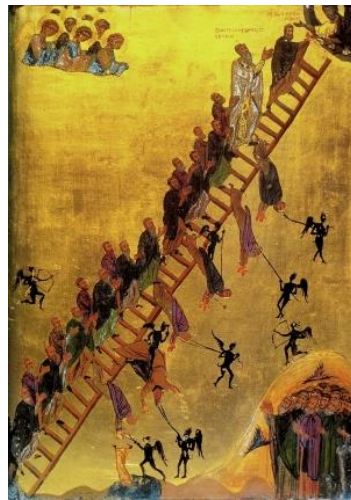


STUDIES: GEORGIAN-BYZANTINE LITERARY CONTACTS

**The Importance of the Georgian
Translations of *The Ladder of Divine
Ascent* by John Climacus for Georgian and
Byzantine Philology**



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Resume: The aim of the present article is to represent the importance of Georgian translations of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus through analysis of various literary issues for Byzantine and Georgian philology.

Key Words: *John Climacus, The Ladder of Divine Ascent*

The Ladder of Divine Ascent by John Climacus is acknowledged as one of the most popular and most accomplished medieval manual of morality. Christian ethical principles embraced by the work are presented in a systemised form, with a distinctive emphasis and employing deeply theological discussions. Climacus was by no means the first author to present spiritual

life as a sequence of stages. Various other authors used the image of the ladder to describe spiritual life, such as Philo of Alexandria, Origen, Syriac fathers, Gregory of Nissa, however John Climacus was the first one to use this image so extensively as to present in it the entire picture of spiritual ascent [11, pp. 22-23]. This is one crucial differentiating feature distinguishing *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* from other works of the genre. Another feature is its psychological contents: refined, sophisticated psychologism, a deep knowledge of human beings' nature and their inner world shine through to the climax of the story [3, p. 43]. In *The Ladder* John usually refrains from giving detailed directions about what food to eat, how much and when, about hours of sleep and the daily program of manual labour. What matters for him is not physical asceticism but humility and purity of heart [19, p. 9].

The significance of the issues posed by the work invoked the admiration of the reader from the very moment of its creation. For instance, a monk named Daniel of Raithu Monastery, who was the biographer and contemporary of John Climacus and an author of his ancient *Vita* considers *The Ladder* to be on a par with the ten commandments of Moses thus the author to be as important as Moses himself: "The one who saw God came down to us from Mount Sinai and showed us tablets with inscriptions by God" or "There was only one difference between him (John Climacus) and Moses. Unlike Moses, who failed to enter earthly Jerusalem, he entered heavenly Jerusalem" [9, p. 13]. Therefore, it is not surprising that *The ladder of Divine Ascent* was translated into many languages of the world as early as the Middle Ages. According to Kallistos Ware, the distinguished researcher of the work, "With the exception of the Bible and the service books, there is no work in Eastern Christendom that has been studied, copied and translated more often than *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* by John Climacus" [19, p. 1]. "Outside the monasteries it has also been the favourite reading of countless lay people in Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Russia and throughout the Orthodox world. The popularity of *The Ladder* in the East equals that of *The Imitation of Christ* in the West" [19, p. 1]. The work by John Climacus was no less popular in the medieval Georgian spiritual culture, which is confirmed by the multitude of Georgian versions and

manuscripts. In Georgian we have six versions of the text translated or edited for different periods of time.

Interest in this text did not reduce during centuries - from the pre-Athonite period to the late Middle Ages. The first translation that was done in the pre-Athonite period according to Euthymius the Athonite's *Will* enclosed with his translation of the work was incomplete and full of mistakes. Euthymius the Athonite re-translated *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* due to the imperfectness and faults found in the "first" translation of the work. "The Christian morality occurred in the work was naturally an object of interest for ecclesiastical literature" [2, p. 150]. As far as Euthymius the Athonite's goal was cultural legitimation of the Georgians by introduction new and perfect knowledge to them in order to be on a par with the Greeks [8, p. 7] could not allow the existence of an imperfect and imprecise translation of the work so important for the middle Ages, especially when the translation played a role of the cultural emancipator.

The richness and specificity of the original is fully transposed in the Georgian translation. In this way, the translation became the equivalent of the original and the symbol of the cultural strength [8, p. 7]. In the Post-Athonite period, due to the new demands posed by the epoch, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* was translated again. In this case, the text, based on Gelati literary-theological tradition (maximal closeness to the Greek original, and preciseness of philosophical terms) was translated by Petre Gelateli.

Furthermore, the work became a poetic inspiration for prominent figures of various epochs. Hence the foundation for versified redactions was laid. In this respect *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* was edited three times: firstly, tradition ascribed the versified version based on the translation by Euthymius the Athonite to Iaone Petritsi; secondly, fragments of the poetic version of *The Ladder* by an anonymous author have recently been found as an attachment to the work by Gregory of Nazianzus [2, pp. 129-154; 3, pp. 142-162]. The last and summative version of *The Ladder* belongs to Anthon Catholicos (18th Century).

Therefore, clearly, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is one of the most prominent and important texts in the Eastern Christian world of the middle ages, including Georgia.

Discussion about the importance of *The Ladder* should be conducted in two directions: one is pointing to the specific structure of the Georgian translation which reaches beyond Georgian philology and becomes significant for the scholars of Byzantine literature. The other point of my research will determine the role and significance of the Georgian translations that as I hope, will contribute to Georgian philological research as well.

The structure of Euthymius' translation of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* does not correspond to any Greek texts that have been published, therefore, it bears a great importance for the scholars of original text as well. In the step titled *On pride* (XXII), Euthymius the Athonite unites two steps - *On the many forms of vainglory* and *On mad pride* (XXII - *Περὶ τῆς πολυμόρφου κενοδιξίας*; XXIII - *Περὶ τῆς ἀκεφάλου ὑπερηφανίας*) of the texts by Matthew Rader, whose publication is received as somewhat better. M. Tsintsadze mentions that John Climacus considers vainglory and pride one and the same evil. Thus it is expected that the author would have dedicated one chapter to it.

Chapter XXIII in which the afore discussed part is included, is entitled as *Περὶ ἀκαθάρτων λογισμῶν τῆς βλασφημίας* (*On Unclean Blasphemous Thoughts*). The scholar argues that this must be the mistake of the copyist of the later period. This "mistake" is also noted by Petre Gelateli although he still follows the Greek text closely and includes this chapter in step XXIII. The *Will* by Euthymius the Athonite reads as follows: The sequence of the steps should not be changed, because I have followed the succession of the chapters I had found – according to this *Will* M. Tsintsadze states that a note by Euthymius makes it clear that he was aware about other Greek manuscripts in which sequence of steps was not muddled [15, pp. 45-47].

As mentioned, the structure of *The Ladder* in Euthymius translation does not correspond to any published text currently known. This is very important for the reconstruction of the structure of Greek text itself. In case of the preparation the Greek critical edition, it would be worth considering the Georgian translation. In addition to John Climacus' instruction regarding the fact that he considers these two evils similar the succession of chapters proposed by Euthymius is more logical semantically. Furthermore,

following prof. M. Tsintsadze's indication, the translator is aware of another Greek version with a different succession of chapters [15, pp. 45-47].

If not the remark by the author, the "deviation" of the Euthymius' translation from the structure that is given in the other versions known to us (Greek, Georgian, Slavic), could have been explained by the peculiar method of the translation employed by Euthymius. In most cases, the opinion regarding the translatory principle adopted by Euthymius is based on the comparison of his translations with non-critical original texts.

However, the latest research, specifically, the study conducted by Prof. Elguja Khintibidze regarding the comparison of two original Greek texts and their translation by Euthymius, revealed above mentioned methodological mistake [16, pp. 144-151].

The importance of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* for Georgian Philology is determined by a number of factors:

1) First of all it should be noted the factor of the reader, forasmuch *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is primarily a practical work designed to be used as an everyday reference. It is well-known that during the Great Lent it was read loudly in Eastern Orthodox churches [19, p. 1]. Regarding the poetic versions, besides its purely aesthetic function (to provoke sublime disposition in the listener), this method was also endowed with a practical function - to encourage memorising the text with a certain pattern of rhythm and rhyme.

The same function also emerged in other cases, when dealing with medieval liturgical poetic texts. Therefore, it is plausible that the Georgian reader of the Middle Ages could memorise poetic texts of *The Ladder*, created ultimately for the liturgical practice.

2) *The Ladder* by John Climacus is a masterly synthesis of the practical experience accumulated during the centuries and the knowledge and traditions. As indicated by Kallistos Ware, when John Climacus created *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, the monastic lifestyle, as an already established institution, already existed and had a three century-long tradition with regulations and written texts. Therefore, John Climacus synthesised rich experience of the monastic lifestyle with pre-literary traditions. From this point of view, he resembles Maximus the Confessor. What

Maximus achieves in the field of Christology, John accomplishes in that of ascetic theology [19, p. 59.].

Translations of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* served to not only familiarise Georgian readers with this excellent work of the ascetic-mystical genre, but also the numerous medieval and ancient sources the work was based on. In his work, John Sinaïtes often refers to such sources himself and other sources have been identified based on special research: Gregory the Theologian, John Cassian, Ephrem the Syrian, Origen, Evagrius Ponticus etc. In addition, he often refers to the examples of Anthony the Great, John the Dwarf, Abba Serapion etc. from the *Apophthegmata*. Beside the sources with direct references in the text, are a number of other sources revealed by special researches: works by Mark the Monk [18, 33. 458-459], Gaza fathers - Barsanuphius and John of Gaza [17, p. V,7], Abba Isaiah [5, pp. 156-157], Nilus of Sinai, [6, p. 400] John Moschus [14, pp. 254] as well as *Phaedo* by Plato [11, pp. 20-21].

In addition to the above mentioned sources, in *The Ladder* we come across a well-known mythologem - adventure of Odysseus between Scylla and Charybdis, or Choosing the least of two evils which later also emerges in *Protagoras* by Plato. Another source presents the well-known Neo-Platonic theory (God is not the Creator of evil), which was conceptually transformed by a well-known medieval figure, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

3) The research of the influences of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* on Georgian literature of the medieval or later period, arguably, will yield an interesting result. the similar research revealed that *The Ladder* had an impact on such reputable representatives of the medieval Byzantine literature as Hesychios of Sinai [4, p. 164-165], Philotheos of Sinai, Anastasius of Sinai, Theodore the Studite, [5, pp. 159-160] , Symeon the New Theologian [4, p. 585], Andrew of Crete [14, p. 256], as well as on the figures of the later period, for example Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas [5, pp. 168-169] and others. Furthermore, Foreign researchers speak about the influence of the text of John Sinaïtes not only on medieval spiritual literature, but also the works of classical writers of the 19th and 20th centuries. For example, a well-known 19th century Danish philosopher, theologian and poet Søren Kierkegaard published several works under the pen-

name of John Climacus and Anti-Climacus as well. At the same time he actively was studying the text by John Climacus.

Russian literary critics see the influence of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* in the works of Russian classic writers of the 19th century - Theodor Dostoevski and Nikolai Gogol which is most obvious in the novel by Dostoevski *Brothers Karamazov* and *The Overcoat* by Gogol [12]. As an example of such influence we could consider Rustaveli's *The Man in the Panther Skin* from the Georgian literature.

4) It is known that *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is distinguished by a diversity of forms of tropological, rhetoric and stylistic figurative speech, symbolic images, which makes the work highly artistic and aesthetically attractive. As the work does not have a classical plot, the aesthetic function is assumed fully by style and language. As indicated by Kallistos Ware *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* is a rhythmic prose and thus is close to poetry [19, p. 10]. Huge spiritual experience is expressed not only by complex argumentation and deep psychological analysis of internal perfection, but also by plain, lively language and laconic, aphoristic form, sentences and moral instructions regarding virtues. This must have been one of the reasons for the heights of popularity achieved by this work [2, p. 129]. Despite different translatory techniques both prosaic translations more or less successfully maintains the Greek text's artistic value, expressive and poetic side created by frequent employment of rhetoric figures typical of the middle centuries such as epithets, comparisons, personifications, gradations, rhetorical questions, repetitions, anastrophe, epanaphora, antithesis, paromoiosis, hendiadys, and paronomasias.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent, as well as Georgian translations of the text, which is amazingly poetic and highly artistic, could not have failed to have an influence on the aesthetic taste of medieval Georgian readers.

This stylistic variety of the Greek text must have been noticed by the authors of Georgian poetic versions of *The Ladder*, because as it turns out, Georgian versified versions cannot have been accidental and atypical. As far as John Climacus sometimes makes the text rhythmic and ends each step with a versified resume [3, p. 146]. It is also worth noting that among numerous versions of *The Ladder*

both in Greek and in other languages no versified version could be found. Obviously such a tradition is unique to Georgian [2, p. 142]. While creating the versified versions of *The Ladder* the authors had a ready, highly artistic Georgian prose translations, together with the Greek text.

The highly Artistic style of the work is created by original using of symbolic images. The author attaches new meanings to individual traditional paradigmatic images. For example, **morning star**, **sun**, and **moon** symbolically denoted God and saints. Sun is a symbol of God, but it can also denote saints. Similarly, morning star is linked to Christ in the *New Testament*. It also heralds a new life brightened by the virtue of Christ. In works by Georgian hymnographers (Ioane Minchkhi, Mikael Modrekili, Ioane Mtbvari, and others), it can also denote saints [7, p. 99]. “The first resembles the morning star, the second the full moon, and the third the blazing sun; and they all have their home in heaven”. Ivane Lolashvili believes that the quoted passage depicts “a natural picture of a dawn and sunrise”, which Ioane Petritsi understood in a completely different manner. With Petritsi, “the Sun of truth” is a metaphorical notion implying Christ [10, p. 143]. To support his opinion, he quotes hymnographic texts, where Christ is regarded as “the Sun of truth”. The Sun of truth and the morning star were indeed images of Christ in Georgian literature, but such an understanding would be taken out of context in such cases and the passage under research would lose meaning. In reality, symbols are used in the contexts quoted to show the path of spiritual progress.

The terminology employed in Georgian translations of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* provides important material regarding the development and specification of medieval translation practice. More specifically, different translations of one and the same text, made in various epochs, employing a different literary style provide an opportunity to observe the process of formation of the language of notions: Philosophical and theological terminology is not very systemic at the earlier stage and no strictly organized terminological apparatus is visible (Euthymius the Athonite finds various Georgian translations of the same word or translates various Greek terms using one Georgian word), which is natural for Euthymius’ era given the purposes of his translations’. As expected, the

well-shaped language of notions can be seen in the translation by Petre Gelateli. In some cases, previous prosaic translations (mostly, that by Petre Gelateli) are the source of Catholicos Anton's version. In other cases, he uses the philosophical and theological terminology elaborated in medieval Georgian philosophy (not only by Ioane Petritsi), and the author shows that he has a deep and substantial command of the terminology. There are cases, when Catholicos Anton uses an existing term, changing its meaning.

Thus, the Georgian translations of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* holds great importance for scholars of Georgian and Byzantine literature due to the unique information provided in the Will of Euthymius the Athonite as well as with the structure of his translation. On the other hand, the numerous Georgian translations, edited versions and manuscripts of *The Ladder* by which the Georgian cultural space is connected to the Eastern Christian world of the middle ages and which is determined by the worldview of the text, its structure, deep philosophical and theological discussions, style and many other factors, indicates the importance of this work for the scholars of Medieval Georgian literature as well.

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