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Bodbe Monastery: Keepers of the Chant

Located just two hours drive east of Tbilisi, Bodbe Monastery nestles between tall Cyprus trees on a steep hillside overlooking the Alazani valley, where it commands incredible views of the Great Caucasus Range.

The monastery is the final resting place of Saint Nino, 'Enlightener of Georgians,' but during the nineteenth century, a Russian bishop doubting St. Nino's burial threatened to dig up the grave. Legend says that as he approached the grave, he suddenly died of a heart-attack.

Down the hill from the monastery church, the bell-tower lies the Spring of Saint Nino, where pilgrims - or visitors - are meant to plunge themselves three times into the frigid water. The water is so numbing that it is difficult to experience the deep cold, the only feeling being an experience of tingling skin and refreshed pores after emerging into the fresh air. They say the spring has curative properties and absolves one of sins.

In bygone times, Bodbe Monastery was a destination point for pilgrims coming to venerate Saint Nino. The current church is an often renovated structure from the 11th century, the bell-tower a creation of the Tsarist Russian period. The frescos inside the church, like the wall around the nearby fortress city of Signaghi, were commissioned by King Erekle in the late 18th century. Bodbe Monastery was once a center for Eastern Georgian chant.

During the 1830s, the monastery went into disrepair under the jurisdiction of Tsarist Russian bishops, who took over the Georgian Orthodox church when the area was annexed to Russia in 1810. But in 1860, a Russian-educated, nationalist-minded Georgian abbot named Makari Batatashvili began to rebuild the monastery. He hired one of the last master chanters in the region, Grigol Karbelashvili, to come and teach chant at the monastery, hoping to revive a tradition quickly fading with the death of so many older generation chanters in the mid 19th century.

Georgian three-part chant is considered one of the treasures of medieval liturgical music, and is slowly attracting the fascination it deserves from international scholars. Known to have originated in the Tao-Klarjeti regions of south-western Georgia (present-day northeast Turkey) in the 9th and 10th centuries, chant was further developed in the Greek monasteries on Mount Athos, Greece, and at the Gelati and Iqalto Monastery-Academies where it spread throughout Tamar Mepe's unified kingdom (12th century).

Written notation of chant at the time consisted of small markings above and below liturgical texts (unique from Gregorian and Byzantine neumes), which served to indicate to master

chanters directional movement of melodies. To this day, the deciphering of the ancient system of Georgian neumes continues to elude scholars.

On a recent trip to Bodbe Monastery, I was called to join a small reception with the abbess of Bodbe.

Over coffee and cakes, my colleague presented a slideshow of nineteenth century abbesses, nuns, and monks who had lived at Bodbe, which at various points throughout history has housed monks or nuns. At the moment, some thirty-five nuns and novices live and pray at Bodbe. As a final treat, several of them began to chant!

I realized they were singing Karbelashvili chants, most likely taught in this very monastery one hundred and fifty years before. The chant harmonies blended sweetly, a shyness and sincerity in their voices bringing a humble quality unheard in many Tbilisi churches. At the end of the chant, the nuns flashed joyful looks at one another, as if to intimate that it was as incredible for them to be singing this music as it was for me, a foreigner, to be sitting here listening to them.

Actually, it is absolutely astonishing that the chant tradition survived at all. During the 19th century, as Georgians looked more and more towards western culture, and the Tsarist church blocked the funding channels for master chanters to operate schools, the old traditions were fading from practical memory.

But there were still some who retained the old knowledge. Grigol Karbelashvili, new chant teacher at Bodbe Monastery in 1860, had learned chant from his father, Petre of Karbela, who had himself studied chant in the Davit Garegi cave monasteries in the late 1700s. His knowledge of chant, which amounted to thousands of individual hymns memorized in three-part harmony, was common for the Sruligabeli elite (master chanters), who are known to have apprenticed for up to seven years in a lost system of chant pedagogy.

Special schools for the study of complicated medieval Georgian chant existed throughout the country, but in the nineteenth century, these schools ceased to exist and the chant tradition survived only in families of singers like the Karbelashvili's. Grigol Karbelashvili died in 1880, but his five sons carried on his tradition and in 1894, Vasili Karbelashvili published a book of chants learned from his father. Vasili became active in the preservation movement of Georgian chant, which sought to transcribe sung chant into the modern, five-line musical notation system coming from Europe.

The system of eastern Georgian chant preserved by Vasili Karbelashvili and his brothers has direct links with the great wealth of scholastic knowledge kept by the monks of Davit Garegi, where their grandfather, Petre of Karbela (1754-1848), studied chant. Aristocratic boys were often sent to schools such as Davit Garegi, so as a childhood playmate of an Amilakhvari heir (who didn't learn any chant), Petre was trained in writing, reading, history, theology, and chant. Partly because of its reputation for scholasticism, Davit Garegi attracted many disenfranchised bishops during the years when pro-royalist clergy were being imprisoned and exiled by the new Tsarist bureaucracy (1810-1830).

At one point, records show that more than twenty high level Georgian bishops were living in self-chosen exile from their own dioceses in the Davit Garegi desert. All of these bishops would have been trained chanters, and their meeting must have represented one of the most incredible gatherings of master chanters in the modern era.

Saint Davit, founder of the desert monastery, was one of Ioane Zedazani's twelve disciples who came from Assyria in the sixth century to spread monasticism in Georgia. Saint Davit first settled in what is now MtaTsminda, Tbilisi, only later moving into the southwestern desert. The monastery he founded attracted many thousands of monks throughout the centuries, and frescoes survive in cliff-face caves from the 9th, 12th, and 16th centuries. At the base of these incredible medieval fresco paintings, one may find half-meter-long artillery shells scattered on the ground from the target practice of Soviet tanks.

The chant tradition of Davit Garegi and Bodbe Monastery survived in the Karbelashvili Family, and was transcribed into western notation at the turn of the 20th century. Some 3000 transcriptions collected dust in Soviet archives from 1936 to 1990, and have only come to light again in recent years.

In 2005, the Anchiskhati Church Choir published the first book of Karbelaan Kilo Galoba (Karbelashvili Mode Chant) in one hundred years, paying great respect to the members of the Karbelashvili family who saved the eastern chant tradition. Many more people worked to save the chant of western Georgia, and much work needs to continue to bring these incredible traditions back to light.

Directions to Bodbe: Half hour before Telavi on the Kakhetian Highway, turn off to the right to go towards Signaghi. There is a sign indicating the turn off for Bodbe Monastery, about two kilometers before Signaghi.

John A Graham, aka 'singing John,' has lived in Georgia for three years and will pursue a Ph.D. in Georgian chant history at Princeton University beginning in 2006. His first book on the subject, written with colleague Luarsab Togonidze of the Georgian Patriarchate, is in process. For more information see www.georgianchant.org