

Georgian Perspectives on the Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus

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Abstract

This article explores the legend of the Seven Sleepers, known in Georgia as the “Seven Infants of Ephesus“, within the context of Georgian scholarly literature and its cultural resonance. Despite the extensive analysis of this legend across various religious and cultural contexts, the Georgian perspective has largely been overlooked. This study aims to address this gap by examining Georgian scholarship, particularly the work of philologist Mariam Nanobashvili, whose dissertation and subsequent book represent the primary contemporary source. The article investigates the representation of the legend in Georgian literature, its perceived significance among scholars, and how it is known to the wider public. Through this analysis, the article contributes new insights to the understanding of the Seven Sleepers’ legend and its place in the Georgian cultural context.

Keywords: *Georgia, Seven Sleepers, Christian manuscripts, early Middle Ages, Georgian veneration*

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Introduction

This article represents the first effort in English to examine how the legend of the Seven Sleepers is depicted and studied in Georgia. The legend has garnered considerable attention and has been analyzed in diverse contexts and religious traditions¹. Two nearly contemporary versions of the Ephesian resurrection miracle from the 6th century exist: one is a Latin translation by Bishop Gregory of Tours, and the other is a Syriac version by Bishop Jacob of Sarugh. Consequently, the legend spread widely across the eastern provinces and the West, particularly within Latin Christianity. It traveled with missionaries from the Syriac Churches, notably the Assyrian Church of the East, along trade routes of the Silk Roads, both northern and southern branches. These routes were frequented by merchants transporting goods and artifacts, as well as missionaries, pilgrims, and soldiers. The legend extended northeast to Turpan in China and southeast to Yemen and Ethiopia². In the 7th century, the story of the Seven Sleepers was incorporated into the Qur'an in Sura XVIII, with significant additions, becoming part of Islamic tradition. Following the Islamic conquest of former Byzantine territories, the Muslim version of the legend, known as Ashab al-Kahf (Companions of the Cave), also spread widely³. Across various regions, multiple caves were identified as the true locations of the legend. Evidence of the story is found in material culture, such as church frescoes, ancient manuscripts, talismans, miniatures, and icons⁴. Prominent caves along the northern Silk Road routes include those in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan; Maymanah, Afghanistan; and the sanctuary at Tuyuq in Turpan's oasis. Along the southern routes, notable sites include Ashab al-Kahf in Tarsus, Afsin in Turkey, as well as caves in Damascus, Syria, and near Amman, Jordan⁵.

¹ For a critical overview of the legend and its different versions, see: Paolo La Spisa et al., *The Seven Sleepers Legend as a case of universal hagiography. The EuTradOr interdisciplinary research project* in EURAS Journal of Social Sciences, vol 3, N.2, October 2023, p.121-144.

² Anna Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia e culto dei Sette Dormienti: Storicità e processi di mitologizzazione dell'agiostoria efesina nel Mediterraneo*. Edizioni del Gruppo di Ricerca Arabo-Cristiana, 2023, Bologna, p.121.

³ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*, p. 141.

⁴ Alexander Lapshin, *The "Seven Sleepers": Materials from North-East Rus'* in EURAS Journal of Social Sciences, 2023, Vol 3, N. 2, 145-161

Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*

Anna Tozzi di Marco, *Preliminary Analysis of the Symbolism and the Agentivity of the dog Qitmīr during the Devotion to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus (Ashāb al-Kahf)* in EURAS Journal of Social Sciences, 2023, Vol 3, N. 2, 191-209.

Manoël Pénicaud, *Artistic Reawakenings of the Seven Sleepers' Myth (19th - 21st centuries)*, in EURAS Journal of Social Sciences, 2023, Vol 3, N. 2, 63-190

⁵ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*

The different versions of the Seven Sleepers' legend and the continuing reverence for them in various Mediterranean regions and Central Asia illustrate how this myth crosses cultural boundaries, thus representing a shared cultural legacy between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Many scholars have examined this peculiarity as it constitutes an interreligious myth linking the three major monotheistic religions. Early scholars like the Italian philologist Ignazio Guidi and the French orientalist Louis Massignon extensively analyzed this legend⁶. Guidi focused on collecting and reviewing Eastern texts from a comparative perspective, while Massignon explored Islamic interpretations and mapped the spiritual significance of the Seven Sleepers⁷. Additionally, also in the work of Paul Peeters, one of the most prominent researchers of Syriac hagiography, the Georgian case is absent⁸.

Although this article is part of a second volume that examines the myth of the Seven Sleepers from a distinctive anthropological and ethnographic perspective, I must acknowledge that during my research for this article, I did not find rituals and acts of veneration related to the Seven Sleepers in Tbilisi. However, I came across two ecclesiastical magazines that reveal a more vernacular aspect of this veneration. In the first part, I will draw upon the work of philologist Nanobashvili, whose dissertation (later published as a book) is the only contemporary source in the Georgian language I identified that deals with the Seven Sleepers in the Georgian context. The second part will explore a vernacular aspect of veneration and how it is presented to the wider public. It is important to note that in the Georgian context, the Seven Sleepers are referred to as the "Seven Infants of Ephesus" (Georgian: *q'rma*). Therefore, I will use the term "Seven Infants" in this article when referring to the Georgian version and "Seven Sleepers" when discussing established scientific research.

⁶ Ignazio Guidi, *Testi orientali inediti sopra I Sette Dormienti di Efeso*. Roma: Tipografia della R. Accademia dei Lincei, 1855.

Louis Massignon, *Les sept dormants d'Ephèse (Ahl al Kahf) en Islam et en Chrétienté*. Parigi: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner. 1955.

Louis Massignon, *Les sept dormants. Apocalypse de l'Islam in Opera Minora*. Beirut: Dar al Maaref. 1963

⁷ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*, p. 15

⁸ Paul Peeters, *Le texte original de la passion des Sept Dormants*, in *Analecta Bollandiana*, vol. XLI, 1923, p. 369-385.

Mariam Nanobashvili, *Motifs of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Georgian and Arabic Traditions*, Tbilisi, 2007 p.35.

"The torture of the Seven Infants" in Georgian literature

Georgian philologist Mariam Nanobashvili has researched the Seven Sleepers within the Georgian context to address a gap in this area. She published her dissertation, "The Martyrdom of the Seven Infants from Ephesus. Georgian Versions," in 1999⁹. This dissertation was later transformed into a book, "Motifs of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in Georgian and Arabic Traditions," in 2007.

In her work, Nanobashvili demonstrates that the hagiographic narrative entitled "The Torture of the Seven Infants," which stems from the martyrdom of the Ephesians, holds a significant place in Georgian literature dating back to the early Middle Ages. She analyzes the discrepancies and consistencies among the early manuscripts, their sources, and the broader implications of these variations.

Within the realm of hagiographic literature in Georgia, she identified several editions of these works in the Georgian language:

1. Kymenian (Georgian: *k'imenuri*)¹⁰
2. Metaphrastic
3. A later translation (19th century) derived from the Armenian language is preserved in the following collections: H3140 (19th-20th centuries), S 7666 (19th century), and Q 409 (1845). The latter edition mentions the translator Ioane Manulovi¹¹. Other editions include Q 499 (1858) and Q 750 (19th-20th centuries). The Mekhitarists in Venice published this work, which is available in the book "Life of Saints" (1859)¹².
4. Finally, an edition was printed as a separate pamphlet in 1893, titled "Life of the Seven Infants." This pamphlet was published by the Printing House of Maksim Sharadze. The text adheres to the norms of the new Georgian

⁹ Mariam Nanobashvili, *The Martyrdom of the Seven Infants from Ephesus, Georgian versions*. Thesis. Tbilisi. 1999.

¹⁰ The Georgian word *k'imeni* stands for a biblical-canonical text presented without explanatory comments, typically found at the center of manuscript pages containing biblical content. Byzantine jurist-commentators distinguished *k'imeni* as a separate text from their own commentaries. The term has a dual meaning. The Georgian scientist and translator, developer of the Athos literary school, Ephraim the Lesser notes that when Symeon Logothete initiated reforms of the saints' lives, a historic text known as *k'imeni*, which translates to "it is located," was placed before him. At the end of this text, the "book of the martyrs" is referred to as *k'imeni*. This concept represents a certain stage in hagiographical writing that preceded later metaphrastic redactions. It is believed that the translation of the hagiographic material from *k'imeni*'s redaction was completed in the 10th century by Ekvtime of Athos and his contemporaries (see K'orneli Kekelidze, *Kartuli lit'erat'uris istoria* [History of Georgian Literature], Vol. 1, Tbilisi, 1960).

¹¹ All these collections are preserved in the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia

¹² "Life of Saints", Tsmindiani ckhovreba (<https://dspace.nplg.gov.ge/handle/1234/317333>)

literary language and presents a straightforward and simple narration based on the Russian original version. According to Nanobashvili, following the words of historian and publisher Zakaria Chichinadze, Maksim Sharadze's printing house focused on producing affordable books for "simple people," providing accessible versions. The content of these publications reflected the lifestyle of Sharadze's Cabinet brotherhood (Georgian: *dzmoba*), who, according to the historian and book publisher Zurab Chichinadze, was very pious and preferred simple prose, translated directly from Russian¹³. In contrast to the Russian version, the Georgian edition is shortened and simplified. The pamphlet's title page printed by Sharadze features an image of the Ephesian martyrs, which is an imitation of an illustration printed in Moscow. Her research examines various Georgian editions of this text, with a particular focus on the Kymenian and Metaphrastic redactions. In this article, I have translated Nanobashvili's work on the Kymenian edition as it proved to be an interesting analysis that places the legend of the Seven Sleepers in Georgia within the broader cross-pollination context of the Middle Ages that see the legend of the Seven Sleepers move across the Christian and the Muslim worlds. The Kymenian edition contains hagiographies of various saints and is preserved in three early manuscripts: one from the Saint Catherine Monastery in Sinai (dated 983) and two others from the 11th century. She refers to these manuscripts as Syn. 62, Bodl. 1, and H 341, respectively¹⁴.

Nanobashvili's comparison of three early manuscripts (Kymenian versions)

Nanobashvili highlights that the hagiographic work of the Seven Ephesian Infants is the only text in the databases of all three manuscripts¹⁵. Nanobashvili observes that these manuscripts comprise collections of different martyrdom accounts. For the three early manuscripts examined, no single manuscript served as the exclusive source; instead, multiple collections were utilized. She explains that copying literary works from various collections and compiling them into a single manuscript was common practice in the Middle Ages. This is often justified in the manuscripts. Namely, the composition of these collections was often influenced by several factors, including the patron's preferences, the copyist's ideas, the unavailability of certain materials, or the later

¹³ Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...*, p. 43.

¹⁴ These manuscripts are preserved in the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia.

¹⁵ Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...*, p. 44.

acquisition of those materials¹⁶.

Her comparative analysis of the text "Torture of the Seven Infants," preserved in the three manuscripts, reveals that the discrepancies arise not only in phrasing and vocabulary but also in using non-standard grammatical forms. Manuscripts Syn.62 and Bodl.1 often present similar readings, while manuscript H341 shows more significant discrepancies¹⁷. Yet, she points out that there are instances where Syn.62 and H341 share the same reading, distinguishing them from Bodl.1. This indicates that the texts of the three manuscripts did not derive from one another. Rather, as collections, they likely originated from similar (though not identical) sources, as evidenced by their textual closeness. Specifically, the first two collections share seven tales of seven martyrdoms, and the order of these works remains consistent in both collections¹⁸.

Regarding the origin of the Georgian translation of the Kymenian edition of "The Torture of the Infants of Ephesus," Nanobashvili notes that the translation maintains a complete archaism in vocabulary, morphology, and syntax, suggesting its antiquity as well as its creation before the Greek version on which "The Torture of the Infants of Ephesus" is based. After comparing the Georgian text with the corresponding Greek, Armenian, Arabic, and Syriac sources, she concludes that the translation was made from Greek (Ibid. 46). She references the Greek text published based on the manuscript from the National Library of Paris (Graec. 1454, 10th century) and the Vatican manuscript (Vat. Graec. 1673, 11th century).

The Georgian Kymenian redaction closely follows the Greek text, nearly word for word, while the Eastern versions differ in phrases, narration, and occasionally specific details¹⁹. For instance, the Syriac tradition states that there were eight infants instead of seven²⁰. She refers to the Armenian

¹⁶ Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...*, p. 45.

¹⁷ Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...*, p. 45.

¹⁸ These are the works present in both the manuscripts: 1. "The Martyrdom of Saint Christopher"2. "Leotis, the Holy Martyr"3. "The Martyrs Paul, Bilon, Theon, Iron, and their companions"4. "Forty-five martyred saints from the city of Nicopolis in Armenia"5. "Athanasius, the martyr of the Holy and Great Martyr from the city of Kolisma, located by the sea"6. "Martyrdom of Saint Panteleimon"7. "Martyrdom of the Maccabees and their mothers, who suffered under King Antiochus in the city of Antioch".

¹⁹ Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...*, p. 46-47.

²⁰ This, however, it is only in one rendition of Jacob of Sarugh (451-521). Of the same tale, Jacob of Sarugh presented two recensions of different lengths, likely composed around 470. Among the elements that have been passed down are many legendary aspects that remain historically unverified, such as the involvement of Decius

version of the story, noting that it clearly shows that the young boys served King Decius as idolaters and were only later converted to Christianity. Additionally, the Armenian version includes details about a basilica being built over the burial site of these young boys (following the version of Gregory of Tours), which is not found in the Georgian version. Furthermore, the Armenian tradition claims that the miraculous sleep of the saints lasted for 144 years, while the Georgian version (following the Syriac version) states it lasted for 372 years²¹. We see then that this Georgian translation features elements that belong both to the Latin version by Bishop Gregory of Tours and the Syriac version by Bishop Jacob of Sarugh.

Similarities to the Greek version and Georgian archaisms

In examining the similarities with the Greek text, the author highlights several aspects related to content and syntax. The first similarity is found in the names of the Seven Infants. The names of the Ephesian martyrs differ across the various versions. Three main groups can be identified: 1) Achilles-Diomedes; 2) Maximiliane-Konstantines; and 3) Maximilian-Exakusdadianes. The first group appears in Syriac, Coptic, and Ethiopic texts, with slight variations including Achillides, Diomedes, Eugene, Stephen, Probatius, Sabatius, and Quiriacus. The second and third groups are found in Greek, Armenian, and Arabic texts, as well as in the Georgian version that Nanobashvili analyzes. The names in Georgian are a direct translation of the Greek ones: Maksimiliane, Iamblike, Martine, Ioane, Dionise, Eksakustodiane, and Antonine. The Georgian version aligns closely with the Greek text, as well as the names mentioned in the writings of kings and bishops. However, the name of the mountain where the cave is located varies among different editions. In the Georgian text, the toponym used is derived from the Greek version, as noted in the Vatican version. Nanobashvili also observes many Greek calques in the Georgian version, along with similar syntax.

While there are notable similarities with the Greek text, her analysis indicates that the Georgian translation of "The Torture of the Ephesian Infants" is not merely derived from a Greek version similar to those found in the Parisian and Vatican manuscripts. Instead, it also retains significant archaic features, suggesting that the Georgian version predates the 10th-

in Ephesus, who interrogated the young Ephesians about their refusal to offer sacrifices to the gods. Notably, in one of his versions, the number of Sleepers was counted as eight (Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...* p.77).

²¹ Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...*, p. 48.

11th century Greek manuscripts from which it originates. She mentions that the Georgian text has been translated into Coptic from the same Greek edition to support this claim.

She references the work of linguist and philologist Ivane Imnaishvili, titled "Historical Chrestomathy of the Georgian Language" (1963) which examines morphological, orthographical, and phonetic changes in the Georgian language over the centuries²². This work supports her thesis regarding the antiquity of the Georgian version compared to the Greek edition from which it is translated. For example, she notes that some lexical units and archaic words have been replaced by New Persian and Arabic terms after the 8th century. One such example is the word for treasure, "sapase," which was replaced by the word "gandzi" in later collections after the 9th century. The historian Abuladze identifies "gandzi" as a word of New Persian origin, asserting that it did not exist before the 9th century²³.

Nanobashvili identifies numerous Persian influences in the Georgian text, noting terms like "Hambavi" and "Zorva."²⁴ It is well-documented that many words from the Persian lexicon were adopted by Georgian speakers, integrating them into the literary language. Overall, she argues that the lexical, orthographic, and grammatical features present in the Georgian manuscript highlight a wealth of archaic elements. The antiquity of the Georgian translation of "The Torture of the Ephesians" is underscored by its textual variations, which reflect the cultural contacts that have taken place in Georgia over the centuries, particularly following the Arab arrival in the VIII century. The presence of such elements further supports the notion that the Georgian translation preserves archaic linguistic characteristics and was likely translated before the 9th century, as indicated by the variant features in the text²⁵.

Additionally, Nanobashvili points out that the circular script used in "The Torture of the Seven Infants" manuscripts suggests these texts were

²² Ivane Imnaishvili, *Kartuli Enis Ist'oriuli Krest'omatia* [Historical Chrestomathy of the Georgian Language] Tbilisi. 1963.

²³ Ilia Abuladze, *Asurel Moghvatseta kkhovrebis ts'ignta dzvel redakciebi* [Old editions of books of life of Assyrian Figures], Tbilisi, 1955 in Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...*, p.51.

²⁴ "Hambavi" is the old Georgian version of the current "ambavi", which means "story". "Zorva" instead means "sacrifice" as well as "victim", depending on the context. Source: Ilia Abuladze, *Dictionary of old Georgian language*, Tbilisi, 1976, p.85.

²⁵ Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...* p.50-51.

produced in one of the prominent literary centers of the East, most likely in Palestine. The assumption that "The Torture of the Infants of Ephesus" was likely translated in one of the three literary centers in Palestine is bolstered by several points. During the early period of Georgian writing, there was significant interaction between Georgians and Christian territories in the East, particularly in regions like Syria and Palestine. This connection facilitated the exchange of literary and religious texts, making it likely that Georgian scholars were involved in translating works from these areas. Additionally, the fact that the oldest manuscripts containing the "Torture of the Seven Infants" originate from Palestine further supports this idea²⁶. The links between these manuscripts and Palestine indicate that there was already an established literary activity in that region, especially in monasteries and lavras, permitting the translation and adaptation of texts. Consequently, the combination of the historical context of Georgian literary activity in Christian centers and the origins of significant manuscripts bolsters the assumption that works, including "The Torture of the Infants of Ephesus," could have been translated into these Palestinian centers²⁷.

In his review of the Legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in the Arab Christian context, La Spisa discusses what is believed to be the oldest Christian Arabic version of this text the standard edition believed to be the oldest Christian Arabic version. This version is preserved in two manuscripts: London, BL, Or. 5019 (X-XI century), fols 40v - 47r, and Paris, BnF, Ar. 6256 (AD 1694-1707), fols 14v - 30r²⁸. He argues that both versions of the text are derived from an ancient Arabic translation of a Greek metaphrastic text. He compares different passages from these manuscripts based on content and codicological analysis conducted by van Esbroeck, who concluded that the origin of the manuscript BL, Or. 5019 (which comes after BL, Add. 26117) is linked to the area of the monasteries of Palestine. Furthermore, La Spisa outlines a genealogy that traces the text back to a Greek *Vorlage* from the X century, from which an initial Arabic version was translated. This initial Arabic version served as the archetype for all subsequent Arabic translations²⁹.

²⁶ See Paolo La Spisa, *Una recensione Araba Cristiana della leggenda dei Sette Dormienti di Efeso* in *Analecta Bollandiana*, Tom 141, II, December 2023, p. 241-292.

²⁷ Nanobashvili, *Motifs of...*, p.51-52.

²⁸ La Spisa, *Una recensione...* p. 259.

²⁹ La Spisa, *Una recensione...* p. 253-254.

For the first time, La Spisa introduces what he calls *recensione antica* of the Arabic versions of the legend in a critical edition. The antiquity of this recension is primarily supported by its close relation to the Greek-Byzantine version, which is documented as early as the X-XI centuries, coinciding with the oldest Greek codices³⁰. There are numerous textual parallels, and he highlights particularly intriguing aspects of their convergence, illustrating a genealogical link between the Arabic and Greek texts through the names of the Sleepers. La Spisa argues that the almost complete overlap between the Arabic and Greek texts supports the hypothesis that the Arabic version is derived from the Greek. He additionally explores other Christian Arabic texts and demonstrates how the Palestinian-Melkite tradition continued to translate the Legend of the Seven Sleepers, which circulated in various versions and adaptations also in the following centuries³¹.

La Spisa's findings and analysis align closely with those of Nanobashvili. It could be interesting to understand whether both the Georgian and Arabic versions examined by the authors derive from the same Greek text from the 10th century. Furthermore, La Spisa's work confirms Nanobashvili's assumption that the Georgian version was translated in one of the monasteries or lavras in Palestine, which served as vibrant hubs for the cross-pollination and interconnectedness of Eastern Christian communities as early as the Middle Ages.

Vernacular forms of veneration

In the previous sections, through Nanobashvili's work, I explored how the veneration of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in the Georgian Kymenian translation reflects a profound syncretism, synthesizing elements from Medieval European, Syriac, and Coptic traditions, while blending theological, liturgical, and cultural aspects. According to the official liturgical calendar in Georgia, the Seven Sleepers are commemorated on August 4th and October 22nd. During my visits to various churches in Tbilisi on both dates, I sought specific observances dedicated to the Seven Sleepers. However, I found no distinct ceremonies or liturgical events associated with these feast days. This absence of dedicated observances raises important questions about the contemporary significance of the Seven Sleepers within the Georgian Orthodox Church, which merits

³⁰La Spisa, *Una recensione...* p. 254.

³¹La Spisa, *Una recensione...* p. 257.

further investigation across different regions and minority groups in Georgia in future research. Additionally, my inquiries with church priests in Tbilisi yielded limited information regarding prayers or specific liturgies associated with the feast of the Seven Sleepers, suggesting either a lack of attention to these dates or a more nuanced practice that remains less visible in public worship.

Despite the absence of distinct ceremonial observances, I came across two ecclesiastical magazines in the library that offered substantial sections on the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, recounting their legend as presented in the "Life of Saints" (2001), based on the Armenian translation by the Mekitarists. The first magazine presents a liturgy invoking the Seven Sleepers, asking for their intercession in prayer for children suffering from sickness, insomnia, and anxiety. This liturgy also seeks divine protection against the persecution of the Antichrist and shielding from the evil eye³². In this context, the invocation of the Seven Sleepers highlights their role as martyrs and protectors of the vulnerable, particularly children, linking them to both pastoral care and apotropaic functions. The prayer reads:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, who judges the living and the dead, with the prayers of the saints, the seven children of Ephesus, have mercy on us sinners. Save us from an immoral life, and by their providence, protect us from the unrighteous Antichrist in the shelter of your salvation. Amen. May the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus pray for the healing of children suffering from sickness, insomnia, anxiety, and deliverance from the persecution of the Antichrist.

This prayer emphasizes the multifaceted role of the Seven Sleepers in the liturgy, highlighting their function in healing, protection, and intercession against eschatological evil. By referencing the Antichrist, it indicates an influence stemming from Christian texts, such as the letters of Saint Paul and the Apocalypse of John. Yet, Tozzi di Marco notes that the Antichrist is an apocalyptic figure in Islamic tradition—considered the false Messiah who deceives the Muslim community at the End of Times and will ultimately be defeated by the true Messiah, Jesus³³. Furthermore, she points out a significant difference between Christian and Islamic accounts of the legend. In early Christianity, the Ephesian legend served an apologetic purpose, conveying the miracle of the Resurrection while honoring the

³² AA.VV. *Khsovna shvidta q'rmata Efeselta* [Commemoration of the Seven Infants of Ephesus] in "Mrevli" 151, 2011, p. 4-5.

³³ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*, p. 145.

first Christian martyrs. In contrast, when the legend is incorporated into the Qur'an in the Sura "The Cave", it shifts to a purely ethical and theological perspective, emphasizing the importance of surrendering to God, where true salvation is found³⁴. This element is present in the Troparion of the Georgian liturgy:

Your martyrs, O Lord, by their deeds, won the crown of sanctity. They drew their strength from You and overcame mighty forces, destroying idols. Through their actions, dear Jesus, they bring peace to our souls.

This text emphasizes the sanctity of the Seven Sleepers, positioning them as figures who transcended physical suffering to achieve divine glory. The notion of peace brought through their actions is tied to the eschatological victory over evil and the tangible protection they offer in the present. Yet, the Book of Liturgy instead expresses the miracle of resurrection, thus returning to the Christian tradition:

The inhabitants of the village, those who rejected corruption and received the gifts of uncorruption, are the ones who established the holy Seven Children. For these children, who will be resurrected later, were laid to rest amidst the unbelief of many years. Let all believers, filled with praise, sing to Christ today.

Here, the Seven Sleepers are positioned as symbols of uncorruption and resurrection, their veneration entwined with themes of spiritual renewal and hope for eternal life. This text underscores their continuing relevance not only in the context of personal protection but also as a reminder of the Christian eschatological promise.

An especially revealing anecdote from the second ecclesiastical magazine, authored by Bishop Isaiah of Nikoz and Tskhinvali, further highlights the syncretism of different traditions of the Seven Sleepers in contemporary Georgian Christianity³⁵. The article, titled *The Cure for Insomnia*, recounts a personal experience on the commemoration day of the Seven Sleepers. This anecdote vividly illustrates the practical, immediate impact of invoking the Seven Sleepers for the protection and healing of children, particularly for issues such as insomnia. Bishop Isaiah recalls:

Returning from the Martq'opi Monastery on the commemoration day of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, I attended the morning prayer service at the

³⁴ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*, p. 145.

³⁵ AA.VV. *Udzilobis k'urneba* [The cure for insomnia] in *K'aribch'è* 23, 2005.

Patriarchate. After the service, His Holiness read the life stories of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus and the saints commemorated that day. He said, 'Those who suffer from insomnia should pray to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. In the Great Blessing Book, special prayers are meant to be read by a priest, and anyone in need can ask a priest to read these prayers for the sick.' One of the nuns complained to His Holiness, 'My grandchild has insomnia; what should I do?' He replied, 'Take a priest to pray for him.' 'Which one?' she asked. His Holiness pointed to me and said, 'This one.' We quickly gathered the necessary items: the Great Blessing Book, a stole, bracelets, a censer, and candles. When we arrived at her grandchild's home and asked about him, we were told, 'He's sleeping.' We did not know what to do. After some brief discussion, we decided it would be best to pray anyway, so we tiptoed into the room where the child was peacefully sleeping. Quietly, so as not to wake him, I began to pray... but the young boy still woke up, got up, and left the room grumbling. We found ourselves in an odd situation—we had come to help him sleep but ended up waking him instead. That night, however, the boy reportedly slept more peacefully than usual. In a way, it worked out—by waking him during the day, he could sleep better at night³⁶.

The veneration of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus in these two examples thus reflects a deep syncretism, integrating Medieval European, Syriac, and Coptic traditions. In Medieval Europe, the Seven Sleepers were invoked to calm restless or sleepless children, likely due to their youthful age, emphasizing their pastoral role as protectors in everyday life. This influence is evident in Georgian practices, where the Seven Sleepers are called upon for children's illnesses, anxiety, and insomnia, blending medieval eschatological concerns with local pastoral needs. In Syriac Christianity, prayers to the Seven Sleepers were employed against insomnia, fever, and the evil eye, as documented by Louis Massignon in liturgical manuscripts of the Patriarchate of Antioch³⁷. These apotropaic practices resonate in Georgian liturgical texts, where the Seven Sleepers are invoked as protectors against the Antichrist and other evils, linking these practices to ancient Eastern Christian traditions.

Similarly, in Coptic Christianity, archaeological and literary evidence attests to the veneration of the Seven Sleepers, such as in the Nubian city of Faras, where a hermit's cave bore a written dedication to them³⁸. A magical papyrus containing apotropaic formulas against ailments further demonstrates their role as healers and protectors in Coptic rituals. Georgian

³⁶ Translated by the author of the article.

³⁷ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*, p. 68.

³⁸ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*, p. 53.

veneration of the Seven Sleepers thus incorporates both formal liturgical practices and folk-Christian traditions, blending theological elements with protective rituals. The use of ritual items such as the Great Blessing Book, a stole, bracelets, a censer, and candles enriches the practice with symbolic meanings: the Blessing Book provides theological legitimacy, the stole signifies priestly authority, the bracelets serve as protective objects linked to apotropaic traditions, and the censer and candles sanctify the space, aligning with Eastern Orthodox and Coptic practices. Together, these elements create a sacred atmosphere while reflecting a syncretic tradition that integrates Syriac apotropaic formulas, Coptic protective rituals, and European medieval customs. The invocation of the Seven Sleepers to combat insomnia and anxiety thus demonstrates the continuity of these traditions, rooted in Syriac Palestine, transmitted through Medieval Europe, and adapted into Georgian liturgy.

Conclusion

In her extensive examination of the hagiography surrounding the Seven Sleepers in both Christian and Muslim contexts, Tozzi di Marco notes that Guidi provides no reference to the Ephesian narrative within Georgian literature due to a lack of relevant information³⁹. However, she argues that because Georgia, along with Armenia, was among the first nations to embrace Christianity as a state religion in the mid-4th century—establishing its own national church several decades before the Roman Empire—the Georgian Church likely absorbed both Western and Eastern Syriac traditions through Armenian Christian influence⁴⁰. Indeed, this is supported by the work of Nanobashvili, who demonstrated that all the different redactions of the "Seven Infants of Ephesus" in the Kymenian edition originate from a common archetype presumably translated from Greek in Palestine before the 9th century. Nanobashvili reached this conclusion through a comparative analysis of the text "Torture of the Seven Infants," preserved in three manuscripts. This analysis revealed differences in phrasing, vocabulary, and non-standard grammatical forms, suggesting that the texts of the three manuscripts were not derived from one another. Nanobashvili explains these instances of cross-pollination and archaisms in Georgian translations by highlighting that, during the early stages of Georgian literature, the Georgians were well-connected in

³⁹ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*, p. 126.

⁴⁰ Tozzi di Marco, *Agiografia...*, p. 126.

the East, particularly with Christian countries such as Syria and Palestine. They engaged in extensive literary activities in three major centers within monasteries and lavras. Therefore, she posits that it is plausible to think that "The Torture of the Infants of Ephesus" was translated in one of those literary centers, most likely in Palestine, before the 9th century.

The brief analysis of the liturgy and the tale about the cure of insomnia in the second part of the article highlights how the prayers related to the Seven Sleepers demonstrate a synthesis of various written sources: Medieval Europe, the Syriac version from Palestine, and the translation into Coptic from Georgian. Further research is needed to investigate how the Seven Sleepers are venerated in contemporary Georgia. It would be interesting to explore their veneration in Adjara region, where about 30% of the Georgian ethnic population is Muslim, as well as among the Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia⁴¹. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to examine whether caves (Ashab al-Kahf) are venerated in Georgia, similar to those found in Azerbaijan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Syria. Hopefully, this article illustrates the importance of the Legend of the Seven Sleepers in the Georgian tradition during the Middle Ages and will encourage new scholars to explore this legend within the Georgian context, analyzing how it is embedded in the contemporary social and cultural landscape.

⁴¹ For an overview of faith-based activism as 'lived citizenship' among Georgian Muslims, especially in the Adjara region of Georgia, refer to Tsypylma Darieva *Claiming the city: Muslim faith-based activism as 'lived citizenship' in Georgia in Religion, State Society*, 2023, Vol 1, N. 1, 65-82.