

## EXCERPT

**The Year** is sometime around 339 AD.

**The Place** is in eastern Georgia (then called Iberia) in the Kakheti region. Nino has settled in the small village of Bodbe by a mountain pass.

**The Setting:** Nino and Jacob 'the Priest' have travelled to the Kakheti region. Joined by her friend Queen Salome,<sup>i</sup> and a bevy of village elders, soldiers, and female slaves, they have converted the people there to Christianity through inspired teaching and baptism. But Nino has fallen sick and is resting in a small village lodge at Bodbe. Her other friend, Queen Perozhavra of the Kartli region has come to help tend to her needs.<sup>ii</sup> But her illness has taken a turn for the worse, and there is some concern that she may not recover.

"I'm so happy that the people of Kakheti have been brought to see the Light, and have embraced it with such joy and good cheer," whispered Nino to the two queens. "They have accepted Christ's Holy Sacrament and are eager to learn more about the Good News. And I'm so glad that you have finally received the baptism from the priest. We are truly blessed this day." <sup>iii</sup>

"Praise be to God," exclaimed Salome. "The people are more hopeful now about the future. Wow, they were really excited when you told them the story of the 'living pillar',<sup>iv</sup> and all the marvels surrounding the miracle. Now they know for sure, as I do, that God's hand is present here. It was a glorious day, and I'm burning with desire now to further the Gospel."

After conversion of many of the people from Kakheti, with pride and satisfaction, and a little inspiration from Nino, Salome had gone out and erected a cross in the royal fortified castle at Ujarma, where she and her family live. The cross still stands today. Then she returned to Nino at Bodbe.

"I'm so lucky to have you two by my side as friends and fellow believers. But I must tell you, with all honesty, that I'm not feeling very well at all these days. My stomach hurts and my head aches. And I'm feeling dull all over. I know that I'm in the hands of Almighty God, and what will be with me is what He wills. If I recover, I will give praise to the Lord. But if I don't, I am content that I have done all I can to further His Kingdom, and I will go with the angels cheerfully as a humble servant. In that case, I turn this most important work over to you, my sincerest friends, to keep the momentum and spread the faith."

"Quiet now," said Perozhavra. "Don't talk like that. You are our beloved teacher, healer, and comforter. You came to this country from outside, and have embraced our customs and enlightened our people – you have freed our souls. We don't know anything about your background or how you got here. But we owe you everything. You are part of us now. We will not desert you. Tell us how to continue your good works."

With that, Nino smiles and dozes off. When she awakens a few hours later, she is feeling worse and uncertain about the future. Her breathing is irregular and her voice is cracked and shaky. But she manages to say aloud: "Come to me now, my dearest friends Salome and Perozhavra. Come close and I will tell you everything about my past – my life story – because I believe it has been directed by God. He has given me the gifts, and I have tried to use them according to His wishes. Then you can understand how it all came to be, why I am here, and how I got here. Let me tell

you the whole story from the beginning, so you can see how God works on earth in preparation for our life in heaven. Before I pass from this life to the next, I want you to know the story, so that you can pass it on to others, with hopes for their salvation in the glory of Christ, our Lord."

Salome and Perozhavra stood by her bed and wept bitterly, but tried to hide their faces. Then they bent down on their knees and leaned close to Nino. "We will listen to everything you have to say and we will remember. And we will tell all the holy believers about your life in the service of God."

"I have a pen and parchment," added Perozhavra, "and will write down all you say, so nothing will be forgotten or misunderstood."

"My dearest friends, you have my gratitude and my blessing," murmured Nino. "So, I shall tell you my story, as long as I have the breath to tell it. May God grant me the strength to say it all."

"Amen," said the two queens in unison.<sup>v</sup>

And with that, Nino started her story: "It all started in Cappadocia ..."

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i. Salome of Ujama was an Armenian princess (from the Arsacid royal family) who was married into Iberian royalty (the Chosroid family). She was a daughter of King Tiridates III and Queen Ashkhen of Armenia. Her birth name was Beoun, but was changed to Salome after she married Rev II of Iberia, the first son of King Mirian III and his second wife, Queen Nana, of Iberia. Through marriage, Salome later became a queen of Iberia, and co-ruled with Rev II and Mirian III.

ii. Perozhavra of Sivnia was a noblewoman who was married to the ruler of the Kartli region, an outlying semi-autonomous district that had been evangelized.

iii. Prior to converting to Christianity, Salome was a follower of Zoroastrianism, the principal religion of the Persian Empire. She converted and was baptized by Nino, but had **just recently** received an official baptism by a priest.

iv. This story is recounted in Chapter 6.

v. Salome and Perozhavra are Saints in the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch. As a dedication to honor the memory of Nino – and as a continuation of her work to spread Christianity throughout Iberia – Salome and Perozhavra wrote a biography on her life, titled "The Life of Saint Nino, Enlightener of Georgia".