

Katskhi Pillar*

[El pilar katskhi]

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Katskhi's "pillar" is a rocky limestone mass forty metres in height located in the village of Katskhi in the district of Chiatura on the River Katskhura, which is a right-hand tributary off the valley of the River Kvirila. The local population call "Katskhi pillar" the "life-giving pillar" and the ruins of a hall on the ridge of the pillar have been linked to the name of St. Simeon Stylites.¹

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¹ L. GOTUA, *Katskhis Svetis Saidumlo, Mgzavruli Krialosani* (Tbilisi, 1960), p. 96; V. TSINTSADZE, "Katskhis Sveti", *Sakartvelos SSR Mgtsnierebata Akademiis Moambe*, Vol. VII:8 (Tbilisi, 1946), p. 557; ID., "Katskhis Sveti, V-VI Saunkuneebis Kurotmodzgvrebis Dzegli", *Dzeglis Megobari* 3 (1964), pp. 52-53; T. KHUSKIVADZE, "Saistorio da Saarkheologio agtsera Qvirilis Kheobisa", *Gazeti "Iveria"* 170 (1889), p. 2; G. TSERETELI, "Katskhis Sveti", *Jurnali "Kvali"* 40 (1895), p. 10; ID., "Arkheologicheskaiia ekskursiia po Kviril'skomu uschel'iu", *Materialy po arkheologii Kavkasa* VII:M

In the year 1944 a group was compiled to climb the Katskhi pillar: At that time this included writers – Levan Gotua and Akaki Beliashvili, architects – Vakhtang Tsintsadze who was young at the time, and the group leader, alpinist Alexandre Japaridze. On 29th July all the participants of the expedition except for Akaki Beliashvili, and also the local young people Shutu Popkhadze and Petre Kapatadze successfully went up the pillar. The participants mentioned above spent the night of 29th July on the pillar and descended on 30th July.² V. Tsintsadze spent several hours investigating the ruins covered with vegetation on the land on top of the “pillar”, in 1946 he published together with other scientific articles the first scientific paper with measurements and sketches of the ruins.³ According to the researcher there are two monumental churches in ruins dating to the Middle Ages on the ridge – one half was rock-hewn (C5th) and the second was stone built (C6th). The “pillar” and its complex were linked by V. Tsintsadze to stylitism – an extremely ascetic monastic rule that spread in Syria. It was founded and led by St. Simeon Stylites the elder (d. 459) who raised a high stone pillar and spent a large portion of his life on it 40 km northwest of the city of Aleppo.

Other scientists have shared V. Tsintsadze’s opinions. N. Chubinashvili considers the chapel built on Katskhi “pillar” one of the earlier chapels built in Georgia, he examines early buildings of the second half of the fifth century side by side, such as: Bodbe’s martyrion of St. Nino, Ujarma’s Ascension of the Cross, the double summit churches of Ss. Barbara and Mankhuti. A partially rock-cut storeroom that V. Tsintsadze put as part of the fifth century church - it was a monk’s cell according to N. Chubinashvili⁴ - was confirmed as a result of an archaeological study of Katskhi pillar. It should be noted that no specialists besides V. Tsintsadze

(1989), p. 8. T. KHUSKIVADZISA and G. TSERETELI talk in articles about a St. Simeon Stylites icon that was kept in a rural church, according to local residents it turns out that it was brought from the pillar church.

² L. GOTUA, *Katskhis Svetis Saidumlo*, pp. 79-103.

³ V. TSINTSADZE, “Katskhis Sveti”, pp. 559-562.

⁴ N. CHUBINASHVILI, *Shashianis Sameba*, (Tbilisi, 1988), pp. 54-56.

have been to Katskhi “pillar” and therefore only Tsintsadze’s information can be relied upon.

Under the leadership of the alpinist Bidzina Gujabidze between 1999 (05.09) and 2005 (24.10), and after an iron ladder was installed, I had the opportunity with other specialists (T. Gabunia, G. Makharadze, D. Berikashvili, B. Matsaberidze, D. Gagoshidze) to climb Katskhi “pillar” many times. This first climb raised further questions: 1. Is the half-rock cut building a church? 2. Is V. Tsintsadze’s date for the stone-built church (C5th-C6th) accurate and 3. That a small monastery linked to Syrian Stylites stood on Katskhi “pillar”. Our doubts were fully justified by the results of an archaeological excavation in 2006.⁵

The ridge of Katskhi’s “pillar” covers an uneven surface area of approximately 150 square metres, a few buildings that were connected to each other were cleared as a result of the archaeological excavations (Fig. 2; Pic. 2). The ruins of a small hall church built of pumice stone are in the extreme south-eastern corner of the “pillar” (dimensions: 4, 5x3, 5 m.), which has a large portion of the rock detached east of the half-spherical deep apse suggesting that a section of the church is standing on a substructure. A massive rock elevation provides the eastern wall of two rock-built storeroom buildings built with rock debris to the north – it was here that V. Tsintsadze speculated that the plot of the church was half in the rock. Due to the lack of space in this small church the only door is built on the north wall and the door must have opened onto the outside. It apparently

⁵ D. BERIKASHVILI, “Qvirilis kheobis arkeologiuri ekspeditsiis mier chatarebuli samushaoebi katskhis samonastro kompleksshi, Navardzetis bortsvisa da perevisashi”, *Jurkha Nadiradzis Dabadebis Me-80 Tslitavisadmi Midzgvinil Sametsniro Konperentsiis Mokhsenebata Tezisebi* (Tbilisi, 2009), pp. 14-15; ID., “Qvirilis kheobis arkeologiuri ekspeditsiis mier chatarebuli samushaoebi katskhis samonastro kompleksshi, Navardzetis bortsvisa da perevisashi”, *Jurkha Nadiradzis Dabadebis Me-80 Tslitavisadmi Midzgvinil Sametsniro Konperentsiis Mokhsenebata Tezisebi*, V (Tbilisi, 2010), pp. 80-91 (Ready for publication). In 2007 the restoration of the small monastery on the ridge of “Katskhi pillar” was finished, author: architect-restorer Tengiz Gabunia. The work was funded by the Georgian Historical Monuments Protection and Survival Fund (Pic. 10).

had a small wooden portico that attached it to the north building. The building was located to the north, to the east it was adjacent to an elevated rock and to the south was located a cell door built into the south wall, thereby directly connecting it to the nearby standing church. The irregular planning has the north cell door cut into the western wall. The west wall has a volume of lime mortar in which is a circular reservoir, the cells have a sloping roof so that they gather the flow of water (Figs. 2,3; Pic. 7). Along the eastern wall of the church (today this wall has collapsed), a roughly-carved stone wall runs to the north and terminates in a massive elevated rock, an opening in the stone and rock reveals an opening similar to a door. This door (?) of the pillar looks east and, I think, it was here that a winch was arranged. It is supposed that this connected the hermit monks on the pillar to the outside world and, probably, this would have been the entrance to the pillar.

On the west edge of the “pillar” several amphorae are embedded in the ground which were likely where the wine and, probably, water for this small monastery were kept (Fig. 2). The cellar followed the west side of the pillar, approximately 10 metres below the vertical rock ridge is the outline of a small rectangular cell, which was investigated by members of the 1944 expedition – Mountaineer Alexandre Japaridze was lowered down and measured the dimensions of the cell.⁶ On the basis of the data on the dimensions of this room on Katskhi Pillar, in the opinion of the researcher Vakhtang Tsintsadze it was a “Stylite’s cell”.⁷ On 24th October 2005 the alpinist Bidzina Gujabidze helped the architect-restorer Tengiz Gabunia to enter the room and thoroughly measure it. It is a rectangular cave in form (dimensions: 2,60 x 2,00m, Height 2,10m.) with an entrance and two windows (Fig. 3).

Underneath and south of the church the plan shows the elongated rectangular form of the vaulted crypt (dimension: 2x1m.), the entrance –

⁶ L. GOTUA, *Katskhis Svetis Saidumlo*, p. 97.

⁷ V. TSINTSADZE, “Some Issues of the History of Early Christian Georgian Architecture (Svetitskhoveli)”, *Kartuli Khelovneba* 11 (2001), p. 14, section 22.

the tympanum is closed with a low, arched doorway, built attached to the western wall. The crypt spreads as far as the apse and is hemispherical (and not horseshoe shaped as the honourable researcher noted)⁸ with a delicate and orderly arch formation – well adjusted with clean, light squares of equal size (Fig. 3; Pic. 2,4,5). The eastern wall of the crypt is of the same type and is created with three rows. To some extent this reminds us of the character of the vaulted ossuary of the crypt of the Annunciation Church at Motsameta. The western wall of the crypt has the church built on it and the wall of the crypt slightly leans to the west and sticks out in comparison with the rest of the church (Fig. 3; Pic. 4). The rocks dividing the church and crypt are elongated. The nature of the formation of the walls forming the crypt is similar to those forming the church, and we can discuss its character only if we rely on the fragments preserved from the west wall (Fig. 3; Pic. 4). The preserved wall is reciprocal. Both the internal and external sides are small and built of simply carved pumice stone. They are set up in linear rows of the cut stones but these stones are of different sizes and it is observable that small sized stones have been inserted. The layer of the mortar where there is rock debris is uncovered; there is some obstruction of cut rock at the back where a square layer in one part of this small church lacks thickness and the mortar is weak (accordingly the wall has less strength here), I think, to mitigate the difficulties of lifting building material to an altitude of 40 metres. South of the west wall, still extant, is a differently built corner where different sizes of stones are used, the non-linear form of the stone of the interior west wall (Fig. 3; Pic. 2) is different to the character of the south west corner of the building (Pic. 3), here the blocks are built of a different shape and form with areas of broken limestone, which has mixed up the formation. No doubt that this section of the wall was updated in a later era. Despite having little material to date the

⁸ V. TSINTSADZE, “Katskhis Sveti”, p.562, The vault of the crypt has an outline of hemispherical lines. The respected researcher made an error in inserting the south crypt arch (supporting) the lower section of the church, which incidentally and not deliberately, is bent slightly in the middle of the interior.

church, it can be boldly stated that it is not C5th-C6th century. The carved stone was used in monuments built in the early middle ages in Georgia in the west (Nokalakevi, Kutaisi, etc)⁹ and the east (Bolnisi Sioni, Mtskheta's Jvari, etc)¹⁰ and stands out for the use of large stones forming equal lines.¹¹ No doubt, in this specific case the small dimensions of the stone available was due to circumstances, this was because it would be difficult to raise the large stones to the summit of the pillar. But the stone formation and lines of stone show that this monument dates from a later period. The west wall of the pillar church is finely carved with a formation that fits regional characteristics (Fig. 3, Pic. 2) and reminds us of nearby monuments such as Tiri and Rgani (both second half of C10th),¹² some similarities can also be observed with the form of the first period of construction of the church of Navardzeti which dates from the verge of the C10th-C11th until the first half of the C11th. However the formation of the Katskhi pillar church particularly looks like that of Tiri.¹³ It should be noted that, as with the churches mentioned above, the Katskhi pillar chapel is built of pumice stone. The neat, refined form with which the western wall of Katskhi's "pillar" church is treated provides us with a date of the C9th-C10th and more likely the C10th.¹⁴ The south wall preserves a section that is built

⁹ P. ZAKARAIA, T. KAPANADZE, *Tsikhe-Goji-Arkeopolisi-Nokalakevi* (Tbilisi, 1991), p. 59, Plates 19;1.2, 22;2; O. LANCHAVA, *Kutaisis Arkeologia* (Kutaisi, 2007), p. 142.

¹⁰ *Kartuli Kristianuli Khelovneba*, D. TUMANISHVILI, M. MIKELADZE, M. DIDEBULIDZE eds. (Tbilisi, 2008), pp. 66, 76-78.

¹¹ The early middle age of Georgian architecture also features: elongated forms, coarse workmanship, equal size smaller stones in horizontal lines, the research literature often measures the formations and calls it the Ujarma type. See Ir. TSITSISHVILI, *Ujarma* (Tbilisi, 1982), p. 18, Plates 12-16; P. ZAKARAIA, T. KUPANADZE, *Tsikhe-Goji*, Plate 50; 1,2.

¹² N. VACHEISHVILI, "The Issue of Materials and Copies in the Study of Georgian Architecture", *Sakartvelos Sidzveleni* 2 (2002), pp.122-125.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 122, 124.

¹⁴ In this region it is observed that ecclesiastical architecture flourished in the C10th and especially the C11th (Koreti, Katskhi, Savane, Ekhevi, etc), probably more C9th monuments were preserved here also (N. VACHEISHVILI, "C9th-C10th ecclesiastical

from rocks from the cliff and it is possible to see traces of repairs probably conducted in the C13th (Pic. 3).

A small monastery has been identified on Katskhi's "pillar", with the monastery having an economy completely unlike that of C5th-C6th Syrian Stylites, and probably Katskhi's pillar hermit monks followed a different rule to the Syrian Stylites, who followed an extremely ascetic life and a rule on a small pillar that provided only a small platform under the open skies (St. Simeon Stylites the Elder lived like this) as "Spiritual Athletes".¹⁵ Katskhi's "pillar" has a small monastery where two or three monks from a larger monastery were probably dedicated to serve in small single cells, which were strongly similar to those in Thessaly (Greece) where the Meteora Monastery (C12th-C16th) was built on an impregnable cliff.

Several kinds of 'towers' intended as single dwellings for monks and referred to as pillars are still preserved in Georgia as well. Among them the oldest dwelling must be that of the monastery of Koshki-Sveti and Martqopi. This monument is located at a distance of 1 km east of the

architecture of the Qvirilis gorge", *G. Chubinashvilis sakhelobis kartuli khelovnebis istoriis institutis XXX sametsniro sesia. Mokhsenebata tezisebi* [Tbilisi, 1994], p. 9), but many old stone ecclesiastical monuments have not been found. At the same time it is worth noting how the south slope of the castle was found on excavation to have (K. Sachere) a late antique era necropolis. The burials date from the middle period of the C4th CE and are buried in a supine posture, with the heads buried facing westwards leading the archaeologist J. Nadiradze to suspect that they were Christians (J. NADIRADZE, *Qvirilis kheobis arkeologiuri dzglebi* [Tbilisi, 1975], pp. 75, 76). In the grave inventories there is mention of probable Christian symbolism (E. KAVLELASHVILI, "A discussion of Late Antique period cups and their material and symbolism", *Jurkha Nadiradzes dabadebis me-80 tslistavisadmi midzghvnil sametsnieri konperentsiis mokhlenebata tezisebi* [Tbilisi, 2009], pp. 25, 26) and this opinion is somewhat supported (a similar situation is confirmed in Chiatura district in the cemetery of the village of Jieti – my thanks for this information supplied to me by archaeologist G. Makharadze) as apparently by the middle of the C4th Christians had already partially spread into the region, but at this time and in the following period (the early stage of the early middle ages) we do not encounter stone ecclesiastical buildings as the forest-rich region means that they probably built wooden (?) churches in the early middle ages.

¹⁵ On Syrian Stylites and pillar remains see I. PEÑA, P. CASTELLANA, R. FERNANDEZ, *Les Stylites Syriens* (Milano, 1987).

complex. The four-storey structure is the oldest part of the Koshki ruins, which Platon Ioseliani explained was apparently built by St. Anton Martqopeli who toiled there until the end of his life.¹⁶ Regarding the restoration of the Martqopi pillar in the year 2005, is being studied by the architect-restorer Nodar Mindorashvili and the art historian Giorgi Chanishvili, As a result of the survey it was shown that, as at Koshki, the chapel was placed on the second floor of which the rounded apse still remains, conch-shaped and vaulted in sections, and the church was furnished with wooden floor beams. The third and fourth floors had two isolated rooms – where the (monastic) cells were located.¹⁷ In G. Chanishvili's view this tower was not built in St. Anton Martqopeli's time (C6th), the researcher believed that the character of the artistic elements of the building dated back to the C8th-C9th.¹⁸

A similar tower-pillar to that of Martqopi is built of hewn rock and preserved at Martvili monastery as well. The building is of a square plan and the lower section of which is vaulted. Above the vault there is a room two stories high, which is covered by a double sloping roof. The first floor

¹⁶ Pl. IOSELIANI, *Opisanie Martkopskogo monastyria* (Tiflis, 1847), p. 43.

¹⁷ N. MINDORASHVILI, *Gardabnis raonis sopel Martqopis Anton Martqopelis sveti, restavratsiis musha proekti*, Tbilisi, 2005, pp.1-16; G. Chanishvili, *Martqopis monasteri, Anton Martqopelis koshki, tsinastsaruli sakhelovnebatmtsodneo mimokhilva (khelnatseri)* (Tbilisi, 2005).

¹⁸ G. CHANISHVILI, *Martqopis*, p. 7; It should be noted that according to the information of Vakhushti Batonishvili this tower was not considered the place of St. Anton's seclusion: "...here (the monastery of the idol of Martqopi) was the abode of Father Anton who built this monastery, the hall was small with a stone interior and was called Martomqopi and later Martqopi", See VAKHUSHTI, *Aghtsera sameposa sakartvelosa*, T. LOMOURIA and N. BERDZENISHVILI eds. (Tbilisi, 1941), p. 95; K. Tsereteli explained that this tower was not C6th as it was not of the type of fortification built then. See K. TSERETELI, *Martqopis ghvtaebis sakhelobis samonastro kompleksis sarestavratsio-sareabilitatsio samushaoebtan dakavshirebuli sakhelovnebatmtsodneo mokvlevis daskvna (khelnatseri)*, (Tbilisi, 2009), pp. 3, 4.

had a vaulted cell, on the second was a small darbazi-style chapel. This tower-pillar dates from the end of the C10th-beginning of the C11th.¹⁹

Ubisa monastery's pillar has preserved an inscription dated 1141, which says that it was built apparently in the reign of Demetre I by Simeon Chqondideli.²⁰ It is a four storey tower built of pumice stone, with the second floor occupied by housing –a small room/cell, and the third floor furnished with a small chapel.²¹

In the vicinity of Rkoni monastery is a tower-pillar building dedicated to Simeon Stylites named Martod-Mqopeli ('the one who is alone'), it dates to the late middle ages and the quality of the building does not compare with the pillars discussed above.²² In the opinion of the Art specialist Manana Suramelashvili it was built in the C15th.²³ The pillar has three stories and the floors had wooden beams, the second floor was used as housing –it was a cell, and the third was a small chapel decorated with a vault and wall painting.²⁴

¹⁹ V. TSINTSADZE, "Martvilis 'sveti'", *Dzeglis megobari* 56 (1981), pp. 30-39.

²⁰ V. SILOGAVA, *Dasavlet Sakartvelos tsartserebi (IX-XIII ss.)* (Tbilisi, 1980), pp. 140, 141.

²¹ V. TSINTSADZE, "Ubisis sveti", *Dzeglis megobari* 18 (1969), pp. 34-37.

²² G. MARSAGISHVILI, I. MAMAIASHVILI, "Svimeon Mesvetis savane", *Sakartvelos istoriisa da kulturis dzeglta aghtseriloba* 5 (1990), p. 190.

²³ M. SURAMELASHVILI, *Rkoni, Svimeon Mesvetis koshki, arkiteturul-mkhatvruli reziume (kheldnatseri)*, see R. GURAMISHVILI, *Tsm. Svimeon Mesvetis sakhelobis koshki eklesiit, restavratsiis proekti*, Vol. 2. (Tbilisi, 2005).

²⁴ In the opinion of L. Mirianashvili the Chichkhituri tower of David Gareja must have been a pillar for a stylite. In the tower of the early monastery the fresco programme of Zosime-Pimenis' private chapel reflects the essence of monastic life, *Analecta Iberica I, Aghmosavlet da sankhret evropis kldis dzeglebi*, T. JOJUASA and L. MIRIANASHVILI eds. (Tbilisi, 2001), p. 197; A Pavlinov described a church and stylite pillar in a village located close to Artvin in 1888, in his opinion the tower was used for stylites, see: A. PAVLINOV, "Sveti", *Materialy po arkheologii Kavkaza* 3:M (1893), pp. 60-62, Tab. XXV, XXVI, XXVII; Today the village pillar church and tower no longer exist, but from observation based on a photograph D. Khoshtaria believes that the pillar tower in the village was a defensive building, see: D. KHOSHTARIA, *Klarjetis eklesiebi da monastrebi* (Tbilisi, 2005), p. 220.

Therefore, after discussion of the above mentioned ‘pillars’ in monasteries, it is possible that similar structural edifices in the vicinity of monasteries were combined agricultural, residential and religious premises intended for solitary monks. In general this view is completely applicable to the Martvili pillar, in reference to which Vakhtang Tsintsadze expressed the opinion that it is “intended as a single dwelling and not for an ascetic stylite.”²⁵ Literary activities were conducted on Martvili pillar – here in 1031 Ioane the Stylite copied a small collection of hagiography.²⁶ It is clear that the way of life of monks in these lonely towers in Georgian monasteries differs from the difficult ascetic way of life of Syrian type Stylites, and it looks like an ordinary cell for solitary monks. There were quite a few cells like this in and around Georgian and Byzantine monasteries in the middle ages.²⁷ In these secluded cells the solitary monks often engaged in writing. Tower-pillars’ inner structure did not much differ from the ordinary solitary cells which were small self-sufficient complexes – personal chapels, cells and workshops. There are a lot of secluded dwellings of this character in the monasteries of Mravalt’a of David Gareja,²⁸ for example there was also a solitary cell and signs of a chapel and a cell built with lime in the rock 2km away from the Cypriot Georgian monastery²⁹ where the Georgian MS no. H.18 was copied at the turn of the C11th-C12th.³⁰ The small monastery of Katskhi pillar (churches, cells and

²⁵ V. TSINTSADZE, “Martvilis ‘sveti’”, p. 31.

²⁶ This book belongs to the former Society of Literacy Collection, Vol. 1, compiled by T. BREGADZE, T. ERUKIDZE, N. KASRADZE, L. KUTATELADZE and Kr. SHARASHIDZE (Tbilisi, 1959), pp. 489-490.

²⁷ II. ABULADZE, *Dzveli kartuli enis leksikoni* (Tbilisi, 1973), p. 401. IV. JAVAKHISHVILI, *Kartulis samartlis istoria*, book II, part II (Tbilisi, 1929), p. 39.

²⁸ L. MIRIANASHVILI, *Garejis adreuli monastitsizmi*, pp.178-179.

²⁹ G. GAGOSHIDZE, “Georgian Monastery in Gialia (Cyprus)”, *Vakhtang Beridze Ist International Symposium of Georgian Culture, Georgian Art in the Context of European and Asian Cultures*, June 21-29, 2008, Georgia: Proceedings (Tbilisi, 2009), p. 255.

³⁰ T. JORDANIA, *Kronikebi*, I (Tbilisi, 2004), p. 128; M. SHANIDZE, *Eprem Mstiris psalmunta targmanebus tekstisatvis, kartuli tsqarotmtsodneoba*, III (Tbilisi, 1971), p. 72.

workshops) shows more connection with the above-described tower-pillars and solitary cells than with the holy Syrian stylites.

In the year 2007 the local monk Father Maksim (Kavtaradze) discovered a small limestone carved stone (measurement: 41x21 cm.) in the ruins on which was carved a ten line Georgian inscription in the Asomtavruli script (Pic. 9.), the inscription reads:

Christ God, through the prayers of Your parent -
Everywhere in the power of the Crucifixion, the power of holy heaven
and all Thy holiness,
greatly pardon the soul of St. George

Help sinner Giorgi who built these three houses (for glory)
for living, for standing in order to live a holy life
and to rest there as your servants.

The inscription is a characteristic shape with elongated lines. The strong, lengthened 'a' reminds us of the letter signs on an analogous inscription (C12th) on a stone foundation pillar (No. 227) in the collection of the S. Janashia National Georgian Museum.³¹ The 't' and 'm' resemble those in the lines of the fresco inscription of the south apse of Ateni Sioni by the son of Grigol Laparitis (C13th-C14th).³² The characteristically shaped 'd's show the pear-shaped belly in two ways is connected to the plough with two lines. Such a 'd' is also in evidence at the Church of St. George, Bethany (1196)³³ and in the inscriptions at Tmogvi (1303).³⁴ The Katskhi

Eptime Mtatsmindeli lived in a tower in Mount Athos' Iviron monastery and worked on translations there, see: Iv. JAVAKHISHVILI, *Masalebi kartveli eris materialuri kulturis istoriisatvis*, I (Tbilisi, 1946), p. 83.

³¹ A. BAKRADZE, S. BOLKVDZE, *Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo muzeumis kartuli epigrapikuli dzegebi* (Tbilisi, 1953), pp. 33-34, Tab XIII, 2.

³² G. ABRAMISHVILI, Z. ALEKSIDZE, *Preskuli tsartserebi I. Atenis Sioni* (Tbilisi, 1989), p. 165.

³³ V. SILOGAVA, *Betaniis tsartserebi* (Tbilisi, 1994), pp. 16, 19.

³⁴ G. GAPRINDASHVILI, *Tmogvis gumbatiani eklesiis 1303 tslis samsheneblo tsarera, Meskheti. Istoria da tanamedroveoba* (Tbilisi, 2000), p. 26.

pillar inscription has palaeographical features (the form of elongated characters in the letters) that must be dated to the end of the C13th or the beginning of the C14th. I think that the second half of the C13th is the most likely date for this inscription.

This inscription may shed light on many significant issues of the history of this small monastery – it mentions someone called the ‘great sinner’ Giorgi who apparently built three houses of the “tree of life” for established stylites. Thereby this stone inscription is dealing with stylites in this case with the construction of three cells for “pillar” stylites; it is obvious that the inscription (“these three cells”) refers to the original formation of the cells (but) although the inscription referred to three houses (cells) archaeological excavations have instead confirmed two cells (Fig. 2) and the archaeological material obtained on the pillar belongs only to the C16th-C17th,³⁵ which since we realise something was there earlier than this, suggests that the two cells were built in the late middle ages. The archaeological excavations on the pillar confirmed how this small monastery functioned in its last stage.³⁶ By the C18th the climb up the pillar was already impossible and Vakushti Batonishvili (1696-1757) noted: “In the gorge (Katskhura gorge) is a rock built like a very tall pillar. On the top of this rock is a small church where no man can go, it was done purely for art.”³⁷

It is significant that it is mentioned in the inscription that the name of the pillar, and that of the church which was probably upon it, was “tree of life.” This is also confirmed by the local population preserving an oral tradition that “Katskhi pillar” is called the “tree of life” or “pillar of life.”³⁸ The “tree of life” is an epithet used for the cross on which the saviour was

³⁵ D. BERIKASHVILI, *Qvirilis kheobis arkeologiuri ekspeditiis mier chatarebuli*, p. 86.

³⁶ Katskhi pillar’s archaeological excavations confirmed the generally characteristic signs of rock monuments. As a rule with such monuments the early layers are destroyed and the last stage of human activity is left apparent.

³⁷ VAKHUSHTI, *Aghtsera sameposa sakartvelosa*, p. 155.

³⁸ V. TSINTSADZE, “Katskhis “sveti” metsnierebata”, p. 557; L. GOTUA, *Katskhis svetis saidumlo*, p. 80.

tortured: Chiaber Mgvimesadmi wrote (1189): "...By the power of the true life-giving cross, tree of life, thou shall stretch forth thy incorruptible arm to us Lord Christ..."³⁹ The erection of the "tree of life" (cross) was mentioned in an inscription on base of the Khunami stele,⁴⁰ the same epithet is used at the top of the sacristy door of the church of Vale which depicts a flowering cross on Golgotha (C10th).⁴¹ Therefore according to the C13th inscription Katskhi pillar was named Holy Cross (Tree of Life). This is confirmed by the eastern side of the "pillar" (rock) at ground level on the foot of the (limestone) rock is outlined an image of an equal-armed cross which has been made as smoothly as is possible on the surface of the rock (Pic. 8). This relief definitely belongs to the early middle centuries, V. Tsintsadze places them between the C4th-C5th and early C6th.⁴² A rough scheme is displayed on Katskhi pillar of an equal-armed cross within a circle and underneath are three horizontal lines which clearly depict the stepped pedestal of the circle; the lines on both sides are cut to descend towards the base. Above the cross medallion is a ribbon that curves around more than half of it, and zigzags in scratched lines around the wheel. This decoration reminds us of Bolnisi and evidence for equal-armed crosses in Georgia in general, the medallions of which have been decorated with triangles.⁴³ The manner of coarse carving of the equal-armed cross on Katskhi pillar must be attributed, I think, to the difficulty in working the hard limestone, as for the iconographical features still extant on the base such as the cross, they are are analogous to those of Eastern Georgia – and

³⁹ T. ENUKIDZE, V. SILOGAVA, N. SHOSHIASHVILI, *Kartuli istoriuli sabutebi IX-XIII ss.* (Tbilisi, 1984), p. 95.

⁴⁰ N. SHOSHIASHVILI, *Lapidaruli tsartserebi, I. aghmosavlet da samkhret sakartvelo (V-X ss.)* (Tbilisi, 1980), p. 109, Pic. 36, Tab. 22; p. 283.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 283; R. MEPISASHVILI, "Vales tadzari da misi aghmsheneblobis ori dziritadi periodi", *Kartuli khelovneba* 3 (1950), Tab. 19.

⁴² V. TSINTSADZE, "Katskhis 'sveti'", *Metsnierebata*, p. 560; V. TSINTSADZE, *Katskhis sveti, V-VI saukuneebis*, p. 52.

⁴³ G. CHUBINASHVILI, *Bolniskii Sion* (Tbilisi, 1940), p. 183, Pic. 111; p. 184, Pic. 112; V. JAPARIDZE, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis arkeologiuri dzeglebi* (Tbilisi, 1982), Tab. III, 2,3; Tab. XIX, 1; Tab. XXXVI, 2; Tab. XLV, 2; Tab. LXVI; Tab. XVII, 2.

remind us of the images on stelae built in the early middle centuries. Two lines descend from the Katskhi pillar cross which remind us of three pairs of analogous features on one side of the cross of Davati (C6th), G. Javakhishvili linked the image schematically to a life-giving pillar.⁴⁴ The flowering crosses are depicted standing on a stepped cross at: Demirbulaghi (C6th),⁴⁵ Satkhi (C6th),⁴⁶ Kveshi (C6th),⁴⁷ Bolnisi (C6th-C7th),⁴⁸ Balichi (C6th),⁴⁹ Qizil-Kilisa (C6th-C7th),⁵⁰ and many other facted stelae. These flowering crosses are more flexible and “alive” than the stele cross on Katskhi pillar.

The cross which is depicted on Katskhi pillar in the inscription certifies that it is the life-giving pillar (C13th), that means that Katskhi pillar had its name (tree of life) and was called this already in the C6th.⁵¹ Katskhi pillar stood as a rock that was an object of worship for the local population – stones (stelae) – and that is why a cross depicting the tree of life is represented on the eastern wall.

The writer Levan Gotua explained: “The pillar (Katskhi pillar) has two feasts: *Svetoba*, or the life-giving pillar, 7 days later than the Friday of the Resurrection and *Kokhinjvroba* (Ritual against hail) on the 7th May.”⁵²

At the time of Emperor Constantine, on 7th (20th) May 351 a prominent shining cross appeared in the sky above Jerusalem and this laid the foundation for the 7th May “Manifestation of the Cross” or “Revelation of

⁴⁴ G. JAVAKHISHVILI, *Adrepeodaluri khanis kartuli stelebi* (Tbilisi, 1998), Tab. XIX, 4, p. 40, No. 104.

⁴⁵ N. CHUBINASHVILI, *Khandisi* (Tbilisi, 1972), Tab. 74.

⁴⁶ V. JAPARIDZE, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis*, Tab. LX, 1.

⁴⁷ K. MACHABELI, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis kartuli kvajvarebi* (Tbilisi, 2008), Tab. 68, p. 132, No. 68.

⁴⁸ G. JAVAKHISHVILI, *Adrepeodaluri*, No. 11, p. 11, Tab. XI, 1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18, No. 36, Tab. XXVII, 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 78, Tab. LXII, 3.

⁵¹ V. TSINTSADZE, The rock at Katskhi was called by variations of the “tree of life” or “pillar of life” based on early Christian wooden examples. See: V. Tsintsadze, “Katskhis sveti, V-VI saukunis khurotmdzghvruli dzegli”, p. 52.

⁵² L. GOTUA, *Katskhis svetis saidumlo*, p. 96.

the Cross.”⁵³ At the same time the 7th (20th) May became Mtskheta’s day for raising a cross.⁵⁴ N. Ghambashidze has explained that in Kakheti the 7th May is known as ‘the tree of life.’⁵⁵ This Christian celebration was linked by people with the agricultural celebration to prevent hail and say farewell to rain as *Kokhinjvroba*, and became famous under this name.⁵⁶

Katskhi pillar is named after the tree of life, the life-giving pillar of Mtskheta and the first holy places connected to the life-giving pillar and cross.⁵⁷ This reality is also confirmed by Katskhi’s pillar feast being celebrated on Fridays, and as for Juansher’s information, Eristavi Stepanoz, son of Adarnerses, (C7th) established the church of Jvari and every Friday was the day of the Cross at Mtskheta.⁵⁸ A stele (C7th) was raised near Tskhisi village by somebody called Kostanti and named after the cross of Mtskheta. The inscription on the base of the stele reads: “This cross... raised in the name of the cross of Mtskheta...”⁵⁹

It is interesting to consider together Katskhi pillar and the domed church of Katskhi (turn of the C10th-C11th). These two shrines are separated from

⁵³ *Tsmidata tskhovrebani, tsigni pirveli (ianvari-ivnisi 2006)*, p. 393; T. MGALOBlishvili, *Klarjuli mravaltavi* (Tbilisi, 1991), pp. 146, 151.

⁵⁴ N. GHAMBASHIDZE, “Mtskhetis jvari da sakartvelos gakristianebis sami etapi”, *Kristianul-arkeologiuri dziebani I* (2008), p. 451; ID., “7 Maisis dghesastsauli sakartveloshi”, *Sakartvelos metsnierebata akademiis iv. Javakhishvilis sakhelobis istoriisa da etnologiis institutis jurnali analebi 2* (1999), p. 66.

⁵⁵ N. LAMBASHIDZE, “Alaverdoba da mastan dakavshirebuli kartuli traditsiebi”, *Akademia 1* (2010), pp. 161-172.

⁵⁶ N. GHAMBASHIDZE, “7 Maisis dghesastsauli”, p. 67.

⁵⁷ The life-giving pillar of Mtskheta and the cross of Mtskheta are ideologically inseparable, if the life-giving pillar is the ideological incarnation of the robe of the Lord and Lord’s grave in Jerusalem, then the true cross on Golgotha is represented by the temple of the cross (Jvari).

⁵⁸ “...and he wrote (Stepanoz) gathered all the congregation each Friday in this place, with all bishops and priests and with the Catholics in front of the adoration of the Cross, to praise Friday, which is Good Friday.” See *Kartlis tskhovreba*, text established according to S. QAUKHCHISHVILI from the primary manuscript, Tom. 1 (Tbilisi, 1955), pp. 228-229.

⁵⁹ N. SHOSHIASHVILI, *Lapidaruli tsartserebi*, pp. 97-99.

each other by 1.5 kilometres and their close connection is preserved in the stories of the local population – a chain was stretched from the top of the pillar to the Church of the Saviour in Katskhi.⁶⁰ This legend reminds us of the story about the stretched chain between the domes of Svetiskhoveli and Jvari churches at Mtskheta on which pious monks walked.⁶¹ Katskhi domed church preserves a stone relief of the “elevation of the Cross”⁶² that is to some extent definitely the same as the extant scene on the tympanum of the south door at Jvari, Mtskheta,⁶³ and this suggests a certain connection between Katskhi and Jvari, Mtskheta. This comparison shines light on the large embossed cross on the altar of Katskhi’s domed church (C13th),⁶⁴ the prototype for which was established at Jvari, Mtskheta when Georgia was Christianised.⁶⁵

Thus it is clear that Katskhi pillar and Katskhi domed church are interconnected and they are dependents of Mtskheta (Svetiskhoveli and Jvari.)⁶⁶ Here too I think, Katskhi is similar to Mtskheta’s holy places with Katskhi’s domed church standing for Christ’s tomb and Katskhi pillar as the embodiment of Golgotha.

⁶⁰ L. GOTUA, *Mgzavruli krialosani, katskhis svetis saidumlo*, p. 94. Pl. Ioseliani explained that the domed church of Katskhi was named for the Ascension of the Saviour. See Pl. IOSELIANI, *Katskhskiĭ khram v Imereti* (Tiflis, 1845), p. 7.

⁶¹ A. NATROEV, *Mtskhet i ego sobor Sveti-Tskhoveli* (Tiflis, 1900), p. 21.

⁶² V. BERIDZE, “Katskhis tadzari”, *Kartuli khelovneba* 3 (1950), Tab. 30.

⁶³ N. ALADASHVILI, *Monumental’naia skul’ptura Gruzii* (Moskova, 2008), p. 33, Tab. 30.

⁶⁴ G. CHUBINASHVILI, *Gruzinskoe chekannoe iskusstvo* (Tbilisi, 1959), pp. 477-489, Figs. 272-276.

⁶⁵ See D. TUMANISHVILI about the connection between big crosses in front of the altar and three crosses (Mtskheta, Tkhoti and Ujarma) raised during the Christianisation of Georgia, *Sakurtkhevlistsina jvarebis religiuri mnishvelobisatvis, mokhseneba tsakitkhuli kartuli khelovnebis istoriis institutshi 1996 tslis 3 ivliss (khelnatseri)*; Z. SKHIRTLDZE, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis kartuli kedlis mkhatvroba, telovanis jvarpatiosani* (Tbilisi, 2008), pp. 111-112.

⁶⁶ In 1392 Katskhi monastery is referred to as being owned by the Patriarch in Mtskheta (the lands of Svetiskhoveli), but this was probably reflecting an older situation that already existed. See S. KAKABADZE, *Gruzinsie dokumenty IX-XV vv. v sobranii Leningradskogo otdeleniia instituta vostokobedeniia AN SSSR* (Moskova, 1982), p. 104.

It is noteworthy that in the inscription not one word is mentioned of St. Simeon Stylites and “Sinful Giorgi” is not praying to this saint for deliverance. From the proceeding information it seems that the Simeon Stylites connection was a layer added on to Katskhi pillar at a later age.⁶⁷

Thus it is conceivable that Katskhi pillar was granted the name tree of life/pillar of life no later than the C6th and it was connected with Jvari, Mtskheta. The name of the Cross that defeated the idols of Mtskheta was perceived as a symbol of victory over pagans in the vicinity of Katskhi, and at the same time it seems that this action to some extent marked the extreme western border of the kingdom of Kartli in the early middle ages.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Stylite images are unknown on Georgian sculptural monuments from the early middle centuries, we encounter many figural images of saints on the sides of stelae but I cannot find stylite images amongst them. However we must ask if the verticality applicable to showing pillar-sitting stylites was applicable to the composition of stelae? The earliest development of stylite imagery we know is C10th (Oshki west façade, the eight-sided column on Oshki south gate. See V. DJOBADZE, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis kartuli monastrebi istoriul taoshi, klarjetsa da shavshetshi* [Tbilisi, 2007], Tab. 166, 167; p. 128), from the C11th stylite imagery increases: Zedazeni, Shio Mghvime chancel screen (R. SHMERLING, *Malye formy v arkhitekture srednevekovoi Gruzii* [Tbilisi, 1962], Tab. 29, 45, 46); amongst the fragments of the St. Giorgi church, Chrdili, chancel screen from the second half of C10th, see T. KHUNDADZE, “Chrdilis Tsm. Giorgis eklesiis kankelis fragmentebi”, *Sakartvelos sidzvelebi* 13 (2010), pp. 34-52; Chukuli wooden door (N. CHUBINASHVILI, *Gruzinskaia srednevekovaiia khudozhestvennaia rez'ba po derevy (pereloma X-XI vv.)* [Tbilisi, 1958], Tab. 43, 47), the Laghami icon (G. CHUBINASHVILI, *Gruzinskoe chekannoe istusstvo* [Tbilisi, 1959] Tab. 205-A), the Ateni Sion mural (T. VIRSALADZE, *Atenis sionis mokhatuloba* [Tbilisi, 1984], Tab. 58, 59) etc., this tendency continued in the following centuries. In the 960s Nikiphorus Phocas (963-969) expanded the borders of the Byzantine Empire again with successful invasions in northern Syria and the city of Antioch (968). From this time, and especially from the C11th, the increase in popularity of stylites was related I think to the revival of the Georgian monastery of the tree of life in the vicinity of Antioch on the Black or Miraculous Mountain – which housed the monastery of St. Simeon Stylites the Younger and many other monasteries (See L. MENABDE, *Dzveli kartuli mtserlobis kerebi*, II [Tbilisi, 1980], pp. 149-167; W. DJOBADZE, *Archaeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch on-th-Orontes* [Stuttgart, 1986]).

⁶⁸ The location of Katskhi pillar on Georgia's western border is discussed by V. Tsintsadze, see: V. TSINTSADZE, “Katskhis sveti”, *Sakartvelos ssr metsnierebata*

Katskhi first had the rock-cut tree of life on the pillar consisting of a cycle with a medallion containing a radiant cross standing on a stepped pedestal (C6th), three or four centuries later the church was built on the rock ridge.⁶⁹

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akadmiis moambe, p. 563; ID., “Katskhis sveti, V-VI saukuneebis khurotmodzghvrebis dzegli”, *Dzeglis megobari*, p. 54.

⁶⁹ Z. Skhirtladze suggests that around the time of the conversion of Georgia they must have erected a cross near to Mount Tkhoti at Telovani and later this was replaced when a church was built there (C8th) and named for the Ascension of the Cross. See Z. SKHIRTŁADZE, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis kartuli kedlis mkhatvroba*, p. 124.