



Section 4. History of Literature

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PLACING THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT QUEEN SHUSHANIK IN THE CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM TRADITION: A LITERARY STUDY

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Abstract

This article examines *The Martyrdom of Holy Queen Shushanik*, one of the earliest known works of Georgian hagiographic literature, within the broader context of Byzantine and medieval studies. Composed in the 5th century by Iakob Khutsesi (Georgian: ხუცესი, which means ‘the priest’), this text holds exceptional significance as the first surviving original Georgian literary work. The study explores the historical and cultural background of the narrative, analyzing its theological, literary, and linguistic features while considering its place within the Christian martyrdom tradition. It assesses the influence of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* on later Georgian literary traditions. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of its importance in both Georgian and broader medieval literary contexts by situating the text in a comparative framework.

Keywords: *Old Georgian Literature, Georgian hagiography, Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik, Iakob Khutsesi, Medieval Literature, Vakhtang Gorgasali*

Introduction

Old Georgian literature raises many issues for research and interpretation, with the question of the origins of Georgian literature being one of the most fundamental. To this day, the earliest surviving monument of original Georgian literature is considered to be Iakob Khutsesi’s *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* (second half of the 5th century CE).

However, the fact that no earlier Georgian works have been preserved does not necessarily mean that nothing was written in Georgian before the second half of the fifth century. *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* itself serves as evidence to prove that Georgian literature must have had certain antecedents. For this reason, many scholars have traced the beginnings of Georgian literature to even earlier centuries.

Georgian philologist P. Ingorokva (1893–1983) believed that pre-Christian Georgian literature from the pagan period must have preceded ecclesiastical writings. He wrote that “the folkloric texts included in the Georgian chronicles date back to before the fifth century” and, together with another researcher I. Lolashvili (1918–1984), identified the now-lost *Nebrotiani* (Story of Nimrod the Hunter) as one of the oldest works (Ingorokva, 1939, 102; Lolashvili, 1977). Meanwhile, R. Baramidze considered *The Life of Parnavaz*, which was reworked by Leonti Mroveli (11th-century Georgian chronicler) in *The Life of the Kings*, to be one of the earliest Georgian literary works (Baramidze, 1971, 99). According to B. Cholokashvili and I. Grigalashvili, the first hagiographic text written in Georgian was *The Martyrdom of the Children of Kola* (Cholokashvili, 2007; Grigalashvili, 2012). Some scholars argued that the first text was *The Life of Nino* (Siradze, 1997; Nachkebia, 2000; Chkhartishvili, 2021, 107). Another perspective suggests that the earliest Georgian text may have been the hymn *Praise and Glory of the Georgian Language* (Pataridze, 1993; Narsidze, 1985). Raised the question of whether the so-called *Description of Idols*, included in Leonti Mroveli's *The Life of the Kings*, could be the oldest Georgian text (Kuchukhidze, 2004). Furthermore, a credible interpretation of sources preserved in both Georgian and Greek confirms that Georgians must have had written monuments even in the pre-Christian era (Khintibidze, 2008, 55–63). Another perspective, most systematically argued by Georgian researchers holds that the origins of Georgian literature date precisely to the fourth and fifth centuries and began with Georgian ecclesiastical writings, stimulated by the spread of Christianity in Iberia (Kekelidze, 1960, 418–420).

However, since the origins of Georgian literature are closely linked to Christianity, the earliest period of literature is represented primarily by religious texts.

The first fully preserved original Georgian hagiographical text *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* is highly structured and artistically refined, indicating a developed stage of literature rather than its origins. It not only includes narratives of mar-

tyrdom but also preserves information about translated religious texts, such as the Gospel and the Psalms. Furthermore, the existence of biblical translations in the Georgian language during the 5th and 6th centuries is confirmed by ancient palimpsests.

The Martyrdom continues to be a subject of enduring interest for scholars to this day. It has been comprehensively researched from various perspectives, including the study of historical sources and manuscripts, textual criticism, comparative analysis of the Georgian and Armenian versions, authorship, clarification of the chronology of events described in the literary work and the date of its creation, the socio-political context, the determination of the genre, the incipit of the text, linguistic peculiarities of the literary work, etc.

Manuscripts

The text has been preserved in eleven manuscripts. The oldest is Manuscript A 95 (X century) – known as *Parkhali Mravaltavi* [the Collection of Parkhali]. It is written on parchment and contains 12 chapters of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik*; the 16th quire, consisting of 8 folios, is missing, resulting in the absence of the rest of the text. It is unknown when the part went missing, though the text is known to have already been lacunose by the 18th century. According to the colophon of the manuscript, the scribe was Gabriel Patarai, who copied the text in the Parakhali Monastery in Tao (see Description A, I₁, 1973, 361–393). The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik can be found on folios 353r-359v.

Manuscript A 130 (1713) is the second oldest manuscript containing *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik*, after the Collection of Parkhali. It is written on paper and a colophon informs that Catholicos Domenti, brother of King Vakhtang VI, had compiled previously scattered and “lost to oblivion” hagiographic works about Georgian saints. At his request, Gabriel Saginashvili copied the entire collection in 1713 at the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in the David Gareji Monastery Complex. The scribe mentions himself several times in the notes to the manuscript (see Description A, I₂, 1976, 137–145). The text of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* can be found on folios 99v-107v.

In addition to these manuscripts, *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* is preserved in nine other manuscripts:

- **A 170 (1733):** The text is on pages 60v-65v (see description A, I2, 1976, 258–260);
- **A 176 (1743):** The text is on pages 98v-109r (see description A, I2, 1976, 278–286);
- **H 2077 (1736):** The text of *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* appears on pages 60r-64v (see description H, V, 1949, pp. 44–47);
- **H 1672 (1740):** The text is found on pages 384r-395r (see description H, IV, 1950, 101–105);
- **S 3637 (1838):** The text of *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* is located on pages 74r-78v (see description S, V, 1967, 103–110);
- **H 1370 (1871):** Written on paper (21x17 cm), in *Mkhedruli* script with purple ink, the text of *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* is found on pages 228r-237v (see description H, III, 1948, 328–333);
- **H 2121 (1748):** The text is on pages 54r-61r (see description H, V, 1949, 74–75);
- **Q 300 (1800):** The text is on pages 125r-146r (see description Q, I, 1957, 313–316);
- **M 21 (1842):** See Karanadze, Keke-
lia, 2018, 152.

All the manuscripts listed above have been preserved at the Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts, except for M 21, which is kept at the depositories of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences, while its photocopy, labeled RT II-No. 22, is kept at the Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts.

Georgian and Armenian versions

The martyrological work of Iakob Khutsesi has been known since the 1880s (1882), while the Armenian versions of *The Martyrdom* had been discovered about three decades earlier (1853) (Abuladze, 1963, 9).

There are several Georgian and Armenian versions of *The Martyrdom*: the long and short Georgian versions, the long and short Armenian versions, and the versions includ-

ed in Synaxaria. Additionally, there are later versions of the work re-edited by Catholicos Anton and Prince Ioane. The long Georgian version has survived in eleven manuscripts. Research showed that the long Georgian versions can be subdivided into two versions – versions a and b. The text in Manuscript A 95 from the Collection of Parkhali (version a) differs from the texts in all other manuscripts (version b). The differences include variations in anthroponyms, extra sentences, word omissions, word additions, word replacements, word order changes, phoneme additions, phoneme omissions, phoneme replacements, conjunction replacements, and stylistic differences. Only the cases where version a differs from the other ten manuscripts have been verified and documented (though several differences also appear between version a and only some manuscripts that belong to version b). The archetype of both versions is undoubtedly the original work written by Iakob Khutsesi in the 5th century. However, none of the surviving texts, either linguistically or stylistically, reflects the 5th-century context, as the texts have been significantly edited according to linguistic norms and literary tastes prevailing at the time of edition. The archetype (referred to as the Q1 version) must have been followed by an intermediate version (referred to as the Q2 version), as despite documented differences, 564 Summary both versions are similar linguistically as well as stylistically, not to mention their structural-textual format, which is practically identical in both versions. The intermediate Q2 version should have formed the basis for versions a and b. It is difficult to determine when exactly these versions emerged. The research is further complicated by the fact that the manuscripts of version b from the 11th century or even from a closer period are not available. The oldest manuscript of version b, A 130, dates to the 18th century, specifically 1713, which makes it difficult to analyze the changes it might have undergone. The correlation between the versions based on existing textual material can be illustrated as follows:

The long Armenian version has been found in two variants. One was published in Venice in 1853, and the other was discovered by I. Abuladze in Etchmiadzin (copied in 1689). I. Abuladze (1891–1968) published the text of the

long Armenian version based on both manuscripts. Other scholars argue that the long Armenian version is a translation and adaptation of the long Georgian version (Abuladze 1938, 36, 37, 55; Janashia 1980, 201, 255).

N. Sargsyan copied the short Armenian version in the city of Karin (Erzurum) between 1846 and 1852. Only one manuscript of the short version is available, and it lacks the date. The short and long versions of *The Martyrdom* were published together in Venice in 1853. The short Armenian version is based on the long Armenian version, while the short Georgian version is believed to be a translation of the short Armenian version (Abuladze 1938, 14, 40; Janashia 1980, 188).

I. Abuladze references several Armenian Synaxarion editions. The first is the so-called Synaxarion of Tserentsi, which includes *A Reading of the Cross of Saint Nino* and briefly recounts the *Martyrdom of St. Shushanik* (Abuladze, 1938, 16). The second is the Synaxarion of Ter Israel. I. Abuladze discovered a third, previously unknown, Synaxarion found in a manuscript dated 1246. Research indicates that these editions share a common origin and presumably had been derived from the long Armenian version (Abuladze, 1938, 16; Janashia, 1980, 259–260).

The short Georgian version of *The Martyrdom* was discovered by N. Marr (1865–1934) in a manuscript of the Mount Athos Collection (Ath. 57). He dated it to the 10th century. No other manuscript of this version has been discovered.

The Georgian Synaxarion contains two manuscripts: A 425 (1718) and A 220 (1726). According to E. Gabidzashvili, the text of *The Martyrdom* in Manuscript A 220 was copied from Manuscript A 425. The version included in the Synaxarion is quite short. N. Janashia believes that this version was derived from the long version rather than the short one. It should be noted that the versions included in both Georgian and Armenian Synaxaria, do not provide new or significant information for the study of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik*.

Metaphrastic versions of *The Martyrdom*

As mentioned, there are metaphrastic versions of *The Martyrdom* – edited by Ca-

tholicos Anton I and Prince Ioane (Batonishvili).

The Martyricon, Eulogies and Lives of Georgian and non-Georgian Saints Who Suffered for Christ by Catholicos Anton I contains accounts of the martyrdoms of 20 saints; the fourth text is dedicated to Saint Queen Shushanik titled: “Eulogy and Story of the Torture of the Holy Great Martyr, the Queen of Ran, Susanna, also known as Shushanik”. Like other works in *the Martyricon*, the text dedicated to Shushanik is accompanied by an iambus composed by Catholicos Anton I. *The Martyricon* must have been written in 1768–1769. It is fully preserved in seven manuscripts, all kept in the K. Kekelidze Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts. These are: Q 78 (1769), S 1272 (1768), S 2988 (1790), S 3638 (1799), A 1484 (1806), H 907 (1821), and H 990 (19th century).

Prince Ioane also recounts *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* in his work *Kalmasoba*, which the author called *Khumarstsvla* (“studying with jokes”). This work was written between 1813 and 1828 and is preserved in seven manuscripts (GNCM: H 2170, Q 720, Q 577, S 5374, S 5375, H 2153, H 2134), though only H 2170 contains the text of *The Martyrdom of Holy Queen Shushanik*. The text can be found on folios 279v–287v.

This version is also included in a 19th-century hagiographical collection (GNCM, S 3687, 40r–61v) with some alterations to the text.

Publications

The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik has been published multiple times. The first edition by M. Sabinin (1845–1900) was published in 1882. Although the text contains significant errors, due to the failure of the editor to analyze it critically, this edition played an important role in the study of the work. Critical editions of the text were published by S. Gorgadze – in 1917, based on four manuscripts; I. Abuladze – in 1938 based on eight manuscripts (reprinted in 1978); in 1963, based on all eleven manuscripts; E. Chelidze – in 2005 also based on all available manuscripts; and in 2025 the critical edition of the text followed with vocabulary, indexes, researches, photocopies of

the main manuscripts was published (Iakob Khutsesi, 2025).

The short Georgian version of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* was first published by A. Khakhanashvili (1845–1912) based on the 10th-century manuscript preserved at Mount Athos – Ivir. Geo 57 (see description: Catalogue, 2020, 520–526) (Хаханов, 1910). Due to errors in this edition, it was republished by I. Abuladze using a photocopy of the same manuscript (Abuladze, 1938, 14). He was also the first to publish the version from the Georgian Synaxarion based on one manuscript (Abuladze, 1938, 63–64), and later, it was republished based on two manuscripts (Janashia, 1980, 23).

The long Armenian version was first printed in Venice (1853); an abridged text of the version was printed by Alishan in 1901; and a complete version of the long Armenian version was republished by I. Abuladze in 1938, incorporating a manuscript discovered in Etchmiadzin, alongside the first edition (Abuladze, 1938, 77–121).

The short Armenian version was also first printed in Venice in 1853 alongside the long version. It was later printed by L. Melikset-Beg in an Armenian language chrestomathy in 1920. The short Armenian version was most recently republished by I. Abuladze (Abuladze, 1938, 122–125). The last two publications are subsequent editions of the first publication.

The Armenian Synaxarion version has been published three times: first in the Synaxaria of Tsarentsi and Ter-Israel, and later in the 1938 work of I. Abuladze. Abuladze also included the reading of the Cross of Saint Nino recounting the story of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* (Abuladze, 1938, 16).

In addition to the above, there are also short stories in Armenian. One such story is included in a collection of lives and martyrdoms of saints compiled by M. Avgerian, while another is included in a book by the Armenian scholar L. Inchichian, which was later translated into Georgian (Abuladze, 1938, 18; Janashia, 1980, 24).

Old Georgian sources on the martyrdom of Queen Shushanik

Accounts of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* can also be found in ancient Georgian written monuments. The ear-

liest of these is the IX-century chronicle *The Conversion of Kartli*. Shushanik is also mentioned by the old Georgian hymnographer Mikael Modrekili (X century) along with Saints Nino, Hripsime and Gayane (Gvakharia, 1978).

Accounts of the *Martyrdom of Saint Shushanik* are also preserved in Armenian sources, the earliest being the Book of Epistles, which contains correspondence between Armenian and Georgian Church hierarchs (605–609). Shushanik is first mentioned in a letter by Catholicos Abraham I of Armenia (early 7th century), referenced by Ukhtanes (10th century) (see Oniani, 1978, pp. 14–18 for more information on this topic). The correspondence between Sumbat Gurgen Marzban (in middle Persian: military commander) and Kyrion regarding *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* is also available.

No other historical sources mention Shushanik. It was expected that Ghazar Parpetsi (5th-century Armenian historian) would have mentioned the queen, but there is no mention of St. Shushanik in his works (Oniani, 1978, 26). The saint is also not referenced in epigraphic monuments. The inscription of Bolnisi Sioni (7th-8th or 9th-10th centuries) mentions a person named Shushanik, but it proved to be difficult to determine who specifically is referred to in the inscription (Shoshiashvili, 1980, 154).

Epoch

The chronology of events in the text and the issue of which king was ruling Georgia at the time of *The Martyrdom of Queen Shushanik* has long been a subject of scholarly debate.

The chronicle of *The Conversion of Kartli* and *The Georgian Chronicles* (as well as religious and secular literature based on these sources) suggest that the martyrdom of Queen Shushanik occurred during the reign of King of Kartli (eastern Georgian kingdom) Bakur, son of Pharsman. However, this information is presumed inaccurate – the event is distanced by a century and a half from its historical time. This misattribution – associating Shushanik's torture with the reign of Bakur – is due to several factors: 1. The surviving text of *The Martyrdom* does not mention the name of the King of Kartli; 2. The name of the

Shah of Persia is also missing from the text, and it must have been lost by the beginning of the 8th century when the chronicle of *The Conversion of Kartli* was compiled. By the time of Leonti Mroveli, no one knew which shah was mentioned in the text; 3. Historical memory failed to preserve the exact time of the martyrdom of Shushanik.

Vakhtang Gorgasali was wounded in a battle with Khosrow Anushirvan, the newly crowned and very young son of Kavadh, who invaded Kartli after the demise of his father, Shah of Persia, Kavadh, in 531. Vakhtang Gorgasali died shortly afterward. At that time, according to The Georgian Chronicles, Vakhtang was nearly 60 years old. At the time of his death, 56 years had passed since the martyrdom of Shushanik, and 47 years since Varsken was put to death (Sanadze, 2016, 295–348; id., 2019, 391–403, 420–432).

Archil, King of Kartli and the grandfather of Vakhtang Gorgasali, died circa 464–466. Afterward, his son and Vakhtang Gorgasali's father – Mihrdat V ruled Kartli from 466 to 478. Shushanik was martyred during the reign of Mihrdat V. At the start of the conflict (468), Vakhtang had not yet been born, and at the time of Shushanik's death (474), he would have been about 4 years old.

During the last years of Archil's reign, the Shah of Persia, Peroz, sent a mobedān mobed, a priest of priests, to oversee the Church of Kartli. There were only two such figures in Georgia: one served around 460–476, and the other around 476–489. The priest of priests Samuel, mentioned in *The Martyrdom*, was the first mobedān mobed sent to Kartli, later replaced by Iovel, as mentioned in the chronicle *The Conversion of Kartli*.

Vakhtang had Varsken killed in 484 (not in 482 as previously believed in historiography) when Vakhtang was 13 or 14 years old. Varsken was killed in the 25th year of Peroz's reign, and Peroz himself died that same year in a war against the Hephthalites.

Author

Neither historical nor literary sources provide any information about the author of the work. However, any debate regarding the author is futile, as the text itself states: "*And I, the priest of Queen Shushanik, accompanied that bishop*" (Abuladze, 1963, 13). The narrative

is written in the first person, with the writer being an eyewitness to the events described. The author is repeatedly referred to by the title "priest", and the name "Iakob" is mentioned within the text itself. Consequently, the conclusion is clear – the author of *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* is Iakob the Khutsesi (Priest).

I. Abuladze suggests that Iakob, the Bishop of Tsurtavi, who participated in the Council of Dvin (506), and Iakob Khutsesi, the author of *The Martyrdom*, may have been the same person. For this reason, in the 1938 edition of the work, the scholar referred to Iakob as "Iakob of Tsurtavi" (Abuladze, 1938, 060). Some scholars speculated that Iakob Khutsesi may have also written a historical work. As evidence, they pointed to the phrase from the text: "*As we have said*" (Kekelidze, 1980, 115; Kilanava, 1973, 431; Oniani, 1978, 83).

Date of Composition

The Martyrdom of Shushanik does not explicitly state the date of its composition. However, based on the information preserved in the text, it is entirely possible to determine this timeframe. It has been frequently noted that Jacob the Priest intended to write the work early on, as evidenced primarily by his own words: "*Tell me how you see fit so that I may know and record your suffering.*" This suggests that the author began preparing to write the work immediately after leaving the queen's palace. However, some scholars believe that the text was commissioned (Gorgadze, 2017; Kuchukhidze, 2004).

K. Kekelidze dated the composition to 476–483 (Kekelidze, 1960, 118), while N. Janashia proposed 475–482 (Janashia, 1980, 285–286), and Sh. Oniani suggested 474–482/3 (Oniani, 1978, 36).

Genre

Another significant issue that numerous scholars have addressed is the classification and precise definition of the genre of *The Martyrdom of Shushanik*. While many researchers have regarded the work as a literary monument confined within the conventional framework of hagiography, others have seen it as a classic example of breaking that mold – one that shares little with traditional hagiography and instead belongs to secular fiction or even historical prose.

Due to this debate, R. Baramidze noted that “*these two extremes are equally removed from objectivity... Highlighting human traits in the character of Shushanik is not a violation of hagiographic norms or a departure from convention, but rather a masterful technique that emphasizes the grandeur of her striving toward divinity*” (Baramidze, 1990, 6–8).

However, at different times, the work has also been interpreted as a historical source, an example of biographical-historical or memoir literature, a literary-biographical work, a Georgian novella, or even a domestic novel (Javakhishvili, 1926; Ingorokva, 1939, 164; Baramidze, 1957, 51–69; Lordkipanidze, 1966; Janashia, 1975; Chelidze, 1978; Baramidze, 1978, 127).

The philological analysis of the text focuses on the structural-compositional characteristics of the work, which follow a general hagiographic model, with the archetype of this model being the structural-compositional property of the Gospels. The discussions concerning the incipit of the text, which has been the subject of scholarly debate, we believe, should be guided by the general structural scheme of a hagiographic text, which, along with the body of the text and concluding part, includes an extensive introduction – an appeal to God, a description of the origin of the protagonist and their distinguished childhood.

Characters

When discussing the literary style of hagiography, scholars often point out that hagiographic texts typically revolve around a single protagonist, requiring the other characters to fade into the background to highlight the saint's figure. However, it has also been noted that this is less characteristic of *The Martyrdom of Shushanik*.

The depiction of Varsken as the tormentor is not limited to the remark “*the wolf Varsken*.” Instead, the author develops his character through real-life episodes, creating a vivid artistic portrait of a cruel and base-spirited man. At the same time, the image of Shushanik, the central figure of the work, is strongly defined through contrast and opposition to the depiction of the **pitiakhsh** (governor). The secondary characters further enrich the narrative, providing

a meaningful backdrop against which various facets of the martyred queen's portrait become sharper and more emphasized.

The characters in *The Martyrdom* can be divided into main (Shushanik and Varsken) and secondary figures. Among the secondary characters, there are both secular individuals – Jojik and his wife, Varsken's messenger, a Persian man, a servant, a young boy, Senakapani, a prison guard, a Magian woman, Varsken's foster brother, and the children of Varsken and Shushanik – as well as clergy members – Iakob Khutsesi, Bishops Apots and Ioane, Samuel the head of the bishops, and unnamed deacons. The text features both historically attested figures and those whose identities remain unknown.

The events of the work take place during the reign of the Persian Shah Peroz, though the text does not explicitly mention him by name.

Many scholars have dedicated their research to analyzing Jacob the Priest's techniques in character depiction. Some argue that in *The Martyrdom of Shushanik*, the author relies on pre-established religious archetypes, linguistic-stylistic methods, and expressive means rooted in biblical texts. Others, however, perceive a greater degree of psychological depth and even individuality in the characters, noting the influence of pre-Christian secular literature in Jacob the Priest's writing, as well as a certain departure from strict hagiographic conventions.

A comparative analysis of these differing perspectives reveals that Jacob the Priest, in shaping both positive and negative characters, follows the traditional hagiographic framework while simultaneously introducing innovation. He presents the protagonist as a dynamic figure, undergoing development throughout the narrative (Sulava, 2024). Although the hagiographic narrative remains aligned with biblical archetypes, in many instances, the author intensifies human elements to preserve the immediacy and relatability of the storytelling (Kuchukhidze, 2016, 43).

The composition of the characters of the work is three-tiered: Shushanik – the central figure, her supporters – Iakob and the entire community, and the opponents – the Pitiakhsh, who had allied himself with the Shah of Persia, together with a small group of like-minded individuals.

According to historiographic sources, Saint Shushanik belonged to the noble Mamikonian family, which held the hereditary title of *sparapet*, the supreme commander of the armed forces. Her father, Vardan Mamikonian, and grandfather, Hamazasp Mamikonian, both bore this esteemed title, while her mother, Sakahanuš, was the daughter of Sahak the Great, the Catholicos of Armenia.

Arshusha Pitiakhsh and Vardan Mamikonian were not only allies and close friends but also bound by family ties – Vardan's brother, Hmayak, was the brother-in-law of Arshusha Pitiakhsh, having married his wife's sister. Both Vardan and, later, Arshusha lost their lives fighting against the Iranians. After Vardan's death, Arshusha Pitiakhsh took on the role of protector for his family.

Shushanik grew up alongside Varsken and Jojik, a bond reflected in her own words when she addresses Jojik: *"I am your sister, and we were brought up together..."* Like Vardan and Arshusha, Shushanik was a devout Christian and a fervent patriot. This made Varsken's betrayal – both of his faith and homeland – all the more agonizing for her.

Varsken's mother was also a member of an ancient and well-known Armenian noble family of the Artsruni dynasty.

Varsken is portrayed as an autocratic and cruel person. His actions were driven by political ambitions. By aligning himself with Peroz, Shah of Persia, Varsken gained a high-ranking position as *Marzpan* (military commander) of Albania, specifically of Ran (the part of Albania located on the right bank of the Mtkvari River) and Movakan (the part of Albania located on the left bank of the Mtkvari River) that turned him from a subordinate official of King Vakhtang, to the suzerain of the King of Kartli. Thus, Varsken gained the legal right to reject the authority of the King of Kartli as his superior. As a subject of Iran, Varsken took on the responsibility of strengthening the northern border of the empire. This is why Ran is considered part of Varsken's domain, and Shushanik is referred to as the Queen of Ran.

He is introduced in the text with entirely negative connotations. His relationship with the protagonist is ambivalent, much like the relationship between Christ and the Antichrist. Varsken was the son of a renowned

figure. His family was exemplary in terms of morality, which makes Varsken's sin, betrayal, and apostasy all the more unforgivable. He belonged to the Sassanian noble family of Pitiakhsh in Kartli. The founder 572 Summary of this family was Peroz, the son-in-law of the first Christian king, Mirian. Arshusha Pitiakhsh, Varsken's father, was a prominent Georgian noble and a significant political figure of the 5th century. Information about him is preserved in the works of Koriun and Ghazar Parpetsi. Koriun refers to him as an honourable man and a devout believer, while Ghazar Parpetsi provides even more detailed information, having once resided at Arshusha's court alongside the sons of Hmayak Mamikonian. Ghazar Parpetsi describes Arshusha as a worthy patriot and a man of high morals.

Among the historical figures mentioned in the text are: Varsken's brother, Jojik, Pitiakhsh Arshusha, and Vardan Mamikonian. Additionally, several members of the clergy appear, including Iakob the Priest (*Khutsesi*), Bishops Apotsi and Ioane, and Chief Archbishop Samuel.

Linguistic characteristics of the text

Although the text belongs to the 5th century, the oldest surviving manuscript dates to the 10th century, meaning it has been significantly altered by scribes and editors (see the chapter on the linguistic features of the work for more details). The text of the martyrdom provides invaluable material for studying the early stages of the Georgian written and literary language. *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* helped to preserve archaic meanings of several lexical units (Imnaishvili, 1978, 132–144). Additionally, the text exhibits a range of linguistic features, such as the excessive use of conjunction and, paronomasia (wordplay), the frequent use of personal verb forms after either Ergative case constructions or after Dative case constructions, unique methods of rendering anthroponyms, instances of tmesis, etc. The text also contains biblical quotations and paraphrases.

The impact of the text on the historiography and ethnography of 5th-century Kartli

Iakob Khutsesi, in his account of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik*, vivid-

ly depicts the lives of the inhabitants of Kve-mo Kartli, its ancient cultural and religious context, social-political structure, ecclesiastical organization, and peculiarities of private and domestic life. The richness of the details related to daily life is a significant argument that the Georgian version of *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* is the original and primary one, rather than the Armenian version (Kekelidze, 1960, 116).

According to the text, we have information about the residence of the Pitiakh and his wife, food consumption customs, food-related prohibitions and restrictions, jewellery and clothing, terminology related to kinship, family law rules, forms of punishment and household items.

Georgian historians used the description of everyday life presented in the work to convey the history of Georgia in the 5th century (Javakhishvili, 1960, 261–282). In the following period, the historiographic data and ethnographic material of the first Georgian written monument many times became the subject of interest and research. From the “Martyrdom of Shushanik,” first of all, it can be seen that **pityakhsh** (a title of high official) plays an important role in the hierarchy of Kartli state officials and rulers (Sanadze, 2019, 340). Varsken the Pityakhsh is one of the main characters of the work. His father is also mentioned in the text – Arshusha the Pityakhsh. In the “Martyrdom,” of course, we also find other terms denoting officials. Iakob Khutse-si speaks about the queen of Kvemo Kartli: “Daughter of Vardan, **spaspet** (high-ranking military official) of the Armenians” (ch. I). **Spaspet-i** (spahpat) is connected with the Middle Persian and means a horseman (Orbeliani, 1991, II, p. 108) or the commander of the army (Andronikashvili, 1966, I, 370). The common name of the ruling class in the V–VII centuries, **aznaur-i**, (nobleman) is mentioned several times in “The Martyrdom of Shushanik” for several times. “The great-great **aznaurs** and zepur mothers, **aznaurs** and ignobles from the country of Kartli” are going to see the Queen Shushanik (ch. XVII); “All bishops and **aznaurs** (nobles) together should ask her for one thing” (ch. XVII) (Sarjveladze, 1988; Guliashvili, 2025).

the study of the books of martyrdom and the lives of the saints has made it clear that

hagiographic literature is an outstanding, and in some cases, highly reliable source for the study of not only the church but also the secular history of the Middle Ages, because “beyond the main plot, the story of the saint’s martyrdom or activity is followed by the background – the history of the country (be it a political situation or a social system), the worldview of the author, and his attitude toward historical events” (Lordkipanidze, 1966, 12).

The significance of the text for Byzantine literary studies

The 5th-century text *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* engages with the broader Byzantine hagiographical tradition. Even though it is an original Georgian work, it likely reflects Byzantine literary models, themes, and theological perspectives. Identifying these connections helps trace the influence of Byzantine literary culture beyond its linguistic boundaries and provides a more comprehensive view of Byzantine literary interactions with the Georgian world. From a literary perspective, the analysis of the text’s narrative strategies, motifs, and theological messages highlights the uniqueness of Georgian hagiographical composition and its place within the wider medieval literary canon.

Conclusion

The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik is a cornerstone of early Georgian literature, marking the transition from oral traditions and potential pre-Christian writings to the established Christian literary canon. While the origins of Georgian literature remain a subject of debate, this text stands as the earliest fully preserved original hagiographical work in the Georgian language. It reflects a sophisticated literary style, demonstrating that Georgian literature had already reached a developed stage by the time of its composition in the second half of the 5th century.

The study of *The Martyrdom of Shushanik* has spanned various disciplines, including textual criticism, manuscript studies, historical context, linguistic peculiarities, and comparative literature. The text has survived in multiple Georgian and Armenian versions, with significant variations between the long and short versions. Manuscript A 95, the

oldest surviving copy from the 10th century, provides crucial insights into the transmission of the text. Later versions, such as those by Catholicos Anton I and Prince Ioane, further demonstrate the ongoing reverence for Shushanik's story and its adaptation across different periods.

From a historical perspective, the text offers valuable insights into 5th-century Georgia, particularly regarding the socio-political struggles between Christianity and Zoroastrianism, as well as the role of Persian influence in the region. The author, identified as Iakob Khutsesi, was an eyewitness to Shushanik's suffering, lending credibility to the narrative. While historical records do not explicitly confirm all details, the text remains an essential resource for understanding early Georgian religious and political dynamics.

The genre classification of *The Martyrdom* has been a subject of scholarly debate.

Some view it as a traditional hagiographical work, while others argue that its emphasis on human emotion and detailed character development transcends conventional hagiographic norms. The text's nuanced portrayal of both primary and secondary characters – particularly Shushanik and her antagonist, Varsken – demonstrates its literary depth and complexity.

The enduring scholarly interest in *The Martyrdom of Saint Queen Shushanik* underscores its significance as a foundational text of Georgian literature. Through numerous manuscript versions, critical editions, and academic discussions, the work continues to be an invaluable resource for the study of medieval Georgian culture, language, and religious history. Its legacy as a testament to faith, resilience, and literary excellence remains influential in both Georgian and broader Byzantine literary traditions.

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