

# AT THE ORIGINS OF GEORGIAN HAGIOGRAPHY

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**Abstract:** Formation of hagiographic (martyrdom genre) literature in Georgian and Byzantine history is dictated by different contexts: in the I-IV centuries it was the persecution of Christians in pagan Rome, in Georgian reality there is only one composition with this content – „The Martyrdom of the Children of Kola“, and „The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik“ describes the story of queen who was martyred by her spouse (a man who was the political ally of Persia). At the same time, there are no fighters against heresy in Georgian literature; the context of Georgian hagiography is different. The martyr tortured by the conqueror enemy is typical for Georgian hagiographic literature (for example, Abo, Michael-Gobron, Eustathius of Mtskheta, David and Tarechan...) This creates the opposing pair: the hero-saint and anti-hero, a non-Christian and non-Georgian invader enemy. Therefore, the hero of Georgian hagiography has acquired another content and idea: except protecting a religion the protagonist was associated with the defender of national ideas (e.g. Abo, despite of Arab origin, is being called Tbileli or former Ismaelite, due to his martyrdom place and the ideological meaning by hymnographers and hagiographers as well) this detail distinguishes Georgian hagiographic matters from Byzantine not only by its content but functionally as well.

**Key words:** Formation of hagiographic genre; Georgian hagiography; hero of Georgian hagiography;

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**Introduction.** Hagiography is one of the earliest and most significant genres of ecclesiastical literature and constitutes an integral part of the cultural heritage of all Christian nations. This literary genre reflects the influence of Byzantine literature on the hagiographic writing practices of other Christian countries. It also poses unique challenges for both Byzantine and Georgian hagiographers. A key distinction lies in the genre's formation: in Byzantine tradition, hagiography emerged as martyrdom chronicles, simple records of action, biographies akin to those of Plutarch, encomia, and Scripture itself. For Georgian hagiography, however, the foundations were primarily Byzantine hagiographic tradition and the Holy Scriptures.

**Literature Review.** In the study of hagiographic texts, both Georgian and foreign scholarship have been utilized (S. Euthymiadis, Averintsev, Losev, C. Høgel, K. Kekelidze, B. Bardavelidze, B. Kilanava, K. Danelia & E. Gigolashvili, N. Vashakidze, E. Alekseeva, A. Kisa, and others). Based on this research, it is possible to apply a new classification system to assess and categorize texts, allowing deeper inquiry into questions such as: What does „kimen“ mean and which texts fall under this term? Are the martyrdoms of Shushanik, Abo, and Eustathius of Mtskheta kimen texts? If not, what terminology should be applied to most Georgian hagiographic texts?

**Methodology.** The article employs analytical, comparative, historical, inductive, and deductive methods.

**Discussion and Results.** Hagiography, as a literary genre, originates from the Byzantine tradition, where established structural-compositional models served as templates for other cultures. Thus, Georgian hagiographers did not need to invent new narrative frameworks, as these were already

developed by their Byzantine counterparts for both lives of saints and martyrdoms. By adopting these established models, even the simplest Georgian texts – often labeled as *kimen* or „plain“ – appear striking in literary terms. Given the syncretic nature of hagiography, such texts – and their protagonists – often transcend the temporal and national boundaries of their specific culture. Yet, from a literary standpoint, they frequently retain formative elements and influences traceable to broader cultural foundations.

These influences include: 1) Greek sources such as ancient biographies and encomia; 2) biblical narratives from the Judaic world; and 3) the Gospels and Acts from the broader Christian tradition. Simultaneously, the oral and written spread of Christianity introduced elements often mistakenly regarded as pre-Christian folklore. These features collectively provide insight into the origins of original Georgian hagiography.

Examples such as the autobiographical account of Saint Nino and the martyrdom narrative of the Kolan children show typological ties to both ancient biographies and biblical texts like the Maccabees. Furthermore, the presence of encomiastic elements – such as those found in the fourth chapter of the *Martyrdom of Abo* – and folkloric traditions reflecting popularized versions of saints' lives (e.g., George, Athenogenes, Basil the Great, Barbara, Kvirike, and Maximus the Confessor) underscore hagiography's cross-cultural and typological complexity.

Narratologically, hagiography emerged both as documentation of martyrdom and as liturgical texts. While the latter developed from the former, the genre's transmission into non-Greek-speaking cultures, such as Georgian, occurred in fully formed literary models via translations and possibly oral traditions. Consequently, unlike Byzantine authors, Georgian hagiographers were not burdened with devising narrative forms anew.

**Formation Specificities.** The development of hagiographic (martyr) literature in Georgia and Byzantium followed different contextual paths. While Roman pagan persecution defined I–IV century Byzantine texts, only one Georgian text (*Martyrdom of the Kolan Children*) describes persecution by pagans. In contrast, *The Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik* depicts martyrdom at the hands of her husband, a Zoroastrian Persian political ally. Georgian literature does not feature anti-heretical saints, revealing a distinct hagiographic context.

Typical Georgian hagiographic antagonists are foreign invaders – non-Christians and non-Georgians – opposed to the saintly protagonist (e.g., Abo, Michael-Gobron, Eustathius of Mtskheta, David and Tirchan). Hence, the Georgian saint often embodies not just religious piety but nationalistic ideals, becoming a defender of both faith and country.

In Byzantine tradition, a new hagiographic era begins with Symeon Metaphrastes, who revised texts in three key ways: correcting heretically damaged material, refining structure, and enhancing language. This reform marked the shift from *pre-metaphrastic* to *metaphrastic* phases. However, this classification does not neatly apply to Georgian literature. Most early Georgian hagiographic texts – despite being refined in style and structure – do not align with the stylistic conventions of Metaphrastes and thus cannot be classified as *kimen* (plain) or *metaphrastic*. They are best labeled as *pre-metaphrastic*, a transitional category.

If we consider truly *kimen* (plain) texts, *The Martyrdom of the Kolan Children* serves as a clear example, with its simplicity in composition, narrative, and language. Conversely, post-Metaphrastes Georgian translations exhibit greater structural complexity. Yet, unlike in Byzantium, Georgian literature continued to preserve and circulate both *kimen* and pre-metaphrastic texts, often without revisions, as there was no pressing need to correct them for heretical distortion.

**Structure of Hagiographic Composition.** Does Georgian hagiography conform to general canonical frameworks? Some scholars (e.g., T.R. Rudy) classify hagiographic lives into typologies based on subject (martyrs, hierarchs, rulers, fools-for-Christ, etc.). Georgian hagiography addresses each, but

structurally, only *Lives* and *Martyrdoms* present distinct compositional features. This area remains under-researched.

Beyond *vitae* and *acta*, Byzantine hagiography recognizes *lives with encomia*, characterized by rhetorical embellishment. Encomia imitate sermons or public orations honoring saints and emphasize moral themes over factual detail. Because genre boundaries are fluid, titles do not always reflect the text's nature accurately.

Hagiographic texts aim not to provide historical accuracy but to reveal the saint's spiritual essence. Consequently, authors often omit individual earthly traits in favor of idealized, heavenly images. This results in common motifs, formulae, and structures across texts. Canonical models and literary imitation guide hagiographic creation – new saints mimic prior ones, and hagiographers affirm the sanctity of their subjects through intertextual borrowing.

Nevertheless, generalization in character and plot depiction does not exclude specific historical features. These are vital for textual credibility, especially in sections describing miracles. A fully developed hagiographic narrative traditionally comprises three parts: prologue, main body, and epilogue. The prologue typically includes genre-specific themes, motives, and formulae – such as a justification for writing the life (e.g., John Sabanisdze's letter from Catholicos Samuel, or George Merchule's reasoning for writing about virtuous fathers), as well as authorial humility and self-assessment.

**The Lives of the Martyrs.** Martyrdom is the conscious and voluntary acceptance of death as a testimony to the life of Christ, faithfulness to Him, and devotion to the Christian faith. Following Christ's example became the ideological and artistic dominant of the hagiographic genre in subsequent literature. In Western academic literature, the Latin term *imitatio Christi* is often used, and this terminology has been adopted by Georgian scholars as well. The ascetic's final words are frequently prayers to the Lord for the forgiveness of their persecutors, echoing the crucified Christ's plea: „Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing“ (Luke 23:34; cf. Matt. 5:44). In such episodes, the biblical model serves as a foundational template. Hagiographic texts widely adopted the Savior's words spoken before death: „Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Having said this, he breathed his last“ (Luke 23:46).

As previously mentioned, hagiographic literature is composed of both translated and original works within the genres of martyrdom (*martyrologium*) and *vitae* (lives). These works were produced in three editorial versions: **kimenic** (original or plain), **metaphrastic** (revised), and **synaxarial** (shortened, for liturgical reading).

**The Original Georgian Martyrological Genre.** The original Georgian martyrological genre differs to some extent from its Byzantine counterpart. Byzantine martyrdom literature arose and developed amid the internal conflict between Christianity and paganism within the Roman Empire. These texts describe the actions of Christians executed before Christianity was declared the state religion of Byzantium (first half of the 4th century). By contrast, Georgian martyrdom emerged in the second half of the 5th century, approximately 150 years after the Christianization of Georgia, in a context already defined by Christianity rather than paganism. Georgian hagiographic protagonists were martyred under Zoroastrian (Iranian) and Islamic (Arab Caliphate) rule. Only one text – the *Martyrdom of the Kolan Children* – describes children converted to Christianity stoned by their pagan parents. Even here, the context is one of coexistence rather than direct conflict between pagans and Christians.

Despite the influence of Byzantine literature, Georgian martyrdom texts diverge from many of the original formulas and reflect national characteristics. These works – particularly those in the martyrdom genre – convey not only a commitment to Christian doctrine but also the idea of the struggle for national independence. For these protagonists, defending the Christian faith is inseparable from defending the territorial integrity of the homeland. Georgian martyrdom literature spans the first century after Georgia's conversion to Christianity through the 18th century. Unlike Byzantine literature, Georgian martyrdom lacks direct metaphrastic parallels.

### **Georgian martyrdom texts can be divided into three groups:**

1. Martyrdoms related to Zoroastrian (Mazdean) Iranian rule in Georgia prior to the 7th century.
2. Martyrdoms under Arab Islamic rule (after the 8th century).
3. Martyrdoms under Persian Islamic rule (17th-18th centuries).

The first group includes the *Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik* (†475), *Razhdan the Protomartyr* (†457), *Eustathius of Mtskheta* (†589), and *Abibos of Nekresi* (second half of the 6th century). These texts survive only in late manuscripts (after the 10th century). One of the main reasons for textual revision was the evolution of linguistic norms.

In the second half of the 10th century, Georgia began consolidating its political power. During the golden age of Georgian statehood in the 11th–12th centuries, there were no recorded cases of martyrdom. However, from the 13th century onward – especially during the fragmentation of Georgia into smaller kingdoms and principalities and the onset of new Islamic invasions – martyrdoms reappeared. In the 17th–18th centuries, during Persian Islamic rule in eastern Georgia, numerous Georgian nobles and royalty were martyred, including King Luarsab (†1622), Queen Ketevan (†1624), and nobles Bidzina Cholokashvili, Shalva, and Elizbar (†1660s). From the 16th century onward, hagiography as a genre began to lose its defining features, as martyrdoms were increasingly recorded in alternative literary forms (e.g., King Teimuraz's poetic version of Queen Ketevan's martyrdom).

## **II. The Genre of Lives in Georgian Hagiography**

The *vita* (life) genre emerged in Georgian hagiography with the introduction of monasticism in the 6th century. Based on geographic and chronological criteria, these works can be grouped into three categories:

1. Lives written in anchoritic (hermit) monasteries in eastern Georgia founded by the Syrian Fathers (e.g., Shiomgvime, Gareja, Alaverdi, Zedazeni).
2. Lives written in cenobitic monasteries in southern Georgia established by Georgian monks (e.g., Khakhuli, Oshki, Shatberdi).
3. (This category was not elaborated in the original text.)

**III. Metaphrastic Literature in Byzantine and Georgian Hagiography** This study does not address in detail the metaphrastic literature that developed in Byzantium in the second half of the 10th century, although it influenced Georgian hagiography in specific ways.

### **Conclusion.** To summarize:

1. Georgian hagiographic norms were established based on Byzantine templates.
2. Before being disseminated in written form, hagiographic narratives were transmitted orally, influencing Georgian folklore.
2. Due to differing historical contexts, Georgian hagiography diverges from Byzantine models (e.g., it lacks depictions of martyrdoms resulting from pagan persecution in Kartli).
3. Georgian martyrdoms, from their inception, are tied to external aggressors who threaten both the nation's independence and its faith – thus equating national and religious identity.
4. Among the so-called *kimenic* (plain) texts, only the *Martyrdom of the Kolan Children* qualifies under this designation.
5. Given that most Georgian hagiographic texts survive only in late manuscripts, the term *pre-metaphrastic* is more appropriate than *kimenic*, as it better reflects the structural and linguistic features of these works.
6. All extant texts co-exist within the ecclesiastical space and remain in active liturgical use.

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