

Towards Evaluating the Historicity of the Claim that Peter the Iberian Descended from the Iberian Royal Family

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In an article that discusses the place, date, and purpose of the creation of the Georgian alphabet,¹ Werner Seibt commented on the difficulties Christianity experienced in Georgia in the fifth century as a context that motivated some Georgians, who were wished to practice their Christian faith freely, to leave Georgia and go abroad. The sources suggest that a good number of them went to the Holy Places in Syria and Palestine, initially as pilgrims. Not infrequently they stayed on for longer as ascetics. Having learned the monastic craft, Georgian-speaking monks established monasteries of their own. Likely the most famous and earliest Georgian pilgrim to the Holy Land among them was Peter the Iberian. His case, as Seibt pointed out, illustrates that such pilgrims-turned-ascetics also included members of the leading families in Georgia. Seibt's doubts concerning the veracity of the evidence of the Syriac and Georgian hagiographical witnesses to Peter's life centered specifically on the question of whether Peter indeed was a member of the royal

¹ Werner Seibt, "Wo, wann und zu welchem Zweck wurde das georgische Alphabet geschaffen?" in *Die Entstehung der kaukasischen Alphabete als kulturhistorisches Phänomen / The Creation of the Caucasian Alphabets as Phenomenon of Cultural History* (eds. Werner Seibt and Johannes Preiser-Kapeller; Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Denkschriften, 430. Band; Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung 28; Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011), 83-90.

Georgian family, or not simply of noble, but not of royal, origins.¹ The following remarks aim at evaluating this concern.

The evidence of the Syriac and Georgian *Lives* of Peter the Iberian for addressing Peter's genealogy has been a subject of discussions several times already. The debate includes contributions by Josef Markwart,² Paul Peeters,³ Cyril Toumanoff,⁴ Bernard Flusin,⁵ and the present researcher.⁶ Whereas Peeters and Toumanoff doubted that Peter the Iberian was indeed a royal offspring, Markwart, Flusin, and Horn considered that the author of the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* may have relied sufficiently on eyewitness accounts, including Peter's own memories. From that source then, it is not unlikely that Peter could have belonged to the Iberian royal family.

Addressing the question requires one to consider different sets of data. These comprise textual evidence, represented by the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian*, the *History of Kartli*, the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian*, which likely was composed by John Rufus, originally in Greek and later on translated into Syriac, and the *Plerophoriae*, as well as epigraphic evidence in the form of the set of Georgian inscriptions at Bir el-Qut in Palestine, which have been dated to the fifth or sixth century CE.

¹ Seibt, "Wo, wann und wozu," 87-88, especially 88, fn. 37.

² Josef Markwart, "Die Bekehrung Iberiens und die beiden ältesten Dokumente der iberischen Kirche," *Caucasica. Zeitschrift für die Erforschung der Sprachen und Kulturen des Kaukasus und Armeniens* 7 (1931), 111-167, here especially 123-136.

³ Paul Peeters, "Les débuts du christianisme en Géorgie d'après les sources hagiographiques," *Analecta Bollandiana* 50 (1932), 5-66.

⁴ Cyril Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1963).

⁵ Bernard Flusin, "Naissance d'une Ville sainte: autour de la Vie de Pierre l'Ibère," in *Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section des Sciences Religieuses* 100 (1991-92), 365-368.

⁶ Cornelia Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine: The Career of Peter the Iberian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chapter 2.

The *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* is a later hagiographical composition and circulates in a longer and a shorter form. Some strata in that text may go back to information which the hagiographer derived from an earlier *Life of Peter the Iberian* that had been composed by Zachariah Rhetor in Greek in the late fifth or early sixth century. Subsequently that *Life* was translated into Syriac. At present, neither the Greek nor the Syriac text is preserved, except for a few words of the last lines of the Syriac text. Although it has been argued that Zachariah's *Life of Peter the Iberian* may have entered into the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian*, detailed study suggests that it is at least as likely that the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* represents in effect a reworked version of another *Life of Peter the Iberian*, namely the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* that goes back to the work of John Rufus. It is quite possible that the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* simply reworked Rufus's text, for the main part by eliminating any traces of anti-Chalcedonian sentiments in the story.¹ Until more than the extant few last lines of the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* by Zachariah are recovered, it will be difficult to prove the direct connection of the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* with Zachariah's text.

The *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* reveals its later final redaction in at least some of its layers. With its reference to Niketas David Paphlagon in chapter two, for instance, one needs to date the text at this point to the tenth century. Other elements of the text in the same chapter suggest that it may even reflect an eleventh-century redaction, for instance in traditions that combine information about missionary activities of the apostle Andrew among the Lazes with the evangelization activities of Nino in Iberia.² For David Marshall Lang, the *Georgian Life of Peter the*

¹ Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy*, 47-49; yet see also David Marshall Lang, "Peter the Iberian and his Biographers," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 2 (1951), 158-168.

² Flusin, "Naissance d'une Ville sainte," 366-367.

Iberian as it is extant at best reflected a status of the text dating to the thirteenth century.¹

For the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian*, Peter's descent from a king of the Georgians is programmatic. The long and short versions, which Nikolai Y. Marr edited, identify Peter explicitly as the son of the king of the Georgians (მე ქართველთა მეფისაი) already in their titles.² Both versions also describe Peter right in the first sentence of the first paragraph as one "who sprang up from royal and divine roots" (რომელი-იგი აღმოსცენდა ძირთაგან სამეფოთა და საღმრთოთა). In the course of chapter two, both versions tell the story of how King Varaz-Bakur, who is spoken of as the fourth king since the reign of King Mirian, received notification in an encounter with an angel that he and his wife, though without male offspring thus far, would be able to conceive. They gave the name Murvan to the child that was born to them shortly thereafter. For the tradition reflected in the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* then, this Murvan, who later on when he was in Palestine and became a monk was to be renamed as Peter, was the son of King Varaz-Bakur and his wife, and thus of royal descent.

The *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* shares traditions about Peter's royal origins with Georgian historiography reflected in the chronicles, here especially the work known as the *History of Kartli*. This text offers a more complicated picture regarding Peter's royal descent. One of the difficulties arises from the *History of Kartli's* contradictory characterization of King Varaz-Bakur.³ The text presents two different pictures of this royal figure. In one instance it

¹ David Marshall Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, second edition, 1976), 58.

² Nikolai Y. Marr, ed. and tr., "Chovreba Petre Iverisa [Life of Peter the Iberian]," in *Pravoslavnyy Palestinskiy Sbornik*, vyp. 47 = XVI, 2 (St. Petersburg, 1896), pp. 1-78 (Georgian text), pp. 81-115 (Russian translation).

³ Gertrud Pätsch, ed. and tr., *Das Leben Kartlis. Eine Chronik aus Georgien. 300-1200* (Sammlung Dieterich. Band 330; Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1985), 189-197.

speaks of him as a pious Christian king. Yet in another tradition, which follows in the text, Varaz-Bakur is identified as a king, who was an enemy of the Christian church. These two different portraits are in turn connected with variants concerning Varaz-Bakur's offspring as well. The narrative segment that sees him as a formidable Christian king also portrays him as having been the father of Murvan, the later Peter the Iberian. Yet according to the portion of the text that sees Varaz-Bakur in a negative light, the king is said to have had three sons from his two wives. Neither one of those sons is identified with Peter the Iberian. Even the tradition that presents Varaz-Bakur as having been the father of Murvan/Peter is not without some complications in its own right insofar as the reader notices readily that two sets of stories concerning the life of Peter the Iberian are offered consecutively in the text at this instance. In effect, Peter's life as a son of Varaz-Bakur is told twice. The two variants do not call into question whether or not Murvan/Peter was an offspring of the royal family. They do place different emphases on aspects of his life, which however are not relevant for our present inquiry. In the end, the *History of Kartli* combines in its narrative of Varaz-Bakur and his offspring three different traditions, or two different traditions, of which one is offered in two variants. Determining the precise relationship and chronological dependency between the tradition in the *History of Kartli* that portrays Varaz-Bakur as father of Murvan/Peter and the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* is a question which requires more detailed exploration in another study.

Information concerning Peter the Iberian's genealogy is also to be found in the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* that is associated with the name of John Rufus.¹ This text was originally composed in Greek in the late fifth century in Palestine. The *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* as well as a second text, which was likewise composed by John Rufus, the so-called *Plerophoriae*, a collection of

¹ Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix Jr., ed. and tr., *John Rufus: The Lives of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius of Jerusalem, and the Monk Romanus* (Writings from the Greco-Roman World 24; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature and E. J. Brill Publishers, 2008).

apophthegmata-like stories about Peter the Iberian as leader of the anti-Chalcedonian movement in fifth-century Palestine and his immediate followers, offer Peter's Georgian name as Nabarnugios.¹ This identification is clearly in contrast to the evidence provided in the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian*. In both texts though the name Peter, by which he came to be known most widely, was the name he received when he became a monk in Palestine. According to Rufus's *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian*, Nabarnugios/Peter was the son of Bosmarios (II), king of the Iberians. The name of his mother was Bakurduktia. On his father's side, his grandparents were Bosmarios (I), king of the Iberians, and Osduktia. On his mother's side, the names of Peter's grandparents were Bakur, who as far as Rufus had been told was the first Christian king of the Iberians, and Duktia.² Rufus mentioned, in addition, Bakur's brother, Arsilios, who shared in the royal reign over the Georgians.

The strongly hagiographical traits of this genealogy have been acknowledged in previous studies already. The *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* depicts several of the members of Peter's family as extraordinarily pious women and men. Yet the text also does not shy away from narrating more problematic family details, for instance that Peter's father had a concubine, with whom he had a daughter, or from talking quite extensively about people of lower social descent, for instance Peter's nurse, as members of the household. That nurse, for instance, was included in the circle of those, whose memory was to be celebrated at Peter's monastery in Palestine. Such rather intimate family details which have little or no bearing on establishing Peter's place in a royal dynasty instead suggest to a reader that the author of the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* relied at least for some of his information on personal memories, which Peter the Iberian had shared. One might argue

¹ John Rufus, *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* 4; *Plerophoriae* 56. For an edition and French translation of the *Plerophoriae* see François Nau, ed., and Maurice Brière, tr., *Jean Rufus, Évêque de Maïouma: Plérôphories, c.-à-d. témoignages et révélations* (Patrologia Orientalis 8.1; Paris: 1911).

² John Rufus, *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* 5; see also Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy*, 50-51.

then that comments on Peter's royal descent in this text may indeed reflect authentic personal memories of the Georgian monk.

In the tradition reflected in the *History of Kartli*, Bakur was Peter's great-grandfather on his father's side, whereas in the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian*, this Bakur is presented as Peter's maternal grandfather. Although the traditions differ with regard to the precise names or even generational relationships of Peter's ancestors, the Syriac and the Georgian hagiographical tradition as well as the tradition reflected in the Georgian chronicles literature clearly agree that Nabarnugios/Murvan/Peter was the direct offspring of a king, and not merely born into an aristocratic, but non-royal family.

Scholars have argued that additional information about Peter the Iberian can be obtained from epigraphic evidence that was unearthed in Palestine in the twentieth century. In the course of excavations in the Judean Desert, Virgilio Corbo discovered the remains of a Georgian monastery at Bir el-Qut, not far to the north-west of Khirbet Siyar al-Ghanam, near Bethlehem and dated the monastery to the sixth century.¹ Four Georgian inscriptions, one of them complete, three of them only partially preserved, were discovered as part of the mosaic floors of the monastery.² The fully preserved inscription has been dated to the sixth century. Since references to St. Theodore appear both in inscriptions one and two, it may be that also inscription two dates to the sixth century.

Two of the partially preserved inscriptions contain the names Marowan and Bowrzn (inscription two) and Bakowr (inscription three), which have been identified as Murvan, Buzmar or

¹ See Virgilio Corbo, *Gli scavi di Kh. Siyar El Ghanam (Campo dei Pastori) e i monasteri dei dintorni* (Pubblicazioni dello Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, N. 11; Jerusalem: Tip. dei PP. Francescani, 1955), 130.

² In addition to Corbo, see also გიორგი წერეთელი, *უძველესი ქართული წარწერები პალესტინიდან* (თბილისი: საქართველოს სსრ მეცნიერებათა აკადემიის გამომცემლობა, 1960), 10-13 with plates III-V and VIII-XII; as well as the material collected in ვ. ჩაჩანიძე, *პეტრე იბერიელი და ქართული მონასტრის არქეოლოგიური გათხრები იერუსალიმში* (თბილისი: მეცნიერება, 1977).

Bosmarios, and Bakur, that is, as Peter the Iberian under the Georgian name he carries in the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian*, and as his father Bosmarios and his maternal grandfather Bakur according to the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian*. While the name "Bakowr" is clearly legible, of the name "Marowan" only "Mar[w.a]n" is preserved in the mosaic and of the name "Bowrzn" only "Bo[]rzn" seems to be preserved. Yet with Flusin, one notes the methodological difficulty in reconstructing this data as information for the details of Peter's genealogy insofar as it would require combining seemingly contradictory evidence from the Syriac and the Georgian *Lives* with one another. It is striking that these inscriptions present the reader with a conglomerate of three names that are, in different traditions, related to the family history of Peter the Iberian. Yet the discrepancy of the Syriac and Georgian hagiographical evidence with regard to Peter's original Georgian name seems to preclude one from being able, definitively to conclude that the epigraphic evidence at Bir el-Qut indeed is strong evidence for the precise details of Peter's genealogy.

It is possible that the solution resides in an attempt to read the dependency of the evidence in the opposite direction. Perhaps the mosaic inscriptions document Peter's original Georgian name correctly as well as that of his father and grandfather. In that case, John Rufus in the *Plerophoriae* and the *Syriac Life of Peter the Iberian* would have erred with regard to preserving Peter's original Georgian name correctly, but would have gotten the details of Peter's genealogy right, whereas the *Georgian Life of Peter the Iberian* and the *History of Kartli* would have preserved his Georgian name correctly, but for reasons that may go beyond mere interest in Peter's genealogy and that may have deeper political underpinnings, chose to rewrite his story into a different dynastic framework. The evidence of the Georgian inscriptions of Bir el-Qut does not suggest, in any case, that Murvan/Peter was merely of aristocratic and not of royal origins.

Even if the truth may never be revealed in full, it seems that neither the epigraphic, nor the historiographical, nor the hagiographical evidence give rise to serious doubts that Peter the

Iberian was indeed a prince, the offspring of a royal family, and not merely a member of an aristocratic family. This does not mean, however, that the evidence provides us with sufficient evidence about the precise contours of the royal family, into which he had been born.