

Materials for St Gabriel Mtsire's biography and his written heritage

Abstract: The data on Gabriel Mtsire's life and activities contained in historical documents are quite sparse. We have obtained the available materials concerning his life and activities and based on the conducted work, some new details of Gabriel Mtsire's biography have been defined. His ordination as a priest must have happened from January 25, 1786 to July 10, 1892. The date of his death is Tuesday, 11th of March, 1802. The time period when Gabriel Mtsire was canonized as a saint is defined not earlier than March 11, 1802 and no later than April 3, 1815.

Key words: *Gabriel Mtsire, biography, Georgian manuscript, David Gareja monastery, theological literature.*

Over the centuries, outstanding figures of Georgian culture created original ecclesiastical works and brilliant translations of Christian literature at enlightenment seats and monasteries both in Georgia herself and abroad. In this respect, of particular importance are the activities of the Church Fathers in the monasteries of Gareja Mravalmta monastic complex in the 17th-18th centuries.

In the bosom of Gareja Mravalmta monasteries zealous monks created the works reflecting the life and deeds of Georgian saints, collections on dogmatic issues, specimens of liturgical writing, original works and patristic collections, which represent the treasury of Georgian theological and ecclesiastical literature.

At the end of the 18th century, Gabriel Mtsire, who was the most prominent representative of the Gareja literary school of that time, labored in the Gareja Mravalmta monastic complex, namely, in the monastery of St. John the Baptist (Natlismtsemeli). Although here and there more or less valuable information about his works can be found but there has not yet been any fundamental scholarly research about the life and activities of this extremely important figure.

As far as it is possible, we have obtained the available materials concerning St Gabriel's life and activities. The data on Gabriel Mtsire's life and activities contained in historical documents are quite sparse. There exists no extensive and accurate biography of him so far. Therefore, we had to establish some dates or make suppositions. Based on the conducted work, some new details of Gabriel Mtsire's biography have been defined. We have investigated St Gabriel's literary heritage, all the works available for today and established their authorship, the issues related to the compilation of collections, the origin of the narratives included in the works, etc.

The study of the text of the manuscript *Jvarshemosili* (Cross-bearer or *Stavrophore*) (Stavrophore f 6) preserved in the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford defines Gabriel Mtsire's arrival date to the monastery. According to this record, Saint Gabriel appeared in the monastery shortly after hieroschemamonk Serapion passed away in 1773. From this record it becomes obvious that Gabriel Mtsire must have come to the monastery around 1773. Obviously, prior to this date, Saint Gabriel could not have been tonsured a monk. Before taking monastic vows, he was a tailor, native of Tbilisi.

According to Ivane Lolashvili, when St. Gabriel came to the monastery, he was about 20-25 years old (Lolashvi 1962). The documentary evidence supporting this opinion has not been

found in the depositories of antiquities by this time. Despite this, if we take into consideration his opinion (presumably, he had a documentary evidence of this), it would be possible to suppose St Gabriel Mtsire's date of birth. Namely: subtracting 20-25 years from 1773, i.e. the saint must have been born between the years 1748 and 1753.

Based on the comparison of the facts, the period of time was defined when St Gabriel ordained as a priest: 1. In the *Jvarshemosili* St Gabriel narrates about the case when he came to pray to the grave of 6000 martyrs. At that time, on January 25, 1786, there was a big battle between King David II and Turk-Leki (Daghestan) troops. In the mentioned narration St Gabriel refers to himself as a hierodeacon. 2. On one of the inscriptions of Gabriel Mtsire's narrative, dated July 10, 1892, he refers to himself as a hieromonach. Thus, Gabriel Mtsire's ordination as a priest must have happened from January 25, 1786 to July 10, 1892.

Various historical facts confirm St. Gabriel's close relationship with the royal family. In this regard, of particular interest is the narration from *Jvarshemosili* which clearly shows that Gabriel Mtsire accompanied King Giorgi during the opening of the relics of Ioane Mangneli. According to Saint Gabriel's account, this was done secretly.

As to the date and circumstances of the death of St. Gabriel Mtsire, two different manuscripts complement each other. They are: 1. Ms *Gvirgvini* copied by Batonishvili Bagrat (The Crown A 228) and 2. Ms *Jvarshemosili*. Both sources attest that Gabriel Mtsire was killed by the Leki (Daghestanians) on the way to the monastery. These two sources have different narrations about the reason of leaving the monastery by Gabriel Mtsire. According to the first source, Archbishop Ioane Chubinidze asked St. Gabriel to accompany him to Tbilisi to visit his family. According to the second source, the reason for leaving the monastery was Gabriel Mtsire's disease.

In our opinion, maybe Father Gabriel was even sick but nonetheless, he accompanied Ioane Chubinidze (his spiritual brother), since he did not consider it expedient to let him go alone. It is noteworthy that in the inscription of the *Gvirgvini* only the year of Gabriel Mtsire's death is indicated (1802), and in the manuscript *Jvarshemosili* - the day, date and month (Tuesday, 11th of March). We checked out and it appeared that March 11, 1802 was really Tuesday. This is precisely the date of martyrdom of Gabriel Mtsire. Saint Gabriel was buried in the St John the Baptist monastery (Gareja, Mravalmta).

It is true, the exact date of Gabriel's canonization is not found anywhere, but on the basis of the study we have determined the time period of the mentioned fact. In the record of the son of King Giorgi, Bagrat Batonishvili, dated April 3, 1815, Gabriel Mtsire is referred to as a saint. As is known, Gabriel Mtsire was killed by the Leki (Daghestanians) on March 11, 1802. Therefore, the time period when Gabriel Mtsire was canonized as a saint is defined not earlier than March 11, 1802 and no later than April 3, 1815.

At that time, in Georgia canonization, i.e., to declare a saint occurred by the unanimous decision of the clergy and secular people, and not by the decision of the Synod. Proceeding from the above mentioned, the canonization of Gabriel Mtsire as a monk-martyr must have happened also by unanimous decision. Presumably, St. Gabriel must have been canonized during his burial or close to this time period. The canonization time of St. Shushanik, St. Giorgi Mtatsmindeli and many other saints gives ground for this supposition.

Gabriel Mtsire began his literary activity in the 80s of the 18th century. Initially, he copied the existing manuscripts, but not as an ordinary copyist. He organized the manuscripts from structural and linguistic viewpoints.

Saint Gabriel, as an editor and compiler, based on the reflections of the Fathers of Christian Church of that time, compiled the collections well known by that time: *Gvirgvini* (The Crown), *Samotkhis Quavili* (The Flower of Paradise) (Gabriel Mtsire 2017), *Okhros Tsqaro* (The Gold Brook) (Gabriel Mtsire 2019a), *Klite* (The Key) (Gabriel Mtsire 2019b), *Supeva* (The Reign) (The Reign H 906), *Manana* (Manna) (Manna H 1748), *Samaseuli* (The Three Hundred) (Gabriel Mtsire 2018). Comparative analysis of these collections and the data indicated in various sources evidence that they were all compiled by Gabriel Mtsire. The number of narrations and chapters in each book are interpreted symbolically, and the narrations are included in the book in a revised form. An identical editorial and compiling approach to these collections and free revision of the text makes clear the literary principles established by the compiler of these collections, which contributed much to the renewal and development of Georgian ecclesiastical writing.

Apart from the fact that all the above-mentioned manuscripts are compiled in one style, with one and the same compositional approach, with only one exception (*Samaseuli*), each of them is supplemented with so-called “Stamp” in which St Gabriel explains the symbolism of compilation the collections. It should be noted that most of the autographs of these books are attached with the same author's signature as in his original texts.

Along with editorial and compiling activities, Gabriel Mtsire also had original writings which include: *An Explanation of the Hierarchical Liturgy*, *The Life and Labors of Venerable Schemamonk Onisphore*, *Spiritual Stories of the Pious*, *An Explanation of the Our Father*, *An Explanation of the Mazar* and *A Short Story of Porfiry*. Only the first two are copied into separate manuscript. In 1801-1802, St Gabriel united all these works in the collection entitled the *Jvarshemosili* (*Stavrophore*).

Though the *Jvarshemosili* does not have a colophon indicating the authorship of St. Gabriel, neither the date of writing the composition, the research conducted in this direction confirms the authenticity of his authorship and approximate date of writing. Two compositions included in the *Jvarshemosili* which are copied as separate manuscripts, are accompanied with colophons testifying that their author is St Gabriel. The *Jvarshemosili* could not be created after March 11, 1802, as St Gabriel had been martyred by that time. It could not have been written until 1801, because the monk Porfiry at that time was alive, but in the book he is referred to as a person who already passed to eternal rest and Gabriel Mtsire devoted to him the narrative and epitaph. Hence, it is established that the compilation of the *Jvarshemosili* was completed in 1801 or 1802.

Gabriel Mtsire's last piece of work seems to have been the *Qebiti Sitkva* (The Word of Praise). This text was pronounced by him at a funeral for the monk Ioanike, who passed away in 1802. And Gabriel Mtsire, as we mentioned above, passed to eternal rest in March 11, 1802. Therefore, the *Qebiti Sitkva* must have been written from the beginning of 1802 until March 11, 1802.

As for the printed editions of Gabriel Mtsire's literary heritage, they may be conventionally presented in two phases by chronology: 1) several collections published by St. Stephane Karbelashvili in 1892-1905, after printing of them nothing was done in this

direction for a long time and 2) publications of complete and fragmentary texts of St. Gabriel Mtsire prepared by Grigol Peradze, Ivane Lolashvili, Zaza Skhirtladze, Kakhaber Kenkishvili, Ekvtime Kochlamazshvili, Enriko Gabidzashvili, Mikheil Kavtaria, Valeri Silogava, Pavle Tsiklauri, David Chanadiri and Georgi Kalandadze in 1934, 1965, 1990, 1992 , 1996, 1999, 2002, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018 and 2019.

On the basis of the study of book depositories existing in Georgia and abroad, as well as printed sources, we have compiled a bibliography of Gabriel Mtsire's autographs and their copies, which has not been compiled so far.

The study of Gabriel Mtsire's life and activities has revealed hitherto unknown details of his life, highlighted the significance of the original works and editorial-compilation activity of this saint monk in the development of Georgian literature.

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