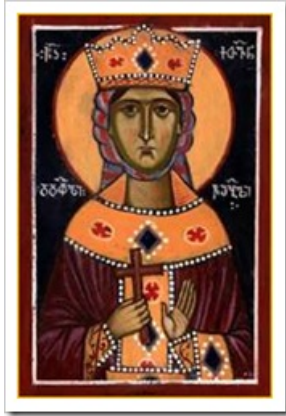


St. Ketevan, Queen of Kakheti



Commemorated on September 13

The holy Queen Ketevan was the daughter of Ashotan Mukhran-Batoni, a prominent ruler from the Bagrationi royal family. The pious Ketevan was married to Prince David, heir to the throne of Kakheti. David's father, King Alexander II (1574–1605), had two other sons, George and Constantine, but according to the law, the throne belonged to David. Constantine converted to Islam and was raised in the court of Persian Shah Abbas I.

Several years after David and Ketevan were married, King Alexander stepped down from the throne and was tonsured a monk at Alaverdi. However, after four months, the young King David suddenly died. He was survived by his wife, Ketevan, and two children – a son, Teimuraz, and a daughter, Elene – and his father ascended the throne once more.

Upon hearing of David's death and Alexander's return to the royal throne, Shah Abbas commanded Alexander's youngest son, Constantine, to travel to Kakheti, murder his father and his other brother, George, and seize the throne. As instructed, Constantine beheaded his father and brother, then sent their heads to Shah Abbas. The widowed Queen Ketevan was left to bury her father-in-law and brother-in-law, but Constantine was still unsatisfied, and he proposed to take Queen Ketevan as his wife.

Outraged at his proposition, the nobles rose up and killed him. Having buried the wicked Constantine, Queen Ketevan sent generous gifts to Shah Abbas and requested that he proclaim her son, Teimuraz, the rightful heir to the throne. While awaiting his reply, Ketevan assumed personal responsibility for the rule of Kakheti. Concerned that if he denied this request Kakheti would forcibly separate from him and unite with Kartli, Shah Abbas hastily sent Prince Teimuraz to Georgia, laden with great wealth.

In 1614 Shah Abbas informed King Teimuraz that his son would be taken hostage, and Teimuraz was forced to send his young son, Alexander, and his mother Ketevan to Persia. As a final attempt to divide the royal family of Kakheti, Abbas demanded that the eldest prince, Levan, be brought before him, and then he finally summoned King Teimuraz himself.

The shah's intentions were clear: to hold all of the royal family in Persia and send his own viceroys to rule in Kakheti. He sought to eliminate King Luarsab II of Kartli as well, but Teimuraz and Luarsab agreed to attack the Persian army with joint forces and drive the enemy out of Georgia. Shah Abbas sent his hostages, Queen Ketevan and her grandsons, deep into Persia, while he himself launched an attack on Kakheti.

With fire and the sword the godless ruler plundered all of Georgia. The royal palace was razed, churches and monasteries were destroyed, and entire villages were abandoned. By order of the shah, more than 300,000 Georgians were exiled to Persia, and their homes were occupied by Turkish tribes from Central Asia.

After they had spent five years exiled in Shiraz (Persia), Princes Alexander and Levan were separated from Ketevan and castrated in Isfahan. Alexander could not endure the suffering and died, while Levan went mad.

St. Ketevan, meanwhile, remained a prisoner of the ruler of southeastern Persia who regarded the widowed Queen of Kakheti with great respect. According to his command, Ketevan was not to discover the fate of her grandsons. She spent ten years in prison, praying for her motherland and loved ones with all her might and adhering to a strict ascetic regime. Constant fasting, prayer and a stone bed exhausted her previously pampered body, but in spirit she was courageous and full of vitality. She looked after those assigned to her care and instructed them in the spiritual life.

Abbas continued to demand that Ketevan be converted to Islam, and he announced his intention to marry her. He asked that his proposal be conveyed to her the same day she was informed of the fate of her grandsons. As a condition of their marriage, Abbas insisted that Ketevan renounce the Christian Faith and convert to Islam. In the case of her acquiescence, she was to be respected and honored as a queen. In case she refused, she would be subject to public torture.

The alarmed imam begged the queen to submit to the shah's will and save herself, but she firmly refused and began to prepare for her martyrdom. According to one foreign observer, her steadfastness delayed the Islamization of the Georgians in Persia: 'In the course of a conversation at the court of Shah Abbas, where a young and recently converted Georgian was present, the question arose as to why it was that, while all young Georgians were forced to embrace Islam, their mothers were not. The explanation given by one of those present was that since the Queen would not change her faith Georgian

mothers likewise refused.”

Queen Ketevan was robed in festive attire and led out to a crowded square. Her persecutors subjected her to indescribable torment: they placed a red-hot copper cauldron on her head, tore at her chest with heated tongs, pierced her body with glowing spears, tore off her fingernails, nailed a board to her spine, and finally split her forehead with a red-hot spade. St. Ketevan’s soul departed, and the executioners cast her mutilated body to the beasts. But the Lord God sent a miracle: her holy relics were illumined with a radiant light.

A group of French Augustinian missionary fathers who had witnessed the inhuman tortures wrapped Queen Ketevan’s body in linens scented with myrrh and incense and buried it in a Catholic monastery. Some time later the holy relics of the Great Martyr Ketevan were delivered to her son, Teimuraz, King of Kakheti. Teimuraz wept bitterly for his mother and buried the relics with great honor in the Alaverdi Cathedral of St. George.

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