

The Name of a Saint Disclosed and Established through Iconography

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Summary: None of the old Georgian sources from the 9th century to the 1830's mentions the name of 'Sidonia', the sister of Elioiz, who brought the Lord's tunic from Jerusalem to Mtskheta. Sidonia is not depicted or mentioned either on the murals, miniatures, or icons dating back to the 9th to 13th and also the 17th to 19th centuries that represent the erection and ascension of the living pillar or on the seals of the catholicoses of the 17th and 18th centuries, or the flag of Vakhtang VI. In the stories of *Life of Saint Nino*, published in the 19th century, Elioiz's sister is mostly referred to as 'Sidonia,' and the understanding is that she is well known to Georgians. In Teimuraz Bagrationi's work – *The History of Iveria from the Origins ...*, for the first time in 19 centuries, we encounter the name of Sidonia, the sister of Elioiz and the embracer of the Lord's tunic. The placement of the name 'Sidonia' in brackets at the mention of Elioiz's sister in Nikoloz Gulaberidze's *Sakitkhavi (The Reader)*, which was included in M. Sabinin's book *Georgia's Paradise* and the mentioning the name of Elioiz's sister on the icon *The Glory of the Holy Orthodox Church of Georgia* greatly contributed to the popularization and establishment of the name of Elioiz's sister - 'Sidonia.'

Keywords: *Sidonia, Teimuraz Bagrationi, M. Sabinin*

The late 19th century marked an important event in Georgia's spiritual life: the Christian Georgian culture was enriched with a new treasure; *The Glory of the Georgian Church*, such was the name of the icon created under the initiative and with direct participation of Mikael-Gobron Sabinashvili (Sabinin). The lithograph of the icon was first created in Leipzig (1889) and then in

Berlin (1895). Old Georgian icons, frescoes, and miniatures, which Mikheil Sabinin had been studying thoroughly for his whole life, served as a basis for this icon.

The composition of the icon is as follows: an angel erecting the miraculous pillar is depicted in the centre. Above him there is the Lord with raised hands, and below- the reclining virgin Sidonia, embracing the Lord's tunic, and the space on the left and right is fully devoted to Georgian saints and public figures from the 1st to the 19th century including martyrs, kings and military characters, catholicoi and monks. Thus, in essence, the icon is a chronicle of the spiritual history of the Christian Georgia filled with life-giving force and perfect harmony, like Georgian hymns, embodying heaven on earth.

The saints on *The Glory of the Georgian Church* are united by the miracle of the living pillar arising out of the Lord's tunic. The Lord's tunic is embraced by the deceased virgin above whom it reads 'Sidonia.' It was this name, the history of which proved to be cryptic and extremely interesting, that attracted attention while researching the editions of *Life of Saint Nino*. The studies revealed totally unexpected findings: it turned out that there was no mention of the name of the woman embracing the Lord's tunic in old Georgian manuscripts.

According to the Shatberdi edition of *Life of Saint Nino* (10th century), upon returning from Jerusalem to Mtskheta, Elioze was welcomed by his sister: "His sister greeted him ... and embraced him, took the garment of Jesus and pressed it to her bosom" [14, p. 129] and expired. Further narration says that King Amazaer desired to take the tunic of Jesus, but he did not dare to touch the deceased 'woman' because of the great mourning [14, p. 129]. Elioze buried his sister together with the tunic. The situation is described similarly in the Chelishi edition (12th century) of *Life of Saint Nino* [14, p. 129], the Sinai Manuscript version (N/Sin – 50, 9th – 10th centuries) [23, p. 355] and the version of *Life of Saint Nino* by Leonti Mroveli (11th century) [12, p. 99-100] – the woman who accepted the tunic is called 'sister' and 'woman'. The Monk Arsen (12th century) expands the text the way the followers of Metaphrastes do. However, here

too, Elioz's sister is mentioned as 'virgin', 'woman, adorned with virtue and piety' [2, p. 31-32], but in the passages about the dead woman she is referred to as 'the deceased' and 'holy sister' [2, p. 31-32]. The paraphrased version of the unknown author (13th century) uses the same references as the Monk Arsen does [18, p. 69-71].

To sum up the above mentioned facts, the versions of *Life of Saint Nino* (9th to 13th centuries) do not specify the name of the woman accepting the Lord's tunic. She is mentioned as 'the sister of Elioz,' 'a virgin adorned with virtue and piety,' 'a woman,' and 'the deceased.' It is likely that the name 'Sidonia' is unknown to the authors of the works.

On the Reason for the Conversion of Iberia to Christianity by Ephrem Mtsire tells the story of the building of Svetitskhoveli cathedral though it says nothing about the history of Christ's tunic. Nor does Nikoloz Gulaberisdze, Catholicos of Georgia (12th century), know the name of Elioz's sister. In his work *The Story of the Life-Giving Pillar, the Robe of the Lord and the Catholic Church*, she is referred to as 'sister' and 'woman' [5, p. 13, 15]. A postscript to *The Story...* (the manuscripts of the 17th-18th centuries) states that *The Story* was corrected by Catholicos Domenti IV, a scholar and a great patron of Georgian culture. Supposedly, he did not know the name of Elioz's sister either, since he did not make any changes to the work in this respect.

The name of Elioz's sister is unknown in the Queen Mariam's version of *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (Life of Georgia) [19, p. 80-81], an old Armenian translation of *Kartlis Tskhovreba* [21, p. 94-95], and also in *Histoire de la G'eorgie depuis l'antiquite' jusqu'au XIXe Siècle*, the book translated and published by Marie Brosset (1849) [20, p. 40-41, 80]. The name of Elioz's sister is not mentioned in the works by Vakhushti Batonishvili, *The History of Georgia* [7, p. 64] and *Description of the Kingdom of Georgia* [8, p. 81-82]. Supposedly, Vakhushti Batonishvili had not even heard the name of Elioz's sister, otherwise he would have mentioned it in the marginal notes (he did refer to some oral traditions though).

In the above works, as in the editions of *Life of Saint Nino*, the virgin embracing the tunic of the Lord is called 'sister', 'maiden', and 'the deceased'.

The Lord's tunic is discussed in the chapter entitled "Reverend Mother - Virgin Nina of apostolic standing" of *Tskobilsitkvaoba* by Anton I. Here, its location is regarded to be revealed by St. Nino [1, p. 112]. In one sub-chapter entitled "On the Lord's Tunic," Anton I explains the essence of the Lord's tunic and its history [*Ibid.*, p. 74]. There he says nothing about Elioze, his mother, or sister. In his work – *Martirika* (Martyrdom), Anton I considers the Lord's tunic symbolically.

In his *Stsavlani (The Teachings)* and *Samotkhis Kari (The Gates to Paradise)*, Sulikhan-Saba Orbeliani mentions the Lord's tunic several times (explains the meaning of the Lord's tunic and monk's tunic), but says nothing about its history. Thus, there is no mention of Elioze's sister. A similar case is presented in Ioane Batonishvili's encyclopedic work *Kalmasoba* (Chapter –*On Svetitskhoveli*) [11, p. 70].

Thus, the study of ancient Georgian manuscripts from the 9th century till the 1830's reveals that none of those sources mentions the name of Elioze's sister.

The history of the conversion of Kartli is also described in foreign sources.

Greek sources of the 4th-5th centuries (Gelasius of Caesarea, Rufinus, Socrates Scholasticus, Salaminius Hermias Sozomenus) say nothing about the Lord's tunic when they describe the miracle of erecting the column.

In Armenian literature, there are two versions of a legend about Christ's tunic known though nothing specific is said about the Lord's tunic after his crucifixion in either of them. Although the work by Movses Khorenatsi – *The History of Armenia* – tells the legend about King Abgar in detail, there is no mention of Christ's tunic with regard to the conversion of Georgia. Thus, Sidonia is not mentioned in these sources.

To clarify the issue, it is important to study Russian sources of the 17th century containing information about the Lord's tunic.

The book – *Materials According to the History of Georgian-Russian Relations* (1615-1640) – contains information, according to which, in the period of the reign of Mikhail Fyodorovich, the secretary Ivan Gramotin questioned the anchorite Ioanike about Christ's tunic and other sacred objects on the order of Filaret, the patriarch of Russia. Ioanike told him that when he was in Jerusalem, he heard that the tunic passed into the possession of a Georgian warrior, and he gave it to his sister. Here emerges a storyline differing from the ones in old Georgian works. According to this passage the virgin started a life devoted to Christ, and asked her parents to bury her wrapped in the tunic when she died [13]. It is said that "A tree grew from the tunic that the dead virgin was wrapped in, and the Georgian warrior took from Christ" [13, p. 97]. *Palestinian Orthodox Collection* states that A. Sukhanov was visiting Mtskheta and a senior church dignitary of Svetitskhoveli and the Catholicos told him the story of the Lord's tunic. The story mentions 'Longin' instead of 'Eliz' [22, p. 76]. Sukhanov refers to the woman embracing the tunic as 'sister' and 'virgin.' One detail is of interest: Sukhanov, as he explains, forgot the name of Longin's friend who accompanied him to Jerusalem. So, had he known the name of Longin's sister, he would definitely have stated it, or mentioned that he had forgotten it.

Brailovski's work *A New Version of the Story about the Tunic of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (1889) argues that in 1621 Shah Abbas presented the King of Russia Mikhail Fyodorovich and Patriarch Filaret with the Lord's tunic, taken from Georgia. Brailovski talks about a story "*Tale about the Tunic of Our Lord Jesus Christ*" which repeats the above story about giving the tunic to a woman by her warrior brother [4]. There is only one difference, namely, the *virgin* kept the tunic for a long time and on her deathbed she asked to be wrapped in it. After sixty years, her grave was dug out and the imperishable body of the virgin was found. They 'tore away' one fourth of the tunic and made a reliquary for it etc. [4, p. 20-21].

Thus, Russian sources of the 17th century, that were available in the late 19th century, do not mention the names of the person

bringing the tunic to Mtskheta, and of the woman buried with it. She is referred to as either 'sister' or 'virgin'.

With respect to studying this issue, a careful examination of the compositions of erection and ascension of the column on the frescos is of interest.

The paintings of the deacon's house of the main church of David Gareja Mravalmta Desert Monastery (9th-13th cc.) and the inscriptions on the frescos of Anisi Church (1215), Svetitskhoveli Cathedral column (decorations and paintings, 1678-1688), Samtavro Monastery Makvlovani Church (early 19th c.), Bodbe Monastery (19th c.) do not mention Sidonia.

The miracle of the column is depicted on 425 miniatures of *Sadgesastsaulo* (*The Book of Holy Day Readings*, 1718), where there are no inscriptions, and on 152 miniatures of *Sadgesastsaulo* (1742), among the inscriptions present ('Sveti Tskhoveli,' 'St. Nino') there is no inscription at the image of the virgin embracing the tunic.

A similar situation is found with the seals of the catholicoses of the 17th – 18th centuries (Catholicos Nikoloz, Domenti II, Domenti III, Besarion, Anton I, and Anton II), on which the main theme is the miracle of the life-giving pillar. Nor can we encounter 'Sidonia' on the depiction of the miracle of the life-giving pillar on the flag of Vakhtang VI.

It is known that the open space on the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral pillar where the chrism flew, used to be covered with the chased silver icon (18th century). There were inscriptions imprinted on it. If the chaser had known the name of Elioz's sister, he would definitely have imprinted it as the images of Apostles Peter and Paul, St. Nino and King Mirian are accompanied with corresponding inscriptions.

Examination of the materials shows that Georgian sources of the 9th to mid-18th centuries do not mention the name of Elioz's sister, Sidonia.

In the 19th century, stories narrating the life of Saint Nino were published in Tbilisi and Kutaisi. For instance, in 1868, Irodion Eliozidze, a 'military priest', published a poem *A Description of the Life of Saint Nina of Apostolic Standing, Enlightener of Georgians*.

However, the author never mentions the events in Mtkheta related to the Lord's tunic. Such is the case with *Life of Saint Nino, Enlightener of Georgians, retold in common Georgian* by M. Sharadze, published in Tbilisi in 1899, and in *Saint Nina, Enlightener of Georgians*, published in Kutaisi in 1895.

In 1878, D. Lazarev and Iv. Arakelov published the work *The Anniversary of the Lord's Tunic and the Life of St Nino, Enlightener of Georgians* in Tbilisi. Here, Elioze's sister is referred to as 'Sidonia' and it seems to be a fact known to anyone. A similar situation is found with the work *Mtskheta Cathedral and Saint Nino, Enlightener of Georgians* published by 'Mtskemi publishing house' in 1887, Kutaisi as well as with the story *Saint Nina, Enlightener of Georgians* published by the same journal in 1890 in Kutaisi.

Thus, in the stories of the life of Saint Nino published in late 19th century, Elioze's sister is mostly referred to as 'Sidonia' and this is considered as a fact widely known to Georgians.

We specially studied the works of Georgian and foreign scholars and researchers of the 19th and 20th centuries, dealing with the issues of the conversion of Kartli. It emerges that some scholars and writers do not mention the episode of the woman embracing the tunic and hence they do not provide her name either (P. Ioseliani, D. Bakradze, E. Takaishvili, Kirion II, Arcimandrite Ambrosi Khelaia, S. Baratashvili, I. Javakhishvili, M. Tamarashvili, A. Tsereteli, I. Chavchavadze, I. Gogebashvili, Bishop Leonide, Priest M. Kelenjeridze, Ev. Nikoladze, S. Kakabadze, Al. Manvelishvili, G. Baramidze); A. Khakhanashvili discusses this issue though he does not mention 'Sidonia'; M. Brosset and N. Mar know about 'Sidonia', they do not mention her name but refer to T. Zhordania's book. M. Seleznyov, A. Muraviov, M. Janashvili, T. Zhordania, P. Khuroshvili, A. Natroev, Z. Chichinadze, K. Kekelidze, T. Rukhadze, Archimandrite Rafael call Elioze's sister 'Sidonia' (and this is considered as a well-known fact). Supposedly, in this period (19th – 20th centuries) no one was interested in the origins of the name of Elioze's sister, 'Sidonia'. It should be noted here that this issue was first put forward and examined by E. Mamistvalashvili in his monograph *The History of Christ's Tunic*

(2003). According to this work (several pages are dedicated to this issue), the first source mentioning 'Sidonia' is not given. The information attested by E. Mamistvalashvili (about not mentioning Sidonia in Georgian sources) is cited by E. Mumulashvili (*Sacred Objects of Georgian Church*, Tb. 2007).

We intentionally omitted any discussion of the work by Teimuraz Bagrationi *The History from the Origin of Iveria* (1848) until now. The work contains a separate chapter on "Life of Saint Nino". Interestingly, in the beginning of *The History...*, when talking about King Aderk, the author gives the history of bringing the Lord's tunic to Mtskheta, and enriches it with new passages. The source is also indicated - "The Divine Scripture of the Georgian church say so" [9, p. 136].

Teimuraz I is the first author who mentioned the names of Elio's mother and sister: "... and the mother of Elio the Jew named 'Sarah' and the sister of Elio - virgin Sidonia ..." [Ibid. p. 136].

We are not sure which sources Teimuraz Batonishvili relied on when citing the names of Elio's mother and sister, or any different episodes of a fairy-tale nature. In the foreword to his work, Teimuraz mentions that he searched and collected information about the ancient history of Georgia, and neglected none of it [9, p. 1-2]. Teimuraz Batonishvili's responsible attitude towards the history of Georgia is clearly seen in his letters to Marie Brosset. In one of the letters he mentions that he had explored about one hundred books for his work and that it would be shameful for his reputation if he failed to create an outstanding piece of work. In addition, as he stated, he would not have asked Marie Brosset to participate in the creation of a worthless piece of work. The work he would present to the Asian Society was the work that could not be disregarded. "A description of someone's life is unlike any other art and the author of a history should be very careful ... Believe me, I do not leave this book day and night. I write it myself. I could not trust anyone else to write it. They will ruin it..." [10, p. 62].

The letter is written with such sincerity and civic duty that it is hard not to trust it. Teimuraz was writing his work for twenty

years. He had access to many sources unknown to us and it is probable that they were a basis for his assertions. In the foreword to *The Introduction to the History of Iveria* he mentions that he had rewritten the stories collected from the history of old Kartli by his uncle, Catholicos Anton, who, in his turn, had relied on various sources [9]. It is possible that Teimuraz took the names of Elio's mother and sister from the stories of Anton II. It should also be taken into consideration that, as Teimuraz mentions himself, he relied on information "heard by him" and folklore which, as he states, should not be disregarded. Indeed, as the above story demonstrates, Teimuraz Batonishvili often relied on "some oral works" as his sources; arguably, the names of Elio's mother and sister appeared in this way, but we cannot be certain. In any case, we encounter the name of Sidonia, the sister of Elio, who embraced the Lord's tunic, for the first time in 19 centuries in *The History of Georgia from the Origin...* by Teimuraz Batonishvili. Never before has this fact been recognized in scholarly literature.

The name of Elio's sister, 'Sidonia', and the story about the vain attempts of Elio, the people, and the king to move the deceased sister of Elio is firmly established in the minds of Georgians and is accepted as factual information. But almost no one knows that credit for this should go to Teimuraz Batonishvili rather than to the oldest editions of *Life of Saint Nino*.

As with the work of Teimuraz Batonishvili, we have left the discussion of the work of M. Sabinin's until the end.

One chapter in Nikoloz Gulaberidze's *Sakitkhavi (The Reader)* included in M. Sabinin's book *Georgia's Paradise* (1882) attracted our attention. In one of the chapters we read that "Elio had a mother descended from the line of Eli, the priest, and a sister (Sidonia) [6, 76]. As we can see, M. Sabinin has placed 'Sidonia', which we do not encounter elsewhere in the text, in brackets. By doing so, Sabinin makes known the name 'Sidonia', unrevealed by other sources, to everyone.

In his book – *The Iverian (Georgian) Church until the End of the 4th Century* (1877) – M. Sabinin narrates stories of Elio's travel

to Jerusalem and events connected with it. In the footnotes he gives Teimuraz's name as one of the sources.

M. Sabinin's further narration which, according to him, is based on the oral tradition of the Georgian church, *The History* by Prince Teimuraz, *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, the old synaxarion of the Mtskheta cathedral, and other remarkable manuscripts are connected with Sidonia and the story of the tunic. During his narration, M. Sabinin cites *The History of Georgia* by Teimuraz three times.

As we have mentioned at the beginning of this work, *The Glory of the Georgian Church* icon was created under the initiative of M. Sabinin in 1889. The inscription at the dead body of Elioz's sister reads 'Sidonia'.

In one of the articles M. Sabinin refers to Elioz's mother as 'Sarra', which we encounter only in Teimuraz Batonishvili's works. Consequently, for Sabinin, the main source for the story about the Lord's tunic must have been Teimuraz Batonishvili's work.

In our opinion, the placement of the name 'Sidonia' in brackets at the mention of Elioz's sister in Nikoloz Gulaberidze's *Sakitkhavi*, which was included in M. Sabinin's book *Georgia's Paradise* and mentioning the name of Elioz's sister on the icon *The Glory of the Holy Orthodox Church of Georgia* greatly contributed to the popularisation and establishment of the name of Elioz's sister – 'Sidonia.' In that period, the existence of these two treasures (Nikoloz Gulaberidze's *Sakitkhavi* and the icon) was so significant for Georgians that it is not surprising that they played a crucial role in the establishment of these findings. We think that the role played by the icon was even more important as *Georgia's Paradise* was not available to all. It should also be noted that placing Sidonia among the saints on the icon by Sabinin proved to be somewhat prophetic regarding her canonization.

The Georgian Church recognizes the later tradition and refers to Elioz's sister as 'Sidonia'. Sidonia, embracing the Lord's tunic, is regarded by the Georgian church as the first saint of Georgia.

To explain the reasons for not mentioning 'Sidonia' by old Georgian sources, we suggested the factor of tabooing her name

from the episodes showing concealment of the location of the Lord's tunic in the manuscripts [14, p. 87, 112, 129-130]. Supposedly, a representative of the Bagrationi family would never disclose this secret.

It should be noted that the word 'Sidon' means fishing [3]. 'Sidon' was mentioned in Genesis, the first book of *The Old Testament*. 'Sidon' is also a name of a person ("And Canaan begat Sidon, his firstborn ..." - Genesis, X, 15), as well as a name of a city in Phoenicia ("And the border of the Canaanites was from Sidon..." - Genesis, X, 19). 'Sidonia' means a fish. It is known that the fish is one of the oldest cryptic symbols of Christ. 'Ichtys' is decoded as: Iesus Christos Theon Yios Soter. This means: Jesus Christ Son of God, Saviour. Thus, the name 'Sidonia' is associated with Christ by its meaning as well.

And finally, we would like to stress one point: it is not a coincidence that we refer to Elioz's sister as 'the embracer of the Lord's tunic.' Let us recall the story from the Gospel about Simeon the Just, the embracer (Luke 2, 25-35). It could be said that the story of Simeon the Just embracing the Lord is a paradigm for the life of Elioz's sister, her expectation of the Lord's relic, embracement of the Lord's tunic, and her demise.

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