Conclusion

The Anomaly of the Missing Artefacts and Its Cultural Significance

As this research progressed over the last five years a strange phenomenon became more and more apparent; with the exception of the ubiquitous Syrian glass, there was an astonishing lack of Syrian artefacts in Eastern Georgia. When this absence was raised with Georgian colleagues working on the archaeology of the classical and late antique periods their initial reaction was to dispute this claim, but on reflecting and examining their records they all conceded that this was in fact the case and nobody had any idea as to why this might be. Brief forays into the literature on excavations in the west of the country produced evidence of classical hoards with significant mumbers of coins minted in Antioch and Emesa (Homs) demonstrating that there had been a regular trade with Syria in the western territories of Lazica/Egrisi, yet this was not replicated on the other side of the Surami ridge in Iberia/Kartli.

This mystery deepened when it emerged that this same dichotomy emerged in the archaeology of the Bronze Age[1] with there being evidence of trade with the Levant via Asia Minor in the regions west of the Surami ridge, but only the material culture of eastern-facing regions such as Persia east of the range. As it has long been apparent that the much higher and more difficult routes across the Greater Caucaus to the north have never offered any impediment to the free movement of people, ideas and artefacts, then it is clear that something else must be responsible for this strange lack of communication. As the archaeologist and director of Tbilisi Archaeological Repository, Mikheil Abramishvili has observed the impediment appears to have been the result of psychological and cultural factors rather than being a question of geographical isolation.[2]

This apparent repetition of a pattern that occurred in the Bronze Age reoccurring in Late Antiquity is reinforced by the fact that in both of these periods there was one exception to this rule; the region of Zemo (Upper) Imereti was culturally, intellectually and often politically dominated by the east even though it is located west of the Surami ridge. The fact that Zemo Imereti maintained this pattern through both the above periods serves to reinforce the parallels between these two periods and underlines the fact that there is something

1 Many thanks are due to Mikheil Abramishvili for talking this through with me and making me aware of the parallels between the Georgian Bronze Age and the situation in Late Antiquity.

2 Mikheil Abramishvili pers. comm.

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currently inexplicable going on. Identifying this phenomenon is in itself an important step forward in our understanding of trade and cultural relations in this period, but at the time of writing the *reasons* for this apparent cultural divide remain unknown.

The discovery of this recurrent phenomenon in the archaeological record leads us to hypothesise several points about the legends concerning the Thirteen (As)Syrian Fathers. Firstly the fact that the accounts of these figures were only written down even in the earliest estimation in the eighth or ninth centuries, some two to three hundred years after the events that they purport to recount, can be held responsible for some minor discrepancies. Secondly if we take into account the degree of lexical imprecision encountered in some of these sources and interpret these figures as being *Assyrian* rather than *Syrian* then this fits in with the evidence of the material culture, which shows abundant interaction with the Persian Empire in Late Antiquity. There are large quantities of Persian coins, monuments such as Zoroastrian Fire Temples (*Ateshgah*) and many other factors suggesting widespread interaction between the two regions and thus making it entirely plausible that a group of Christian holy men would have been free to travel from the Persian Empire to Kartli and Kakheti. Since this empire included the land formerly known as Assyria, it seems probable that any such travellers were coming from the environs of modern Iraq or possibly the parts of Mesopotamia that now fall in the countries of Syria and Turkey. However we must bear in mind that the question of a *Syrian* identity for these figures is not entangled simply with questions of material culture; it is also a reference to the vicious doctrinal disputes of the time and this is the factor that we shall turn to next.

Building an 'Orthodox' Past

It is clear that all literary references to the Thirteen *Assyrian* Fathers, as we shall finally call them, were written post 610 and the final divorce of the Georgian and Armenian Churches at the Third Council of Dvin. This is of course highly significant in helping us understand the political and doctrinal biases of the authors of these texts. The saints' *vitae* were sanitised as far as possible to make them appealing to a Chalcedonian Orthodox population. On the other hand the events of the past were problematic in that they had occurred before the 'triumph of Orthodoxy' in Kartvelian lands and therefore there was only so much obfuscation possible in trying to create an 'orthodox' interpretation of a period when Kartli and Kakheti were in union with the anti-Chalcedonian Armenians (and therefore by extension also in union with the Syrian mia-

physites). It is here that, in the opinion of this writer, the deliberate haziness between *Syrians* and *Assyrians* began to be employed for the first time. Whilst the Syrians had incorrectly been labelled monophysite[3] this was perhaps for many Chalcedonian commentators a preferable 'heresy' than to have been of the Assyrian doctrinal party. The Assyrians, who have historically been pejoratively referred to as Nestorians by their detractors, had become the majority Christian group in the Sassanian Empire due to their persecution on Byzantine territory. To the Chalcedonians who were fiercely at odds with the miaphysites over the phrasing of how Christ's humanity and divinity intersected, this 'Nestorian' rejection of Mary being *Theotokos* (God-bearer) instead merely accepting her as the *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer) was so far from their concept of 'orthodox' thinking that it was perhaps a lesser evil to accept a miaphysite past than to acknowledge the possibility that monasticism came into Kartli and Kakheti via monks who rejected not only Chalcedonian teaching, but also the Ephesian Mariological definition as well.

By the eighth or ninth century, when the accounts of the *vitae* of the Assyrian Fathers were put down on paper there were also other political and ethnic factors coming into play that could have made the desire to merge Syrian and Assyrian identities seem more palatable to a contemporary audience; as the newly autonomous Georgian Orthodox Church was taking great pains to distance themselves from an 'heretical' past in doctrinal terms, it was also an astute move to try and place some distance between themselves and their Persian past. As the Church relied on Constantinople for both spiritual and temporal succour, a narrative of *Syrian* monastic missionaries kept the conversation within the parameters of the Byzantine Empire. It meant the question of the 'otherness' of the Persian Empire could be neatly sidestepped and left out of the conversation.

At the same time as we can see an underlying doctrinal imperative shaping this narrative, we must also conclude that the (to us) odd vacuum in which these events purport to take place was also very much a product of its time with regard to the tropes of late antique hagiography. In this genre conforming to a known pattern of events and reinforcing the tropes of the form were more important than including historically verifiable elements or placing the action within a familiar and geographically identifiable location populated with notable figures. Finally we must also remember that concepts of ethnic-

3 See Brock, Sebastian P., 'Miaphysite, not monophysite!', *Cristianesimo nella storia* 37:1 (2016), pp. 45–54 for a summary of the ongoing discussion on the reasons why this term is no longer valid.

ity and nationhood were understood and expressed in very different terms in this period and, when we look at Northern Mesopotamia, the region we chiefly associate with Assyrian Christianity, there is evidence to suggest that these contemporary preoccupations were not relevant in the lives of the people of the time. Payne observes that:

> Although historians frequently classify the population of Northern Mesopotamia into discrete Aramean and Iranian groups, those individuals who did not espouse an Iranian ethnicity do not appear to have shared a similarly cohesive epithet.[4]

Payne's arguments that the middle class Christian élite of Mesopotamia developed an historical origin story that did not equate to the same thing as a cohesive ethnic identity, is instructive when related to the context of Kartli and Kakheti. If we accept the view that ethnic identity was fluid in this particular circumstance, then it makes sense that our Assyrian Fathers would have arrived speaking the Aramaic that was the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire and they would automatically been able to communicate with the highest level of Kartvelian society; in this context the conversations between kings and missionaries are no longer miraculous, nor do they need complex historical justifications to explain how Kartvelians and Assyrians could find a mutually intelligible language. As with Russian in the Soviet Union, all educated people of the Persian Empire had a common tongue and that helps explain the many narratives that suggest the conversion of Kartli and Kakheti was a top-down affair in many regions.

At the same time it also answers the question as to why no evidence of Syriac epigraphy has yet been discovered in Kartli and Kakheti; if they were using Aramaic we have examples of Persian and native Kartvelian (Armazian) inscriptions across Kartli and Kakheti and elsewhere—it occurred in Armenia at places such as Garni for example. However, these Sassanian-educated missionaries would have understood that their Syriac dialect would not have been understood in Kartvelian lands and that could account for its absence. On the other hand, it may have been that given the ethnic ambuiguity of their homeland that they did not strongly identify with their homeland or city and therefore saw no need to continue using a 'vernacular' language once settled

4 p. 206, Richard E. Payne, 'Avoiding Ethnicity: Uses of the Ancient Past in Late Sasanian Northern Mesopotamia' in Pohl, Walter, Gantner, Clemens & Payne, Richard E. (eds.), *Visions of community in the post-Roman world the West, Byzantium and the Islamic world, 300–1100*, Ashgate: Farnham & Burlington, VT, 2012, pp. 205–221.

in their new home. For all of these reasons it seems more and more likely that we are dealing with a group or groups originating in Northern Mesopotamia who left to spread their faith in Kartli and Kakheti at some point in the sixth century.

The Hagiopolite Relationship

One factor that has been a persistent theme in the study of early Kartvelian Christianity is the enduring devotion to the Holy Land, and Jerusalem in particular, in Kartvelian lands. This was, quite naturally, seen as a factor to support the view that these missionaries came from Syria, or as the literature often stated it, Syria-Palestine. However this devotion for the places identified with Christ's time on Earth had become a factor across wider early Christian society from the time of Constantine onwards and the dominant place of hagiopolite rites in the Kartvelian liturgy can easily be explained by the presence of Iberian/Kartvelian monastic communities from at least the fifth century—with Peter the Iberian remaining the most famous of these monastic figures.

However back in Kartvelian lands it seems that, as observed above, this cultural phenomenon of a strong east-west division meant that this Palestinian influence was probably transmitted to Egrisi/Lazica via the coast of Syria (now Lebanon) and Asia Minor. In the east any hagiopolite link was more complicated and mediated via the doctrinal and cultural viewpoints of Assyria—it is perhaps an echo of this process that is recalled in the now famous story of Davit Gareja turning back from his goal within site of Jerusalem saying that he was not worthy to enter the holy city. In this interpretation the hagiopolite influence was always present, but was strengthened post 610 and the reinvention of the Kartvelian Church as an Orthodox, Chalcedonian institution.

The Identity of the Assyrian Fathers

At some point in the sixth century a group, or more likely several groups over a period of years, travelled together or as individuals from Northern Mesopotamia to Kartli and Kakheti. They came overland on routes that would have taken them across parts of what is today Eastern Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and possibly Iran, before reaching the territory of the Kartvelians. There they commenced preaching and living an ascetic life in the hope of pleasing God and attracting disciples to a life of prayer. Their exact number and individual identities are difficult to ascertain with any certainty, and thirteen is always a number

with an obvious Christian resonance, but it does seem probable that there were real men who inspired Georgian stories and beliefs in the *Asirieli Mamebi*.

There will be many people, especially in Georgia, who will at the very least be uncomfortable with the above conclusions. Therefore it is important to note here that this project was approached with no preconceptions and, if anything, there was a strong presumption at the outset that there would be copious evidence linking Syrian and Kartvelian society in the fourth to seventh centuries. When one by one 'Syrian' artefacts turned out to be anything but and 'Syriac' inscriptions revealed themselves to be early Arabic or pseudo-kufic decoration and the like, there was a brief period of panic and despair before the pieces began to realign into a clearer and more logical pattern.

This is not to say that this work is intended to be the last word on this subject. Rather it is intended to open a discussion and encourage more interdisciplinary and international debate on these questions. With several honourable exceptions, few non-Georgian scholars have made serious efforts to engage with the large volume of Georgian language literature on this subject. On the other hand many of the Georgians working on this issue pay too little attention to non-Georgian literature and regrettably not one Georgian scholar working on this subject has ever travelled to Syria to study Syrian material culture in context. Naturally the years of war, first in Georgia and now in Syria, have made this a hugely complicated endeavour, but there does need to be more awareness of this lacuna when writing on these issues.

At a time when too many students are turning their backs on studying languages for languages' sake and barriers between societies are proliferating, it only remains to urge future scholars to invest time and patience in trying to truly understand other cultures; only in this way can we illuminate the past and hope to show others how to avoid repeating the same mistakes over and over again.

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