

THE PASSION OF ST. EUSTACE OF MTSKHETA

The martyrdom of St. Eustace of Mtskheta represents one of the most important documents of early Georgian history. It gives a vivid picture of the relationship, which existed between Christian Georgia and Sasanian Iran during the reign of Khusrau Anushirvan (531-79), and has come down to us in a relatively unaltered form from the late 6th century, when it was composed by an anonymous writer. Many Iranian names are preserved in their original form with surprisingly little corruption, and the absence of miracles in the text enhances the narrative's authenticity.

The Passion of St. Eustace is here translated unabridged from German of the revised text published at Tbilisi in the Chrestomathies edited by Qubaneishvili and Imnaishvili, who have based their editions on some eight manuscripts, the earliest being of the 11th century.

A.D. 540-41. In the tenth year of King Khusrau's reign when Arvand Gushnasp was Marzapan ('Governor-General') of Georgia, a certain man arrived from Persia, from the province of the Arshakids; son of a Magian was he, and a pagan. His name was Gvirobandak, and he was a young man of about thirty.

He came to the city of Mtskheta and set himself to learn cobblery. He saw the Christians celebrating their services and worshipping Christ, and witnessed the manifestation of the power of the Holy Cross. He became fond of the Christian faith, and came to believe in Christ. When he had learnt cobblery, he sought the hand of a Christian wife and he became a Christian and was baptized. On being baptized he was christened Eustace. And the holy Eustace abode in Christian faith and virtue.

At that season the Persians who lived in Mtskheta, cobblers and shoemakers by trade, used to assemble for their festival. So they sent for the blessed Eustace and said to him, "Come and join in this celebration of ours." But the blessed Eustace laughed at them and said, "Your festival is dismal, and you, its celebrators, are a dismal crowd. But the seal of the baptism of Christ has been imprinted on me, and I make mercy at Christ's feast; for I am stamped with the mark of Christ, and stand aloof from such dismal festivities as yours."

When they had celebrated their festival, those cobblers and shoemakers assembled and gave voice before Wistam, the commandant who was set over Mtskheta castle, and said, "There is a man here belonging to our faith who refuses to come to our festival. He pays no respect to the sacred fire and pours scorn on our cult and rails at us and says: I am a Christian. Now summon him and interrogate him, for you exercise authority over this city."

Wistam, the commandant of Mtskheta castle, listened to what they had to say about Eustace and sent one of his horsemen to call the blessed Eustace to him. The horseman told him brusquely, "The castle commandant is calling for you."

The holy Eustace was somewhat confused and wanted to run away, but then thought and said, "These are my comrades - if I am afraid of them, how shall I stand up to great princes? Rather will I go to him and openly confess Christ, as I have learnt from the Holy Gospel, where He said: He who confesses me before men, I will confess also before my Father which is in heaven, and whoever denies me before men, him I will deny also before my Father which is in heaven." And he made the sign of the cross over his brow and his heart and said, "The Lord be with me." So the blessed Eustace came and stood in front of Wistam, the commandant of Mtskheta castle,

and the man who had fetched him said to Wistam, "This is the fellow who rails at our creed." The commandant glanced at the blessed Eustace and said, "Now look you, my man, tell me what province you are from or what city, and to what faith you belong?"

St. Eustace said to him "I used to live in the land of Persia in the province of the Arshakids, in the town of Gandzak. My father was a Magian and he instructed me also in the creed of the Magians. But I did not adopt the Magian creed, for in the city of Gandzak the Christians are in the majority, with their own bishop and priests, and from them I learnt beyond all manner of doubt that Christianity, the greatest of religions, is above all pagan beliefs. Now I believe in Christ and abide in Christ's service."

Then Wistam the castle commandant said to him, "No one will give you permission to exercise the Christian cult. If you will not be quiet and forsake this lunacy of yours, then great torment is in store for you."

St. Eustace replied, "Not only am I ready to face torture for the love of Christ, but I will not even seek to avoid death."

When Wistam observed the blessed Eustace's steadfast resolve he meditated and said, "I have no authority to punish this man either by crucifying him or by imprisonment. I had better send him to the city of Tbilisi to Arvand Gushnasp, the Marzapan of Georgia, for him to do with him whatever is expedient; for it is he who holds the right of life and death over every man in Georgia."

So Wistam, the commandant of Mtskheta castle, gave orders to two of his horsemen to take the blessed Eustace to Tbilisi. Then those same cobblers and shoemakers assembled and came to Wistam and said, "There are also some other men of our creed here who have turned Christians. So order them to be summoned and sent to Tbilisi as well." Wistam said to them, "Who are they?" They told him their names and said, "One of them is called Gushnak and one Bakhdiad, one Borzo, one Panagushnasp, one Perozak, one Zarmil and one Stephen." Wistam had them summoned but did not subject them to interrogation, merely commanding the eight of them to be bound and handed over to Arvand Gushnasp, the Marzapan of Georgia, at Tbilisi. He reported to him in the following terms, "These men used to belong to our faith, but now belong to the Christian religion. I have arrested them and sent them to you, my lord, because you have the authority to interrogate them."

So these eight appeared before the Marzapan, who said to them, "Where are you from and to what creed do you belong?" Then each one declared his native land and place of birth, and all of them stated, "In our home-land we belonged to the faith of our fathers and followed the Mazdayan religion, but when we migrated to Georgia and witnessed the faith of the Christians, we became Christians and are Christians now, for the faith of the Christians is holy and fragrant and passing excellent and beautiful, and no other creed can compare with that of the Christians." Their spokesman before the judge was the blessed Eustace. And when the judge heard these words of theirs he was enraged and ordered his retainers to strike these saints on the face and take them all away, and he commanded, "Shave their heads and beards and pierce their noses and fix chains on their necks and fetter their legs and lock them up in jail. If any one of them will profess the faith of his fathers, release him and bring him to me, and I will enrich him with generous presents. But any one who will not profess the creed of his fathers shall die in prison." When they heard the words of the Marzapan – "Whoever professes the faith of his fathers I will let live, and whoever will not profess it shall die in prison" - then the devil entered into the hearts of Bakhdiad and Panagushnasp and they denied Christ and professed paganism. So they took the

side of the crucifiers of Jesus, but the blessed Eustace and Gushnak and Borzo and Perozak and Zarmil and Stephen clung firmly and steadfastly to the faith of Christ.

When they told the Marzapan that two of the men had reverted to the faith of their fathers, the Marzapan was pleased and had them brought to him and seated them by his side and promised them a valuable reward and handsome treatment. But he ordered the blessed Eustace and his other companions to have their heads and beards shaved and chains hung round their necks, and to be kept fettered in prison. And the retainers carried out the Marzapan's orders and shaved off their hair and beards and fettered them and locked them up in prison. Bakhdiad and Panagushnasp, on the other hand, he entertained and let go; but of the reward and handsome compensation he had promised them he gave them not one farthing.

St. Eustace and his other companions stayed in prison for six months. After six months had passed, a courier arrived to summon Arvand Gushnasp to the king of the Persians. When the Marzapan was setting out to go to the king the princes of Georgia assembled to say farewell to him. As the Marzapan was mounting his horse the princes of Georgia, Samuel the Catholicos of Georgia, Gregory the Mamasakhlisi¹ of Georgia, Arshusha the Pitiakhsh² of Georgia, and other scions of princely families arose and said to the Marzapan, "We beg you to grant us the privilege of asking you one favor." So he said to them, "Tell me what it is you want. What have I failed to grant you?" And they all said, "We beg you, my lord, to see your way to freeing those men from Mtskheta who have been imprisoned on account of their adherence to the Christian faith." The Marzapan said to them, "Those men were to be put to death, but as a result of your intercession I will set them free." They thanked him. And he ordered them to be released, and they were brought out of jail.

So those blessed ones came home as Christians and lived a life pleasing to God. And by God's command some of them have passed away at various times, while others are still alive. But of those who denied Christ, Bakhdiad was seized with a devil and came to a bad end, while the wretched Panagushnasp passed his days in poverty, without bread to eat or clothes to cover his body, and as long as he lived, his days were full of misery and woe.

Georgian text found in:

Zveli k`art`uli literaturis k`restomat`ia (Tbilisi Technical State College of Georgia Press: 1941)

German translation of older Georgian copy by:

Adolf von Harnack: *Sitzungsberichte der Berliner Akadamie*, (Berlin University: 1901)

English translation of German by Timm Króll

¹ "Mamasakhlisi": literally "Father of the House," i.e. head of a clan, an ancient Georgian title dating from patriarchal times.

² "Pitiakhsh": from the Iranian word Bitiashkh (*Bidexš*), a viceroy.