SOME ASPECTS OF THE GEORGIAN PRESENCE IN THE HOLY LAND

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Abstract- Jerusalem is the holy city for three religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Its history is very interesting from many points of view. It is also very important that for many centuries there lived different communities of Christians: Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Catholics, that means the Greeks, the Arameans, the Georgians, the Armenians, the Ethiopians, as for the Roman Catholics, the Franciscans were responsible for the shrines in the Holy Land, the tradition, which is strong also nowadays. A number of studies have been dedicated to the relations among all these Christian communities, as well as to their contact with the Moslem governors after the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem. Presently we carry out a research project concerning the Georgian monastic community and cloisters from the 11th to the 18th century according mainly to Greek, Arabic (the Firmans) and Western sources, among them largely to the Italian narrative sources, descriptions of the Holy Land. The project is funded by Rustaveli Foundation in Georgia. For the present paper we have chosen Description of the Holy Land by the Venetian pilgrim Barbone Morosini (XVI c.) and some Firmans from the Mamluk period, as well as Voyage in the Holy Land and Lebanon by the 17th century Venetian pilgrim Giovanni Benedetti. We analyzed these sources about the Holy Cross Church and the relations between the Georgians and the Moslem governors until the Ottoman conquest of Jerusalem. Barbone Morosini's work is especially interesting, as it is the last description of the Holy Land just on the eve of the establishment of the Ottoman rule there.

Keywords- Holy Land, Georgia, Venetian pilgrims

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a long history of relations between Georgia and the Holy Land. According to ancient Georgian sources, the first encounters of the Georgians and the Hebrews were in the time of Nebuchadnezzar the Great, after the devastation and looting of Jerusalem, when the first wave of the Jews went to Georgia. Relations between Georgia and the Holy Land became especially close from the fourth century, after the official adoption of Christianity in Kartli or Iberia (Eastern Georgia). The Georgians were in the Holy Land as early as the fifth century, Peter the Iberian being among the first to settle there. From the sixth century on, the geography of Georgian presence in the Holy Land is rather impressive [14].

The position of the Georgians became especially remarkable in the Holy Land after the unification of the Georgian kingdom in the 12th century. They had distinguished places in the most important Christian shrines, like the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and others, as well as certain monasteries belonged entirely to them, like the Holy Cross Church. Recent archaeological work in the Church of the Holy Cross has shown that the present building was constructed over the remains of an earlier church of the sixth or seventh century. It might be possible to identify it with the monastery of the Lazi in the desert of Jerusalem that Procopius (c. 560) records as having been restored by Justinian (527-565), though it is perhaps more likely that this monastery lay in the wilderness to the East of the city.

The fortunes of the church during the Persian occupation (614-631) and after the Moslem conquest (638) are unknown. It seems very likely, however, that it would have been severely damaged or destroyed during the reign of the Caliph al-Hakim (996-1021), when other churches in Palestine shared that fate. It was certainly under way, if not in part complete, by 1038, when the copyist, George, whose priestly name was Prochorus, identifies himself in the colophon to a Georgian manuscript of St. John Chrysostom's commentary on the Gospel of John as the builder of this holy place of the life-giving Cross. Other undated colophons also refer to Prochorus as the builder of the monastery. Work was still possibly in progress in 1056, when George Mtatsmindeli visited Palestine [14].

The monastery may have suffered further depredations before the Crusaders' capture of Jerusalem in 1099. But the Russian abbot Daniel found that the Georgian monks were still there. This restoration may perhaps have been due to King David IV of Georgia (1089-1125), who defeated a huge coalition of the Moslems and unified Georgia. He is identified as having been a patron of the Holy Cross Church. The place where the wood of the Lord's Cross grew is mentioned in a number of twelfth- and thirteenth-century pilgrim texts [12,13]. Other sources also mention a church or monastery and many of them record the presence of Georgian monks in it.

The present work is based on the sources, which we could study at St. Mark's library in Venice and at the Franciscan Monastery of St. Saviour in Jerusalem. At St. Mark's library we mainly concentrated on Italian pilgrimage literature, what we also did at St. Saviour's Monastery in Jerusalem, but there we

worked not only at the so called Bibliotheca Generalis, but also at the rich Franciscan archives, where there are preserved a number of important Arabic documents, the Firmans. Among other significant issues they deal with the relations between the Georgians and the Moslem governors in the Holy Land.

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE HOLY LAND BY THE ITALIAN PILGRIM BARBONE MOROSINI

Description of the Holy Land is preserved in a single manuscript, it is the autograph of Barbone Morosini. It was absolutely unknown until the collection of Amadeo Svajer was transferred to St. Mark's library. Nowadays it belongs to the 6th class of the Italian manuscripts, Ms. No. 6.

Before continuing the description of the text itself, we would like to say a few words about Amadeo Svajer as well. This is the Latinized form of his name. He was German and is also known from the sources as Amadeus or Gottlieb Schweyer. He was born in Venice on December 12, 1727 and passed away in the same city on December 28, 1791. He was a successful merchant.

The family of the Svajers migrated from Nurnberg to Venice at the end of the 17th century. They were Lutherans. Like other children of the rich German merchants in Venice, Amadeo received a very expensive private education. His teacher was a famous German learned man, Johann Konrad Hoffmann (1702-1756), who also lived in Venice. The teacher developed in his pupil great interest in history and literature. Amadeo Svajer took a very active part in the life of the German Lutheran parish in Venice. He collected a number of manuscripts and books. This rich collection was purchased by St. Mark's library [4].

The text by Barbone Morosini covers 60 pages. It is written with the typical Latin calligraphy of the 16th century. He uses abbreviations quite often. The narrative is written in Italian but there are also quite long Latin insertions.

T. Domenichelli (1889) was the first scholar, who cited the work by Morosini, then M. Da Civezza [8] quoted some parts of the text, dealing with Jerusalem, the Church on the Mount Sion, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Bethlehem. In the 20th century some researchers used the source. One must mention the monograph by E. Cerulli [6], where he published all the extracts dealing with the Ethiopians in Palestine. B. Bagatti [1], D. Baldi [2] and M. Roncaglia [15] also published certain parts of Morosini's work. M. Roncalgia was planning to prepare the critical edition of the text, but he was not able to finish it. Finally, a long article was dedicated to this source by L. Cruciani [7], we use just this edition.

Barbone Morosini traveled to the Holy Land in the period between July 15 and August 26, 1514. We have not got much information about him. The family name of the Morosinis is one of the most distinguished among the Venetian noblemen. The information about them is gathered in the Diarii by Sanuto, which was published in Venice in 1886. It is one of the largest and the most important chronicles from the period of Renaissance, containing the notes on all the famous families of Venice. Barbone Morosini is mentioned in vol. XVIII, col. 22 and in vol. XXV, col. 287. He was the son of a Venetian merchant. Since 1513 he followed the occupation of his father and started to travel to Syria quite often. In 1523 he was elected as a Consul of Venice in Damascus. He passed away in 1530. Since 1505 he was married to Elisabetta Giustiniani. From the sources it is evident that by 1511 they have a son, his name is Vincenzo. From the archives it becomes evident that in 1513 there was an epidemy of cholera in Syria. Barbone Morosini was ill but he could recover. It seems that it was an additional reason for him to express his gratitude to God and to go for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Unfortunately, we have not got any additional data about Barbone Morosini, but we can judge about him according to his own writing.

While reading the work by Barbone Morosini, it becomes obvious that the author was a gifted, brave, vigorous, attentive and sociable person. He was fluent in Arabic, he could easily contact the local population and the governors. He was a believer, a traditional Roman Catholic but it did not prevent him from developing friendly contacts not only with all the different Christian communities but also with the Moslems. His discourses are far from any kind of radicalism and fanatism, what can not be said about all the western authors, for example, even the famous Guardian of the Holy Land, Francesco Suriano (1512-1514) calls the Greeks "heretics and the principle enemies of the Latins", giving as an argument only the fact, that the Greeks do not recognize the supreme power of the Pope. He also uses a very offensive style while speaking about the Georgians, because in that period the Georgians and the Franciscans had a conflict regarding the Golgotha [10,3]. One can never see such tendencies in the writings of Barbone Morosini, on the contrary, he shows his sympathies to all the confessions and the nations, which were present in Jerusalem and in the Holy Land in general.

As it was already mentioned, Barbone Morosini's work is the last description of the Holy Land just on the eve of the Ottoman conquest. He also mentions, that the Georgians had their own monastery, called the Monastery of the Holy Cross, besides, they stayed at Golgotha (Questo sacratissimo locho é in governo de Gorgi Christiani), under it they possessed some rooms for living, they celebrated holy mass in the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Barbone Morosini's work is one of the last sources, in which the distinguished place of the Georgians in the

Holy Land is documented. That situation was due to the good relations between the Georgians and the Mamluk governors, which started much earlier, than Morosini's pilgrimage.

Five years after the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin, his secretary Baha ad-Din records in September 1192 that an embassy came to the sultan from the Georgians, complaining that they had been dispossessed and asking for the places of pilgrimage that they had formerly maintained in Jerusalem to be restored to them. Whether the monastery of the Cross had also been appropriated is uncertain. Queen Tamar (1184-1212), however, is credited with sending funds for the rebuilding of Georgian monasteries in the Holy Land through her emissary, the poet Shota Rustaveli. It seems that the programme of wall painting was renewed in this period. Thirteenth-century Western pilgrim texts also continue to refer to the presence of Georgian monks in the monastery.

In the reign of sultan Baybars (1260-1277) the Georgian monks were accused of passing military information about the Mamluks to the Mongols, under whose suzerainty the kingdom of Georgia had been since c. 1240. The "spies", including the abbot, were executed, and the Monastery of the Cross was made into a mosque. In July 1311, however, after the death of the Mongol il-Khan Ghazan, an embassy sent from the king of Georgia to Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun, and supported by the Byzantine emperor, Andronicus II, succeeded in convincing the Sultan to return the church to the Georgians [5].

This agreement marked the beginning of a new phase in Georgian-Mamluk relations, which for the next two centuries was to make the Georgians the most favoured of the Christian communities in Jerusalem. It was followed by an edict protecting the position of the Georgian monks in Jerusalem; and when this was reissued in an expanded version by al-Nasir Muhammad's son, al-Muzaffar Hajji (1346-1347), it included a clause commanding that they be allowed to rebuild to the original plan what time had destroyed of their monastery, under the supervision of the Qadi of Jerusalem. This is the information we get from the Arabic Firmans of the archives of the Franciscan Monastery in Jerusalem.

In addition, at about this time an Italian pilgrim, Nicolo da Poggibonsi also describes the Monastery of the Holy Cross as surrounded by high walls and held by the Georgian Christians. In 1344 an anonymous English pilgrim was served there "the best of wine in big jars"; and an Italian, forty years later, describes it as a "rich monastery, well adorned and well officiated, where the monks give plenty of bread and wine to the pilgrims who call there" [11]. Much of this prosperity was due to the patronage of the Mamluks. In 1347 Ibn Fadlallah al-Umari records that the revenues of a village near the monastery, possibly Maliha, had been granted to the monastery by the Sultan, and the names of other similar endowments are known, including Dair Kaʿkul, Jaljala and Dair Musa.

With the ending of Mamluk control in Palestine in 1516 the privileged status of the Georgians also came to an end. In 1517 the Greek Orthodox Patriarch obtained an Ottoman Firman placing all the Orthodox communities, including the Georgians, under his protection.

III. DESCRIPTION OF THE HOLY LAND BY THE ITALIAN PILGRIM BARBONE MOROSINI

Description of the Holy Land by the Italian pilgrim Barbone Morosini (1514) is especially interesting not only for the study of the Georgian community in Jerusalem, but from many other points of view, as it is the last work of its kind on the eve of the Ottoman conquest.

By the 16th century the Georgians were in the following shrines: 1. Monastery of the Holy Cross (their own church in Jerusalem); 2. Golgotha and some rooms under it for living; 3. Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

In the 17th century the situation seems to be quite different. In the given case we would like to analyze Voyage in the Holy Land and Lebanon by the 17th century Venetian pilgrim Giovanni Benedetti, who went on pilgrimage to the holy shrines in 1667-68. His "Voyage" is kept in two manuscripts: 1) Ms. Marciana It. VI, 41 (Venice); 2) Bayerische Staatsbibl. Cod. Ital. 801, 43 (Munich). A special research has shown us that none of them can be considered an autograph of the author. Besides, the manuscript of Munich was not copied from that of Venice, which contains several lacunas. Both of them were based on an earlier archetype. This text has never been published even partially.

The actual family name of Giovanni Benedetti is Mubarak, which means "blessed" in Arabic. "Benedetti" is the Italian translation of just this word (with the plural ending, very common in Italian family names). He was Lebanese. The Catholics sent him to Rome where he studied at the famous Maronite College, although he did not return to his home country and stayed in Venice, where he got married and became a successful merchant.

In December 1666 Giovanni Benedetti set off for the Orient, till 1668 he stayed in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Cyprus. He left especially detailed description of the Holy Land and Lebanon. At the moment we would like to point out the accounts he left about the Georgians. He mentions that the Georgians had their own altar at the tomb of the Holy Virgin in the given period. As for the Church of Resurrection, Giovanni Benedetti only generally indicates that among other Christians there are also the Georgians on the holidays. Later, when he describes Jerusalem, he mentions the Georgians among the inhabitants of different nations there.

Unfortunately, there are not accounts about the Georgians in Calvario or the Monastery of the Holy Cross any more, the information which is still firmly present in the Italian sources of the 16th century.

IV. RESULTS

we can conclude that among other Christian communities the Georgians were always present in the Holy Land. Their relations with the Moslem governors were mainly quite good until the appearance of the Ottomans in the region, the fact, documented in both, Western pilgrim literature and Arabic Firmans of the Mamluk period.

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