merchule, 2015, pp. 134–153).

From these passages, it becomes evident that women of lower social status were also dynamic and influential figures. This prompts the question: What endowed them with such power that they could even sway the destinies of the highest aristocrats, including royal families? Addressing this query remains speculative, as the sources do not directly elucidate the reasons for such "gifts". It can only be surmised that they acted as agents for their benefactors, closely observing the lives of the royal family and relaying information to their masters.

### Role of Women in Late Medieval ages – Influence of Islam

This perspective gains further credence from a text dating back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, "The Book of Wisdom and Lies" by Sulhkan-Saba Orbeliani. Within the fable "The King of Khorasan and the Chinese Jew," a king revels on a grand balcony while singing girls provide musical accompaniment. "One of the girls (gifted to the king by a kind man, a servant of certain Jewish noblemen) spotted her former lord passing below, and she wept, her harp slipping from her hands. When the king inquired about her distress, she recounted what she had witnessed. They sought out the man, located him, bathed him, clothed him, and ensured he rested. The following day, the king saddled his horse, embarked on a journey, and brought the man along. He vanquished the Jew and bestowed all his possessions upon his vassal, recompensing him for his benevolence." (Orbeliani, 2018, pp. 11–12).

Though undoubtedly a fable, it indirectly illustrates the purpose of "gifted" maidens, who remain loyal to their initial benefactors and serve them despite changing ownership. Evidently, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, after centuries of intimate interactions with the Islamic world, the function of these "gifted" individuals—both maidens and eunuchs—became clear: they embodied an external culture, one foreign to Georgian Christian monogamous traditions. In S.-S. Orbeliani's narrative, a character named Ruka, a eunuch, personifies malevolence, constantly sowing discord between the king and his loyal subjects.

### Conclusion

In summary, the roles of free and slave women in Georgian Christian culture are distinct. Free women, regardless of their social standing, are viewed as the backbone of families, in line with their societal status. On the other hand, slave women, and later eunuchs, are perceived as outsiders by the Christian community, often acting as potential informants or agents for foreign entities. While those in positions of royal authority may tolerate their presence due to political obligations, they harbor a desire to part ways with them when the opportunity arises. This dynamic sharply contrasts with

practices in ancient Greece and Islamic cultures, where the possession of slaves, including women, is emblematic of power.

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