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ST. NINO AND THE CHRISTIANIZATION OF K'ARTLI: GENDER, MEMORY, AND MISSION IN MEDIEVAL GEORGIAN TRADITION

Irma Makaradze [1]

[1] Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

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Abstract

This study re-examines the Christianization of K'artli through the figure of St. Nino, foregrounding the role gender played in the formation, suppression, and later revival of her cult. While early Christian sources outside Georgia recognize a female agent in the conversion of Iberia, Georgian written tradition remains silent on Nino until the 9th–10th centuries. The recensions of The Life of St. Nino preserve traces of an early Christian stratum in which women functioned as primary agents of the faith – missionaries, baptizers, and ascetics. The diminishing visibility of Nino reflects the gradual restriction of women's roles in ecclesiastical life from Late Antiquity onward. Her figure was rediscovered and re-elevated only after the Georgian-Armenian ecclesiastical schism, when the need arose to assert a national enlightener against the cult of Gregory the Illuminator. The article argues that St. Nino's narrative preserves an early layer of Christian memory, later reworked under gendered pressures of institutional Christianity.

Keywords: *St. Nino, Christianization of K'artli, Gender, Hagiography, Memory and Identity, Early Christian Church*

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the Christianization of Kartli (Eastern Georgia), with particular emphasis on the figure of St. Nino (enlightener of Georgia) and the shifting dynamics of her representation within Georgian ecclesiastical literature. By analyzing Georgian, Greek, and Armenian textual traditions from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, the article seeks to reconstruct the historical memory surrounding the Christianization of Kartli and to understand the mechanisms through which certain narratives were preserved, transformed, marginalized, or reactivated over time. Special attention is given to the question of why St. Nino, although acknowledged in Greek ecclesiastical histories, remains absent from Georgian written tradition before the 10th century.

Research method

Methodologically, the research relies on comparative textual analysis, source criticism, and elements of gender-oriented historiography. The study evaluates historiographical, hagiographical, and ecclesiastical texts not merely as transmitters of historical fact but as culturally conditioned narratives shaped by genre conventions, theological agendas, and sociopolitical contexts. Such a methodology enables us to reveal how memory, authority, and gender have shaped the narrative of K'artli's Christianization.

The Narrative of the Christianization of K'artli

Christianity began to spread across the Caucasus region, including Georgia, Armenia, and Caucasian Albania, as early as the 1st century CE. According to local traditions, this process was closely associated with the missionary journeys of the Apostles, and each region developed its own narratives linking apostolic figures to its Christian origins. In the Georgian tradition, the introduction and dissemination of Christianity from the 1st century CE is likewise attributed to apostolic missions (For medieval Georgian authors, the question of the apostolic preaching of Christianity in Georgia held particular significance, functioning as a key argument in defending the autocephaly of the Georgian Church against Byzantine claims. It was with this intent that Ephrem Mtsire (Ephraim the Lesser, a Georgian translator and writer of the second half of the 11th century) composed the treatise *"On the Cause of the Conversion of the Georgians and the Books in Which It Is Mentioned."* Ephrem grounds his work in the accounts of Greek authors concerning the Christianization of Kartli so that his narrative might carry credibility and authority even in the eyes of the Byzantines. In the treatise, the Christianization of Kartli is attributed to the apostle Andrew the First-Called, who is said to have preached Christianity in Western Georgia, as well as to the apostle Bartholomew, who is credited with preaching in Kartli (Ephrem Mtsire, 1959, p. 2). Arsen the Monk (An ecclesiastical figure and writer active in Georgia during the second half of the 11th century and the first half of the 12th century), author of the metaphrastic edition of *The Life of Nino*, likewise notes that, before Saint Nino, Christianity had been preached in Kartli by the apostles Andrew the First-Called, Simon the Canaanite and Matthias (The Life of St. Nino, 1971, p. 9–10). However, the Christianization of the region (Armenia Major, K'artli, and Caucasian Albania) ultimately culminated in the 4th century, following the conversion of the royal families. In Georgian church tradition, the conventional narratives about the baptism of the royal family of K'artli at the beginning of the 4th century link to St. Nino, a woman originally from Cappadocia. St. Nino had a vision in which she saw the Virgin Mary, who called her to go to Kartli and preach Christianity. Upon her arrival in Mtskheta, the ancient capital of K'artli, Nino witnessed the persistence of pagan cults and prayed for the destruction of idols. She then settled in the royal garden, dedicating herself to ascetic life, preaching, and healing. Her miraculous cure of Queen Nana led the queen to embrace Christianity. King Mirian, however, initially resisted abandoning ancestral beliefs. His conversion is associated with the miraculous solar obscuration experienced during a royal hunt. When his prayers to pagan deities proved fruitless, Mirian turned to the Christian God; daylight returned, and he resolved to accept the new faith. Subsequently, he dispatched envoys to Emperor Constantine the Great, requesting clergy for his own baptism and for the conversion of his people (Moqc'evay K'artlisay, 1963, p. 81–163).

Medieval Sources on the Conversion of K'artli

There are five known Georgian recensions of *The Life of St. Nino*: the Shatberdi recension (970s); the Chelishi recension (14th-15th centuries) (Abuladze, 1963, pp. 81–163); the Sinai manuscripts (Sin-48, 10th century; Shin-50, first half of the 10th century) (Aleksidze, 2007, p. 10–59); the recension attributed to the 11th-century chronicler Leonti Mroveli, included in *K'artlis Cxovreba (The Life of Kartli)* written by him (Leonti Mroveli, 1955, p. 72–124); and the 12th–century metaphrastic recension produced by Arsen Beri (Arsen the Monk) (Arsen Beri, 1971, p. 7–51).

The extant hagiographical recensions are generally dated no earlier than the 10th cen-

tury, and no other medieval Georgian source mentioning St. Nino predates the 10th century. However, recent scholarship proposes that a proto-redaction of The Life of St. Nino may have originated as early as the 4th century and was subsequently revised in the 9th or 10th century, a hypothesis supported by textual features that reflect the earliest stratum of Christian tradition.

What accounts for the absence of St. Nino's name in Georgian sources over several centuries? While early Greek authors (from the 4th century onward) refer to her as the illuminatrix of Iberia (Eastern Georgia), they describe the conversion of Iberia in connection with an anonymous captive woman. According to the Georgian tradition, this captive woman is identified with Nino. Notably, later Georgian recensions likewise refer to Nino as the captive woman. On the other hand, there are early Armenian sources concerning the conversion of Kartli. Among them are Agathangelos, a 5th-century Armenian chronicler, and Movses Khorenatsi, also regarded by some scholars as a 5th-century historian. According to Agathangelos, Iberia was converted by Gregory the Illuminator, the founder and first Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Gregory is said to have converted Armenia from Zoroastrianism to Christianity in the early 4th century, and, after completing this mission, to have undertaken evangelizing work across the Caucasus, converting Iberia, Albania, and the highland regions of the Caucasus. In Movses Khorenatsi's History, the narrative appears to draw on both Agathangelos's account and Greek-Georgian traditions. According to him, following the conversion of Armenia, Gregory sent a woman named Nune to Iberia for missionary purposes; she is described as one of the companions of Hripsime, Gayane, and other virgin martyrs who had come to Armenia from Rome (Kekelidze, 1980, p. 523–524).

This later viewpoint also appears to have been accepted, at least to some extent, by the early medieval Georgian Church. In *The Book of Epistles* (A compilation of letters exchanged between Georgian and Armenian ecclesiastical leaders in the 7th century, reflecting the doctrinal schism that emerged between the two churches from the early 7th century onward, stemming from their divergence over Monophysite and Dyophysite Christology (Epistoletha ts'igni, 1968), the letters written by Armenian ecclesiastical figures repeatedly assert that both Armenia and Kartli were converted by Gregory the Illuminator (Aleksidze, 1968, P. 40, 93). Moreover, in the second letter of Abraham I of Armenia (Armenian Catholicos at the beginning of the 7th century), he cites a letter attributed to Kyrion I of Kartli (Catholicos of Kartli – VI–VII cc.), claiming that the faith received by both Georgians and Armenians had been brought from Jerusalem by Gregory the Illuminator (Aleksidze, 1968, p. 85). However, nothing of this kind appears in the surviving letters of Kyrion I of Kartli. On the other hand, in the preserved letters of Kyrion I of Kartli, an interesting position emerges in response to the Armenian accusation that Georgians had abandoned the faith allegedly brought to Armenia and Kartli by Gregory the Illuminator. In his replies, the Georgian Catholicos does not engage with this claim at all. While his letters respond thoroughly and systematically to each issue raised by the Armenian side, Kyrion neither confirms nor refutes the assertion that Gregory converted Kartli. Apart from the reference preserved in the second letter of Abraham I of Armenia discussed above, Kyrion's silence on this matter suggests that the tradition of Kartli's conversion by Gregory the Illuminator may, at least to some extent, have been accepted by both the Armenian and Georgian churches.

Another Georgian source that attributes the conversion of Kartli to Gregory the Illuminator is the treatise *On the Separation of Georgians and Armenians*, composed in the 9th century by Arsen the Great of Sapara, Catholicos of Kartli. In this work, which reflects on the schism between the Georgian and Armenian Churches, Arsen notes that, according to the Book of Epistles, the Georgians believed that Gregory the Illuminator had brought the Christian faith to them from Greece (Arsen Sapareli, 1980, p. 81). Yet, although Arsen acknowledges this earlier Georgian belief, he neither confirms nor denies that Gregory converted Kartli. Arsen's silence leads to a similar conclusion as earlier: the tradition that Kartli was converted by Gregory the Illuminator appears, at least to some extent, to have been recognized by both the Armenian and the Georgian Churches.

Thus, based on the analyzed sources, it becomes evident that St. Nino's memory gradually became obscured over several centuries, suggesting a process of marginalization and perhaps even an intentional attempt to remove her from historical memory. Against this backdrop, Gregory the Illuminator appears as the figure credited with the Christianization of K'artli. Such a shift may be attributed to several factors:

1. The historical unity of the Armenian and Georgian churches in the earliest phase of Christianity in the Caucasus, along with the presence of a mixed Armenian–Georgian population in southern Kartli (Kekelidze, 1980, p. 524).

2. Queen Shushanik, which requires further elaboration. Shushanik, Queen of Southern Kartli (V c.), of Armenian origin, was martyred after enduring torture from her husband, Varsken, the Pitiakhsh of Kartli. She was the daughter of the prominent Armenian military leader Vardan Mamikonian. One recent study suggests that the Mamikonian dynasty rose to exceptional influence in the fifth century, particularly after the marriage of Hamazasp I Mamikonian to Sahakanoysh of Armenia, the daughter of Sahak I of Armenia (4th c.), Catholicos of Armenia and the last male descendant of St. Gregory the Illuminator (Stopka, 2017, p. 35). Vardan Mamikonian, Shushanik's father, was the son of this union, which makes Shushanik a direct descendant of Gregory the Illuminator. According to the same study, the rise of the cult of Gregory in Armenia from the fifth century onward is closely connected to the increasing authority of the Mamikonian family. The earliest sources portray King Trdat as "the Constantine of their nation." Originally, Gregory the Illuminator remained somewhat in the background. It was only after the fall of the Arsacids, when the Mamikonian family assumed their political role in the aristocratic milieu, that the veneration of Armenia's Apostle began to overshadow the merit of Trdat, the monarch who had previously been placed on a level with the Apostles (Stopka, 2017, p. 35).

Thus, the tradition reflected in Georgian sources that attributes the Christianization of Kartli to St. Gregory may be connected to the figure of Queen Shushanik. As a member of the Mamikonian family and the great-granddaughter of the last male descendant of St. Gregory, her lineage may have contributed to the increased emphasis on Gregory's role in introducing Christianity to Kartli. This possibility becomes more plausible when we consider references preserved in the *Book of Epistles,* indicating that St. Shushanik introduced Armenian-language worship in southern Kartli (Aleksidze, 1968, p. 67).

Gender in Early Christianity and St Ninos' Cult

We may now return to the central question: Why does Nino remain absent from Georgian sources between the 4th and the 10th centuries?

One of the main factors may have been Nino's gender. This idea was proposed by Mikheil Tarchnišvili, who considers the overshadowing of Nino's cult to be closely connected to the fact that she was a woman; a further reason, he argues, lies in her low social origin. Tarchnišvili associates the centuries-long marginalization of Nino's figure with the Georgian cultural environment and the undervaluation of women's roles in early Georgian society (Tarchnišvili, 1994, p. 118).

However, a woman's marginalization and the diminishing of her role cannot be explained solely through the prism of Georgian cultural context. Georgia was part of the Christian world, and this tendency naturally reflects a broader process within the Christian tradition as a whole. Therefore, in examining this issue, it is crucial to consider the wider Christian context rather than isolating it as a uniquely Georgian perception of womanhood.

According to Anne Jensen's research, in late antique ecclesiastical historiography (Sozomen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Socrates Scholasticus, Theodoret), not only are women mentioned in very small numbers, but there is also a discernible tendency toward their anonymization (Jensen, 1996, p. 7–8). A comparable form of anonymization is evident in the case of Nino. In ecclesiastical histories that describe the Christianization of Iberia in considerable detail, the woman responsible for this process is never named. In Greek sources, St. Nino is referred to merely as "a captive woman." Thus, despite the richness of the narrative and the significance of the conversion itself, her identity remains unnamed and unknown to the reader (However, we must

also take into account the reference given by Ephrem Mtsire (second half of the 11th century) regarding the appearance of Nino's name in Greek sources. Ephrem notes that Nino's name is not preserved in the History of Theodoret (i.e., Theodoret of Cyrus, 5th c.), yet maintains that in "other writings" she does appear by name, for in Greek she was called Nonna (Ephrem Mtsire, 1959, p. 8). Although Nino does not appear by name in the Greek sources that have survived to the present day, Ephrem's testimony suggests that the phrase "other writings" refers to Greek materials available in his time that did explicitly name her. His ability to provide the Greek form of her name further supports this conclusion).

However, in the early Christian Church, women played a significant role and participated actively in religious life and worship. In the Greco-Roman world of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, more women than men appear to have embraced Christianity. As Anne Jensen observes: "That more prominent women than men became Christians is especially reflected in the second and third-century attacks against Christians, which speak of the problem of these women often being forced to marry pagans or to live with Christian slaves in a kind of 'common-law marriage.' Since this was prohibited in Roman civil law, it was acknowledged by the church only by Callistus, who was himself a slave before becoming bishop of Rome at the beginning of the third century" (Jensen, 1996, p. 167).

The distinctive role of women in the early Christian Church, including their involvement in missionary activity, is evident in both the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Paul (for more details, see Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994, p. 168–173).

The work also examines *The Acts of Paul and Thecla,* a second-century apocryphal hagiography that centers specifically on the missionary activity of a woman, and which, in some regions, was regarded as canonical during the first three centuries. In addition to Thecla herself, the narrative contains numerous female figures who support her mission, and after her death, a group of women publicly mourns her. Thecla converts to Christianity after hearing Paul's preaching and subsequently follows him. Paul, in turn, commissions her as a missionary to proclaim the word of God among non-Christians. Thecla thus appears as a female Christian teacher, preacher, and baptizer, and significantly, she baptizes herself (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994, p. 173–175).

The prominence of women in early Christian communities was further strengthened by the institution of the house-church. Since the domestic sphere was traditionally associated with women, they were often highly involved in religious gatherings held within the home. The Acts of the Apostles and Paul's epistles both indicate that women could serve as leaders in such communities. A notable example is the house-church of Priscilla and Aquila, identified as Paul's co-workers. The number of active women in these congregations was significant. In Romans 16, where Paul greets fellow believers, eight of the twenty-five individuals named are women (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1994, p. 175–180). These features, associated with the earliest phase of Christianity's spread and also depicted in the Life of St. Nino (In this regard, Sh. Matithashvili's research is particularly noteworthy, as he interprets the ascetic activity of women depicted in The Life of Nino as reflecting the tradition of the early Christian period (Matitashvili, 2021, p. 253–277), suggest the existence of a *proto-redaction*, which may have been composed as early as the 4th century.

The primary figures in *The Life of St. Nino* are predominantly women, who appear as active agents in defending and advancing the Christian faith. Significantly, the first member of the royal household to accept Christianity was Queen Nana, Mirian's wife. This detail may indicate an early stratum within the text, since, as noted above, women were more likely than men to adopt the new faith during the initial stages of Christian expansion. A parallel may be observed in the 2nd–3rd–century apocryphal hagiographical work, *The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena*. Xanthippe is depicted as the wife of the wealthy Spanish noble Probus. Her maidservant hears Paul's preaching in Rome and, upon returning home, conveys Christian teachings to her mistress. By divine providence, Paul later comes to Spain, where Xanthippe seeks him out, receives instruction, and is baptized in the house of Philotheos. At first, her husband,

Probus, rejects the new faith, only accepting baptism after a miraculous vision; thereafter, the entire household converts (Miller, 2005, 166–180). As in *The Life of Nino*, this narrative also highlights female initiative and leadership, seen in their desire for baptism, prayer, ascetic practice, and evangelization, while male conversion (Probus, the prefect, servants, and in the Georgian text Mirian and his retainers) occurs later and often only following the experience of a miracle. Both narratives demonstrate that in the early period of Christianity, the model of female preaching and missionary work was widespread, only to be gradually restricted by the later ecclesiastical hierarchy.

In the early Christian Church, women also held a significant role in the liturgical sphere. For instance, the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (3rd c.) and the *Apostolic Constitutions* (4th c.) (the texts belong to the genre of church order literature) describe in detail the functions of female deacons. Their responsibilities included anointing and instructing women during baptism, caring for the sick, visiting the households of women, maintaining order among the women during church services, and deepening the spiritual instruction of widows and virgins (Didascalia Apostolorum, 2009, p. 192–194). These texts clearly demonstrate that the office of the female deacon was not merely nominal; rather, it carried substantial liturgical, pastoral, and social responsibilities. However, the role of women in the early Christian Church appears not to have been limited to these functions alone. A passage in *The Life of Nino* reveals not only a supportive role in ecclesiastical ministry but also women's direct participation in sacramental ritual, specifically, the baptismal rite, which in this instance is performed by women. Notably, the passage in which Nino herself administers baptism has been preserved unchanged in two recensions of *The Life of Nino*. In the remaining three recensions, the editors evidently found it problematic for a woman to act as celebrant of the sacrament and thus inserted a priest to officiate at the baptism instead: "I (Nino) baptized her (Hripsime) and forty of his companions" (Abuladze, Shatberdi codex, 1963); "Most of them were baptized by Saint Nino…" (Leonti Mroveli, 1955); "I (Nino) baptized her (Hripsime) and fifty of his companions through the priest" (Aleksidze (ed.), 2007, Sin-50); "Then the woman (Ripsime) accepted Nino's words and was baptized by the priest" (Arsen Beri, 1971).

Despite the prohibition on women performing the baptismal rite, it appears this restriction was not always observed in practice. Evidence for this may be found in the same *Didascalia Apostolorum* (3rd c.), which states:

"As to whether a woman may baptize, or whether one should be baptized by a woman, we do not counsel this, since it is a transgression of the commandment and a great danger to her who baptizes as to the one baptized". For were it lawful for a woman to be baptized, our Lord and teacher would himself have been baptized by Mary his mother; he was, however, baptized by John just as others of the people (Didascalia Apostolorum, 2009, p. 189).

It is clear that such a strict prohibition on the administration of baptism by women in the early Church provides evidence that the practice must have existed.

Beginning in the 4th century, this dynamic gradually shifted, and women became increasingly restricted from roles and activities that they had previously exercised. This change is evident in *The Life of St. Nino* itself. The female identity of St. Nino appears to have posed a conceptual difficulty, evident in the narrative. The text contains repeated affirmations of the equality of men and women, which seem to function as a rhetorical justification for entrusting such a great mission to a woman. This is confirmed by numerous direct addresses to Nino found throughout the text: "I see, your strength is like that of a female lion… or even like the female vultures that rise higher than the male" (Abuladze, Shatberdi codex, 1963, p. 111). Nino had a vision on her way to Kartli: a man appeared to her, handed her a letter, and instructed her to deliver it to King Mirian. Frightened, Nino wept and said: "Lord, I am a woman, a foreigner, and ignorant…" (Abuladze, Chelishi codex, 1963, p. 116). In this episode, the central emphasis is legitimizing the missionary authority of a woman, an idea reinforced by the text's explicit citation of *Galatians 3:28*, particularly the portion that emphasizes spiritual equality beyond gender

distinction: “There is no longer male and female, for you are all one” (Abuladze (Ed.), Chelishi codex, 1963, p. 116). Additionally, the authority of Mary Magdalene is invoked to support this perspective: “Jesus said to Mary Magdalene: ‘Go, woman, and say to my brothers…” (Abuladze, Chelishi codex, 1963, p. 117). M. Tarchnišvili justifiably interprets these passages as the author’s deliberate attempt to establish gender equality and to legitimize the apostolic mission of a woman (Tarchnišvili, 1994, p. 122).

The question of Nino’s gender remained relevant even in the 12th century, when Georgia was ruled by its most powerful woman-king, Tamar. Nikoloz Gulaberisdze, Catholicos of Kartli in the 12th century, especially addresses the issue of Nino’s gender. He poses the question: “And for the first time, it must have been clarified, why did God send the woman to us?” (Gulaberisdze, 2007, p. 8). The author provides several answers to this question:

“After Christ’s passion, his disciples scattered in all directions to spread the word of the Savior. The Mother of God was going to preach in the East, but the Lord stopped her. And because she was a woman who was almighty and blessed, she was the most superior among mothers and fathers; for this reason, in the last days, God showed mercy to our relatives and sent us a woman. This is one true and undoubted reason” (Gulaberisdze, 2007, p. 8).

„And the second, and most true thing, is that Georgians were the most furious and wildest, and to show the power of His divinity, God sent us the woman. And with the powerless nature of woman, He mollified their cruelty and mercilessness. And if we want to find even more dignity in a woman, then let’s remember the fact that after the crucifixion of Christ, a woman was the first who saw Him, and it was a woman who told others about Christ’s resurrection“ (Gulaberisdze, 2007, p. 8–9).

It is often assumed that Tamar’s reign strengthened women’s status and, by extension, contributed to the increased emphasis on Nino’s role as the enlightener of Kartli. However, the same treatise in which Catholicos Nikoloz Gulaberisdze seeks to justify the Christianization of Kartli by a woman also contains a warning: “… therefore, be silent, you who maliciously and falsely denigrate the preaching and conversion performed by a woman” (Gulaberisdze, 2007, p. 9), which indicates that even in this period there existed opposing and negative attitudes toward the idea of Kartli being converted by a woman. However, as noted in scholarly literature, after the Georgian-Armenian ecclesiastical schism, it became necessary to revive the cult of Nino as a counterweight to that of Gregory the Illuminator; consequently, the Georgians re-emphasized their own national enlightener.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the formation and eventual prominence of St. Nino’s cult align with broader Christian patterns concerning the memory, visibility, and erasure of women in ecclesiastical history. The silence of Georgian sources before the tenth century does not signify the absence of Nino, but rather suggests a deliberate suppression of her memory, a marginalization in which her gender was likely decisive. The evidence preserved in later 10th-12th-century sources points consistently in this direction.

A comparative reading of the recensions of The Life of St. Nino reveals vestiges of an early Christian moment in which women stood at the forefront of evangelization, engaged in church life, sacramental practice, and missionary labor. However, as women’s ecclesial authority diminished over time, the idea that a woman could have accomplished the conversion of Kartli grew increasingly uncomfortable for the tradition. Her legacy was muted, her agency diminished, and her role overshadowed.

Only centuries later, when historical, polemical, and ecclesiastical circumstances demanded a distinctly Georgian apostolic figure, was Nino restored to visibility. Her cult was revived not merely as hagiographical memory, but as a theological and national counterweight to the tradition that credited Gregory the Illuminator with the Christianization of Kartli.

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Contact: Makaradze85@gmail.com