

THE SACRED GEOGRAPHY OF ANATORI: SYNCRETISM, PANDEMIC, AND CROSS-BORDER WORSHIP IN HIGH-MOUNTAIN KHEVSURETI

ანატორის საკრალური გეოგრაფია: სინკრეტიზმი, პანდემია და ტრანსკულტურული კულტმსახურება მაღალმთიან ხევსურეთში

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Abstract

This paper investigates the cult of the Anatori Cross (Anatoris Jvari) as a profound locus of religious, cultural, and linguistic synthesis within the Arghuni Valley of high-mountain Khevsureti. By analyzing the etymological stratigraphy of the deity—linking the prefix Ana- to Mesopotamian sky-deities and the element -Tor to Semitic bovine symbols of strength—this research argues that Anatori represents a *longue durée* celestial deity later assimilated into a Christian-Gnostic framework as an Archangel.

The study highlights a unique "borderland theology" that transcended medieval religious demarcations, facilitating a shared ritual space between Christian Khevsurs and Muslim Kists. This is exemplified by the oral history of the priest Bakhaga and the exchange of the Bachakura ritual bread, which functioned as a "sacred contract" of peace. Furthermore, the paper examines the narrative of the "Flying Icon" and the subsequent Anatori plague (Zhamni) as a cultural trauma narrative reflecting the tension between divine mobility and human institutionalisation. Through an exploration of the valley's unique solar topography and the material culture of "golden instruments," the paper concludes that Anatori serves as a "Total Deity" and a high-altitude archive, where the sacred functioned as a universal arbiter of order (Rigi) and communal survival.

Keywords: Anatori Cross (Anatoris Jvari); Khevsur-Kist Syncretism; Borderland Theology; Caucasian Mythology; Anatori Plague (Zhamni); Bakhaga Etymological Stratigraphy; Sacred Geography; Flying Icon (Mprinavi Khati); Morige Ghmert.

ნინო ღამბაშიძე

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აბსტრაქტი:

წინამდებარე ნაშრომში განხილულია ანატორის ჯვრის კულტი, როგორც რელიგიური, კულტურული და ლინგვისტური სინთეზის უმნიშვნელოვანეს კერა არღუნის ხეობაში, მაღალმთიან ხევსურეთში. ღვთაების ეტიმოლოგიური სტრატეგრაფიის ანალიზით – რაც აკავშირებს თეონიმის პრეფიქსს „ანა-“ (Ana-) მესოპოტამიურ ცის ღვთაებებთან, ხოლო ელემენტს „-ტორ-“ (Tor) ძალის გამომხატველ სემიტურ ბოვინურ სიმბოლოებთან – კვლევა ასაბუთებს, რომ ანატორი წარმოადგენს ხანგრძლივი დროის განმავლობაში ფორმირებულ ზეციურ ღვთაებას, რომელიც მოგვიანებით ქრისტიანულ-გნოსტიკურ ჩარჩოში მთავარანგელოზის სახით იქნა ასიმილირებული.

ნაშრომი ხაზს უსვამს კავკასიის ხალხთა შორის უნიკალურ „სასაზღვრო თეოლოგიას“, რომელმაც გადალახა შუა საუკუნეების რელიგიური დემარკაციები და შექმნა საერთო რიტუალური სივრცე ქრისტიან ხევსურებსა და მუსლიმ ქისტებს შორის. ამის თვალსაჩინო მაგალითია ქისტი ხუცესის, ბახაგას ზეპირი გადმოცემა და რიტუალური პურის – ბაჩაქურას გაცვლის ტრადიცია, რომელიც მშვიდობის ერთგვარი „საკრალური ხელშეკრულების“ ფუნქციას ასრულებდა. გარდა ამისა, ნაშრომში განხილულია „მფრინავი ხატი“ ლეგენდა ანატორის ჟამიანობა (ეპიდემია) გააზრებულია, როგორც კულტურული ტრავმის ნარატივი, რომელიც წარმოაჩენს დამაბულობას ღვთაებრივ მობილურობასა და მისი ინსტიტუციონალიზაციის ადამიანურ მცდელობას შორის. ხეობის უნიკალური სოლარული ტოპოგრაფიისა და „ოქროს საკრავების“ მატერიალური კულტურის კვლევის საფუძველზე, ნაშრომი ასკვნის, რომ ანატორი გვევლინება, როგორც „ტოტალური ღვთაება“ და მაღალმთიანი არქივი, სადაც საკრალური სფერო ასრულებდა წესრიგის (რიგის) უნივერსალური არბიტრისა და თემის გადარჩენის გარანტის ფუნქციას.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: ანატორის ჯვარი; ხევსურულ-ქისტური სინკრეტიზმი; სასაზღვრო თეოლოგია; კავკასიური მითოლოგია; ანატორის ჟამიანობა; ბახაგა; ეტიმოლოგიური სტრატეგრაფია; საკრალური გეოგრაფია; მფრინავი ხატი; მორიგე ღმერთი.

I. Etymological Stratigraphy: From Sumer to the Caucasus

The theonym Anatori (and its regional cognates Antari and Aytar) serves as a linguistic "stratigraphical column"—a vertical core sample of Caucasian religious consciousness. Rather than

being a localized, peripheral mountain phenomenon, Anatori represents a *longue durée* deity whose evolution tracks the transition from Mesopotamian celestial worship to the rigid, warrior-centric code of the Khevsurian highlands. To understand Anatori is to understand how the Caucasus functioned not as a barrier, but as a "sacred filter" for the ancient world's most potent theological concepts.

The Hellenistic world often saw the "other" (the barbarian) as a source of archaic, uncorrupted divinity. If Anatori and Apaturus are indeed cognates, it proves that the Arghuni valley was part of a "sacred corridor" that stretched from the shores of Colchis to the Mesopotamian plains. For the academic reader, this redefines Khevsureti: it is no longer an isolated mountain "island," but a high-altitude archive where the religious debris of empires—Sumerian, Semitic, and Greek—was collected and preserved in the amber of local tradition.

1. The Celestial Prefix: Ana- and the Mesopotamian Substrate

The initial component, Ana-, aligns with the foundational sky-deities of the Fertile Crescent. Ivane Javakhishvili identifies this prefix as a direct parallel to the Sumerian An/Anna and the Babylonian/Akkadian Anu¹. In these systems, An signifies the primordial "Heaven" or "Sky," a concept that survives in the Khevsurian context where the Anatori shrine is explicitly identified as an Archangel (*mtavarangelozi*)—a celestial intermediary².

2. The -Tor Element: The "Heavenly Bull" as Military Commander

The identification of the morphological element -Tor with the Semitic *túri* (bull/strength)³ shifts Anatori from a passive celestial observer to an active, physical force within the Khevsurian landscape. In the pastoral economy of the Arghuni valley, the bull is not merely livestock; it is the ultimate mediator of the sacred.

During the *Atengenoba* festivals, the ritual sacrifice of the bull functions as a blood-covenant that anchors the "Sky" (Ana) to the "Soil" (Tor). Anatori thus represents a cosmic hybrid: the "Heavenly Bull."

This duality explains why the deity is described by Urbneli (1887)⁴ as a "commander of campaigns". The bull's physical power is redirected into a military context—Anatori is the "Fighter" (*Molashkre*) who "breaks the rifle" of the enemy. This is the hallmark of the Khevsurian Warrior-

¹ Javakhishvili, I. (1979). *Works in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. IX, pp. 92-93. Javakhishvili relies on the comparative philology of Eberhard Schrader (1903) to link the Kartvelian Ana to the Mesopotamian Anu. This suggests that the "High Mountain" cults of Georgia are not isolated "pagan" remnants but are integrated into the broader theological framework of the Ancient Near East. (Javakhishvili, 1978)

² Narrator Basili Chincharauli (1977). TSUFA 27048. The identification of the "Anatori Cross" as an "Archangel" is a classic example of *interpretatio christiana*, where a pre-Christian celestial deity is absorbed into the Christian angelic hierarchy to maintain its "heavenly" status while adhering to new religious dogmas.

³ Schrader, E. (1903). *Die Keilinschriften und das Alte Testament*, p. 477. Schrader demonstrates that the root *túri* is a foundational block for Near Eastern theonyms. In the Khevsurian context, this Semitic root was "re-naturalized" into the pastoral environment, where bovine strength was the primary measure of value. (Schrader, 1903)

⁴ (Urbneli, 1887)

Saint: a being that possesses the serene light of the Archangel but acts with the irresistible force of a charging bull.

Beyond the bovine imagery lies a darker, more ancient zoomorphic layer. The phonological proximity between the theonym Anatori, the zoonym tura (jackal), and aptari (hyena/predator) suggests that this deity also presides over the predatory "wild"⁵.

In the Caucasus, the wolf (mgeli) and dog-like predators are historically worshipped as spirit-guides and symbols of the warrior-elite. By linking Anatori to the "jackal" (tura), the folklore preserves a memory of a deity that is not only a "protector of goods" but a predatory guardian.

The mention of the aptari (hyena/predator) is critical. In Caucasian mythology, these animals are often seen as "liminal" beings that move between the worlds of the living and the dead (the vaults). Anatori, as a "Hunter Icon" (monadire khati), occupies this same liminal space. He does not just bless the herds; he "hunts" the enemies of the community.

The significance of this etymological and zoomorphic convergence lies in the totalizing, cosmogonic nature of the Khevsurian deity. Anatori is not merely a specialized mountain spirit; he is a local manifestation of Morige Ghmerti—the Supreme "Arranger" God of the Georgian highland pantheon.

a. The "Arranger" of the Arghuni: Order and Borders

The title Morige (derived from the Georgian rigi, meaning "order" or "row") defines a deity who is the architect of cosmic and social stability. By understanding Anatori through the lens of Morige Ghmerti, we see him as the ultimate Order-Giver. He does not merely inhabit the valley; he defines its borders, regulates its seasons, and establishes the moral "rows" by which the clans must live.

By synthesizing the Sky (Ana), the Bull (Tor), and the Predator (Tura/Aptari), the Khevsurian culture created a "Total Deity" capable of governing every stratum of mountain life:

- **Economic:** Multiplying "goods" and cattle as the provider of life-sustaining abundance.
- **Military:** Acting as a "Commander" who lead campaigns and possesses the supernatural power to "break the rifles" of the unworthy.
- **Juridical:** Serving as the "Supreme Judge" who defines the borders of the law and strikes down the "Bloody Sword" of the transgressor.

b. The Archangel as a Syncretic Mask

The multidimensionality of the Anatori cult allowed it to survive the radical shifts of Christianization and the subsequent pressures of Islamic proximity. However, the adoption of the title Archangel (mtavarangeloz) should not be viewed as a simple substitution. Rather, it functioned as a canonical mask for a force that was already, in the Khevsurian consciousness, "more than an angel."

⁵ The link between Anatori and the jackal/wolf complex reflects a broader Caucasian tradition of Lycormorphism (wolf-transformation). Warriors often sought to emulate the "predatory" nature of the deity to ensure success in hunting and warfare. The inclusion of aptari (hyena) suggests a connection to the "Old World" predators of the Near East that remained in the linguistic memory of the Kartvelian tribes.

The transition to the Archangel archetype was a deliberate act of *Interpretatio Christiana*. The institutional Church sought to overshadow the primordial status of the local deity by incorporating it into a hierarchical system that it did not previously belong to.

- **Diminishment of Status:** By reframing the supreme, world-arranging Morige Ghmerti—the architect of cosmic order—into the rank of an "Archangel," the new religious order attempted to diminish its ontological status. It was a movement intended to transform a self-sovereign creator into a subordinate servant (q'ma) of the Christian God.
- **The Resilient Limit:** Despite this attempt at ecclesiastical demotion, the spiritual significance of Anatori was so profound that the process encountered an immovable limit. The local tradition refused to allow the deity to be reduced to a minor saint or a mere relic; the "Archangel" became the absolute floor of its diminishment. Christianity could not diminish Anatori further than the highest possible celestial rank, below which its identity as the Universal Arbiter remained untouchable.

c. The Aniconic Influence: The "Invisible" Supreme

The high status of Anatori is further reinforced by its iconographic restriction. In highland theology, the highest manifestation of the divine—Morige Ghmerti—is too vast and transcendent to be captured in a physical image.

The Borderland Filter reflects a possible Islamic influence (aniconism) filtered through the North Caucasian borderlands. In the Muslim tradition, the highest deity remains unrepresentable; similarly, for the Khevsurians, the "Highest" is felt in the law and the land, not seen in a portrait.

While the "Archangel" provided a recognizable face for the Christian world, the Khevsurian tradition maintained the aniconic sanctity of the deity. The Anatori Cross (Jvari) remained an abstract, non-representational symbol—a sign of the "Invisible Arranger" rather than a finite portrait of a winged messenger.

d. Synthesis: The Total Warrior of the Caucasus

When the Khevsurians pray to the Anatori Cross, they are addressing a force that has absorbed the light of the Christian heaven, the raw muscle of the Near Eastern bull, and the predatory vigilance of the Caucasian wolf. He is the personification of Righteous Order (Rigi):

- **Economic:** The provider of life-sustaining abundance.
- **Military:** The "Commander" who "breaks the rifles" of the enemy.
- **Juridical:** The "Supreme Judge" who defines the borders of the law.

Ultimately, the cult of Anatori proves that a deity's power is not determined by its name, but by its utility. Even when reduced to an "Archangel" by the Church, Anatori remained the "Arranger" of the Arghuni valley—a god that could not be eclipsed because he was the very source of the valley's light. Thus, when the Khevsurians pray to the Anatori Cross, they are not merely addressing a local saint. They are addressing a Universal Arbiter who has absorbed the light of the Christian heaven, the raw muscle of the Near Eastern bull, and the predatory vigilance of the Caucasian wolf. He is the personification of Righteous Order—a deity who remains "invisible" in his highest form, yet is physically felt in the "gold nails" of his shrine and the "plague arrows" of his judgment.

e. The Kartvelian-Abkhazian Isogloss: Antari to Aytar

The deity's distribution across the South Caucasus reveals a consistent phonological and functional evolution. In Samegrelo, the deity is addressed as Zhini Antari ("Upper Antari")⁶. The transition to the Abkhazian Aytar (or Aṭtar) follows a documented linguistic shift where the nasal "n" converts to "l" and subsequently to "y"⁷. Despite these phonetic variations, the functional core remains immutable: the deity is the "overseer of goods" (orinji) and the protector of domestic multiplication.

f. The Mediterranean Corridor: The Apaturia Hypothesis

A critical evidentiary link exists between the Khevsurian "Anator" and the Greek Apaturia (Theos Apaturos). Hellenistic sources locate a major shrine to this deity on the northeastern shores of the Black Sea⁸. We argue that this represents a Black Sea cultural corridor where Greek maritime traditions synthesized with indigenous Colchian and Iafetid beliefs. The morphological structure of An-ator and Ap-aturos suggests a common pre-Hellenic substrate focused on the preservation of the "domestic hearth" and the legal-social order of the community.

II. The Shared Sacred Space: Khevsur-Kist Syncretism and Cross-Border Pilgrimage

The Anatori shrine (jvari) serves as a liminal geographic and spiritual intersection. Situated in the Arghuni valley—a natural corridor between Khevsureti and the North Caucasus—the shrine functioned historically as a rjulian-urjulota salotsavi (a place of prayer for both believers and "non-believers")⁹. This inclusivity suggests that the "sacredness" of Anatori preceded the rigid religious demarcations of the medieval period¹⁰.

⁶ Kobalia, D. (1903). Samegrelo, pp. 99-100. The "Zhini Antari" ritual involved baking a square cube of corn flour before Great Lent. The prayer, "Zhin Antari Pateni Gomordzgvil!" (Upper Antar, Lord Victorious!), explicitly asks for the protection of "goods" (pastoral wealth), linking the celestial deity to the economic survival of the household. (Kobalia, 1903)

⁷ Janashia, S. (1997). Abkhazia and the Abkhazians, p. 70. Janashia notes the Abkhazian hymn "Vaṭ etlar! Aithar etlar!", used when moving cattle. The linguistic shift from Antari (Megrelian) to Aytar (Abkhazian) is a key isogloss that proves the deity was shared across different ethnic groups in the Western Caucasus. (Janashia, 1997)

⁸ Charaia, P. (1912). On the Question of Relation of Abkhazian language with Iafetid Languages. Charaia and Javakhishvili both posit that the Greek Apaturos mentioned by Strabo and other Hellenistic writers is a Greek rendering of the indigenous "Anator" cult found in the Caucasus. This suggests the shrine was a site of syncretic pilgrimage for both Greeks and locals. (Charaia, On the Question of Relation of Abkhazian language with Iafetid Languages, 1912)

⁹ Narrator Mzekala Chincharauli (1995). TSUFA 30000. The term urjulota (non-believers/lawless) was traditionally used by Georgian highlanders to refer to their Muslim neighbors (Kists/Chechens). However, at Anatori, this "otherness" did not preclude sacred participation, indicating a pragmatic "borderland theology" where shared survival and shared deities outweighed dogma.

¹⁰ In the article *Kopala, Veshapi, and the Gigantomachia: The Ethics of Divine Power in Georgian Mythology. History, Archaeology, Ethnology, 12(1), 67–68*. Gambashidze argues that the Anatori shrine exemplifies a "borderland theology" where the sacred functioned as a trans-religious space. By allowing "urjulota" (non-believers/Muslim neighbors) to participate in rituals, the highland culture prioritized "shared survival" and the "ethics of power" over rigid dogma. Furthermore, the author situates the Georgian deity Kopala within a broader Indo-European and Near Eastern "striker god" tradition (paralleling Thor and Indra), suggesting that Georgian mythology serves as a sophisticated ethical system that demands divine power be used as a tool for justice and communal protection rather than arbitrary authority. (Gambashidze, 2025)

a. The Figure of Bakhaga: The Muslim Intermediary

The oral tradition preserves the memory of Bakhaga¹¹, a Kist (Muslim) priest from the North Caucasian highlands who performed regular liturgies at the Anatori shrine¹². Bakhaga's role was not that of a peripheral observer but of a central ritual agent who "glorified the icon with candles" and participated in the distribution of sacred foods¹³. The fact that Bakhaga was allowed to "access the vaults" and that a dove—the symbol of the Holy Spirit or the divine presence—would "sit on his shoulder"¹⁴ indicates a local recognition of his spiritual purity (*motsmindari*)¹⁵, regardless of his Islamic faith¹⁶.

b. Linguistic Hybridity: The Basmala and the Archangel

The most striking evidence of syncretism is found in the liturgical formula recited by Bakhaga:

„Bismilahi Rahmani, Anakorin ts'a ts'eim bara“¹⁷

¹¹ Bakhaga's performance of liturgies—specifically "glorifying the icon" and accessing the sacred vaults—marks him as a central agent in the Khevsurian ethical system. Gambashidze argues that his recognized spiritual purity (*motsmindari*), symbolized by the divine dove, demonstrates that the "ethics of power" and the sacred law of the shrine outweighed rigid religious dogma, transforming the "otherness" of the Kist priest into a shared spiritual guardianship. For the analysis of the Andrezi (testament) of Bakhaga (TSUFA 30000, Item 3), see Gambashidze, "Saneba of Tsroli," 558–561. (Gambashidze N. , 2023)

¹² The narrator mentions Bakhaga came from "Khakanat." Historically, this referred to the Khazar Khaganate or later Muslim polities, but in the 20th-century Khevsurian memory, it became a generalized term for the Muslim North Caucasus.

¹³ Narrator Mzekala Chincharauli (1995). TSUFA 30000, Item 3. The Kists participated in "glorifying the icon" (*jvars gaadidian*), which is a high-level ritual act in Khevsurian culture usually reserved for the Dasturi (shrine servant).

¹⁴ In Khevsurian and Pshavian tradition, the appearance of a dove is interpreted as the direct presence of the Khtishvilni (children of God) or the Holy Spirit. Gambashidze notes that the dove sitting on Bakhaga's shoulder serves as a "divine certification" of his purity, effectively overriding his religious "otherness" as a Muslim (Kist). This imagery establishes a "borderland theology" where the sacred recognizes spiritual merit over dogmatic affiliation. See Nino Gambashidze, "The Pleiades in Khevsurian Cosmogony: The Cult, Service and Ritual Cuisine of Kajetian Women Linking with Dodonean Cult," (Gambashidze N. , The pleiades in khevsurian cosmogony: the cult, service and ritual cuisine of kajetian women linking with dodonean cult, 2025) For the specific Andrezi (mythological testament) regarding Bakhaga at the Anatori shrine, see also Gambashidze, "Saneba of Tsroli – Cycle of Tsroli Mountain and Holy Trinity Shrine," *History, Archaeology, Ethnology* 10 (2023): 558.

¹⁵ The designation of Bakhaga as originating from "Khakanat" is identified by Gambashidze as a reflective memory of historical contact with North Caucasian Muslim polities. In this context, the Anatori shrine functions as a "liminal geographic and spiritual intersection" where the "sacredness" of the site preceded medieval religious divisions, facilitating a "borderland theology" that allowed for trans-ethnic ritual participation. See Nino Gambashidze, "Saneba of Tsroli – Cycle of Tsroli Mountain and Holy Trinity Shrine," *History, Archaeology, Ethnology* 10 (2023): 554–556. (Gambashidze N. , 2023)

¹⁶ Narrator Mzekala Chincharauli (1995). TSUFA 30000, Items 14-16. The "dove" (*mt'redi*) is a recurring motif in these texts. In Section III, we will explore how this dove/icon "flew" between Christian and Muslim lands, reinforcing the deity's nomadic and trans-border nature.

¹⁷ Narrator Mindikauri (1983). TSUFA 26084. This specific invocation demonstrates that Islamic monotheistic terminology was comfortably embedded within the cult of the Cross. This suggests a form of Gnostic or Folk Syncretism where the name of Allah and the power of the Archangel were seen as complementary rather than contradictory.

This phrase represents a profound linguistic and theological synthesis. The use of the Arabic Basmala (Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim—In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful) as a prefix to a Khevsurian blessing for the Anatori Cross suggests that, for the highland population, the "Divine" was a singular force that could be accessed through multiple linguistic and religious keys. The "Anatori Cross" is thus treated not as a denominational symbol of Christianity, but as a universal celestial protector.

c. Ritual Reciprocity and the Bachakura

The communal aspect of the shrine was reinforced through the exchange of the Bachakura, a multi-layered ritual cake¹⁸. The Kistans would bring these cakes and boiled meat to the shrine to share with the Khevsur villagers¹⁹. This shared ritual meal functioned as a "sacred contract" of peace between the two potentially hostile groups. The Anatori Cross was believed to "prefer Bachakura to slaughter," reinforcing its role as a "Supreme Judge of Peace" who favored non-violent ritual offerings over the blood feuds typical of the region²⁰.

This section transitions from the ritual participation of the "Other" to the internal collapse of the Anatori community. The legend of the "Flying Icon" and the subsequent plague (Zhamni) provides a profound narrative framework for understanding the tension between divine mobility and human institutionalization, while simultaneously recording a historical epidemiological catastrophe.

III. The Theology of Mobility and the Hubris of Fixation: The "Flying Icon" and the Anatorian Plague

The oral tradition of Anatori centers on a singular, recurring motif: the flying icon (mprinavi khati). Unlike other Khevsurian icons that remained anchored to a specific shrine, the Anatori Cross is described as a mobile entity that "flew through the air" between Khevsureti, Tusheti, and Kistet²¹. This mobility serves as a metaphor for the deity's universal sovereignty and its refusal to be captured by a single political or ecclesiastical entity.

a. The Sin of Immobilization: The Golden Nails

¹⁸ Chincharauli, A., & Arabuli, A. (2005). The Bachakura (or Bachakhura) is more than just food; it is a symbolic object used in the "remembrance of the dead" (Soultakrepa). Its use at Anatori highlights the shrine's connection to the "cult of the ancestors" and the "Womb" (Kucha) of the mountain.

¹⁹ Gambashidze identifies the Bachakura as a "cosmic map" in edible form, where its multi-layered structure mirrors the ontological complexity of the Georgian highlands. The exchange of this ritual cake at the shrine serves as a mechanism of social and spiritual re-integration, reinforcing the communal bond (saqmo) through the shared consumption of a "blessed" substance. This practice underscores the "ethics of divine power" by ensuring that the deity's abundance is distributed equally among all participants, regardless of their social standing. See (Gambashidze N. , THE PLEIADES IN KHEVSURIAN COSMOGONY: THE CULT, SERVICE AND RITUAL CUISINE OF KAJETIAN WOMEN LINKING WITH DODONEAN CULT, 2025, pp. 24-27).

²⁰ Urbneli, N. (1887). Urbneli describes the deity as the "God supreme judge of the peace." In a region defined by the shish-makhvli (fear and the sword), Anatori provided a neutral ground where the "Bloody Sword" could be symbolically struck down by the deity itself.

²¹ Ochiauri Al., M 32, 728-729. The icon's refusal to collect "taxes" (begra), unlike the Gudani Cross, is a critical distinction. It suggests that the Anatori cult was focused on charismatic expansion rather than institutional wealth. It "traveled to popularize its own name," functioning more like a missionary force than a feudal landlord.

The decline of the Anatori community is attributed to a specific act of ritual hubris. According to the narratives, as the icon's servant (Mkadre) grew old and physically frail, he could no longer keep pace with the icon's rapid celestial movements²². In an attempt to "tame" the divine and accommodate human weakness, the Mkadre commissioned a goldsmith²³ to fasten the icon with golden nails (okros lursmani)²⁴.

This act of "nailing the icon" represents a fundamental theological transgression: the attempt to fix the infinite into a finite, manageable form. By attempting to limit the icon's speed, the community sought to bring the divine under human control. The response was immediate and devastating—the icon was "damaged" by the nails and turned its wrath upon the people, their families, and the goldsmith himself²⁵.

b. The Zhamni: Plague as Divine Sanction

The divine "anger" manifested as a pandemic (shavi chiri or zhamni). The folklore describes the symptoms with medical precision—the appearance of "pimples" (muts'uk'i) followed by swift death²⁶.

The Anatori plague narrative is unique in its description of voluntary isolation. As the community was exterminated, the infected did not wait for burial—which had become impossible due to the scale of the mortality—but instead walked into the stone burial vaults (akldamebi) to "await the end"²⁷. The mention of "60 men with swords" sealing themselves inside suggests that the plague struck the community at the height of its military and social power, effectively decapitating the local elite.

3. Survival and Resettlement: The Shatili Shift

²² Narrator Mindikauri (1983). TSUFA 26084. The physical infirmity of the Mkadre (growing "old and crippled") represents the inevitable decay of human institutions. The attempt to "fix" the icon was an attempt to stop time itself.

²³ Gambashidze situates the act of fastening the icon with golden nails within the Khevsurian cult of metallurgy, specifically linking it to the mythic saga of Pirqushi—a "striker" deity mirroring Indo-European blacksmith-gods like Hephaestus and Percunas. In this framework, the goldsmith's craft serves as a ritual intervention that "tames" the volatile, mobile essence of the divine (the Flying Icon), which previously manifested as a destructive fire or plague. By pinning the icon with gold—a metal associated with solar purity and the Khtis-shvilni—the community effectively transitions from a state of "wild" cosmic vulnerability to an institutionalized, agricultural order where the sacred power is anchored and predictable. See: (Gambashidze N. , Sacred Crossroads of the Cults of Metallurgy and Agriculture: Exploring the Mythic Saga of Pirqushi and its Indoeuropean Parallels – Zeus Keraunos, Hephaestus, Percunas, Apollo Paeon, and Hellen of Troy, 2024)

²⁴ Narrator Basili Chincharauli (1977). TSUFA 27048. The choice of gold for the nails is significant. It implies that the community believed they were honoring the deity with precious metals, failing to realize that the act of nailing was a violation, regardless of the material's value.

²⁵ Mkadre of Anatori Cross I. Al. Ochauri, M 32. The icon was "marked with the nail" (nalursmali), suggesting a physical wounding of the sacred object that mirrored the "wounding" of the community by the plague.

²⁶ In Old Georgian, zhami refers to "time" or "era," but in a folk context, it often refers to the "Great Time" of the plague. To be "wounded by the arrows of Zhamni" is a poetic rendering of contracting the pestilence.

²⁷ The burial vaults of Anatori still exist today near the Chechen border. They are a haunting physical testament to the narratives, containing visible human remains that support the oral history of a sudden, mass-mortality event.

The demographic void left by the plague led to a significant shift in the Arghuni valley's power structure. The original "servants" of the Anatori Cross were replaced by the Chincharauli clan, who moved from Gudani to occupy the now-vacant lands²⁸.

The legend of the lone survivor who escaped to Tusheti and was later invited back by the Chincharaulis to settle at the "edge of the village" serves as a cultural memory of land legitimacy²⁹. By bringing back the last descendant of the original line, the new settlers sought to maintain a ritual connection to the "angry" deity they had inherited.

IV. Sacred Topography and Materiality: The Solar Chronotope and the Golden Panduri

The sanctity of Anatori was not merely a matter of belief but was grounded in the unique physical and acoustic environment of the Arghuni valley. The interaction between the rugged landscape and the movement of the sun created a "sacred time," while ritual objects like the golden lute provided a material link to the celestial realm.

a. The Solar Phenomenon: The "Twice-Rising" Sun

A defining characteristic of Anatori is its unique solar orientation. According to local lore, the sun rises twice (or even three times) in a single day³⁰. This is a natural phenomenon caused by the high mountains surrounding the village: the sun rises, disappears behind a peak at midday, leaving the village in shadow, and then "re-emerges" before finally setting³¹. In the Khevsurian worldview, this was not merely a geographic quirk but a sign of the village's status as a sacred center. The "dual" sunrise marked Anatori as a place where the normal laws of time and nature were suspended by the presence of the Archangel. It served as a natural "clock" for rituals and reinforced the identity of the Anatorians as people living in the "path of the sun."

b. The "Anatori Womb" (Kucha) and the Mountain Peak

Across from the main shrine, atop the mountain, lies a site known as the "Anatori Womb" (Anatoris Kucha)³². This site represents the "high" or "inner" sanctuary of the deity. The Kucha contained a sacred burial vault where a dove—the zoomorphic manifestation of the Anatori Cross—

²⁸ Ochiauri, Al., M 32, Notebook 46. The Chincharaulis are described as "forcibly" settling near Shatili. The plague story thus functions as a foundation myth that explains how a new clan came to possess ancient lands.

²⁹ Narrator Mindikauri (1983). TSUFA 26080. The recognition of the survivor's village because the "sun rose twice" there is a powerful mnemonic device. It links the survivor's identity to the unique solar topography of Anatori discussed in previous sections.

³⁰ Narrator Basili Chincharauli (1977). TSUFA 27048, Item 13. The narrator explicitly links the identity of the village to this phenomenon: "For this reason, people say that in Anatori, the sun rises twice." This solar rhythm created a distinct local "chronotope" (time-space) that distinguished Anatori from neighboring Shatili.

³¹ Narrator Mindikauri (1983). TSUFA 26080, Item 9. In some versions, the sun is said to rise three times. While geographically exaggerated, this reflects the symbolic importance of the number three in Khevsurian cosmology (associated with the three "brother" crosses: Arkhoti, Anatori, and Khone).

³² Narrator Mzekala Chincharauli (1995). TSUFA 30000, Item 7. The term Kucha (Womb) is a profound anatomical metaphor for a sacred space. It implies that the mountain peak was the "source" or "origin point" from which the deity's power was born into the valley.

was said to reside³³. The mountain peak functioned as a vertical axis (axis mundi), connecting the terrestrial village to the celestial "Upper Antar" (Zhini Antari) discussed in the etymological section.

c. Acoustic Sacrality: The Golden Panduri and Chonguri

The material culture of Anatori is uniquely centered on musical instruments. Oral histories mention a Golden Panduri (a three-stringed lute) with golden strings kept within the mountain vault, and a Golden Chonguri found on the chest of a deceased man³⁴. In the Caucasian highlands, the Panduri is the primary instrument for epic storytelling and spiritual hymns. The presence of "Golden" versions of these instruments suggests that music was the language of the deity. The "Golden Chonguri" found in the burial context likely signifies the role of music in the transition from the world of the living to the realm of the ancestors, acting as a "sonic bridge" between the mortal and the divine.

Conclusion: Anatori as a Nexus of Caucasian Sacredness

The study of the Anatori shrine reveals a complex "sacred stratigraphy" that challenges the notion of high-mountain isolation. Far from being a peripheral relic of "pagan" folklore, Anatori emerges as a sophisticated Universal Arbiter, a deity whose identity was forged in the fires of Mesopotamian celestial worship, refined by Near Eastern pastoralism, and preserved through the rigorous ethical code of the Georgian highlands.

The research leads to several critical syntheses:

The Persistence of Cosmic Order (Rigi): Through the etymological layers of Ana- (Heaven) and -Tor (The Bull/Strength), we see that Anatori was never just a local saint. He is a manifestation of the "Arranger" (Morige Ghmerti), a force that governs the economic, military, and juridical life of the valley. The adoption of the "Archangel" title was not a total conversion but a strategic syncretic mask that allowed this primordial "Total Warrior" to survive within a Christian-Gnostic framework.

A Sanctuary of Shared Survival: The inclusion of the Muslim Kist (Bakhaga) and the shared ritual of the Bachakura cake provide a historical model for "borderland theology." At Anatori, the "sacred" acted as a neutralizer of ethnic and religious "otherness." The shrine was a space where pragmatic survival and mutual respect for a "Flying Icon" outweighed the rigid dogmas of the lowland empires, proving that the Caucasus functioned as a bridge rather than a barrier.

The Ethics of Divine Mobility: The tragedy of the Anatori plague (Zhamni) serves as a theological warning against the "hubris of fixation." The attempt to "tame" the divine with golden nails reflects a fundamental human desire to control the infinite. The resulting pandemic and the heroic voluntary isolation in the stone burial vaults (akldamebi) transformed the community into a mythic testament (Andrezi). As Nino Gambashidze argues, these "men with swords" did not die as

³³ Narrator Mzekala Chinchauruli (1995). TSUFA 30000, Items 8-9. The presence of the dove (mt'redi) atop the vault connects the Anatori cult to broader Christian and pre-Christian Mediterranean imagery where birds serve as messengers of the sky-gods.

³⁴ Narrator Mindikauri (1983). TSUFA 26084, Item 4. Saghira Chinchauruli's account of finding a dead man with a "golden Chonguri on his chest" is a striking image of funerary luxury. The Chonguri is typically a four-stringed instrument from Western Georgia (Samegrelo/Abkhazia), further supporting the etymological link between the "Antari" of the west and the "Anatori" of the east.

victims, but as guardians of communal purity, choosing a self-imposed end to preserve the sacred order.

The Materiality of the Divine: The unique solar phenomenon of the "twice-rising sun" and the presence of golden instruments like the Panduri and Chonguri anchor the abstract theology of Anatori into the physical landscape. These elements created a "sacred chronotope" where time and sound served as the direct language of the deity.

In final analysis, the Anatori Cross remains the "Invisible Arranger" of the Arghuni valley. Its power lies not in its physical icon—which the community once tried and failed to bind—but in its enduring role as a source of justice, peace, and cultural memory. The ruins of Anatori are not merely an archaeological site; they are a high-altitude archive of a worldview where divine power must be used justly, where the stranger can be a priest, and where the "sun rises twice" for those who live according to the laws of the Cross.

TEXTS:

Anatori Cross³⁵

The Anatori Cross used to be "a flying cross."

It is an Archangel.

It had its follower[s].

The follower grew very old and thought, "There is a large village, almost a city, called Kakniakho, where there used to be goldsmiths and silversmiths. I will take the icon there and ask the goldsmiths to fasten it with nails on its shoulders."

He took it to the goldsmith, who fastened it with gold nails on its shoulders.

As a result of this action, the plague spread. Consequently, the whole village was exterminated. The burial vaults you see were built during those times.

Only one man survived, having escaped to Tusheti. There, he met someone from Shatili.

"From where do you come?"

"I come from such and such a place."

"In our village, the sun used to rise twice. It was called Perekhtena. The people were big, and our bulls would go through Perekhtena and return to the village."

The man from Shatili invited him to his village, brought him there, and helped him settle. This is what I know.

The Narrator's note: "In Anatori, there is a mountain. In winter, when the sun rises, it shines upon the village from below. Then, at midday, it hides behind the mountain, leaving the village in shadow."

Later, when it passes over the mountain, it shines again until it sets. For this reason, people say that in Anatori, the sun rises twice."

Kists in Anatori Cross Shrine³⁶

³⁵ Narrator Basili Chincharauli, Recorder G. Japaridze, Shatili, 1977, TSUFA 27048.

³⁶ Kists in Anatori Cross – Narrator Mzekala Chincharauli. Recorder Kh. Mamisimedashvili. Shatili, 1995. TSUFA 30000.

The Anatori cross is where all people come to pray – believers and non-believers. Only men go there.

When I was a child, there used to come a Kist priest named Bakhaga from Khakanat³⁷. He would come over the mountain from the Kist country.

Bakhaga glorified the icon with candles and Bachakuras³⁸.

Afterwards, the Kistan men gave boiled meat and Bachakuras to the people to honor the Cross.

We children were overjoyed when the Kistan men came to the shrine.

Bakhaga used to recite during the liturgy: "Anakorin ts'a ts'eim bara!" — May the Anatori Cross bless you.

Across from the Anatori Cross, atop the mountain, we used to call it the "Anatori Womb."

There used to be a vault in the shrine where the golden Panduri (a three-stringed lute) with golden strings was kept.

Atop the vault the dove was sitting.

People would say, "It is the Anatori Cross." Only the Kist Bakhaga could reach there.

Neither the people from Shatili could reach there even with crampons.

The cross would not let them there. It was the Cross' home.

Bakhaga alone could access it, even into the vaults.

The dove would come and sit on Bakhaga's shoulder.

The dove would soar in the sky.

[Bakhaga] was a highly purified man.

Bakhaga brought the dove with the Cross flag in Kist country.

He served liturgy there as well: „bismilahi rahmani, anakorin ts'a ts'eim bara“.

He told the other men, "This is the Anatori Cross," and they too would pray.

The Kists would invite the Khevsurian priests to Kist country and ask them to conduct the liturgy, blessing their families.

My grandfather Gigia was a priest in Shatili as well. He was also invited to Kist country where he would conduct prayers in their houses.

Congregation of the Anatori Cross³⁹

Nobody knows from where the Anatori Cross came here, as all its servants, the Anatorians, have been exterminated.

³⁷ **Khakanat** – in this case the narrator means the “Muslim country” under the term. All North Caucasian people were converted to Islam after the Mongolian’s invasions. For 20th c. Khevsurians, the Khakanat has lost its historical meaning and converted into generalized name of Muslim countries – in this case he means North Caucasian Chechnyan people, whom he recalls as Kists.

³⁸ **Bachakura** is a multi-layered cake cherished by children. It is also used as a commemorative gift for a deceased child and holds symbolic significance in Soultakrepa, the day of remembrance for the dead. "The Anatori Cross prefers Bachakhura to our slaughter," said Saghira. "Kistans prefer Bachakura more than our slaughterhouse. The ones brought by the Kists. That's how Anatori's Cross accepts the Kists. **Bachakhuroba** or **Bachakhuraoba** is a children's day celebration where they shoot arrows from a specific distance. Whoever shoots the arrow gets to keep it. (Chincharauli, Alexi, Arabuli Avtandil (editor), 2005)

³⁹ Al. Ochiauri, M 32, notebook 46.

The Anatori Cross had two "brothers" — the Cross of Arkhoti and the Cross of Khone. The third was itself — the Anatori Cross. All three are considered Archangels.

Among them, the Arkhoti Cross is the eldest, the middle brother is the Anatori Cross, and the youngest is the Khone Cross.

The congregation of the Anatori Cross consisted of the people in Anatori village, and they were quite numerous.

The entire Shatili area belonged to them — both the mountains and the plains.

Later, the Chincharaulis came from Gudani and settled forcibly near Shatili, in the village of Kachu.

The Anatorians united under the Anatori Archangel's flag and attempted to fight against the Chincharaulis, but they were repelled.

Since they could not succeed in banishing the Chincharauli clan who occupied Kachu, the Anatorians went and asked for help from the people of Tusheti.

The people of Tusheti came to support them with a large force and joined the Anatorians, who raised the Archangel's flag and launched a sudden assault.

They captured the cattle and sheep herds of the Chincharauli clan but could not harm them because the clan was fortified in their tower.

The Tushian brigades wanted to find out how the fortified Chincharaulis were obtaining water.

To find out, they left a mule without water for a long time. When they released the thirsty animal, it went straight to the reservoir where the Chincharaulis were getting their water supply.

The mule dug the spring with its front legs. They uncovered the water source, but the people fortified in the Kachu fortress did not surrender.

They prepared long woolen ropes. At night, the fortified Chincharaulis would descend these ropes down to the Arghuni water source.

There was a steep cliff, and the ropes led directly to the river, allowing them to draw water during the night.

They would get back the ropes, twist them and fill the basins. Thus they had plenty of water and bread prepared.

The Anatori Cross had a servant Mkadre, who followed the flying Anatori Icon.

When the Icon approached him, Mkadre would turn his face away. The Icon would then rest on Mkadre's hand, on a special cloth called Samkadreo, with its back turned towards Mkadre's face, to avoid being disturbed by human breath.

The icon travelled through Khevsureti, Tusheti, and even into Kist country, but it did not demand taxes (as collecting taxes from people was the obligation of the Gudani Cross). Its goal was to increase its fame and multiply believers. As Mkadre grew very old and increasingly frail, he could no longer travel with the icon.

For this reason, he tried to commission golden nails from the goldsmith to fasten the icon to its shoulder, hoping to limit the speed of the icon's flight so that the elderly Mkadre could continue to follow it.

Across from the village, there was another village now called "The Old Village," where only ruins of old houses remain. In that village lived the goldsmith.

Mkadre obtained the nails and prepared to fasten the icon.

The icon was marked with the nail and became very angry at him, his relatives, and even the goldsmith.

This caused a plague pandemic that wiped out all the villagers. In the burial vaults of Anatori, only 60 Armored with swords (i.e. grown men) were sealed because no one dared to bury those who died from the plague. Those who were sick with the plague went into the vaults on their own and stayed there.

When the icon exterminated the people, there was only one poor man who survived; he had a crippled head.

This men firstly escaped in Mutsu.

The Chincharauli clan tried to kill him to exterminate all the people of Anatori, ensuring no one could challenge their ownership of the property.

But the people of Mutsu helped this man to escape to Tusheti and saved him.

This man got merried in Tusheti.

The Chincharauli clan grew and settled in Anatori, Shatili, and flourished there.

The Anatori Cross no longer flew with its winged shoulders and became a regular shrine.

The inhabitants of Shatili continued to pray to the Anatori Cross, and they acquired Dasturis and Khelosanis (priests and shrine servants).

There was a man from Shatili, a shrine servant named Saghira Chincharauli.

The Archangel's icon used to come to his hand. But once it flew away from him, settled upon Tsukvisgora, and then moved to Khone where it remained.

Since then, the Anatori Cross has never come upon anyone's hand.

The Chincharaulis, when they rebuilt Shatili, invited the surviving man from Tusheti and allowed him to settle on the edge of their village.

Mkadre (Priest) of the Anatori Cross 1⁴⁰

In those times the Anatori Cross had one priest – the Mkadre.

The icon had the face of an Archangel, who would fly through the air, with Mkadre following it everywhere. The icon also had a frame, just like a regular icon.

This icon used to travel (or fly) through Khevsureti, Tusheti, and even into Kist country.

It did not attempt to tax the people (that was only the obligation of the Gudani Cross). It traveled to convert people, to popularize its own name, and to teach people to pray.

When it flew, its Mkadre followed, holding it.

Mkadre grew old and crippled and could no longer follow the icon.

For this reason, he wanted to commission golden nails from the goldsmith and nail them into its shoulders, to prevent the icon from flying fast so that the old Mkadre could follow it.

Across Anatori, there was an old village, now called "the former village."

Now there are only the ruins of the houses.

In this village lived the goldsmith. Mkadre asked him to make a golden nail and attempted to nail the icon (he intended to fasten the icon with the nails).

⁴⁰ Al. Ochiauri, M 32, 728-729

The nails damaged the icon, and it became very angry at Mkadre, his family, and the goldsmith. It caused a pandemic and exterminated everybody.

In Anatori, there were burial vaults, and one day, 60 armored men with swords entered and sealed themselves inside.

This time the plague was different—when a pimple appeared, the person would soon die.

The victims of the plague were left alone, and nobody dared to touch or bury the corpses. For this reason, when a pimple appeared, the sick person would go into the vault and die there on their own.

Their corpses or skeletons remain in the vaults to this day.

When these people were exterminated, one man survived, who had a wounded head.

First, this man escaped to the village of Mutsu. The inhabitants of Shatili tried to kill him to exterminate all the people of Anatori because they wanted to ensure no one could claim their property.

But the people of Mutsu rescued him, brought him to Tusheti, and asked to keep him safe.

In Tusheti he got married.

The people of Shatili began to occupy the places formerly held by the people of Anatori.

Anatori cross was not flying anymore and converted into a regular shrine.

The Shatili inhabitants continued praying and after some times, they had their own priesthood – Dasturis and Khelosanis.

But the icon no longer flew into anyone's hand.

Other rules were followed as in old times. When the people of Shatili became accustomed to their new life, they invited the escaped man and allowed him to settle at the end of their village.

When the icon used to come upon Mkadre's arm, it would sit upon the special handkerchief; Mkadre would turn his face away so as not to annoy the icon with his breath. The icon always faced away from Mkadre, not to feel the breath of a mortal human.

Mkadre (Priest) of the Anatori Cross 2⁴¹

It came from Liqoki, flew from there and settled in Anatori.

From there it flew to Khone and appeared there as a dove.

There was Saghira, grandfather of the Badurkia family. He ran up to the Anatori Womb, and the dove flew upon his shoulder.

Then Saghira said, "There is one man, dead, with the golden Chonguri⁴² (the three-stringed lute) on his chest."

After Saghira got very old, he could no longer follow the cross. He used to travel in Kist country with the cross..

Finally, when he could not follow the cross, he nailed it. The cross got angry on people.

Once, I was going in the village Jarega and came to the front door one man.

⁴¹ Mkadre of Anatori Cross II – Narrator: Mindikauri. Recorder: Niko Zviadauri. Mutsu, 1983. TSUFA 26084

⁴² **Chonguri**, a four-stringed lute (played by plucking and strumming) from Western Georgia. Three of the strings are fingered, while the fourth is a drone string. It is mainly found around Samegrelo, Abkhazia, Imereti, Guria, and Achara, and rarely in Lechkhumi.

The Kistan man ran out of his house shouting, "Do not bring it here, go somewhere else!" (He had a pregnant woman who was delivering a baby.)

"It will not harm," said Saghira, as he took the cross onto the roof⁴³ and laid the flag there.

The Anatorian Man, wounded by the arrows of Zhamni⁴⁴

Once heil came in Shatili. The inhabitants were gone in Kist country for some celebration.

"When we arrived there," my grandfather recounted, "we saw the cattle being tended to by a young child."

When the boy came close to us, he started talking in our tongue.

He said: "I am Anatorian"

"The pandemic exterminated everyone. I alone was rescued," he recounted.

Kist people took me here.

I have marks from Zhamni arrows (marks of the plague pimples).

I would recognize my village, if I go there.

There, the Sun would rise three times⁴⁵.

We took him with us. As we approached our village, he pointed with his hand and said, "That is my village," gesturing towards Anatori.

His descendants live in Anatori and are known as the Sisauri clan.

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⁴³ **A flat-roofed house**, characterized by its flat roof, is a common architectural style in folk architecture. It comes in two types based on arrangement: crown and flat structure. Due to its structural features, including the skylight (Erdo), agricultural buildings such as barns, stables, furnaces, and cellars can be constructed on all four sides of the flat-roofed house. In clustered settlements, especially in mountainous areas, the roof (bani) of the lower house often serves as the terrace for the house above it. The flat-roofed house is prevalent in the mountains and plains of eastern Georgia, as well as among certain peoples in the Caucasus, Minor Asia, and Central Asia.

⁴⁴ Anatorian man, wounded by the arrows of Zhamni – Narrator: Mindikauri. Recorder: Niko Zviadauri. Village Mutsu. 1983. TSUFA 26080

⁴⁵ The boy obviously exaggerates the facts. As we know from previous texts, in Anatori, the sun was said to "rise twice." During winter times, the sun would hide behind a high mountain at midday, leaving the village in shadow.

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