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Religious Plurality and Mixture in the Persianate North

Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Manichaeans in Late Antique Georgia

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ABSTRACT Persistent images of late antique Caucasia belonging naturally to the Byzantine world obscure the isthmus' deep multi- and cross-cultural condition. They rest on the flawed assumption that shared Christian affiliation necessarily linked Byzantium and Caucasia. Moreover, such conjectures elide Caucasia's longstanding integration into the Persianate world, a status enduring for centuries after the fourth-century Christianization of the Georgian, Armenian, and Caucasian Albanian monarchies. This essay engages the religious dimensions of Caucasia's cross-cultural fabric through the example of sixth-century Georgia. Before the formation of a Georgian "national" church in the seventh century and the accompanying obsession with orthodoxy, Georgian religious life was remarkably diverse and mixed. But in the fourth and fifth centuries, the longstanding dominance of Zoroastrianism—particularly in hybrid local forms—was being eclipsed by various confessions of Christianity. Manichaeism and Judaism also had a visible presence. While there is much we do not know about actual Jewish, Manichaean, and Zoroastrian communities in late antique Georgia, surviving Georgian texts offer valuable, if occasional, glimpses of their existence. And they deploy carefully crafted imaginaries of non-Christian religions embedded in an increasingly Christian environment.

KEYWORDS Caucasia, Georgia, Iran, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism

Introduction

Vestiges of the long historical encounter of Jews and Christians in Georgia are frustratingly meagre until the annexation of Caucasia by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century.[1] [1]

1 This essay is framed around research I conducted as a 2018 fellow of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg "Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe" program at Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Since 2017

Such interplay is indisputably old, yet the received textual, visual, and material evidence is fragmentary at best (Mgaloblishvili and Gagoshidze 1998). For the pre-modern period we must therefore focus our energies on broad strokes and the known historical and cultural contexts for such encounters. As an initial step in recovering the earliest phases of Judeo-Christian interaction in Georgian lands, this essay addresses the religious facets of Georgia's cross-cultural matrix in Late Antiquity. Because space is limited, our brief investigation converges on the long sixth century, a temporal inflection commencing with a political bang, of sorts, which subsequently degenerated into the smoldering ruins of the eastern Georgian monarchy.

Vaxtang Gorgasali

The initial two decades of the 500s coincide with the reign of the beloved national hero Vaxtang Gorgasali (Vakhtang Gorgasal, r. 447–522). The king's anonymous historian, active in the twilight of Late Antiquity, pronounces Vaxtang's age as one of unprecedented political and military vigor.[2] According to this triumphalist source, Vaxtang unified the disparate Georgian lands; he grew the episcopal organization and nurtured the consolidation of Christianity; he single-handedly rescued the Holy Land from Sasanian tyranny; he stood down cruel Roman interventions; and he brokered unprecedented peace between Ctesiphon and Constantinople and relaxed tensions engulfing the imperial strains of Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Such are the mighty claims advanced by the royalist historian behind *The Life of Vaxtang*. [2]

Through it all, Vaxtang is said to have comported himself as an intrepid Christian hero-king. By his own volition, he campaigned alongside the Sasanian *šāhan šāh*—the greatest imperial proponent of Zoroastrianism—in far-away lands subsumed under the shadowy epic designations India, Sind, and Ethiopia. This dazzling flash of vitality did not last. Upon Vaxtang's death, eastern Georgia's political culture spiraled into disarray. Turmoil gripped its hub K'art'li[3] and its ancient royal seat Mc'xet'a (Mtskheta) at the confluence of the Mtkvari (Kura) and Aragvi Rivers. Sensing the opportunities at hand, members of Vaxtang's Chosroid dynasty jockeyed with leading nobles for the debris of Georgia's sovereignty. Meanwhile, imperial eyes tightened their envious gaze on Caucasia's strategic expanse. In Georgian lands, the *šāhan šāh* installed in Tp'ilisi a proxy holding the rank of *marzbān*. Tp'ilisi was a newly built up city in K'art'li that would concurrently serve as the new royal capital starting with Vaxtang's son and successor, Dač'i (r. 522–534). The monarchy survived, but its autonomy was significantly compromised and continued to deteriorate thanks to the presence of a *marzbān*. Around the year 580, six decades after Vaxtang's death, the Sasanians snuffed out the Georgian monarchy for good, thus replicating their suppression of the royal Armenian Arsacids back in 428. [3]

An evolving Georgian royal institution with historical roots anchored in the fertile soil of [4]

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2 On the complexities of *The Life of Vaxtang*, traditionally but spuriously credited to a certain Juanšer Juanšeriani, see Rapp Jr. (2003, 601:197–242).

3 Roughly equivalent to Asiatic Iberia in Greek and Latin sources. "Georgia" is a later exonym. To the west were other "Georgian" polities, including Egrisi/Colchis, Lazika, and Ap'xazet'i/Abasgia. On the various geographical designations for and related to Georgia, see the essays in Paičaže ed. (1993).

the Achaemenid and Hellenistic enterprises thus was interrupted.[4]

[5] Vaxtang is a colossal figure in *K'art'lis c'xovreba* (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*), the medieval compilation of royalist histories popularly (but inaccurately) known as the "Georgian Chronicles" (Rapp Jr. 2017). The specific component celebrating his (supposedly) extraordinary feats, *The Life of Vaxtang*, throws a tall literary shadow that is evident throughout the pre-modern period down to the present day. At the zenith of the medieval Georgian monarchy in the eleventh, twelfth, and early thirteenth centuries, Vaxtang is one of the few pre-Bagratid kings mentioned with any regularity by Georgian historians championing the unique and unparalleled legitimacy of the Bagratids.[5] Pre-modern memories of Vaxtang are formidable, but what can be said of the actual man? Given the epic nature of the extant sources, we know very little about him. In this light, it is remarkable how rarely scholars have interrogated Vaxtang's supposed greatness.[6] More often than not, modern treatments are an intoxicating cocktail spiked, purposefully or not, with a triple shot of positivism, ethnocentrism, and patriotism.

[6] But there are alternate, more sober voices from Late Antiquity itself. Consider the testimony of the Armenian historian Łazar P'arpec'i (Ghazar Parpetsi). A contemporary of Vaxtang, P'arpec'i paints the eastern Georgian king as occupying a weak and vulnerable position, thus offering a critical counterweight to the exultant Georgian-language *Life of Vaxtang*.[7] While P'arpec'i harbored open bitterness towards the eastern Georgian crown, there can be no doubt that *The Life of Vaxtang* grossly exaggerates this monarch's strength and ecumenical accomplishments. In addition, we observe an important literary discordance between our Georgian and Armenian source: Vaxtang's loyalist Georgian biographer copiously mixes actual people, places, and events with Iranic or what we may call Persianate epic elements.[8] As a consequence, modern historians operating outside the Georgian national narrative tend to regard *The Life of Vaxtang* as an amusing fiction bereft of historical value. (Though, curiously, the same historians tend to operate within rigid ethno-national boxes). Such hasty appraisals miss a crucial fact about *The Life of Vaxtang* and, for that matter, the whole corpus of early Georgian historiography. When Georgians initially wrote down their history in the sixth and seventh centuries, they engaged—and actively helped to create—the model of the epic-histories of Iran and the Persianate universe (Ērānšahr) and *not* the historiographical paradigms of Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines. Vaxtang is a historical figure, a member of the Chosroid dynasty, who was a Christian king through and through. Concurrently, however, he was a Persianate monarch who spoke a language suffused with Middle Iranian vocabulary and who imagined himself as an Iranian-like hero-king radiating a *xwarrah* whose sacral basis was the Christian God.[9]

4 We must take care not to present the Georgian monarchy as static or permanent, as is too often the case in "popular" histories. On the murky—but genuine—late Achaemenid/early Hellenistic provenance of Georgian kingship, see, e.g., Melikishvili (1959); Toumanoff (1963); and Braund (1994).

5 The Bagratids acquired power in Georgian lands in the ninth century and were dislodged only by the Russian conquest a thousand years later.

6 Accessible studies of Vaxtang include Shurgaia (2018) and Martin-Hisard (1983).

7 E.g., Łazar P'arpec'i, cap. 74, trans. Thomson (1991, 192). See also Janašia (1962).

8 Scholars have yet to develop a sufficient and succinct vocabulary for the cross-cultural phenomena characterizing the various Iranian Commonwealths, both before and after the advent of Islam. Conventionally, scholars have used "Persianate" in Islamic contexts. But for the sake of readability, I have opted to deploy the term and concept over a significantly wider space-time and thematic spectrum (see my preference for "Iranic" in other publications).

9 See the ingrained assumption that Christian Caucasia was naturally bound to the Byzantine imperial core and reflected Byzantine institutions, including kingship. See, e.g., the learned study by Patariże (2009), with English summary, "Political and Cultural Identities in [the] 4th-8th cc. Georgian Community: The World of Life of Kartli," 174–180, esp. 176.

Christianity in a Persianate Society

By no means am I suggesting that Georgia and the Caucasus isthmus stood apart from the Graeco-Roman world.[10] Traces of Graeco-Roman culture, and its influence on local peoples, are particularly evident in western Armenian lands, which the Roman Empire annexed and de-Armenized from the reign of Justinian I (527–565) (Adontz 1970). Sustained Graeco-Roman ties are evident along the far rim of the Black Sea, home to polities Romans called Colchis, Lazika, and Abasgia (contemporaneous Georgian-speakers collectively referred to these as Egrisi). Pockets of Greek and Roman settlers were implanted in western areas such as Nok'alak'evi, a gateway to eastern Georgian K'art'li and the Caucasus Mountains, and whose imposing Roman fortress was demarcated from the countryside by a massive stone wall (Everill 2014). Yet even in these lands on and near the coast, the long-term impact of Iranian and Persianate culture was palpable. Resonances of this impact are evident in the story of Gubazēs, the Christian ruler of the kingdom of Lazika whose tragic end is chronicled by the Roman historian Agathias. Having skillfully played the Sasanians against the Romans, Gubazēs was assassinated by two Roman generals in 555. The despicable act, meant to maintain Roman security over a vital entrance to the Caucasus highlands and the Eurasian Steppe beyond,[11] was reportedly orchestrated without Justinian's sanction. In the confused aftermath, Agathias says, Laz elites convened in a remote valley to contemplate their future. A certain Aeëtēs urged alliance with the Sasanians, while Phartazēs pleaded for alliance with the Romans on the basis of a shared devotion to Christianity (Agathias 1967, 2:8–14). In a fascinating twist, Aeëtēs' name recalls the mythical king of Colchis at the time of the Argonauts whereas Phartazēs' name is unmistakably Persianate.[12] Agathias' dialogue may be literary fantasy, but it harnesses the genuine cross-cultural matrix of late antique Caucasia and the choices available to its elites. This is precisely the context we must engage when probing the religious fabric of Caucasia. [7]

The image of Phartazēs underscores another essential context: Christianity. By the sixth century, Christianity—in a myriad of forms—had supplanted local strains of Zoroastrianism to dominate the three principal realms immediately south of the main chain of the Caucasus Mountains: Armenia Major, K'art'li in eastern Georgia, and Albania.[13] Christianity was entrenched in other Caucasian polities as well, including Lazika in western Georgia.[14] As is well attested, Christianization had erupted into the public sphere with the royal conversion of the isthmus' three inland kingdoms. The baptism of the Armenian King Trdat in or around 314 was followed within a decade or two by Mirian's baptism in eastern Georgia. Uṙnayr, the king of the Albanians, followed suit by mid-century. [8]

Without question, the scholarly oversimplification of Caucasia's Christian affiliation—and the tunnel-vision of modern ethnocentrism and nationalism—have obscured the complexities of the region's cross-cultural history. A feature shared by academic investigations and modern patriotic visions alike is the firm location of Christian (and *Christianizing)* late an- [9]

10 For Georgia, see Toumanoff (1963); Braund (1994); and Furtwängler, Gagoshidze, Löhr, and Ludwig eds. (2008).

11 Lazika asserted dominance over the northern region of Suania (modern Svanet'i) (Blockley 1985, frag. 6.1).

12 An earlier Laz king named Gubazēs visited Constantinople "dressed in Persian style and with a bodyguard in the Median manner": Priscus, para. 44, in Blockley ed. and trans. (1983, 352–53).

13 For Caucasian Albania (not to be confused with the Albania in the Balkans), see now the essays in Hoyland ed. (2020). On the transition from the Sasanians to the Umayyads, see Vacca (2017).

14 Surviving Christian architecture in this region is examined by Khrushkova (2002), with English summary, "Early Christian Monuments in the Eastern Black Sea Coast Region," 460–482.

tique Caucasia within a Romano-Byzantine framework. Caucasia is thus presented as an extension, albeit an inherently exotic and dangerous one, of the Romano-Byzantine Empire. At the heart of this deeply ingrained assumption resides another intoxicating assumption holding that late antique Christianity is a decisive emblem of Later Roman "civilization." Though quivering under the crushing weight of fallacy, this notion has endured, in part, thanks to non-Roman traditions that claim early Christian imperial interventions by Constantinople, especially under Constantine. These kinds of traditions exist in medieval Armenian and Georgian. The pan-Christian esteem with which Constantine came to be held is noteworthy, but for Caucasia such reverence is mostly anachronistic for the fourth century. Insofar as external players were involved, Caucasia's *initial* Christianization was stimulated by interactions with Syria, Mesopotamia, and Cappadocia and, as is rarely acknowledged, Iran and the Persianate enterprise. Put another way: from their inception, Georgia's early Christianities were oriented chiefly towards the south and to the immediate west, not towards Constantinople and the Roman imperial nucleus. They were, moreover, profoundly plural and mixed. The southerly orientation is clearly demonstrated by the Georgians' tenacious embrace of the Jerusalemite liturgy of St. James, which was not supplanted by the imperially sanctioned liturgy of Constantinople until the tenth century. As a result, early Georgian chant books, called *iadgaris*, roughly equivalent to Greek *tropologia*, have made possible the reconstruction of early Jerusalem chant. Among the specialists who have studied this phenomenon are Peter Jeffrey (1994) and Daniel Galadza, whose monograph *Liturgy and Byzantinization in Jerusalem* has recently been published by Oxford University Press (2018).[15] Stephen Shoemaker's *The First Christian Hymnal: The Songs of the Ancient Jerusalem Church* (2018) provides the first English rendering of the oldest extant Christian hymns that were performed by Georgians in fourth- and fifth-century Jerusalem.[16] Also valuable for this subject is the Great Lectionary of Jerusalem preserved in Georgian (Tarchnishvili 1959–1960).

Christology is another barometer of a socio-cultural bearing not pointing mainly towards [10]
Rome and Constantinople. Up to the seventh century, the Christians of K'art'li and the other interior districts of Georgia were only mildly drawn into the obsessions with orthodoxy and heresy sweeping the Roman Empire. By the same token, Zeno's attempt at Christological compromise, the *Henotikon*, seems to have won the sympathy of eastern Georgian clerics in the late fifth century. Basic devotion to the monotheistic Christian God, Christ, and bishops was the chief concern of early Christian Georgians. Within the confines of Caucasia,[17] Georgian preoccupations with orthodoxy and heresy crystallized only after the early seventh century, when an emboldened and increasingly autonomous church in eastern Georgia explicitly rejected the primacy asserted by its Armenian counterpart. Simultaneously, the Georgian Church cultivated unprecedented ties to the imperial ecclesiastical organization, a process accelerating because of Heraclius's Iranian campaign and his passage through Georgian lands. As the theological contours of Georgian Christianity achieved focus, the environment nourishing Christian heterodoxy evaporated and the remarkable religious receptivity and tolerance of the earlier age constricted.[18] A Georgian "national" church espousing the dyophysite Chris-

15 For Caucasia's connections with the Holy Land as preserved in material culture, see Tchekhanovets (2018).

16 Shoemaker (2018, xv): "[…] the version of the *Chantbook* extant only in Georgian is actually the earlier, pre-reform version of the hymnal that survives in Georgian alone, which means that we can date the contents of this entire collection to sometime before 600 CE."

17 However, eastern Georgian monks residing elsewhere were affected by this obsession, e.g., Peter the Iberian in and around Jerusalem (see Horn 2006).

18 Kwrion (Cyrus) "the Caucasian," former *katholikos* of the church in eastern Georgia, was a crucial figure in this development. Heraclius seems to have appointed Kwrion as patriarch of Alexandria. Thereafter,

tology of Chalcedon had been born.[19] But modern observers overwhelmingly fail to recognize that this occurred within the Persianate society stretching across Caucasia. With the resuscitation of the Georgian monarchy by the "Byzantinizing" Bagratids in the ninth century, a sharply-defined Georgian Chalcedonian Christianity was cemented as a central pillar of medieval Georgian identity but, lest we forget, in a regional, cross-cultural environment that remained fundamentally Persianate.

[11] Such is the entangled milieu of the long sixth century, the "last hurrah" of deep religious plurality and mixture in Georgia—a microcosm of the situation in Iran as probed by Richard Payne and others.[20] By this time, Christianity had been practiced publicly in Georgian lands for some two centuries. An episcopal web traversed the Caucasus isthmus. According to his royal biography, Vaxtang had shepherded the growth and consolidation of the network of bishops across Georgian lands. It was during his reign that the chief prelate of the eastern Georgian Church began to style himself *katholikos*, a title akin to patriarch that was deployed across Iranian and Persianate spaces including Armenia and Iran.[21] Also in the sixth century, cenobitic monasticism germinated in the Georgian interior. According to received tradition, the first monasteries were set up by the so-called Thirteen Syrian Fathers—including Udabno and the larger Davit' Gareja monastic complex, along the Soviet and post-Soviet Georgian-Azerbaijani border. Heated debate surrounds the identity and contributions of these ascetics. Outside modern Georgia, scholars often depict them as miaphysites escaping persecution in Roman Syria. Quite possibly. At the least, a non-Chalcedonian affiliation might explain why the surviving Georgian *vitae* of these figures—or at least the traditions standing behind them—were comprehensively rewritten in the tenth century, at the peak of the selective "Byzantinization" of the Georgian Church, Bagratid crown, and aristocracy. But the Thirteen Fathers were Syriac Christians who represented a culture that itself was substantively Persianate.[22] The ensuing period witnessed the proliferation of monasteries throughout eastern and western Georgia. Over time, these monastic foundations played a leading role in the hardening of lines between orthodoxy and heresy. But the monastic web also conveyed other Christian ideas and traditions, and it came to facilitate the harmonization of Georgian Christianity with its imperial Byzantine counterpart. Early on, this monastic network was extended throughout Georgian territories, the whole of Caucasia, and into Syria, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Holy Land, including Mar Saba. With a growing presence in and around Jerusalem, the potential for Georgian interaction with Judaism increased. But in the sixth century, all of this was in its infancy.

Gwrobandak

[12] The religious plurality and mixture characterizing sixth-century Georgia is epitomized by an Iranian named Gwrobandak (Rapp Jr. 2014b, 33–51). Gwrobandak was born into a Zoroas-

Kwrion negotiated the surrender of Egypt to the Arabs. See Zaza Alek'sidże's commentary in his (1968) edition of the Armenian *Girk' T'łt'oc'*. See also Nikoloz Aleksidze (2018).

19 Subsequently, earlier traditions reflecting religious plurality were reedited and, in some cases, comprehensively rewritten. On this phenomenon, see Loosley Leeming (2019). See further for the Thirteen Syrian Fathers. In the case of Kwrion (see the preceding footnote), the ex-*katholikos* and Alexandrine patriarch was entirely excised from the Georgians' collective memory.

20 For the Iranian and Persianate context of Late Antiquity, see Payne (2015). A wider temporal view with an emphasis on the built environment is engaged in Canepa (2018).

21 On the ecclesiastical office *katholikos* (*catholicus*), see van Esbroeck (1993).

22 Aspects of Syro-Georgian interplay are explored in Loosley Leeming (2018).

trian family around the year 570 in Ganzak, a bustling city in the northwestern reaches of Sasanian Iran (Ganzak should not be confused with Ganja in today's Republic of Azerbaijan). His father was a *mowbed* and, according to Iranian social norms, Gwrokandak should have followed in his priestly footsteps. But while still in Ganzak, the young man resolved to abandon Zoroastrianism and to embrace either Judaism or "Christianity." These quotation marks are intentional and necessary: by "Christianity" I think Gwrobandak's anonymous Georgian hagiographer actually intends Manichaeism, which he casts as a Christian sect.[23] Indeed, when Gwrobandak definitively turned his back on Zoroastrianism, he seems to have been initiated into a Manichaean congregation. For some reason, he then migrated to Mc'xet'a around the year 600. In the former royal seat of eastern Georgia (the monarchy had recently been suppressed by the Sasanians around 580), Gwrobandak became a new man: he converted to Christianity proper; he was baptized, supposedly by the *katholikos*; he assumed the Christian name Eustathios, Evstat'i in Georgian transcription; he married a Christian wife; and he took up a new profession, shoemaking. The Christianized Iranian Evstat'i attracted the ire of Mc'xet'a's Iranian residents when he refused to participate in their Zoroastrian festivals. These Iranians, clustered in a city quarter called Moguet'i ("the place of the *mowbeds*" < *mogwi* + the standard geographical suffix *-et'i*), registered complaints with the local Sasanian commandant. He, in turn, referred the case to the *marzbān* just downriver at Tp'ilisi. Sasanian agents apprehended and questioned Evstat'i. Unrepentant, the Zoroastrian apostate was beheaded by order of the *marzbān*. Within a few decades this Christian hero was commemorated with an original *vita* composed in Georgian. Because Gwrobandak-Evstat'i's story is principally one of Ērānšahr, not the Roman-Byzantine ecumene, Gwrobandak must be counted among the Persian martyrs.

The narrative of Evstat'i's passion features an intriguing synopsis of universal religious history. In the process, this rich hagiographical account pushes Judaism more fully onto the literary stage. The *vita* contains one of the earliest surviving references to Judaism in Georgian literature. The Sasanian *marzbān* [13]

> "[…] said to the holy Evstat'i: 'Who are you, or to which religion do you adhere?' The holy Evstat'i said [to him]: 'Since you have asked, then listen carefully and I shall tell you everything. I used to belong to the land of Iran [Sparset'i], the region of Aršaket'i [literally 'the ravine {*q'evi*} of the Arsacids'], the city of Ganžak [i.e. Ganzak].[24] And my father was a *mowbed* [*mogwi*], my brothers were *mowbeds*, and my father taught me as well in Zoroastrianism [literally '*mowbed*ism, magism,' *moguebay*]. But I did not love the religion of my father, and I said in my mind: '[Because] I do not love this religion, now I shall listen to [the religion] of both the Jews and the 'Christians,'[25] and whichever religion is best, I shall accept.' And during the day my father taught me Zoroastrianism and at night, when 'Christians' would ring [a bell], I would go to the church and listen to their liturgy[26] and watch the service of the 'Christians,' which was done for God. And I also would [14]

23 For Gwrobandak-Evstat'i as a Manichaean, see Mgaloblishvili and Rapp Jr. (2011).

24 For late antique Iranians, "[h]ouse and tribe were questions of blood, village and land questions of place. The genealogical thinking characteristic of Iranian elites frequently conflated land and lineage" (Payne 2015, 73).

25 The placement of quotation marks around "Christian" is mine does not occur in the original text.

26 The Georgian word for liturgy is *žamobay*. Still is use today, it is based on the Middle Iranian loan *žamān*, "time, hour," for which see MacKenzie (1986, 98). This and other such examples serve as further reminder of the Persianate character of Caucasian society in Late Antiquity.

> go with the Jews to [their] temple and watch their service. But in the prayers of the 'Christians' I heard their voices as the voices of angels, and their liturgy is extremely fragrant and agreeable. But at night when I would go to the temple of the Jews, I could not comprehend what was being said […]
>
> […] And Archdeacon Samuel began to speak and said […] 'First there was the religion of the Iranians, as you yourself know, but God disliked the religion of the Iranians and He was not pleased [by it]. And then God favored the Jews and they were pleasing to Him and He gave them a religion and commandment[s] to follow. After this God favored the Christians more than the Jews […]"' (*Passion of Gwrobandak-Evstat'i* (1963), 35–36; trans. *Passion of Gwrobandak-Evstat'i* (1976), 101–102 [modified]). [15]

Here, from a Christian hagiographer's vantage, we obtain insight into Georgia's religious environment in the twilight of Late Antiquity. Two things stand out. First, the anonymous hagiographer regarded Christianity and Manichaeism as registers of the same "Christian" faith, though confusions and inconsistencies in the received text suggest later Christian Orthodox irritation with such inclusivity. In Gwrobandak-Evstat'i's case, conversion to Christianity proper was facilitated by an earlier adherence to Manichaeism, a syncretic faith creatively incorporating elements from Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism.[27] His religious transformation thus bridges the Sasanian Empire and Caucasia. Second, the hagiographer imagines three privileged religions to have existed up to his time in the seventh century. The oldest, Zoroastrianism, ultimately displeased God; it was supplanted by the second, Judaism; and then came "Christianity," which here comprehends both Christianity and Manichaeism. Accordingly, Georgians envisioned a continuum of primary religions starting with Zoroastrianism, shifting to Judaism, and pushing ahead to Christianity. All shared the same monotheistic God. [16]

This vision is consistent with the continua residing at the heart of contemporaneous Georgian conceptions of Eurasian political and religious history. Georgians conceived Sparset'i, "Iran" (and not only Persia or Parthia), as a great supra-cultural, or "civilizational," chain stretching from primordial Iranians through the Achaemenids and on to the Arsacids and Sasanians. Another chain called Saberžnet'i, "Greece," extended from the ancient Greek city-states through Alexander and on to the Eastern Roman Empire. Significantly, Christian Georgian writers, by contrast, perceived Islam as a deviation and innovation of the Prophet Muḥammad.[28] Because it did not fully belong to any of the established "civilizational" continua, Islam had upset the natural political and cultural order of Eurasia. [17]

The religious spectrum evoked in Evstat'i's *vita* is remarkable for another reason. Although the hagiographer signals God's eventual annoyance with Zoroastrianism, hence the relocation of divine favor to Judaism, the anonymous Georgian writer does not heave sustained critique upon Zoroastrianism. So far as we know, early Christian Georgians did not produce *any dedicated* polemic against Zoroastrianism. There are, however, occasional anti-Zoroastrian barbs punctuating texts like the *Life* of Abibo of Nekresi, the *vita* of one of the Thirteen Syrian Fathers that is transmitted exclusively in a heavily-altered tenth-century text. This literary situation contrasts that of the Armenians, including the fifth-century polemicist Eznik who openly assailed Zoroastrianism in its various manifestations, as well as Zurvanism (see Eznik of Kołb [18]

27 On the intersections of these faiths, see the special issue of *Entangled Religions* and its introduction by Iricinschi (2020).

28 For the rise of Islam, see the ca. 800 account in the anonymous continuation of *The Life of Vaxtang* (1955, 229), reprinted as *Life of Vaxtang* 1998; trans. by Thomson as *The Life of Vaxtang* (1996, 237).

1998). I should emphasize that polemics of any kind, including anti-Jewish tracts, are unusual in the surviving pre-modern literature of the Georgians (Kekeliže 1960, 1:474–96; Tarchnišvili 1955, 368–86). This includes works translated into Georgian from other languages, including Greek and Arabic.

Zoroastrianism in Persianate Caucasia

The dearth of anti-Zoroastrian polemic extends to early Georgian historiography. Despite having been composed in a Christian environment that could harbor considerable antipathy towards the Sasanians, Georgian historiographical literature tends to refrain from direct critiques of Zoroastrianism. To be sure, occasional Sasanian threats to Christianity and the intermittent destruction of churches are mentioned in Georgian histories. Yet anything more than a jab at Zoroastrianism is absent. In this regard, let us return to *The Life of Vaxtang*. In its received form, the text's narrative curtain opens with the incarceration and death of Vaxtang's great-grandfather Mirdat IV (r. 409–411) in Ctesiphon. A Sasanian assault upon churches in eastern Georgia ensued. Following its long celebration of Vaxtang's reign, the text concludes with Vaxtang having been mortally wounded in combat against Sasanian forces. The dying king implored his notables to maintain their friendship with Christian Romans ("Greeks"). But the remainder of the story is far more complex with respect to the treatment of Iran and Zoroastrianism. Time and time again, Vaxtang and his father Mirdat V (r. 435–447) adeptly negotiated Sasanian and Roman concerns while maintaining their autonomy and distinctiveness. Moreover, *The Life of Vaxtang* invariably, and positively, paints eastern Georgia's monarchy, society, and culture in gleaming Persianate colors. [19]

Much of Vaxtang's biography is more epic than history "as-it-actually-happened," while it highlights the purported single combats of champion warriors, called *bumberazis* in Georgian.[29] Although Vaxtang and his fellow *bumberazis* grapple with Alans, "Khazars," Indians, Sinds, and even a Roman official, they do not engage Iranians in single combat. Instead, Iranian *bumberazis* are said to have been under Vaxtang's command, including a warrior named P'arsman-P'arux. During Vaxtang's one-on-one contest against the king of Sind, a verbal spar preceded physical battle. The unnamed Sind accused Vaxtang as forsaking his Christian faith by having campaigned with the Zoroastrian *šāhan šāh*. Vaxtang's rejoinder consists of a staunch defense of his actions and faith. Vaxtang boasted about his ostensible rescue of Jerusalem and all Christendom from certain Iranian ruin (*Life of Vaxtang* (1955), 192; trans. *Life of Vaxtang* (1996), 209). The eastern Georgian king justified his joint military operation with the Sasanians in this way: [20]

> "[…] Although the reason was not the salvation of Christians, yet I came here in person to aid the Iranians. This was indeed right, first because of [my] kinship [with the Iranians], and then for this purpose, that although the Iranians are not in the True Faith yet they know God the Creator and believe in the spiritual life […]" (*Life of Vaxtang* (1955), 193; trans. *Life of Vaxtang* (1996), 209 [modified]). [21]

These fictional words, put into the mouth of a Christian king, reveal much about the cross-cultural fabric of late antique Caucasia. First and foremost, this quotation encapsulates an unequivocal Persianate voice. Moreover, these are not the ideas of a polemicist. We must remem- [22]

29 The standard medieval Georgian spelling is *bumberazi*, though an earlier variant *mumbarezi* more obviously echoes the Iranian *mumbāriz* ("fighter"): Rapp Jr. (2014a, 236–37).

ber that local forms of Zoroastrianism had dominated religious life across the Caucasus isthmus prior to Christianity's ascendancy.[30] The oldest Georgian sources—which were composed in an age of Christian dominion—refer to Zoroastrianism by three imprecise terms: "paganism" (*carmart'obay*), "fire-worship" (*c'ec'xlmsaxurobay*), and "*mowbed*ism, magism" (*mogobay*, *moguebay*). They further distinguish between Caucasia's indigenous Zoroastrian confessions and varieties of Zoroastrianism from the Iranian core that Sasanian authorities endeavored to impose on early Christian Caucasia. This is an acknowledgement that Zoroastrianism, like Christianity, existed in multiple confessions. For their part, Iranian authorities were divided in their opinion about whether Caucasia's Zoroastrianism was a definite badge of Iranian-ness. Back in the third century, *Šāhan šāh* Šāpūr I (r. 240–270) had counted Persianate Caucasia within the hegemonic confines of Ērānšahr, whereas his contemporary, the chief *mowbed* of the Zoroastrians Kerdīr, had not.

This *existing* religious difference helps to explain how and why the acculturated Parthian monarchs of Caucasia adopted Christianity in the first place. Despite pervasive and confident assertions to the contrary, Christianization did not hasten Caucasia's exit from the Persianate world. [23]

And so Vaxtang, a Christian hero-king, is made to revel in his biological kinship with the Zoroastrian Iranians, archrivals of the Christian Romans. Vaxtang was as scion of the Parthian Chosroid dynasty, the royal house founded by the first Christian king of eastern Georgia, Mirian. As their Georgian name Xosroiani implies, the Chosroids claimed to be direct descendants of "Xusrō" (Chosroes), the supposed forefather of the Sasanians. While Chosroids may have actually intermarried with minor Sasanians, the Chosroids' founding member, Mirian, was actually a Parthian. Mirian was probably a member of the Parthian Mihrānid house who immigrated from northern Iran to K'art'li in the late third century.[31] In eastern Georgia, Mirian straightaway faced a legitimacy crisis and married into an earlier Georgian royal family. But the fact remained that the Mihrānids had not previously achieved royal status. Across Persianate Caucasia, in short order, the Chosroids connected themselves to and even co-opted Sasanian kingship. So as to maximize their legitimacy, these acculturated Chosroids consciously represented themselves as main trunk of the Sasanian family that had been unfairly brushed aside in a succession dispute back in Iran. There is more. The Chosroids grafted themselves onto the existing Georgian understanding of Iranian history, which envisioned a continuous Iranian polity stretching from pre-Achaemenid antiquity, through the Parthian Arsacids, and on to the Sasanians. More precisely, the Christian Vaxtang declared himself the direct descendant of Nebrot', the first king of the world and the initiator of Iranian kingship. Nebrot' is the Georgian rendering of Nimrod, who early Christian Georgian authors held in high esteem (Rapp Jr. 2014a).[32] [24]

Judaism

This re-sculpting of an ancient biblical tradition leads to our final topic: the deliberate images of Judaism and Jews in the received stories of King Mirian's conversion to Christianity through the intercession of the holy woman Nino.[33] As is (reasonably) well known, several tantalizing [25]

30 See, e.g., Russell (1987), de Jong (2015), and Shenkar (2014).

31 Under the early Sasanians, nobles were transferred to Iran's frontiers: Payne (2015, 137).

32 Nimrod was also reinvented as an ancestor of the aristocracies in neighboring northern Mesopotamia: Payne (2015, 148–49); and Walker (2006, 248–49, 257–59).

33 For overviews from a modern Georgian perspective, see: Mamistvalishvili (2014); and Gambashidze (2015).

allusions to Judaism and Jews are preserved in early Georgian literature. Invariably, these are echoes of the Persianate Christian environment in which these sources were produced. Thus, the anonymous hagiographer of Gwrobandak-Evstat'i, who wrote in the seventh century, imagined a religious continuum that started with Zoroastrianism, pivoted to Judaism, and persevered with Christianity.

But Judaism was considerably more than a malleable image to be shaped by later Christian Georgians seeking to plant their roots in the fertile soil of biblical antiquity. Archaeological evidence is fraught with interpretational problems yet strongly implies the actual presence of Jewish communities in eastern Georgia throughout Late Antiquity.[34] Admittedly, there is much we do not know. Literary evidence provides oblique confirmation, but its received Jewish imagery is highly representational. The chief surviving text addressing Georgia's pre-Christian history, the anonymous *Life of the Kings*, proposes two waves of Hebrew migration to K'art'li from the Holy Land. First, after Nebuchadnezzar's capture of Jerusalem, at which time expelled Jews reached eastern Georgia (*Life of the Kings* (1955), 15–16; trans. *Life of the Kings* (1996), 21). There, the overseer (*mamasaxlisi*, "father of the house") of Mc'xet'a granted them nearby land called Zanavi.[35] According to the same source, another surge of Hebrew migration transpired after Vespasian's suppression of the First Jewish Revolt. Unusual in early Georgian literature, the (future) Roman emperor is explicitly named. The text asserts that the newcomers settled with "old Jews," *żvelni uriani*. Among the recent arrivals were "the sons of Barabbas, whom the Jews had released at the crucifixion of the Lord in place of our Lord Jesus" (*Life of the Kings* (1955), 44; trans. *Life of the Kings* (1996), 52). In my view, these passages were likely added by Archbishop Leonti Mroveli, who, much later in the eleventh century, re-edited several received Georgian histories. Mroveli himself may have compiled the first iteration of *K'art'lis c'xovreba*, the so-called Georgian Chronicles. Here, as elsewhere, Mroveli—or some early medieval editor—inserted biblical signposts so as to foreshadow Georgia's subsequent Christianization. Another example is a short, inserted passage about Moses and the Red Sea. [26]

Using readily identifiable biblical and Roman markers, Mroveli also attempted to explain how eastern Georgia's Jewish community had been established in the first place. Most of Mroveli's claims have yet to be corroborated by independent evidence, including earlier Georgian textual sources, yet the Jewish presence in Georgia was undoubtedly genuine and old. But why should Mroveli mention Georgia's Jews at all? The archbishop's larger historiographical project, the editing and perhaps compilation of *K'art'lis c'xovreba* (Rapp Jr. 2014a, 172–74), emphasized Georgia's Christianization by adapting an existing hagiographical account of Nino, the holy woman whose intercessions had led to King Mirian's conversion in the 320s. *The Life of Nino* was originally written in the ninth or tenth century, though on the basis of the oldest surviving conversion tale in Georgian: a concise seventh-century text known as *The Conversion of K'art'li*. One of the central themes of the later, expanded account of the *Life of Nino* is the holy woman's proselytizing activities that directly led to King Mirian's conversion.[36] Nino's first converts, according to the hagiographer, were members of the royal capital's Jewish community. The very first were the Jewish priest Abiat'ar, his daughter Sido- [27]

34 Though interpretational issues remain, the chief evidence is presented in Mgaloblishvili and Gagoshidze (1998). See the cautions about the lack of archaeological material clearly pertaining to the fourth and fifth centuries, for which see Shapira (2008).

35 Also called Xerki, after *xarki*, "tribute," since Jews offered tribute in return for land. Note the term's later Arabic influence. For Zanavi as the "quarter of the Jews," see *Life of the Kings* (1955), 17 and *Life of the Kings* (1996), 24.

36 Payne (2015, 43), notes the role of ascetic women among Christian communities in Iran in the fourth century. Georgian sources, and the ca. 400 Latin account by Rufinus, underscore Nino's status as a "captive"

nia, and six other Jewish women (Life of Nino 1955, 95, trans. 1996, 103). Magnifying the role of Jewish-Christians in *The Life of Nino*, Sidonia and Abiat'ar are made to recount, as supposed authors (!), Nino's activities in the first person. And here we must remember the religious continuum communicated in the earlier *vita* of Gwrobandak-Evatat'i. Through the Jewish presence in eastern Georgia and the pivotal Christianization of some of the local Jews, eastern Georgia had thus been the scene of all three of Eurasia's divinely-favored religions: Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. Here I should add that the Georgian text called *The Life of the King* proffers another dimension to this religious continuum by asserting that Alexander himself had instituted among the Georgians the worship of the one true Creator God.

Conclusion

The Jews and Judaism embody another fascinating cross-cultural phenomenon in early Georgian literature. On the one hand, genuine Jewish communities had existed in this part of Caucasia since the end of antiquity. On the other hand, as presented in surviving Christian Georgian texts, the Jews and Judaism were integrated into the imagined continuum of major religions leading to the ultimate triumph of Christianity, particularly in eastern Georgia itself. This image reinforced the notion that Georgians had long been on the monotheistic Orthodox path, and that their history was as old as that of the ancient Hebrews. And this image would gain new potency under the Bagratid dynasty, members of which claimed to be the direct descendants of the King-Prophet David. But this is another story for another time. [28]

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and "stranger." In the Sasanian context, Christians and Christian deportees called themselves "captives" (Payne 2015, 66).

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