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Bodbe Convent in Georgia

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English / Προσκυνήματα-Οδοιπορικά-Τουρισμός



Bodbe Convent, where the relics of St. Nino, Equal to the Apostles and enlightener of Georgia lie, is situated in eastern Georgia (Kakheti), two kilometers south of the city of Sighnaghi, in a picturesque place, at the feet of the Great Caucasian Range. The convent has a miraculous view of the Alazani Valley and the

snow-capped mountains of Caucasus.

According to ancient literary sources, the convent was founded right after St. Nino's earthly life, in the first part of the fourth century.
St. Nino's ancestral roots lead to Cappadocia. Her father Zabulon, a general of the Roman Emperor Maximian, introduced Christianity to ten fiefdoms of the Gallic lands. He was married to Sosanna, a sister of the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Their only daughter was Nino.

St. Nino was twelve years old when her family left their home and set out for Jerusalem. Zabulon gave all his possessions to the poor and chose a life of ascetic solitude in the Jordanian desert, while Sosanna looked after the weak and the miserable. Nino's uncle, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, gave her up to be raised by Sarah from Bethlehem, who served at Christ's Sepulchre.

The Virgin Mary appeared to St.Nino when the latter was fourteen years old, and announced her important destiny through a divine revelation to her -to preach the True Faith in the Virgin's chosen holy place of Iberia (Georgia). Blessed to serve as an Apostle, with the sign of God's will, the Mother of God gave her a cross made of branches of vine, which St. Nino bound with her own hair. (The Cross of St. Nino is currently kept in Tbilisi, in the Sioni Cathedral).

In Georgia, the country which St. Nino converted to Christianity around 327-332 A.D., she completed her mission with a lot of work and prayer. Her prayers cured Queen Nana from a serious disease and made her believe in the True God, and King Mirian himself soon followed her example. Shortly afterwards the entire population was baptized in the waters of the Aragvi River in Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Georgia.



After completing her great deeds, St. Nino reposed in the village of Bodbe, and there, in accordance with God’s providence, she was buried.

King Mirian, wishing to honour the Enlightener of Georgia, intended to transfer the relics of the Saint to Mtskheta, to the Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli, where the tunic of Christ (allotted to Georgian Jews after the Crucifixion) was buried. However, not even two hundred people could move her coffin from its place. Soon the King St. Mirian built a church on the burial place of the Saint. Before passing away the king said to Queen St. Nana, “You, Nana, if God grants you enough time, divide the royal treasury into two and sacrifice half of it to the tomb. Let this place be honoured unto the ages.”

Since then, Bodbe Convent has witnessed many interesting historical events. In the fifth century the faithful King Vakhtang Gorgasali, who was distinguished for being most beloved and marked by St.Nino’s grace, widened and decorated the church and the tomb. In the 8th – 9th centuries it acquired a “three-church” basilica form. In the 12th c, another Georgian King Demetre I, the son of the faithful King David the Builder, renovated the whole site.



The tomb of St. Nino was revered so much that even Tatar-Mongols, who had devastated the entire country, did not dare to desecrate it, although they did some damage to the church itself.

During the Middle Ages the Bodbe church became the place where the coronation of Kakhetian Kings took place. It is well known that Persian Shah Abbas I witnessed the coronation of Teimuraz I (1589-1663), but this did not keep him from almost destroying the Convent just a few years later. Soon afterwards, in order to rebuild

the church, King Teimuraz I himself worked very hard there.

From time immemorial, Bodbe Convent represented not only an ecclesiastical but also a cultural centre. A theological school started functioning in the 17th century, where not only theological subjects, but also popular sciences were taught. Here was also located one of the richest book depositories in Georgia. From the second half of 18th century, there existed a monastery with numerous monks in Bodbe.

19th century brought a lot of trouble to Georgia and its church. In 1801 the Russian Emperor Alexander I annulled the Kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti and proclaimed it a Russian province, which was a rude violation of the,"Georgievsky Traktat," – an agreement of friendship between Georgia and Russia signed in 1783. The agreement was made with the coreligionist country, Russia, by King Erekle II in order to protect Georgia from invasions by Muslim aggressors.

Soon the Church of Georgia shared the fate of the country, and its autocephaly, which was granted to Georgia in the fifth century from Antioch, was annulled by the decision of the Holy Synod of Russia in 1811. Since then the Church of Georgia was ruled by Russian bishops. In that period many dioceses were dissolved, the Bodbe diocese among them in 1837.

The last Bishop of the Bodbe before the end of the Eparchy was the illustrious ecclesiastical person Ivane Maqashvili (Bodbeli). By him, in 1823, the Convent was reconstructed and decorated once more, the cathedral was painted, and a new iconostasis was constructed. (The frescoes and iconostasis still exist).

The bishop's palace was built in the area attached to the yard of the church. The annulment of the Bodbe Eparchy and seminary coincided with the death of Ivane Maqashvili. However, the monastery in Bodbe was still functioning, ruled by archimandrites. Under the leadership of Archimandrite Nikoloz Mikeladze there was built a three-storey bell-tower, which still stands in the yard of the Bodbe Convent. Soon the monastery was also dissolved and was later restored thanks to the great efforts of the famous icon painter Michael Sabinin, who took on the responsibility of taking care of the monastery, which had been left without hosts. His untiring work was preparing the ground for the foundation of a convent.

The first inhabitants of the reopened convent were twelve sisters sent by the Russian Emperor Alexander III after his visit to Georgia. One of those sisters, Abbess Juvenalia, became the first Mother Superior of the Convent.

Mother Tamar (in the world, Georgian Princess Tamar Marjanishvili, the sister of the famous theatrical director, Kote Marjanishvili) was her successor, who subsequently

became famous by her activity in Russia.



At the beginning of the 20th century, there were three hundred sisters living in Bodbe, and there was a school, educating girls from noble families.
Bodbe was awarded the title of a first-class monastery by the Order of Russian Emperor Nikolai II in 1906.
In 1917, some hierarchs of the Church of Georgia, taking advantage of the situation in Russia, managed to restore the autocephaly of the Apostolic Church of Georgia. Later, the political independence of Georgia was also restored.

Sir Oliver Wardrope, who visited the place in 1919 and was fascinated by the Cloister, in a letter to his wife speaks well about the state of the monastery in former times: "…We reached the convent where we found a triumphal arch erected (made of foliage) and were received by the Mother Superior (a Princess Vachnadze). The nuns, in their black robes with their curious tall headdresses and veils, the girls of the convent school (all in white dresses) and the people of the neighbouring villages, were all collected in the inclosure of the convent. The priest led me into the little church, originally built in the fourth century, and held a short service for a few minutes, praying for the servant of God, Oliver, and the nuns sang a hymn … Then the abbess showed me around the girls' school-dormitories, class-rooms, refectory, kitchen and the work rooms where carpets, embroidery, ecclesiastical vestments and icons are made … We also saw the large garden attached to the convent and then loaded with flowers, presented by the girls and thrown into the car and, amid the shouts of the people, we galloped (or rather accompanied our galloping escort) into Signakh." It is worthwhile mentioning that this letter was passed over to the contemporary Mother Superior of the convent,

Abbess Theodora, by the daughter of Oliver Wardrope Nino, not long before her death (2004).



Bell-tower

In 1921 the independence of Georgia, unfortunately, appeared to have a very short life and was annulled as a result of the second annexation, this time by Bolshevik Russia. This process was accompanied by the persecution of the Church of Georgia and closing of monasteries, the Bodbe convent among them. It happened in 1924. The last person in charge there was the Mother Superior of the Convent, Abbess Nino (in the world Princess Elene Vachnadze). Being very hardworking, she was a disciplinarian of the Bodbe School. She helped young people to become acquainted with monastic life, and till the last moment, she looked after her dear home. Bolsheviks threatened to kill her many times, but she, with God's help protected her vulnerability with a shield of faith. Nevertheless, in the end she was forced to leave Bodbe. She spent the rest of her life in Tbilisi and served at the Anchiskhati Church. After she passed away, according to her will, her remains were taken back and buried in the yard of the convent.

The dilapidated Bodbe convent came back to life only in recent times, in 1991.
Now the convent consists of thirty sisters. The inheritresses of the great monastic traditions of the Bodbe convent are mostly young. Under the leadership of the current Mother Superior, Abbess Theodora, the sisters ceaselessly work to rebuild and strengthen the roots of their convent.



The cemetery

The convent, with the help of parishioners and lay people, slowly but surely is starting to regain its former appearance. It is being developed and rebuilt. St.Nino's tomb has already been redecorated; half-destroyed buildings and the font at St. Nino's spring were restored. A small church has been erected to glorify the Saint's parents Sts. Zabulon and Sosanna. Refectory "Pilgrim" has been open for numerous visitors. A modern hotel will be built in the near future. The convent cultivates many crops and has an icon painting and needlework studio. Following the old traditions of Georgian monasteries, the sisters carry out research studies in the field of old Georgian literature (the Georgian language is one of the most unique and ancient in the world with its own elegant script). On the basis of ancient Georgian manuscripts they prepare books used in divine services for publishing. Most importantly, there is a daily cycle of prayers for peace, the prosperity of Georgia and the whole Orthodox world, read at the grave of the Equal to the Apostles, St. Nino.

St. Nino's Tomb offers healing, both spiritual and physical, and the inhabitants of the Convent help pilgrims to come closer to this constant spring of holiness.

Source: *Bodbe Convent of St. Nino, 4200 Signagi Region, Georgia, 2009.*