

Vassiliki Nerantzi-Varmazi (Thessaloniki)

BYZANTIUM AND IBERIA (6TH -11TH CENTURY)

The Byzantine Empire was for many centuries an extended and powerful state. From the 4th to the 7th century its main rivals from the East were the Persians until the Arabs succeeded them from the middle of the 7th century and afterwards. Between the two great powers of the area, Byzantium and the Halifate, smaller principalities of Armenians, Georgians and Avasgians were created and played a secondary role in the district. These principalities, as they attempted to maintain their own independence and autonomy, sometimes fell under byzantine and other times under Arabic influence.

Among all these principalities Iberia, the district we nowadays call Georgia, is the favorite of the byzantine written sources. The reason for this preference is very simple; the Iberians always remained orthodox Christians. Christianity was communicated to the inhabitants of Iberia in the 4th century, during the reign of Constantine the Great (324-337). According to the ecclesiastical chronicles of that period, Iberians were persuaded to adopt Christianity, when they saw the miracles of a Christian woman, who was captive in their country¹. In the contrary of the Armenians, who became Christians about the same period, but didn't remain faithful to the orthodox doctrine and a little later created their own separate church, the Iberians remained orthodox and always kept close relations with the patriarchates of the East. As the centuries passed Iberians believed and spread around the legend that they were descendants of King David and that many years ago their ancestors had emigrated from the district of Jerusalem to their mountainous and rough country. For that reason they always preserved close relations especially with the patriarchate of Jerusalem to which they occasionally offered financial help. According to Constantine Porphyrogennitus "Iberians sent a lot of money to Jerusalem's patriarch and to the Christians of Palestine"², who were in a difficult position, because they were under Muslim occupation since the 7th century.

Close relations between Byzantium and Iberia are obvious in three levels: In the level of diplomacy, in the military level and in the level of monasticism.

In the diplomatic level we include the exchanges of ambassadors between the two countries and also the official visits of the sovereigns of Georgia to Constantinople. During the reign of the emperor Justinian I., in the 6th century (627-665) and also during the reign of Romanos Lecapinos in the 10th century (920-959) the Iberian sovereigns visited the byzantine capital. In fact the Iberian sovereign Zamanarzos, to whom the chronographer Theophanes gives the very official title "vassileus", came to Constantinople followed by his wife and the nobles of his country, whom Theophanes calls "senators". The purpose of his visit was to beg the emperor Justinian to consider him as a friend and as a Romans' ally. Justinian accepted this request and sealed the agreement by offering to Zamanarzos and to his followers rich gifts. At the same time the empress Theodora offered to Zamanarzos' wife precious gifts and then Justinian saw off all the members of the embassy to return home "in peace"³.

Many years later, in the first half of the 10th century, another Iberian sovereign visited Constantinople. The byzantine historians of the period characterize him simply as the "Iberian couropalatis", which means that the sovereign of Iberia at that time had the byzantine court title "couropalatis". It is known from the byzantine sources that some years earlier the emperor Leon VI the Wise (886-912)

¹ Rufinus, *Eccles. History* 10, Sokrates, *Eccles. History* 1. 10, Sozomenos, *Eccles. History* 2. 7, Theophanes, *Chronographia* 24. 9-12, Georg. Monachos, *Chronicon Syntomon* 403. 14 ff.

² Constantine Porphyrogennitus, *De anministrando Imperio* chapter 45.

³ Thephanes, *Chronographia* 216. 5-14.

granted to the Iberian chief Adranasis the title of "couropalatis" and this byzantine title passed honorary to his successors⁴.

So, some years before the middle of the 10th century the Byzantines of Constantinople reserved for the sovereign of Iberia a luxurious reception and made sure that he would be astonished by their wealth and their magnificence. The emperor Romanos Lecapinos (920-944) sent him to admire especially the church of Saint Sophia. The people responsible for the receptions of the foreigners to the byzantine capital had assured the decoration of the church with gold-woven veils and many other precious ornaments. As it was expected, the sovereign of Iberia was astonished by the dimensions and the wonderful decoration of the church and, fascinated by everything he had seen, returned to his country⁵.

Despite of all the above, relations between Byzantium and Iberia was not always so peaceful and quiet. Very often their contacts were related with cruel wars.

During the reign of Heraklios (610-641) the Iberians had allied with the byzantine emperor in his long war against the Persians. This alliance became very profitable for the Iberians, because at the end of the war they managed to impose their authority to some nearby regions belonging until then to the Persians⁶. However, the long lasted war weakened all the parts engaged in it, winners and defeated alike, and opened the road for the Arabs, who had just adopted the Muslim religion and succeeded in predominating the East the following years.

In 688 Iberia is namely included in a treaty between Byzantium and the Arabs. According to this treaty Iberia together with Armenia and Cyprus are obliged to pay taxes to both the Byzantine Empire and the Arabic Halifate⁷. So, from the last years of the 7th century a period of condominium began for these three districts, which at the same time preserved a status of internal autonomy. For Cyprus this status was continued for about three centuries⁸, but for Armenia and Iberia it is obvious that it stopped sooner, as the Arabs dominated the area during the 8th century and the Byzantines were obliged to withdraw from the east part of Asia Minor. However, after the first half of the 9th century, when a period of counter attack began, Iberia was found again under the sphere of byzantine influence⁹. The following years Iberians in organized troops cooperated with the byzantine army in many war operations and many individuals of Iberian origin served and made a career in the byzantine military forces.

In the years of the Macedonian dynasty and especially in the first half of the 10th century, during the reigns of Leon VI the Wise, Romanos Lecapenos and Constantine VII the Porphyrogennitus, the byzantine military forces invaded the far east of Asia Minor and the Arab emirates of the district acknowledged the byzantine authority. It was the period of "Éropée byzantine" as G. Schlumberger has characterized it¹⁰. In these campaigns the byzantine emperors asked the Iberians' help, who having the fame of capable warriors promptly contributed to the operations and conquered some of their neighboring castles.

Problems were created as byzantines attempted to conquer Theodosiupolis, today Erzerum of Turkey. The city was big and well fortified. It had many gates and at a small distance from it other smaller castles and important commercial stations were located. Iberians were not ready to help in the conquest of the city, because they had friendly relations with the inhabitants of Theodosiupolis and, of course, because they didn't want the exaggerated growth of byzantine power, that at the end could be a threat for themselves too.

Finally Theodosiupolis was conquered after many attempts in the years of the reign of Constantine Porphyrogennitus. Due to the military undertaking around the city the nearby castle Ardanoutzi remained with the Iberians. The castle was a well fortified position and at the same time an important commercial center for the products of Iberia, Avasgia, Trepizond and even from the remote Syria. The byzantine government tried to occupy the castle, but they didn't insist, since the Iberians threatened to abandon the alliance with the emperor and ally with the Saracens¹¹.

⁴ Constantine Porphyrogennitus, *De anministrando Imperio* ch. 45. 35-36.

⁵ Theophanes Continuatus 402. 8-21, Io. Skylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum* 216. 28-35.

⁶ Constantine Porphyrogennitus, *De anministrando Imperio* ch. 45. 22-25, Theophanes, *Chronographia* 309. 14-15.

⁷ Theophanes, *Chronographia* 363. 9-10.

⁸ R. Jenkins, *Cyprus between Byzantium and Islam, A.D. 688-965, Studies presented to D. M. Robinson II*, Washington University St. Louis 1953 (= *Studies on Byzantine History of the 9th and 10th Centuries*, n. XXII, Variorum Reprints, London 1970).

⁹ Theophanes, *Chronographia* 391 and 453.

¹⁰ G. Schlumberger, *L'Époree Byzantine* I, II, III, Paris 1890, 1900, 1905.

¹¹ Constantine Porphyrogennitus, *De anministrando Imperio* ch. 46. B. Koutava-Delivoria, *Ο γεωγραφικός κόσμος του Κωνσταντίνου Πορφυρογέννητου* I,II, Athens 1993, p. II 139, 255, 351, 395.

Meanwhile Iberia had ceased to be a single state and from the second half of the 10th century it appears divided in smaller principalities. During the revolution of Bardas Fokas against the emperor Basil II (976-1025) the attitude of the Iberian sovereign David the "couropalatis" was not clear. When finally Basil II predominated, David promised to bequeath his country and his army to the byzantine emperor after his death¹². So in the spring of the year 1000 Basil II, immediately after he learned the death of David the "couropalatis", hurried with his army to Iberia to receive his heritage. So a part of Iberia, the territory called Tao, became a part of the Byzantine State. At the same time several Iberian nobles were obliged to leave their country and follow the byzantine emperor¹³.

In the next years byzantine officials with the title of "doucas" or "catepano" governed Iberia that formed a byzantine administrative and military unity, a "theme", in the beginning alone and later together with a part of Armenia, the Anion, which passed under the byzantine sovereignty in 1045¹⁴.

Some years later the emperor Constantine IX Monomachus (1042-1054) took a measure that had serious consequences for the general area. He revoked the Iberian army that reached the number of 50.000 men and imposed new taxes on the inhabitants of Iberia as an equivalent for their release from military service¹⁵. The byzantine historical sources of the period accuse Constantine Monomachus for this act and they ascribe it to the prodigal policy of the emperor and his cruel economical measures. However it is probable that the motive of the emperor was not only the need for new financial resources, but also his desire to discharge the Iberian warriors, who frequently caused problems for the byzantine government¹⁶. Regardless, the timing for such a move was completely wrong. The Turks, the Seljuq Turks, had already made their threatening appearance at the eastern border of the Byzantine Empire and the presence of capable military forces was necessary in the area. After the abolition of the Iberian army the defence against the Turks was almost impossible. In the next 20 or 30 years the Seljuqs had overflowed not only into the district of south Caucassos but also the biggest part of Asia Minor.

A third level where the relations between Byzantium and Iberia were developed is the level of monasticism.

From the first centuries after their christianization the Iberians founded monasteries not only at their principality but also at the big monastic centers of the Byzantine Empire¹⁷. However especially in the 10th and 11th centuries two big monasteries were founded by noble Iberians at the two known byzantine monastic centers of the period. The first was erected on the mountain Athos and even in our days is called the "Monastery of the Iberians"; the second was founded on the Papikion mountain, at the Rodope, in a district which did not preserve the characteristics of a monastic center for many centuries.

The Monastery of Iberians on Athos was founded in 979/80 by John Tornikes, a noble Iberian, who by his military activities contributed to the victory of the emperor Basil II against the usurper Bardas Focas and for his contribution he was honored with the title of "syggellos". A little later Basil II gave him the permission to found a monastery on Athos, the Saint Mountain¹⁸. This monastery had as its first abbots John the Iberian and the monk Euthymios, both relatives of John Tornikes the "syggellos", and it was inhabited by monks who came from Iberia. Some years after its foundation the Monastery of Iberians was distinguished as one of the biggest and richest monasteries of Athos. Its property stretched up to Ierissos and Polygyros in the Peninsula of Chalkidiki, to the district of Thessaloniki and to the valley of Strymon. Also the wealth of the monastery in gold and precious ecclesiastical objects was of high value. At the first years of its foundation the monastery had also considerable revenues by copying and translating texts of Greek ecclesiastical literature to the Georgian language and due to the donations of pious Georgians¹⁹.

¹² Io. Karayannopoulos, *Ιστορία του Βυζαντινού Κράτους* II, Thessaloniki 1976, p. 446-47, *Actes d' Iviron* I., Paris 1985, p. 22-23.

¹³ Io. Skylitzes 339. 71 ff., Io. Zonaras III. 557-558, E. Honigman, *Die Ostgrenze des byzantinischen Reiches von 363 bis 1071*, Brussel 1935.

¹⁴ Chr. Bartikian, Για τον Ιβηρικό στρατό και το βυζαντινό θέμα "Ιβηρία", *BYZANTINA* 13. 1. (1985) 467-477, M. Gregoriou-Ioannidou, *Οργανωτικά μέτρα του Κωνσταντίνου Θ' Μονομάχου, το πρόβλημα του στρατού της Ιβηρίας*, Thessaloniki 1993, 94-107, 117.

¹⁵ Io. Skylitzes 479. 51 ff, Mich. Attaleiates, 44-45, Io. Zonaras III. 647. 6-10, Mich. Glycas 598. 3-6, M. Gregoriou-Ioannidou, *Ιβηρικός στρατός*, passim.

¹⁶ Io. Karayannopoulos, *Ιστορία* II. 522.

¹⁷ *Actes d' Iviron* I (= Archives de l' Athos XIV) ed. J. Lefort, N. Oikonomides, D. Papachryssanthou, H. Metreveli, Paris 1985, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Actes d' Iviron* I. p. 22 ff.

¹⁹ *Actes d' Iviron* I. p. 48-57.

About a century later, in 1083, another Georgian, who followed a career in the byzantine army and ascended the high office of the "big domesticus of the West", Gregory Pacurianos, "who was coming from the distinguished gender of the Iberians" founded the monastery of Virgin Mary the Petrijonissa at the district of Rodope. For the building of the monastery and for insuring its preservation Pacurianos disposed a big part of his property. Also for the monastery's harmonious function he wrote its "typicon" in greek, armenian and georgian languages, according to which the monks had to live. The property of the Virgin Mary the Petrijonissa included many estates in Thrace and eastern Macedonia and also books and precious ecclesiastical objects. In the beginning the monastery had only Iberian monks and its founder took care to exclude the "Romans" from his institution²⁰. However, as the centuries passed, both the monastery of the Iberians at Athos and the monastery of Pacurianos at the Papikion mountain witnessed the reduction of their Iberian members and the passing of their management to Greek hands. The distance that separated Georgia from the big byzantine monastic centers was prohibitive for the normal evolution and the fortune of the monasteries that noble and pious Iberians had founded.

This paper tried to capture the most important aspects of the relations between Byzantium and Iberia. Some other aspects, as the marriages between Georgians and Byzantines, are not included here²¹. And of course, the relations of Iberia with the Comneni and the Palaeologues of Constantinople, and especially with the Comneni of Trepizond, continued in the next centuries under more balanced conditions between the two countries.

²⁰ P. Gautier, *Le typikon du sebasto Gregoire Pakourianos*, *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 42 (1984) 5-145.

²¹ J.F. Vannier, *Notes genealogiques Byzantino-Georgiennes*, *EYΨYXIA*, Melanges offerts a Helene Ahrweiler II. Paris 1998, p. 673-683.