



Saint Menas in Medieval Georgia¹

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Abstract: Despite the survival of St Menas's hagiography in various Georgian iterations and his commemoration in practically all Georgian calendars and martyrologies – both pre-Constantinopolitan and Byzantine – the cult of St Menas was weak in Georgia. To this day, collections of St Menas's miracles in Georgian await discovery, apart from one miracle discussed near the end of my article. Nonetheless, given the significant role Georgian evidence plays in the study of late antique and mediaeval hagiography and the cult of saints, the article attempts to contextualise the cult of St Menas from the Georgian perspective.

Keywords: ecclesiastical calendar; hymnography; metaphrasis; warrior saints; medieval translations

1. A short overview of Georgian hagiography

Since the creation of the Georgian alphabet in the early fifth century, martyrdom accounts and related narratives have dominated Georgian literature. The earliest surviving pieces of Georgian writing recount stories of martyrdom under the Sasanians and Arabs. In addition to original hagiographies, translations from Greek, Syriac, and Armenian, and later from Arabic, have proliferated. Multiple hagiographic codices, dated primarily to the tenth century, contain translations created between the fifth and ninth centuries.

Scholars conventionally divide the Georgian hagiographic corpus into three types:

- pre-metaphrastic hagiographies. Mediaeval and modern Georgian scholarship refers to the pre-metaphrastic corpus as *keimena*, a term

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explained in the tenth century as “original” hagiographies written in what functioned as simple and plain language at the time, and often relatively short. The earliest corpora containing these pre-metaphrastic compositions are miscellaneous hagiographic narratives, such as the so-called *Mravalt’avi* codices, as mediaeval authors knew these works. Like *keimena*, *mravalt’avi* is a calque of a Greek term, *polykephalon* (“of many chapters”), used as a reference to various hagiographic and homiletical texts (chapters)³;

- metaphrastic hagiographies. A comparably large corpus of mediaeval Georgian hagiography consists of the metaphraseis, which started to appear in the tenth century. Along with the translations of Symeon Metaphrastes’s hagiographies, a continuation of the metaphraseis undertaken supposedly by John Xiphilinos has survived and undergone translation only in the Georgian language⁴;
- the *Great Synaxarion*. Finally, shorter martyrdom accounts form the eleventh-century *Great Synaxarion* of George Hagiorites. The *Synaxarion* essentially relies on the Athonite adaptation of the Typikon of the Stoudiou Monastery in Constantinople⁵.

Apart from hagiographies, miracle collections remained equally well known in Georgian writing. Several collections were indeed particularly popular and widespread. For example, extended and abridged versions of the miracles of St Nicholas of Myra, St Timothy the Wonderworker⁶, St Basil the Great, St Demetrios of Thessaloniki, or St Theodore of Euchaita, or multiple collections of the miracles of St George have survived in numerous manuscripts⁷.

St Menas appears in all of these hagiographic collections: pre-metaphrastic, metaphrastic, and the *Great Synaxarion*. However, the exceptionally popular miracle collections of St Menas, whether in their full or abridged form, are regrettably absent.

³ K. Kekelidze, *Simeon Metafrast po gruzinskim istochnikam* [Симеон Метафраст по грузинским источникам; Symeon Metaphrastes According to Georgian Sources], in: K. Kekelidze, *Etiudebi* 5, Tbilisi 1957, p. 212-226.

⁴ For an overview of Georgian hagiography see B. Martin-Hisard, *Georgian Hagiography*, in: *The Ashgate Companion to Byzantine Hagiography, Volume 1: Periods and Places*, ed. S. Efthymiadis, New York 2011, p. 285-298. Xyphilinos’s metaphraseis remain unedited; I am currently performing their edition and translation.

⁵ Giorgi Mt’acmideli, *didi svinak’sari* [დიდი სვინაქსარი; *Great Synaxarion*], ed. M. Dolakidze – D. Chitunashvili, Tbilisi 2017.

⁶ Kekelidze, *Etiudebi* 6, Tbilisi 1960, p. 336-406.

⁷ See E. Gabidzashvili, *k’art’uli nat’argmni hagiograph’ia* [ქართული ნათარგმნი ჰაგიოგრაფია; Translated Georgian Hagiography], Tbilisi 2004.

2. The cult of warrior saints in medieval Georgia

Although Georgia introduced and established the cult of warrior saints at an early stage, the Georgians appeared selective about which cults to embrace and which to disregard. As a result, while the cults of certain soldier saints flourished, others remained relatively marginalized. Among the prominent figures, St George, St Theodore Tiron, St Stratelates, and St Demetrios stood out, enjoying substantial veneration in medieval Georgia. In addition to these well-known saints, lesser soldier saints also gained notable traction, such as St Eustathios, whose cult enjoyed greater prominence in Georgia and Cappadocia than in other regions.

Later, St Eugenios of Trebizond rose in popularity, along with other regional or international soldier saints. The emergence of these cults often stemmed from clear historical and political contexts: Georgia's elites, particularly the Bagratids, adopted figures like St Demetrios and St Eugenios from the Byzantine political rhetoric and wove them into their own power narratives. Other cults, such as those of St George and, to a lesser extent, St Theodore, were more ancient – that is, internalized and incorporated into folklore early in Georgia's history.

Notably, the success of any soldier saint largely depended on their association with a political agenda or the ambitions of a powerful individual or dynasty. Conversely, other celebrated soldier saints who thrived in the surrounding region often fell outside the focus of Georgia's ruling elites, resulting in their significant absence within the country. For instance, St Sergios, widely venerated in neighbouring Armenia, is almost completely absent from Georgia.

3. St Menas in the pre-Constantinopolitan liturgical tradition

Before the tenth century, when Georgian monasteries appeared in Byzantium, the epicentre of Georgian writing and liturgical tradition functioned in the monasteries of Holy Land rather than in Georgia itself. In fact, our understanding of the heritage of Georgian monks in the Holy Land is likely deeper than of their contribution within Georgia. The earliest evidence in Georgian language for the cult of St Menas stems from Palestine, specifically from the seventh-century *Lectionary of Jerusalem*. The fifth-seventh century *Lectionary* is the earliest witness to the Hagio-polite rite and has largely and predominantly survived in the Georgian

language – apart from the *Armenian Lectionary*, which reflects an even earlier stage of its development. The *Lectionary of Jerusalem* commemorates St Menas three times: 10 July⁸, 31 October – together with the Prophet Isaiah and martyr Phokas⁹ – and 12 November¹⁰. In all three instances, the *Lectionary* points to a particular site of the stationary liturgy where St Menas must receive commemoration: the church of St Menas founded by Bassa, an aristocrat and friend of Empress Eudocia, who founded the monastery where Bassa was an abbess. We learn from Cyril of Scythopolis that “blessed Bassa called Andrew, the brother of Bishop Stephen of Jamnia, from the laura of the great Euthymios and appointed him the superior of the shrine of St Menas, which she had founded”¹¹. This must have happened by c. 456¹². If the current identification of the church is correct, based on the surviving inscription, then the foundation must have later become part of the Armenian patriarchate of Jerusalem¹³.

St Menas appears multiple times in another important liturgical document, the tenth-century *Calendar* of Ioane Zosime. Compiled at Mar Sabas Monastery in Palestine, the *Calendar* unites several liturgical traditions, including that of the *Lectionary of Jerusalem*. St Menas’s feast falls there on 4 May, 10 July, 31 October, 11 November, and 12 November¹⁴. This multiplication of feast days is not unusual to Zosime’s *Calendar*, which suggests that it was indeed a transitional calendar, uniting several local and larger liturgical calendars.

Crucially, St Menas appears in a tenth-century hymnal, the *Iadgari*, and its various versions, which highlight his shrine as a particularly strong miracle-working site, with a reference to the types of miracles St Menas performed:

⁸ For St Menas and the general discussion on the *Lectionary* see e.g. CSLA.E03270 (N. Aleksidze). Below, CSLA refers to the Cult of Saints in Late Antique Database, followed by the ID number.

⁹ CSLA.E3415 (N. Aleksidze).

¹⁰ CSLA.E3427 (N. Aleksidze).

¹¹ Cyrillus Scythopolitanus, *Vitae monachorum Palaestinae, Vita Euthymii* 49, 20-25, tr. R.M. Price, p. 46.

¹² S. Verhelst, *Les lieux de station du lectionnaire de Jérusalem. 1ère partie: Les villages et fondations*, “Proche-Orient Chrétien” 54 (2004) p. 47.

¹³ <https://dig.corps-cmhl.huji.ac.il/epigraphicals/jerusalem-old-city-st-menas> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

¹⁴ CSLA.E03729, E03796, E03912, E03923, E03924 (N. Aleksidze). For a study of the *Calendar* with the full text see *Le Calendrier Palestino-Géorgien du Sinaiticus 34 (Xe siècle)*, ed. G. Garitte, *Subsidia Hagiographica*, v. 30, Brussels 1958.

და გვრგვინოსნად გმოსჩნდი : მოწამეო მენა მოვისწრფოთ ტაძრად
შნდა : და მსგვსად კურნებსა და სენთა ლხინებსა : აღმოვივსებთ
უხუეებით ვსენებასა : შნსა ვადიდებთ ჩნ ყლითურთ : მინა ყდ ქბულო
გვთხოე ქესგნ : გმოვსნაა შეცთომილთაჲ : მონებსგნ მტრისა¹⁵.

You appeared as a crown-bearer. Martyr Menas, we come to your shrine and are filled with healings and deliverance from afflictions. We glorify your feast day in unity. Praiseworthy Menas, intercede on our behalf with Christ, to save those who have erred and [save us] from the servitude to the enemy.

This reference suggests that at least a part of the Georgian monastic community, especially those people who lived in the Near East, knew the shrine in Alexandria and its miracles.

4. The hagiography of St Menas: The pre-metaphrastic tradition

The only copy of the *Martyrdom of St Menas* is unedited and appears in MS O/Sin.georg.11, kept on Mount Sinai, where most of the Georgian Palestinian manuscripts ultimately arrived¹⁶. The manuscript is a hagiographic collection copied, as the colophon suggests, at the “Palavra” (*Palaia Lavra*) Monastery, namely the monastery of St Chariton in the Judean desert¹⁷. In the tenth and eleventh centuries – the supposed time of copying the MS – the monastery had a substantial presence of Georgian monks. The same colophon points to Seit‘ as the translator, living in the eighth or early ninth century; however, it is unclear which texts he translated. While some texts, such as the *Martyrdom of St Menas*, are clear translations from Greek, others had an Arabic source. As of now, the Georgian pre-metaphrastic martyrdom of St Menas remains unstudied and its relationship with the source language is not immediately clear.

¹⁵ Mik‘ael Modrekili, *himnograf‘ia* 2 [ჰიმნოგრაფია 2; Hymnography 2], ed. V. Gvakharia – R. Burchuladze – S. Amiranashvili, Tbilisi 1978, p. 306.

¹⁶ <https://www.loc.gov/item/00279388379-ms> (accessed: 15.05.2025).

¹⁷ For the Georgian literary production in Palestine in general and specifically at the Monastery of St Chariton see e.g. T. Chronz *et al.*, *Palestine*, in: *Mediaeval Georgian Literary Culture and Book Production in the Christian Middle East and Byzantium*, ed. T. Otkhmezuri, Köln 2022, p. 23-106.

5. Metaphrastic translations

The *Martyrdom of St Menas* appears as two independent metaphrastic redactions: Ivir.georg.36 – translated at the Iveron Monastery on Mount Athos by Theophilos the Hieromonk, and another translation from the same century by Ephrem the Lesser of the Black Mountain (Mss. S 384 and A 128 at the Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts)¹⁸. Both translations emerged independently but follow the Greek original relatively faithfully. The colophon to Ephrem's translation is noteworthy as it reveals the monastery's abbot's particular interest in St Menas:

წმიდანო მამანო, ესე წმიდისა მინდს წამებაჲ იყო ძუელადცა თარგმნილი კიმენისაგან, რამეთუ ესრეთ ეწოდების პირველ ლიტონად აღწერილსა წიგნსა მოწამეთასა. ხოლო აწ ესე ითარგმნა ახლად მეტაფრასისაგან ბრძანებითა კალიპოსელთა წინამძღურისა ბასილისითა, რამეთუ მას უკმდა მინა წმიდისათეს და ესე ირჩია ლოლოთეტისა სვემონის შეკაზმულისა მოწამეთადსაგან, რომელსა მეტაფრას ეწოდების. შეგვანდევიტ და ლოცვა-ყავტ¹⁹.

Holy Fathers, the *Martyrdom of St Menas* had been translated earlier from *kimeni*, which is the name for the first simple martyrdom accounts. Now, however, it has been translated anew on the order of the abbot of Kalippos, Basil, for he wished to [have] St Menas and chose the rewritings of Symeon Logothetes, which are called *metaphraseis*.

The colophon suggests that the Black Mountain's community realized the existence of an older translation but that St Menas was not a particularly popular saint, prompting the abbot to revive his memory in the Georgian milieu of the Black Mountain.

6. St Menas in Constantinopolitan liturgy

The Georgian Constantinopolitan liturgical manuscripts represent St Menas equally broadly. We do not know whether he enjoyed

¹⁸ For the Greek source see *Acta Sancti Menae martyris Aegyptii*, ed. G. van Hooff, AnBol 3 (1884) p. 258-270.

¹⁹ L. Akhobadze, *zveli metap'rasuli krebulebi. Noembris sakit'xavebi* [ძველი მეტაფრასული კრებულები. ნოემბრის საკითხავები; Old Metaphrastic Collections: Readings for November], Tbilisi 2020, p. 301.

commemoration in Euthymios Hagiorites's *Minor Synaxarion* (1030), copied in Constantinople, since that section of the MS has gone missing. However, St Menas is present in George Hagiorites's *Great Synaxarion* (c. 1044), where his commemoration falls on 11 November. Still, the attached biographic note is extremely brief and generic²⁰. St Menas also appears in George Hagiorites's *Menaion* as well as other liturgical manuscripts from the period.

7. St Menas in Georgian art

In medieval Georgian art, St Menas is one of the most poorly represented soldier saints. Medieval and late medieval Georgian monumental art provides a strikingly rich array of saints, especially of soldier saints. Starting from the tenth century, monumental images of St George, St Theodores, St Demetrios, and other soldier saints dominate in most churches²¹. Since medieval Georgians were particularly keen on adopting and internalizing the cults of soldier saints, the absence of such an early and great soldier saint as St Menas is striking.

Nevertheless, one can explain this fact. The proliferation of the imagery of soldier saints was almost always a conscious project of royal or other military elites. While the cult of St George had a long tradition, his incorporation in royal rhetoric was a project of the Bagratids. The same applies to St Demetrios of Thessaloniki. The appearance of other soldier saints, such as St Eugenios of Trebizond, in royal foundations stemmed from the strategic requirements of the era. The remarkable popularity of other soldier saints who were less prominent outside the region, for example that of St Eustathios Placidus, originated from the similarity of his story to the Sasanian narratives of royal hunt and to the Georgian story of conversion of its first Christian king through a similar miracle. In contrast, St Menas, associated with asceticism and desert monasticism, struggled to secure a prominent place in the visual aesthetics of Georgia's military elites. His cult showed a weaker connection to military life and he was primarily known as a specialized miracle worker, which likely limited his appeal in this context.

²⁰ Giorgi Mt'acmideli, *didi svinak'sari* [დიდი სვინაქსარი; *Great Synaxarion*], ed. M. Dolakidze – D. Chitunashvili, Tbilisi 2017.

²¹ For a detailed study of the cult of soldier saints in medieval Georgian art see *Warrior Saints in Medieval Georgian Art*, ed. N. Aleksidze – E. Gedevanishvili, Tbilisi 2025.

To the best of my knowledge, only one image of St Menas has survived in Georgian murals, and in a rather unusual setting. A portrait of St Menas, depicted in well-established traditional iconography, appears in the dome of the cathedral church of Iṣxani (1032) in south-western Georgia, on the territory of modern-day Turkey. The dome's window soffits display half figures of saints: in addition to St Menas, one can see the busts of St Sergios, St Konon, St Phokas, St Orentios, St Demetrios, St Prokopios, and St Theodore²². Apart from the last three, representations of the other saints shown in Iṣxani are equally rare.

The presence of St Menas in Iṣxani may stem from his popularity in the ethnically diverse region of Tao, located in north-eastern Anatolia, where ethnic Armenians and Georgians lived side by side. One can suggest that the introduction of St Menas in Iṣxani, much like St Sergios, served the intent of incorporating “new” and less common saints into the Georgian literary and visual tradition.

Another unique image of St Menas appears in a fifteenth-century Georgian-Greek liturgical manuscript kept at the National Library of Russia in St Petersburg²³. Menas is represented among other martyr saints (86v) with Christ's portrait depicted on the front-piece of his himation, which is typical for Byzantine monumental art as well as liturgical manuscript illuminations.

8. A miracle at Abu Mena

Despite the absence of miracle collections of St Menas, one miracle associated with Abu Mena appears in the Georgian collection of apophthegms.

The miracle reports the following story: A rich man in Alexandria fell ill. Fearing death, he distributed thirty pounds of gold to the poor and was

²² See E. Privalova, *Notes on the Murals of Tao-Klardjeti (X-XIII cc.)*, in: *Hagion Oros: Physē – Latreia – Technē II*, Thessaloniki 2001, p. 68-70.

²³ L. Evseeva, *Afonsakaia kniga obraztsov XV veka. O metode raboty srednevekovogo xudozhnika* [Афонская книга образцов XV века. О методе работы средневекового художника; Athonite book of images of the 15th century. Concerning the method of work of a medieval artist], Moscow 1998, p. 251; See, also, *k'art'ul-berž-nuli ilustirebuli xelnaceri sankt-peterburgis kolek'c'iidan* [ქართულ-ბერძნული ილუსტრირებული ხელნაწერი სანკტ-პეტერბურგის კოლექციიდან; Georgian-Greek Liturgical manuscript from the collection of St Petersburg], ed. E. Dughashvili – N. Kavtaria, Tbilisi 2012, p. 3-8.

immediately cured. Then, however, he began to regret his own generosity. The man had a friend, a pious and good man, and to him he confessed that he regretted his own good deeds. The friend replied that instead of regretting, he should be rejoicing since he had offered his money to Christ, but he was unable to convince the man. Then the friend told him to take his own thirty pounds of gold, for he too was a wealthy man, go to the church of St Menas, say that it was not he who donated to charity, and keep the money. The man did so; he went to the shrine of St Menas, confessed that he was retracting his donation, and kept thirty pounds of gold. Upon leaving the shrine, however, he fell and died immediately. The monks asked the real owner of the gold to take the money back. The man refused and said that he had offered it to Christ and wished them to distribute the money among the poor. And so they did²⁴.

The earliest attested version of the story appears in a Georgian manuscript from Mount Athos (MS Ivir.georg.9.) dated to 977 and copied at the Oški Monastery in Tao-Klarjeti. It forms part of an addendum to the *Spiritual Meadow* of the Georgian John Moschos, which is probably a translation from Arabic. The editor of Moschos dates the addendum to no later than the beginning of the ninth century²⁵. The addendum bears the title “ესე თავები იპოვა კვპრეს ადგილსა რ(ომე)ლსა ჰრქჳან თეომორფო მიმსგავსებოვლი სამოთხესა” (These chapters were found in Cyprus at a place called Theomorphos²⁶, resembling the Paradise [Moschos’s original composition])²⁷. The Georgian text follows almost verbatim the version published by Wortley in the “anonymous collection”, whereas Theophilos’s translation has a slightly more expanded and embellished source.

Another translation of the same story, albeit longer and more elaborate, appears in the Georgian translation of the “systematic collection” of *Apophthegmata Patrum*. The monks of Mount Athos translated the systematic collection twice: Euthymios Hagiorites (955-1028) performed the work first, and near the end of the eleventh century, Theophilos the Hieromonk produced an expanded translation. The miracle of Abu Mena appears in Theophilos’s translation.

²⁴ T’ēop’ile Xuc’esmonazoni, *mamat’a scavlani dat’xrobani* [მამათა სწავლებანი და თბრობანი; Teachings and Sayings of the Fathers], Tbilisi 2014, p. 496.

²⁵ Ioane Mosxi, *Limonari* [ლიმონარი; Leimonarion], ed. I. Abuladze, Tbilisi 1960, p. 86; for commentary see p. 020–022.

²⁶ Evidently modern Morphou in North Cyprus.

²⁷ See J. Gippert – B. Outtier – S. Kim, *Holy Monastery of Iviron, Catalogue of the Georgian Manuscripts*, Mount Athos 2022, p. 107.

Although the miracle appears in the Georgian translation of the systematic collection, it is missing from alphabetical and anonymous collections²⁸. Structurally and in terms of the message that it conveys, the story resembles other miracles of St Menas, where the saint punishes or nearly punishes those who make a promise to his shrine but fail to keep their word. These include the “Eutropius and the Silver Plates” miracle ascribed to Theophilos of Alexandria²⁹ and, perhaps more marginally, the “Barren Camel” miracle.

9. Conclusion

St Menas was a known and celebrated figure in the Georgian liturgical tradition; he enjoyed commemoration in all the early liturgical calendars and in the later *Synaxaria*. His martyrological dossier exists in all three manifestations: pre-metaphrastic, metaphrastic, and the abridged versions of the *Synaxaria*. Nonetheless, one can hardly speak of the “cult” of St Menas in Georgia. His representation has marginally transcended monastic literature, and his visual imagery has never established itself. The faithful apparently knew his cult as Abu Mena and the associated miracles, yet he has not garnered sufficient interest to cause the translation of the miracle collections.

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²⁸ For the same miracle in the Greek anonymous collection see J. Wortley, *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Cambridge 2013, p. 42-44.

²⁹ CSLA.E01222 (G. Schenke).

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