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Motivations for the Beheading of John the Baptist in Byzantine and Old Georgian Writings

There are five surviving Georgian translations of Byzantine homilies and several Georgian original writings dealing with the beheading of John the Baptist. According to Georgian manuscript tradition, the translations are attributed to John Chrysostom (two readers), Andrew of Crete, Theodore of Studion and John Xiphillinus. Georgian manuscripts of these works date from the 9th to the 16th centuries.¹

The authors foreground different motivations for Herod's crime. All of them rely on the story of the Gospel: 'For Herod had laid hold on John, and bound him, and put him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife. For John said unto him: 'It is not lawful for thee to have her.' And when he would have put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet. But when Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod. Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask. And she, being before instructed of her mother, said: Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger. And the king was sorry: nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her. And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison. And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to

¹ See Gabidzashvili E., *Translated Works of Ancient Georgian Literature, Bibliography, 3, Homiletics*, Tbilisi 2009.

her mother.² The Gospels of Matthew and Mark mention that Herod was sorry, 'nevertheless for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her'³ and 'the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her.'⁴

Thus, according to Matthew and Mark, Herod seemed aggrieved but avoided breaking his oath and offending the girl before his fellow diners. It should be noted that in the Gospel of Luke, Christ calls Herod 'fox'. When the Pharisees approach Him and advise to leave the place as Herod is seeking to kill Him, Jesus responds: 'Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day and to morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.'⁵

The first homily from the Sinai Polycephalon⁶ bears the name of John Chrysostom but in fact was composed by an anonym. The author expounds on why Christ called Herod a fox and not a lion: 'Because the Lord knew their deeds. Therefore, He said to them, 'go ye, and tell that fox ...', as he had the power of lion but was the embodiment of fox.' ο' .. ο Κύριος ἐπιστάμενος, οὐκ εἶπεν, Ἦΐπατε τῷ λέοντι τοῦτω (καίτοι τοῦτο τὸ θηρίον ἐδόκει βασιλικόν), ἀλλ', εἶπατε τῇ ἀλώπεκι. Εἰ γὰρ καὶ ἡ ἔξουσία λέοντος, ἀλλ' ὁ τρόπος ἀλώπεκος.⁷

The author explains to the listener why the king and the queen persecuted John. He would fearlessly criticize and condemn Herod for marrying his brother's widow. The author explains when the Law of Moses allows for such a marriage: if the deceased did not leave a child, 'his brother shall marry his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother'.⁸ Philip had a daughter. Herod banished his lawful wife, daughter of King Areta from his kingdom and married his brother's widow, Herodias, adding one sin onto

² *Mt.*, 14, 3-11.

³ *Mt.*, 14,9.

⁴ *Mark.*, 6,26.

⁵ *Luk.*, 13,32.

⁶ Greek original in MPG 59, col. 757-766. The homily is published in Sinai and Udabno Polycephala (Sinai Polycephalon of 864th Year, ed. by A. Shanidze, Tbilisi 1959, 206-212; Udabno Polycephalon, ed. by A. Shanidze and Z. Chumburidze, Tbilisi 1994, 300-303). It is also preserved in yet unpublished Jer. 17, 148v-152v (12th-13th cc. manuscript) at the National Centre of Manuscripts in Tbilisi.

⁷ MPG 59, col.761.

⁸ *Mt.*, 22, 24.

another. This explanation appears in all the mentioned homilies but the second text from the Sinai Polycephalon. The text also highlights Herodias' guilt of marrying her husband's brother. The sin was even graver because it was committed by the king, who took the path of transgression.

The author of the Sinaic text adds that Herod became furious and Herodias even more exasperated. They had similar names and were kindred spirits, equally vile. ... παρωξύνθη μὲν ὁ Ἡρώδης, πλέον δὲ παρωξύνθη Ἡρώδιᾶς (γείτονες γὰρ τῶν ὀνομάτων, καὶ τοῦ τρόπου πλέον ἤπερ ὁμόζυγοι· καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο, οὐκ εἰς σάρκα μίαν, ἀλλ' εἰς ἀκрасίαν μίαν).⁹

The author marvels at the fearlessness of Christ's precursor, whose words contain a recurrent statement: 'It is not lawful for¹⁰ thee to have thy brother's wife.'¹¹

The author attempts to present a full picture of this horrible murder: nobles invited to Herod's birthday sit around the festive table tipsy with wine. It did not befit the King's daughter to appear before them and dance as if she was a commoner. The prelude to this crime starts when Herod impudently brings the virgin in and lets her dance in front of men. Moreover, he himself takes delight in this. He enjoys the girl's dance so much that even agrees to give up half of his kingdom, should she request this. Pseudo-Chrysostom sarcastically calls Herod to pray that his niece does not dance again, or he may turn into a beggar ['begging for bread']: if he lets her have half of his kingdom for one dance, the second dance may earn her the entire kingdom. The author emphasized the king's voluptuousness: 'Can you see his voluptuousness? He swears in advance: 'Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee'.¹² Then Pseudo-Chrysostom cites a passage from the Gospel: 'Swear not at all'.¹³ One must not bind oneself by oath. Herod killed a prophet because he did not break his oath. The conclusion is that giving an oath was evil and even a greater evil was to fulfill it. The oath and his fellow diners were so important for Herod that he did not even fear the Supreme Judge.

⁹ MPG 59, col. 762.

¹⁰ MPG 59, col. 762.

¹¹ *Mark*, 17,18.

¹² *Mark*, 6,23.

¹³ *Mt.*, 5,34.

Pseudo-Chrysostom believes that Herod feigned sorrow before others, as if it was hard for him to keep his promise. The author blames the king that he was more eager to commit the crime than the solicitors of John's death and adds that 'the contested head (of John) was paid as a price for dance'. The author of this homily highlights Herod's likeness with Pilates in wickedness and hypocrisy, and disclosing the king's insidiousness, writes: 'The fox did not hide himself.'

The second homily from the Sinai Polycephalon¹⁴ was likewise composed by a pseudo-Chrysostom. Both translations date from the 5th-7th centuries.¹⁵ The author names women as the source of evil. He writes: 'Methinks there is no other beast on the earth like an evil woman. Ἡμοὶ μὲν δόκεῖ μηδὲν εἶναι ἐν κόσμῳ θηρίου ἐφάμιλλον γυναικὸς πονηρᾶς.¹⁶ He then gives an account of Biblical stories where woman became a cause of many evils and adds: 'Because of woman, John, the light of the entire world, got killed.' It names evil woman as the cause of the crime. This Sinaic text ends with the author's remark that here he finishes his word with evil women. The same text was found in Tarasi Meskhishvili's manuscript collection,¹⁷ which continues with a word on good women, as it is in the Greek original.

In a homily by Andrew of Crete dedicated to this theme John the Baptist's words repeat as a refrain: 'It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife', Οὐκ ἔξεστίν σοι ἔχειν ... τὴν γυναῖκα Φιλίππου τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου.¹⁸

which enhances the dramatic effect of the narration. Andrew analyzes the working of the sin Herod was driven by. He was so 'possessed with bestial lust', that his mind was darkened. The Prophet warded him by teaching and censuring and tried to persuade him. Herod, on his part, avoided the Prophet, as he knew that John was holy and righteous. He could recall stories from the Bible (for example, Ahab's story) where a sinner listened to the censure and repented his wrongdoings. However, he did not want to follow what is good but added sin onto sin, yielded to

¹⁴ Sinai Polycephalon, 212-215; see also MPG, 59, col. 485-490.

¹⁵ The Georgian Translated and Original Homiletic Literature, ed. by N. Melikishvili and M. Maisuradze, Tbilisi 2012, 432.

¹⁶ MPG 59, col. 485.

¹⁷ A-1448, (1801-1862), 74r-75v.

¹⁸ MPG 97, col. 1132.

concupiscence and enslaved himself to grudge. He was entrapped by 'his passion for an adulteress and the dance of a lecherous girl'. Andrew does not think that oath was the cause of the crime. It is clear for him that Herod would use all his wicked guile to repudiate his promise if the girl asked him to abdicate or separate from her mother. Andrew finds Herod ineligible for kingship as he lacks 'royal consciousness'. The Bishop criticizes Herod for incontinence of speech: He did not 'keep the door on [his] lips'. His senses could not curb his voluptuous nature. The author thinks that the king was completely enslaved to passions and lost fear of God and men because of inebriety, while the fear of forswearing was only a guise. He had better break his oath in good faith rather than keep it, as by slaughtering John, he most of all harmed himself as he doomed himself to the fire of hell. 'Movements of legs and body suppressed royal reason'. Andrew describes this dance as demonic emulation. He mentions several musical instruments which he calls 'the weapons of temptation' not befitting a king to listen to.

In his homily, Theodore of Studion¹⁹ foregrounds the genetic sin. Theodore puts a question: who was Herod? and answers himself: 'His father was he who massacred infants.' Theodore gives forth the reasons why John the Baptist was persecuted and like Pseudo-Chrysostom in his first homily, explains when the Jewish Law allows for marrying one's late brother's wife.²⁰ He too notes that Philip, Herod's brother, had a daughter and that Herod banished his lawful wife, King Areta's daughter from his kingdom to marry Herodias. He was the king and was even more responsible to observe the laws of faith. It was for this reason that John censured him and called on him to separate from Herodias. The royal power compelled Herod to forget about God and he 'came into possession of what was not his due'. Herodias would abet him against John and say: 'I, the Queen, will not bear derision from the son of Zacharias. Arrest him, my censurer, kill him summarily with a sword, who wounds my soul with his word, as if with an arrow.' Οὐ φέρω, φησὶν, κομφοδέισθαι, βασίλισσα τυγχάνουσα, ὑπὸ τοῦ παιδὸς Ζαχαρίου· κάθες τὴν γλώσσαν ἐν φυλακῇ τὴν ἐμὲ στηλιτεύουσαν· κτεῖνον ἐν τάχει αἰχμῇ τὸν ἐμοῦ τὴν ψυχὴν τοῖς λόγοις ὡς βέλεσι τραυματίζοντα. Καὶ θέλων αὐτὸν ἀποκτείνειν, ἐφοβήθη

¹⁹ MPG 99, col. 758-770; Georgian translation, done by George the Athonite (11th c.), is included in H-1347 (11th-13th cc).

²⁰ *Mark*, 6,18.

τὸν ὄχλον, ὅτι ὡσπερ προφήτην αὐτὸν εἶξον· οὐ γὰρ ἠνίκα βουλευθῶσιν οἱ κρατιῦντες πράξαι τι τῶν ἐκτόπων, εὐθύς τὴν ὀρμὴν εἰς ἔργον ἄγουσιν, αἰδοί καὶ φόβῳ τοῦ ὑπηκόου ἀναβαλλόμενοι καὶ κλωθέντες εἰς ἑαυτοὺς τὸν ἐφαρμόζοντα καιρὸν τῆς μοχθηρίας.²¹ Herod wanted to kill John, but was afraid of people. Theodore adds that kings do not fulfill their desires immediately out of fear and deference for their people. Therefore, he writes, they keep their will secret in their minds and await a suitable time. Such a time was the king's birthday. According to the author, 'the dance gave birth to an oath and the oath to a crime'. Theodore sees a chain of sin, in which one wrongdoing brings forth another: evil must be prevented at the very beginning. The first instance of wrongdoing was Herod's banishment of his lawful wife and marrying his sister-in-law, while the last sin was the beheading of John the Baptist: 'Evil must be eradicated from the roots to prevent transgression, because if there exists a source of sin, it will necessarily be fulfilled.'

In the text attributed to John Xiphillinus²² and called *A word commemorating the birth, upbringing and beheading of the Holy Glorious Prophet John the Baptist and the recovery of His Venerable Head*,²³ the author focuses on a phrase from the Gospel: 'And when a convenient day was come ...'²⁴ According to Xiphillinus, these words indicate that the day was convenient for what Herod, and even more Herodias desired with all their heart but could not dare as people considered John a prophet. Herod too knew that John 'was a just man and an holy'.²⁵ Xiphillinus emphasizes that at first, the girl did not ask for any reward but the king himself proposed her to do so. The girl did not request half of the kingdom or anything Herod possessed, but him 'who was greater than anyone born of women'. The oath was not an excuse as the king promised to give away any of his possessions: the worldly glory, riches and power, which he could share with the girl, but not the head of John. Xiphillinus too believes that Herod's sorrow was feigned and addresses him: 'you even gave a false

²¹ MPG 99, col. 764-765.

²² Kekelidze K., *Studies from the History of Old Georgian Literature, Foreign Authors from the History of Old Georgian Literature*, 5, Tbilisi 1957, 183.

²³ Halkin, *bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca*, t. I, 835, 837; Bruxelles 1947, 268-269; Кекелидзе К., *Иоанн Ксифилин продолжатель Симеона Метафраста, Христианский Восток*, I, 1913, 340-347, К 1, 558-578.

²⁴ *Mark*, 6, 21.

²⁵ *Mark*, 6, 20.

appearance of grief.' The king pretended as if he found it hard to fulfill the girl's request but was bound by oath. However, the author of the homily argues that the king's gloat was even greater than the requesters' (the mother and daughter's).

The mentioned Byzantine homilies, written later than John Chrysostom's *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*,²⁶ owe a lot to the latter, though tend to introduce new motives and details, some to a greater and others to lesser extent. John Chrysostom, on the one hand, focuses on the adverse influence of corporeal pleasures on Herod's decision and on the other hand, emphasizes woman's crime in this drama. He points out that it was Herodias who threatened John the Baptist that she would have Herod kill him. Specifically, Chrysostom's *Teaching on the Beheading of the Precious Forerunner and on Shunning Singers and Actors*, Chapter 14, reveals from the very title that the author associates this ruthless crime with a spectacle. He vividly describes all circumstances leading to the crime. First, he points out that John the Prophet did not censure Herodias but called on Herod to separate from her, which made her furious. Chrysostom then mentions Herodias' threats addressed to John as her censurer that she would make Herod his murderer. The church father thereby foregrounds woman's crime as one of the central motifs of this Biblical drama. John Chrysostom also writes that Salome was instructed to dance before the guests by her mother. These two motifs – Herodias' threats to John and her prompting Salome to dance – do not repeat in homilies. However, like Chrysostom, other authors too mention that Herod, being inebriate, swore to his niece that he would give her whatever she wished. According to Chrysostom, Herod might have expected Salome to ask for something more befitting his birthday celebration, but was misled by his shortsightedness. Chrysostom believes that Herod should not only have resisted his niece's request but should have vehemently rejected it. However, the king chose to do a favor to the infamous woman at the expense of ruining his soul and angering God.

²⁶ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, translated by Euthymius the Athonite (11th century), ed. by a group of editors, editor-in-chief M. Shanidze, III, Tbilisi 1995, 29-33; Saint John Chrysostom, *Commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew*, translated by St Euthymius the Hagiorite, prepared for publication by the Athonite Manuscript Research Laboratory *Orion*, Tbilisi State University.

The church father's message to the reader is that a sin cannot be eradicated by adding another sin, but through repentance and confession. Chrysostom, as well as the authors of the homilies,²⁷ does not think that Herod was aggrieved at Salome's wish. He also explains that sin is rooted in wine drinking, revelry and in listening to musical instruments that stir base passions in humans and dull their ability to discern the divine providence – to see the deeds of God.²⁸ This latter motif can be found in Georgian original church writing as well. Thus a 7th century Georgian homilist, John Bolneli and a well-known 17th-18th century Georgian clergyman and writer, Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani consider inebriety as a cause for beheading John the Baptist. In his homily *For Wine Drinkers and Drunkards* John Bolneli convincingly expounds on adverse effects of excessive wine drinking and cites stories from the Bible: what happened to Noah, Lot and Samson when they got drunk. The author finally mentions Herod and his guests: 'Herodias entered and danced. And [Herod] had John, the Baptist and the Holy Forerunner, beheaded and thus inherited the abyss of the hell.'²⁹

Motives of the beheading of John the Baptist are also discussed in two teachings of Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani. In his homily (teaching) *On Inebriety and the Beheading of the Baptist*³⁰ he explains that filth lurks in drunkenness and therefore, the latter puts a righteous man in jeopardy. He too recalls Noah, who divested himself of his clothes and incurred Ham's derision. Sulkhan-Saba then proceeds with Herod, who killed the Baptist because he was drunk. Interestingly, Sulkhan-Saba distinguishes between five different types of inebriety, wine being responsible for only one of them. Herod was overcome by all of them. Apart from wine drunkenness, these five types of inebriety include lust for adultery – Herod wished to marry his brother's wife, arrogance, lust for sin and rage – Herod was exasperated by John's reluctance to make allowance for his sinful desire.

²⁷ The second reader by Pseudo-Chrysostom does not expose the author's position on this question.

²⁸ St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 32.

²⁹ *Homilies of Bishop John Bolneli*, Ecclesiastical Museum series #14, Mose Janashvili, Tbilisi 1911, 82-85. See also Chkonia T., *The Bulletin of the Institute of Manuscripts*, IV, Tbilisi 1962, 145-161.

³⁰ Beliani, *Works in Four Volumes*, vol. 3, prepared for publication and furnished with research notes, comments and glossary by I. Lolashvili, Tbilisi 1963, 195-199.

The author comments that rage makes a person more inebriate than wine or mead. Orbeliani's homily *Teaching on Drunkenness*³¹ dwells on the evil of wine intoxication. It starts with Apostle Paul's words: 'And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit'.³² Then the author notes that inebriety turns good into evil and cites several examples from the Bible, including Herod's beheading of John. Sulkhan-Saba appeals to drunkards and argues that wine drinking leads to the violation of all the commandments given by Moses.

All Byzantine homilies rely on the story of the Gospel and at the same time reflect the two main motives foregrounded by John Chrysostom: on Herod's part, it is his arrogance, reluctance to break the oath and offend Herodias before his fellow diners, his feigned sorrow and malignant joy rooted in his exasperation at John the Baptist's recurrent statement: 'It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife' (*Mark*, 17, 18); on the part of Herodias, it is her guilt of marrying her husband's brother and her hatred for John, who would call for observing the Law of the Bible and personal ethics. Along with these, the Byzantine authors also mention other general religious motives underlying the biblical crime: woman is the source of evil; one must not bind oneself by oath; the power of inherited sinfulness (Herod is a murderer like his father King Herod I, who massacred infants); one sin generates another and corporeal pleasures are reasons of sins. As concerns John the Baptist, as pointed out by Xiphillinus, he would have received every comfort and honor by merely being silent. However, he was Christ's forerunner, the greatest among those born of women, and would never keep silent when seeing sinfulness.

Abstract

This paper discusses Georgian translations of the homilies on the beheading of John the Baptist as well as Georgian original writings, specifically, Ioane Bolneli's and Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani's sermons and teachings. All of them rely on the story of the Gospel (*Mat.*, 14,3; *Mark.*, 6, 26). There are five surviving Georgian versions of Byzantine homilies dealing with the beheading of John the Baptist. They were composed by Pseudo-Chrysostom (two texts), Andrew of Crete, Theodore of Studion and John Xiphillinus, and date from the 9th to the 16th centuries.

The authors foreground different aims and motivations of Herod's crime: the king's reluctance to break the oath and offend Herodias before his fellow dinners;

³¹ *Ibid.*, 212-219.

³² *Ephesians*, 5, 18.

the king's feigned sorrow and malignant joy fostered by his exasperation at John the Baptist's recurrent statement: "It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife" (*Mark*, 17, 18); Herodias' guilt of marrying her husband's brother. The medieval fathers also point out that: women are the source of evil; one must not bind oneself by oath; Herod inherited sinfulness from his father, King Herod I, who massacred infants; one sin generates another; the king was driven by voluptuousness, as he was "possessed by bestial lust" that darkened his mind.

In this paper I only dwelt on Georgian translations of Byzantine homilies. However, it should be noted that the 7th century Georgian homilist, Ioane Bolneli and a well-known 17th-18th century Georgian clergyman and writer, Sulkhan Saba Orbeliani consider inebriety as the main cause for beheading John the Baptist.