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SAINT MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR AND MOUNTAINOUS COLCHIS (GEORGIA)

Abstract: Mountainous Colchis, part of Colchis, is located in the north-eastern part of Western Georgia. The name of Maximus the Confessor is associated with the history of Lechkhumi, one of the regions of mountainous Colchis. Lechkhumi (modern administratively known as Tsageri Municipality) has been a historical province of Georgia since ancient times, which, in addition to Georgian sources, is mentioned in Greek, Byzantine and Armenian sources - as Lechkhumi/Skvimia-Skvimnia/Takveri. The migration, death, and burial of St. Maximus the Confessor are connected with Lechkhumi. We are interested in information concerning a specific, local region - a small political unit called „Sadekhviro“, which included 9 villages and was considered the center of Lechkhumi. According to one folk legend, after moving to Lazika, St. Maximus first went to Lechkhumi, specifically to the Dekhviri fortress located in “Sadekhviro”, and in the neighboring village of Chkhuteli there was a monastery named after him. Scholars believe that the Maximus myth is of local Lechkhumi origin, and the mystery was held based on the Maximus myth with the participation of the villages of Dekhviri.

Key words: *St. Maximus the Confessor*, Lechkhumi, Sadekhviro, myth of Maximus, mystery, ritual procession

Mountainous Colchis, a part of Colchis, is located in northwestern Georgia. The name of Maximus the Confessor is associated with the history of one of the mountainous regions of Colchis, Lechkhumi. Lechkhumi (according to the modern administrative division – Tsageri municipality) has been a historical province of Georgia since the ancient times, and is mentioned in Greek, Byzantine and Armenian sources, in addition to Georgian ones, as Lechkhumi/Skvimia-Skvimnia/Takveri¹.

The migration, death, and burial of St. Maximus the Confessor are associated with Lechkhumi. We are interested in the information about Maximus

¹ N. Sulava, *Mountainous Colchis in Antiquity (Lechkhumi)*, Tbilisi, 1996, 7, 134, 137 (In Georgian).



Fig. 1 Muri fortress.

Сл. 1 Тврђава Мури.

the Confessor preserved in a specific region, a small political unit called “Sadekhviro”, which consisted of 9 villages and considered the centre of Lechkhumi.

According to one popular legend, Saint Maximus the Confessor, upon arriving in Lazika, was first sent to Lechkhumi, namely to the Dekhviri fortress, located in „Sadekhviro,“ not far from which, in the neighboring village of Chkhuteli, there was a monastery named after him; he died in the Muri fortress near Tsageri (Fig. 1).

According to another version, Blessed Maximus was taken from Lazika to Skimari. Skimari is believed to be modern-day Skimeri, located in the mountainous region of Lentekhi, near the Skimerula River. St Maximus reposed on August 13. His body was buried in the Skimari fortress. Three divine candles appeared at his grave, and numerous healings occurred. His remains were subsequently reburied in the Monastery of St. Arsen at the foot of the Muri fortress near Tsageri, that was later named after Maximus the Confessor, as his body was placed there. The grave of St. Maximus is still located in a small church built in the monastery complex named after him near the Muri fortress.

In 1914, in the village of Muri near Dekhviri, at the church of St. Maximus, photographer Dmitri Yermakov took several photographs of the 80-year-old peasant Bekolia Kvirikashvili who lived in the village of Chkhuteli and was a storyteller of the legends about Maximus the Confessor, as well as a participant of ritual procession of “Muroba” (“weather prediction”)² (Fig. 2, 3).

Scholars suggest that the myth of Maximus is of local, Lechkhumi, origin and that a sacred mystery based on the myth of Maximus was performed with the participation of residents of the Dekhviri villages.

The name of Maximus the Confessor (580-662 AD) is unknown in other parts of Georgia. The first information about the burial of Maximus the

² N. Sulava, T. Agapishvili, N. Kopaliani, I. Koridze, M. Pataridze, I. Bakradze, R. Chagelishvili, G. Mamardashvili, *Tsageri Historical Museum (Album)*, Tbilisi 2012, 82.

Confessor in Lechkhumi comes from the Georgian historian and geographer Vakhushti Batonishvili (1696-1757). According to him, the fortress of Dekhviri stands on a cape on the banks of the Tskhenistskali River. Whoever owns this fortress is the lord of Takveri (that is, Lechkhumi). South of Dekhviri, in Tsageri, a large church stands, above which there is a monastery named after Maximus the Confessor, where he is buried. And above it, there is the Muri fortress, along which the road to Svaneti runs³.

The first information about St. Maximus was written down in 1910 in Tsageri and published in Russian in 1912 by Korneli Kekelidze⁴. A student at St. Petersburg University, Dimitri Kipshidze, who, on behalf of Niko Marr, was conducting excavations in the village of Muri to discover the grave of Maximus the Confessor, collected more materials in 1914.

The notes on the myth of Maximus (nine texts), compiled in 1914, were first published by Mikheil Chikovani in 1969, along with his own notes in the work “Maximus the Confessor in Georgian Legends of the VII-VIII Centuries”⁵. Information on the myth of Maximus the Confessor in Lechkhumi is contained in the works of ethnologists Mikhail Alavidze and Papala Gardaphkhadze⁶.

According to the recollections of storytellers in the first ethnological notes, recorded in 1910 and 1914, the last “Muroba” – “The Mystery of Maximus” – was performed 30-35 years ago, that is, around the 1880s. In the 1960s, there were still people in Dekhviri who remembered the myth, but no one remembered the mystery based on it, which was performed by residents of the Dekhviri villages.

The resounding fame of Maximus the Confessor in Lechkhumi gave impetus to the search for folklore material, initiated by A.I. Brilliantov from the Petersburg Scientific Society⁷.

Zurab Kiknadze considers:

The myth’s distribution area is very narrow - it is widespread only in the Dekhviri community, and outside of it, it is as if no one has heard of it. The story of Maximus might have remained a legend, with all its mythical depth, if it had not, as a scenario, formed the basis of an annual ritual (mystery performance).

What we have here is a myth in the classical sense: it contains a verbal text—the myth—and an action—the ritual based on the text⁸.

³ Vakhushti, *Description of the Kingdom of Georgia (Kartli’s life IV)*, Tbilisi 1973, 749 (In Georgian).

⁴ K. Kekelidze, *Etudes from the History of Ancient Georgian Literature: Volume VII*, Tbilisi 1961, 33. (In Georgian).

⁵ M. Chikovani, *Maximus the Confessor in Georgian Legends of the 7th-8th Centuries (Issues of Greek and Georgian Mythology)*, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi 1971, 62 and following (In Georgian).

⁶ M. Alavidze, *Lechkhumi Oral Literature*. Tbilisi. 1952, 152 and following (In Georgian). F. Gardaphkhadze, *Georgian Folk Holidays (Racha-Lechkhumi)*, Tbilisi 1955, 53, 54 (In Georgian).

⁷ A. I. Brilliantov, *On the Place of Death and Burial of Maximus the Confessor*, Petrograd, 1918, 62. Idem, *Emperor Constantine the Great and the Edict of Milan of 313 – On the place of death and burial of Maximus the Confesso*. Saint Petersburg 2006, 5-30.

⁸ Z. Kiknadze, *Saint Maximus in Georgian Folklore. Georgian Folklore*, 4 (XX),



Fig. 2 80 years old serf Bekolia Kvirikashvili from Chkhuteli, Saint Maximus' story-teller and the participant of the "Muroba". 1914.

Сл. 2 80-годишњи кмет Беколиа Квирикашвили из Чхутелија, приповедач прича о Светом Максиму и учесник „Муробе“. 1914.

According to the records of K. Kekelidze, D. Kipshidze, M. Chikovani, P. Gardapkhadze and M. Alavidze, the plot of the myth of Maximus is the following:

1. Maximus is a kind, philanthropic, and "devout" man. He lives in Dekhviri, in the hollow of a large lime, but no one knows where he has come from; He wanders from village to village to pray in churches and eradicate injustice – "St. Maximus walked like a traveler, never settling in one place".

2. In Dekhviri lives a man named Chabukiani (nickname Kareishvili), the complete opposite of Maximus: evil, nasty, malicious, godless, unbeliever, breaking the fasts and violating the holidays. "He had a habit of driving cattle into other people's pastures".

3. Maximus exposes Chabukiani repeatedly, but to no avail. He drives the cattle back from the other men's pastures, repairs the broken fences, and warns him, but Kareishvili continues his villainous deeds.

4. On threshing day, when the village is sweltering and everyone is threshing, rain clouds appear over the Chabukiani's threshing floor and dampens his sheaves ready for threshing. Chabukiani is unable to thresh the grain. The same happens on the second and third days.

5. Furious Chabukiani fires his gun at the cloud, and dead Maximus falls down in front of him.

6. Chabukiani secretly buries the deceased at the place of the murder. At night, he comes to inspect the grave but finds the dead alive; and it goes on and on, wherever he buries him, the same thing happens again (the places of burial are Churistskali – the old church of Dekhviri – Kokoshas Tsveri – the church of Tskheta – Genishis Tsvero – the church of Chkhuteli).

7. Tormented by the impossibility of burying the deceased, Kareishvili dreams: Maximus appears and advises him to put his body on a sledge pulled by unbroken young oxen and let it go. Where the oxen fall, that's where he should be buried. The young oxen rush at great speed past Tskheta, Orbeli's Tsveri, Muri bridge, and fall down at the Muri fortress. There he is buried. Burial is a

culmination of the myth's narrative, but it is not an end in itself, it has an additional meaning: apart from the fact that the rite has been performed and the dead has been buried with the participation of the entire village (that is, justice has been restored towards the deceased), the burial site will be the final point of the mystery procession organized subsequently. The distance between the first and second burials is the route of mystery procession. Later, at the end of this route, on the site of the final burial, a church dedicated to Saint Maximus will be built. The burial of the deceased is not the end of the story. Undoubtedly, there is some sign in the fact that immediately after his burial, a heavy rain begins, and now not only Kareishvili but the entire village cannot thresh grain. It seems that the village itself is tainted by sin.

9. Kareishvili begins to repent: now Maximus appears before his killer for the second time and warns him, that he would stop raining at his threshing floor only at the request of the entire village. He teaches them how to behave, how to pray to him for the cessation of rain, and in case of drought, for its sending down. This is the last phase of the myth's narrative, where the mystery starts – St. Maximus establishes a ritual for the village to perform during times of draughts or continuous rainfall. The establishment of the mystery in the village marks the introduction of a moral transformation. A new life begins in the village: it now has its patron saint.

The last participants in the mystery, including a man who bore the same name as the first Chabukiani-Kareishvili, recount the course of the mystery, and, according to Zurab Kiknadze, if one studies the text, compiled from various records, one can extract the following information:

During draught or storm, on a designated day (Monday or Thursday), by agreement of the villagers, early in the morning, at the call of a horn, about forty people from the five villages of Dekhviri society (Chvalbechi, Tskheta, Lashvana, Tsilamieri, Lesindi) would gather, one (living chastely for one week) man from each family. Women were strictly forbidden from participating in the mystery. Barefooted and unbelted, the Memures (as the participants in the mystery are called) led by Kareishvili and a barefooted priest, go first to Churistskali to the large lime (it was here that Kareishvili first buried Maximus), kneel and supplicate: "Saint Maximus and God, you created heaven and earth! Clear up the weather!" From there, the procession walks at a quick pace along the road where the oxen that carried Maximus's body for burial passed. Thus, the Memures become participants in an event that took place in illo tempore. Now, they, this generation buries Maximus. They pass all the places where the oxen passed with the body of Maximus, chanting (with Kareishvili usually being the lead singer), kneeling and supplicating – "St. Maximus, grant us sunny weather! Hear our prayers! Oohio! Oohio!" At the top of Orbeli, near the cross, as a sign of repentance, they tie twisted hazel rods around their necks and continue the way to the grave of St. Maximus, where the church named after him stands. As the Memures always follow the path trodden by the oxen, even though over time a building or a field of grain appeared along this path, this does not hinder them, not a house, if it has been built on the old road – they enter through the door and exit out of a window, not a grain field, vegetable garden, yard or fence – they break, smash, trample everything, they stop at nothing and



Fig. 3 Ritual procession “Muroba” (weather praying) with the participation of Bekolia Kvirikashvili. 1914.

Сл. 3 Обредна поворка „Муроба“ (молба за време) уз учешће Беколије Квирикашвилија. 1914.

shy away from no one. Those they encounter remove their hats and respectfully let them pass, otherwise they’ll run them over. If anyone laughs, they’ll be beaten. The people with hazel rods around their necks finally arrive in Muri and stop at the church, walk around it thrice, then kneel, wail and ask St. Maximus and God not only for good weather, but also for forgiveness. Then they ask the intermediary (whether a priest or bell ringer) to intercede. The intermediary enters the church, emerges after a while, and tells the people: “Maximus is very angry; he will not listen to your prayers, for you are very sinful, as you do not observe holidays and fasts”. People: “If only he would forgive us now, we will never make a mistake again”. This is repeated twice. When he comes out third time, he delights the people, telling them that St. Maximus has forgiven them their sins. People remove the hazel rods from their necks, throw them there, and go home. The narrator adds that as soon as the Memures used to disperse, rain began to fall or the sun came out (depending on what they asked for).

Zurab Kiknadze notes that we have before us a unique myth that grew on local soil, from a small world, such as the Dekhviri society in Lechkhumi. The real Maximus was a prisoner in the fortress of Muri, and it’s doubtful he ever left it during his stay there. However, folklore tradition claims otherwise: “St. Maximus walked like a traveler, never settling in one place”. The most characteristic feature, which is easy to remember, namely, that his tongue and hand were cut off, is unknown to folklore. A stranger, a wanderer, a pauper—these are the notable characteristics of Maximus. It is difficult to say how Christ-loving the population of Dekhviri must have been in the middle of the VII century, but it is easy to understand what impression the prisoner of the Muri fortress must have left on them, someone they probably had never seen and could not understand the reasons for his resettlement and mutilation. But

one thing is clear: in their eyes, this man must have been a complete stranger, entirely different from them, whose origins no one knew; who he was, where he came from, this orphan and rootless man, where he lived, a man whose death and burial revolutionized the village. Maximus, in his strangeness, is akin both to mythical figures and to Christian monks who deliberately leave their homeland and pursue ascetic labors in a foreign land. The highest dignity of an ascetic, a Christian toiler, is the complete mystery of his origins, when his only homeland is the „Heavenly Jerusalem.“ It is from there that he comes to a foreign land to establish a „heavenly“ order. According to one of the records, Maximus lives in the hollow of a lime tree (the lime is a leitmotif of the myth and mystery of Maximus). His residence in the hollow supposedly indicates that he does not belong to this world. His characteristic trait is restlessness. „He never stayed in one place“, „wandered from village to village“ – this is how his essence was reflected in the popular imagination. He is a real stranger, wanderer in this microcosm. With his restlessness and constant movement, he opposes the earthly world, and thus embodies the Christian ideal. Maximus’s mission is revealed through the existence of Chabukiani. If not for Chabukiani’s antisocial and antimoral behavior, Maximus would never have appeared in the village. But where there’s crime, there’s exposure, and where there’s exposure, there’s both the exposor and the executor of the punishment. Chabukiani commits a crime against God and the village. The crime against God consisted of violating the holiday. If a holiday is a sign of divine order in the village, then violating it is a rebellion against divine order. The crime against the village is expressed in aggression, non-compliance and violation of the rights of fellow villagers. Chabukiani (Kareishvili) belongs to a group of people (or families, or clans) who try to become master of the village in one way or another. The village resists their aggression, but if the village is powerless against them, the village’s supreme patron (a saint, a cross) becomes its protector and stops and punishes⁹.

The important role of the myth of St. Maximus with these villages. Sadekhviro by the connection of the myth of St. Maximus with these villages. Sadekhviro is one of the historical parts of Lechkhumi, its integral part. And Lechkhumi is considered one of the cradles of the Colchian bronze culture, as evidenced by archaeological materials – from sites of copper metallurgy to Colchian settlements and burial grounds of the classical period¹⁰.

⁹ Z. Kiknadze, *Georgian Mythology. Kutaisi*. 1996, 172. (In Georgian).

¹⁰ L. Sakharova, *The Late Bronze Culture of the Tskhenistskali River Gorge (Dissertation for the scientific degree of the candidate of historical sciences)*. Tbilisi 1966, 18-164 (In Georgian). L. Sakharova, *Burials of the Classical Period. Journal „Soviet Art“*, N 9, Tbilisi 1967, 79, 80 (In Georgian). Idem, *Bronze Hoards from Lechkhumi*, Tbilisi 1976, 5-78 (In Georgian). N. Sulava, *Mountainous Colchis in Antiquity (Lechkhumi)*, Tbilisi 1996, 3-157 (In Georgian). †L. Sakharova, Sulava, *Tskheta Settlement (Results of the Work of the 1970-71 Lechkhumi Archaeological Expedition)*. Proceedings of the Tsageri Historical Museum I, Tbilisi 2014, 67-87 (In Georgian). N. Sulava, Br. Gilmour, N. Rezesidze, R. Chagelishvili, T. Beridze, *The Origin and Development of Prehistoric Copper Metallurgy in Mountainous Colchis (Lechkhumi)*, Tbilisi 2020, 28-30, 115, 61-65, 144 (In Georgian and English). file:///C:/Users/User/Desktop/Sulava-120cfe8d08eaca1f499142ffcd40d99ce5c20d66.pdf

The presence of burial grounds of the classical period (Tskheta cemetery) in Sadekhviro, dating back to the IV c. BC – IV c. AD, indicates the existence of a population of that time and also suggests the existence of an early Christian building layer.

Conclusion. The mystery rite performed in the name of Maximus and with his invisible participation at the turn of the XIX-XX centuries in Lechkhumi, in the villages of the Dekhviri community, documents the exile of the famous Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor to Lechkhumi, where he was imprisoned and died in the Muri fortress. The myth of Maximus is of local, Lechkhumi origin and is associated with the Dekhviri villages. His name is unknown in other parts of Georgia.

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СВЕТИ МАКСИМ ИСПОВЕДНИК И ПЛАНИНСКА КОЛХИДА

Име Максима Исповедника, његово пресељење, смрт и сахрана повезани су са планинским регионом Колхиде, Лечхумијем (Грузија, општина Цагери), који се у грчким, византијским и јерменским изворима, као и у грузијским, помиње као Лечхуми/Сквимиа-Сквимниа/Таквери. Сачувани подаци о Максиму Исповеднику везани су за одређени регион, малу политичку јединицу под називом „Садехвиرو“, која се састојала од 9 села и сматрала се центром Лечххумија.

Према једној од распрострањених легенди, Свети Максим Исповедник, прогнан у Лазику (Колхетију), најпре је послат у Лечхуми, тачније у тврђаву Дехвири („Садехвиру“). Сахрањен је у тврђави Мури, у близини Цагерија. Према другој верзији, из Лазике је прогнан у Скимар (вероватно Сванетију), где је умро 13. августа. Његово тело је сахрањено у тврђави Скимар. Потом је поново сахрањено у малој цркви подигнутој у његово име, у близини тврђаве Мури, у оквиру манастирског комплекса.

У Лечхумију су настале легенде о Максиму Исповеднику, као и обредна поворка заснована на тим митовима – „Муроба“ („молба за временску прогнозу“). Научници претпостављају да је мит о Максиму локалног, лечхумијског порекла, посебно везан за села „Садехвира“, будући да ове легенде нису познате другде. Обредна поворка заснована на миту о Светом Максиму обављала се уз учешће становника села Дехвири.