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A BILINGUAL EPITAPH OF SVETITSKHOVELI

Numerous relics of oriental inscriptions have been discovered on Georgian territory, including Arabic epigraphic material — largely Islamic. However, there occur inscriptions on Christian cult objects belonging to a later period. One such specimen is the Svetitskhoveli bilingual epitaph.

Svetitskhoveli, an 11th cent. patriarchal church, is one of the most important monuments of Georgian architecture. It is situated in Mtskhet, the ancient capital of the country, within 20 km. of Tbilisi.

In front of the door of the ambo, in the Svetitskhoveli church, at the floor level there lies — among other tombs — a rectangular marble gravestone (length: 1m. 48 cm.; width: 50 cm.) with a bilingual epitaph (Georgian and Arabic texts) carved on it. The stone is framed with a border.

* An extended Georgian version of this paper was published in «Mat-sne», series of history, archaeology, ethnography and art, No. 3, Tbilisi, 1974.

Fig. 1. The Georgian text of the Svetitskhoveli bilingual inscription.

The epitaph drew the attention of researchers as far back as the turn of the present century. Information about it has been...
supplied by T. Zhordania, A. Natroev, and B. Dorn. According to A. Natroev the epitaph is in Georgian and in Persian. B. Dorn correctly considered it an Arabic-language epitaph.

The epitaph begins with the Georgian text in asomtavruli

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2 Chronicles and Other Materials of Georgian History and Literature, published by T. Zhordania, Book Two, Tiflis, 1897, p. 499.
3 A. Natroev, Mtskheta and its Cathedral Svetitskhoveli, Tiflis, 1901, p. 320.
4 B. Dorn, op. cit., p. 23.
5 The old form of Georgian writing used in the 5th-10th centuries, sometimes in later centuries too.
capitals, executed en creux. The beginnings of the first, second and third lines and the end of the first and fifteenth lines are effaced, for the slab is placed at the floor level. Nevertheless, an approximate reconstruction of the missing passages is feasible.

The inscription comprises sixteen straight lines. The inscription area (81 cm. x 50 cm.) is filled almost uniformly. The words are divided one from another with three dots, the words being ciphered. The cipher mark above the word ēns in the first line is obliterated, while it is superfluous over the letters sa of the «indiction» in the third line. The largely equal-sized, longish, carefully drawn letters are noteworthy. The text begins with the letter ḏ [k]. The inscription is dated.

Transliteration of the inscription:
1. K.: ż-: m-s.: odes.: ē-ns.: samkvidros.: sql-mdipo.:  2. [...] br-ni: m-pis: šan-vzis: švili: g-i: ndikțio
3. [n]sa: m-pbis: ē-nisasa: e-: o-xnnmn: sp-lmn-n:
5. ep-ra: tv-ita: ēn-ign: t-a: mec
7. it: šeçir-vbsa: š-a: mivi-γt: sp-l-v
8. sa: ē-nsa: d: gnvç-qvit: mr-mrilo:
10. vid-t: š-mdb-s: hqp-dit: oke
11. to: vinme: m3lvrb-it: ano: o3
12. γ-bebit: m-pm-n: ano: did-qlmn-n: es:
13. mosl-s: an: es: sp-lv: g-xnsn-s: ē-nta:
14. codv-ta: tvis: igimc: g-nkitux
15. is: dyesa: m-s: didsa: g-nkitxvisasa:

The deciphered Georgian text:
1. K. žansa mas, odes čvens samkvidros saqelmçipo[s]
2. [gav]batondi mepis šanavazis švili giorgi, indiktio
3. [n]sa mepoβisa čvenisasa “e”, uxanoman sopelman
4. mogvivlinia sikkvilis salmoba da migv
5. epara tvalta čventaqan tanamec
6. xedre čveni dedopali Tamar da davšt-
7. it šeçirvebasë šina. miviyet saplav-
8. sa čvensa da ganvaçqevit marmarilo
9. esc loskumasa zeda. vinc çarikitx-
10. videt, šendobas hqopdit. ułe
11. tu vinme m3lavrebit anu u3-
12. yebebit mepeman, anu didebulman es
13. mošalos an es saplavi gaxnsas čventa

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14. codvatatvis, igimc ganiktxv
15. is dyesa mas didsa ganiktxvisasa
16. Adams akat z 7 atas r p ib (= 7192) koronikons tob (= 372).

English translation:
1. Christ. At the time when in our sovereign kingdom
2. I assumed office, Giorgi, son of King Shanavaz, in the
3. indication q /“e”/ of our reign, the fleeting world
4. sent us a disease of death, and there
5. disappeared from our eyes our spouse
6. our queen Tamar, and we were left
7. in grief. We brought her to our
8. sepulchre and placed this marble
9. on the grave. Whoever shall read it
10. forgive her. But
11. if anyone, through power or
12. avarice – be he a king or a noble –
13. shall remove this, or open this grave for our
14. sins, let he, too, be called to account
15. on the day of the great judgment.
16. since Adam 7192 at Koronikon 372.

The above-cited researchers and I read the Georgian text in the
same way, with a slight difference. T. Zhordania omits
several words, and occasionally a whole line, placing dots in-
stead. He conveys the date in the following way: (ъ ѯ о ѯ я ѯ б
ѯ о да) q r ū b kks tob. 6 A. Natroev (and I) places the numerical
values of the letters in parentheses: «Since Adam: 8: one
thousand (7000) ѯ r (100), ѯ p (80), oла ib (12) (= 7192)». He
supplies the Georgian text with a Russian translation in which
the Koronikon is given in the new chronology «... in the
Koronikon 372 (= 1684)». 7 Both T. Zhordania and I decipher
the abbreviation o xamn in the same way – as uxanoman, as
demanded by the context. A. Natroev reads it as uxanelman.

The Georgian text is followed by its Arabic counterpart,
with a space of 26 cm. between them. The Arabic text is pre-
served almost entirely; only the final part of the sixth and
seventh lines is obliterated. The text is fairly legible. The en-
graver of the inscription tried to fill the inscription area (44
cm. × 50 cm.) proportionately.

6 T. Zhordania, op.cit., p. 499.
7 A. Natroev, op. cit., p. 320.
The inscription counts seven lines, the characters are sunk deep, engraved in a slightly cursive hand. The craftsman failed to preserve the proportion in drawing some of the characters. The text is vocalized only in three places. The inscription is furnished with diacritical marks. In some cases the diacritical marks are either placed without need or are confused.

The inscription cannot be classed as an example of refined calligraphy. There also are mistakes in the text, the craftsman evincing a poor command of Arabic; the inscription is undated.

The Arabic text reads thus:
1. fi 1-wakti l-ladhi 'ataynā 'ilā mulkinā wa 'ilā saľataninā
2. wa 'itamallakānā 8 nahu bnu l-maliki shah nawāz Kiū[r]ki9
3. fi ta'rikhī mulkinā wa saltanatinā l - 'alamu9 l-fāniyyu
4. ghadara" bina wa 'arsala 'ilaynā l-marađa wa l-mawte" wa
   'azlama min
5. 'amāmi 'a'yunina" mutanādjiyatu l-malikatu" Tāmar" wa bekina"
   mutahayyirina
6. wa mahmūmina fi l'-ahzānī fa dafānnāha" [fi]
7. mağbaratinā fi hadhā l-makāni wa 'a'djabnā lahā hadhā

Translation:
1. At the time at which we came to our kingdom and domain
2. and ascended the throne, we, the son of Shahnaz Giori,
3. in the time of our reign and command, the perishable world
4. proved perfidious to us and sent us a disease and death and
   vanished from
5. our eyes through the decease of the spouse, Queen Tama: and
   left us stunned
6. and distraught with grief, and we buried her
7. at our sepulchre at this place which we deemed appropriate for
   her

8 This form is characteristic of Christian Arabic literature. J. Blau, A
   Grammar of Christian Arabic, I, Louvain 1966, p. 163.
9 There are spelling mistakes: kiūki, l'-alamu, ghadhar, al-mawta, 'a
   'uninā, Tāmar, baykinā, dhafrnāhā, pointing to the poor knowledge of
   Arabic by the carver.
10 Giorgi XI, King of Kartli (1676-1688; 1703-1709) son of
   Vakhtang V, Shahnaz. Formally being «Muslim», a vassal of the Shah, Giorgi XI
   remained a Christian at heart to the end. In 1703 the Shah appointed him
   Commander-in-Chief of his army and charged him with quelling the Alans.
   In this battle, Giorgi XI was murdered in 1709 (VAKHUSHI, A Description
   of the Kingdom of Georgia, ed. by S. Qauckchishvili, vol. IV, 1973, pp. 456,
   457, 484; IV. JAVAKHISHVILI, A History of the Georgian People, IV, Tbilisi,
   1967, p. 399; N. BERDIENISHVILI, Problems of Georgian History, II, Tbilisi,
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A comparison of the Georgian and Arabic texts shows that the Georgian text is longer, the Arabic being its abridged translation. With a number of exceptions, a part of the Arabic text follows the Georgian. Thus, «The fleeting world» is rendered in Arabic as «the perishable world». The ending of the Arabic text: «which we deemed appropriate for her» is altogether absent in the Georgian text. The lines 11-15 of the Georgian text, containing the formula of curse, are not to be found in the Arabic text. Neither are the dates of the Georgian text (the indiction of King Giorgi and the date of Tamar’s death) rendered in Arabic.

The epitaph refers to historical figures: king Giorgi the son of Shanavaz (Shahnavaz of the Arabic text) and Tamar, the spouse of king Giorgi. We find three dates in the text, two of which indicate the decease of Queen Tamar: 1. $8 \ (z)$ since Adam one thousand $6 \ 3 \ oo$ ($r \ p \ ib$), which amounts to the year 7192 (= 1684); 2. The Koronikon tob = 372 years (= 1684). 2. The Koronikon tob = 372 years. The date from the beginning (since Adam) and the Koronikon coincide. The third date indicates the fifth year of Giorgi XI’s reign: the indiction «q» (“e”) = 5 years.

The year 1683 is accepted in Georgian historiography as the date of Tamar’s death. In the present writer’s view, the dual indication of the epitaph (from the beginning and the Koro-

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11 The following is the descent of Queen Tamar according to the historical sources: «... the daughter of Elizbar’s son (VAKHUSHTI, op. cit., 454), daughter of David, David Elizbar’s son» (S. CHERKHEIDZE, Life of Georgia, ed. by M. Chubinashvili, St.-Petersbourg, 1854, p. 309; cf. N. Nakashidze’s Russian translation, Acad. edition, 1976, p. 10), «of the house of the Kakhete rulers» (VAKHUSHTI, op. cit., 459). The identity of Tamar’s father is not clear from this evidence. Some light has been shed on the vague problem by D. NINIDZE’S monograph A History of the Branches of the Royal House of the Bagrationis (13th-18th cent.). This is a study of the history of the Davitishvili house, with their genealogy. (My profound thanks are due to the author for placing the manuscript of his Doctoral thesis at my disposal [in print]; cf. S. BICHIKASHVILI, D. NINIDZE, A. MEHEIDZI, The Bagrationis, Tbilisi, 1995, pp. 13-14.) According to Ninidze, Tamar was the daughter of David Davitishvili, son of Elizbar Davitishvili (bokaulkutkutsset), the chief official, a member of the Kakhetian Bagrationi-Davitishvili branch of the Bagrationi royal dynasty.

nkon), according to which Tamar died in 1684, must be more correct.

The epitaph provides highly interesting information about the date of Giorgi’s accession to the throne, for three different dates are represented in Georgian historiography: 1675, 1676, 1678. In resolving this question priority should — it would seem — be again given to the Mtskheta epitaph, for it was executed in King Giorgi’s lifetime and, doubtless, under his direction. As already noted, according to the epitaph, the date of Tamar’s death falls to 1684, while the date of King Giorgi’s accession to the throne, given in the same epitaph, precedes Tamar’s death by five years (in the indication «y» (“c”), which yields the year 1679 (1684-5 = 1679). This evidence is presumably trustworthy, and hence important for the specification of the reign of Giorgi XI.

Besides the foregoing points, the epitaph is interesting from the cultural-historical point of view as well. For the period in question one would have expected the use of Persian alongside Georgian, as is attested by numerous facts in Georgian epigraphy. Although the use of Arabic along with Georgian is not widespread in the 16th-17th centuries, anyhow the Mtskheta epitaph is not an isolated case. It is notable that Arabic inscriptions occur on 16th-17th cent. icons from Urbiisi and St. David’s churches. Similarly, parallel Georgian-Greek-Arabic inscriptions have been recorded in Samtavisi church (1679).

13 A. Natroev, op. cit., p. 320.
18 Sh. Amiranashvili, A History of Georgian Art, Tbilisi, 1971, p. 387; G. Sokhavashvili, Samtavisi, Tbilisi, 1973, p. 104. Information about these inscriptions was kindly provided by I. Jandieri, which is gratefully acknowledged.
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The fresco inscription on the life-giving pillar of the Svetitskhoveli cathedral features an Arabic text along with Georgian 19.

The use of the Arabic language alongside the local language at the end of the 17th century is, in the present writer's view, explainable by historical tradition and by the close links of the Georgian church of the period with the Christian Arab world (Antioch, Jerusalem).

ABSTRACT

In front of the door of the ambo, in the Svetitskhoveli church, there lies a rectangular marble gravestone with a bilingual epitaph (Georgian and Arabic texts) carved on it. The Author translates the texts into modern Georgian and into English, reading the ancient Georgian with a slight difference in comparison with the other researchers. He shows the importance of the epitaph, from which we get some historical fundamental information.

KEY WORDS

Bilingual; Epitaph; Svetiskhoveli.

19 Sh. Amiranashvili, ibidem.