

Saqmo and polis

Summary

Pshavis-khevi (the mountain district of East Georgia) - like Israel - is the unity of twelve saqmos (communities). And as the twelve tribes of Israel were united around the Jerusalem Temple, so communities of Pshavi unite around Lasharis-jvari, their religious centre.

In contrast to the tribes of Israel who represented "one flesh and bone" (they were derived from one scion - Jacob) the saqmos of Pshavis-khevi are from the start a religious-social unity. According to its oral traditions, each of the twelve was created on religious grounds as a religious union and later at a higher stage all they constituted a religious ligue under the patronage of Lasharis-jvari.

The sacred character of number "twelve" is universal which is confirmed by written sources of different cultures (J.C.Cooper, *Lexicon Alter Symbole*, Leipzig, 1986, 222). This is the full number of a unity bearing important goal as task (as the twelve knights in quest of the Grail), being consummated in the twelve Apostles of Christ, whose concrete source lies in the tradition of the Old Testament.

But the symbolism of "12" in the referred sense is not alien to the Classical world. The optimum meaning of "12" as a sacred number for a community occurs first in Plato's writings. The ideal state envisioned by him and its main city must be divided into twelve parts (Laws, 745b-c).

The Plato's opinion undoubtedly leans upon the ancient tradition according to which the Grecian world were represented by the twelve tribes who had their religious centre in the temple of Delphi. It was Amphictionic Counsel where the twelve tribes had an equal voice. "The main duties of the Council were to restrain acts of aggression against its members, and to preserve the rights and dignity of the temple of Delphi" (W.Smith. *A History of Greece*, London, 1854, p.50).

Further, each of the twelve tribes consisted of 12 poleis (state-cities).

Herodotus in book I of his "History" writes:

"As for the Ionians, the reason why they made twelve cities and would admit no more was in my judgment this, that there were twelve divisions of them when they dwelt in Peloponnesus, just as there are twelve divisions of the Achaeans who drove the Ionians out [follows the names of poleis, Z.K.).

It is clear why the Ionians did not want to admit a 13th polis into the union of twelve poleis founded by them. They did not break the sacred tradition, preserved it and wherever they settled they would live in twelve poleis. The Achaeans too, who had expelled them submitted to this tradition. They could not increase nor decrease the sanctioned number of poleis.

The Ionians emigrating to Asia Minor in the 11th-10th cc B.C. formed united Panionia of twelve cities (dodekapolis), a military-religious union, the so called Amphictyony. Later, during the second Great colonization the Greeks founded twelve poleis, on the pattern of the Panionia, a Bosphorian Symmachy including twelve poleison the northern and the

eastern Black Sea littoral. .

The religious origin of the twelve poleis system becomes clear on the example of Delphi, the religious centre of Greece, which united twelve poleis. By virtue of this ancient tradition Greek tribes were united in twelve poleis each around religious centre. Each polis had its polis deity, temple, religious festivals, its heroes. Likewise an amphictyony had common deity, temple, festivals which were celebrated by divine feast and sacred games.

Aristotle considers the polis as a unity - a self-sufficient unit whose territory with its population should be "easy to be viewed", all polites should personally know each other in order to know the capacity and virtue each is endowed with (Politeia, 1326b). Further, what is more essential, "Polis is a partnership of free men". That is a fundamental condition for the existence of polis as such. A classic definition of the Greek polis that it is a territorially and demographically circumscribed settlement, society of free men that originated with the purpose of getting the best conditions for material and spiritual life can be wholly applied to the Pshav-Khevsureti saqmos. But both polis and saqmo are not only social-political, but religious unities, united by their founder in the past and protected by him in the present. The high patron (otherwise Saint), who laid the foundation for their unity, heroes whose deeds are imprinted upon their memory, and many other features and factors of their existence create their unique individuality. A person - qma united in a saqmo (sa-qm-o) who follows the faith and obeys only his supreme patron is free, although he is called qma "vassal", but this vassal enjoys much more freedom within the saqmo than anybody who is "free" from it, or does not belong any one. His freedom lies in his right of service to the patron and participation in the social life of the community. A man without a polis, according to Aristotle, "is either low in the scale of humanity or above it" (Politeia 1253a). As to the fate of a qma, cut off from his saqmo, is known to be tragic.

Only a free polis-saqmo may unite in a free union with other poleis-saqmos. Greek tribes were united into Delphi, poleis - into amphictyionics with a common religious centre. The saqmos of Pshavis-khevi united around Lasharis-jvari - the focus of their common religious life. And in both cases the "12" - universal number of cosmic order - serves as a guarantee of stability and ideal equilibrium.