



**Shushanik Queen of Georgia  
Whom the Holy Church commemorates October 17.**

**Although** the nine martyred infants of Kola fell victims to their kinsfolk's rustic beliefs and superstitions, St. Shushanik died as a result of her refusal to accept the Zoroastrian religion professed by Georgia's Iranian overlords. The life of Shushanik is the oldest surviving work of Georgian literature. It was composed between the years A.D. 476 and 483 by Jacob of Tsuraveli, father-confessor to the princess, and is remarkable for its directness of language. The background of the saint's life is well known from other historical sources. Shushanik's father, Vardan Manukonian, was the hero of the Armenian nation during an uprising of the year 45, directed against the authority of the Zoroastrian king of Iran, Yezdegird. Shushanik's husband, the Georgian prince Varsken, occupied a strategic position as Pitiakhsh (from Iranian Bitakhsh, a viceroy) of the frontier region between Armenia and Georgia. As we see from the life of Shushanik, King Peroz of Iran sent Varsken to fight against the Huns who threatened to invade Persia from the north via Derbent and the shores of the Caspian Sea. Varsken was also supposed to exercise control over the king of Eastern Georgia (Iberia), whose capital at Mtskheta was within easy reach of Varsken's castle in Tsurtav.

Shushanik's death was brought about by political as much as by religious considerations. Her refusal to deny Christ infuriated her husband, who had embraced Mazdaism to ingratiate himself with the Persian court. Shushanik's obduracy placed Varsken in a difficult position vis-à-vis his suzerain, ultimately provoking him to murder her in particularly atrocious circumstances. He did not long profit by his crime for the Armenian chronicler Lazarus of Pharp tells us that in the year 484, the redoubtable Christian king of Georgia, Wakhtang Gorgaslan (Gorgasali), rose in revolt against the Iranians and took prisoner their renegade ally Varsken, who was put to a painful and ignominious death.



## The Life of Saint Shushanik Queen of Georgia

**I**t was in the eighth year of the reign of the king of Persia that Varsken the Pitiakhsh, son of Arshusha, traveled to the royal court. Formerly he too was a Christian, born of Christian father and mother. And his wife was the daughter of Vardan, generalissimo of the Armenians, bearing the name of Varden, or Rose, after her father, and the pet-name of Shushanik, or Susanna; and she lived in the fear of God from her childhood days. Because of the unrighteousness of her

husband, she prayed perpetually in her heart and besought all to pray God to convert him from his deluded ways, so that he might become wise in Christ.

**B**ut who could describe the wickedness of that abandoned and thrice wretched Varsken? For when he appeared before the king of the Persians, it was not to receive honour by rendering service to the monarch, but to deliver himself up body and soul by denying the True God. So he bowed down to the fire, utterly cutting himself off from Christ. And this miserable man sought to win favour in the eyes of the king of the Persians by asking him for a wife, adding, “The lawful wife and children I already have, these I will likewise convert to your faith, just like myself.” (In making this pledge, however, he had reckoned without Shushanik.) Then the king rejoiced, and gave him his own daughter to be his bride.

**S**oon after the Pitiakhsh took leave of the king. And as he was approaching the borders of Georgia, the land of Hereti, it occurred to him to have the noblemen and his sons and retainers informed that they were to meet him, so that in their company he might enter the country like a snake. He therefore dispatched one of his servants on a post-horse. When the servant had arrived at the township which is called Tsurtav, he came in and appeared before Shushanik our queen, and enquired after her well-being. But the blessed Shushanik said with prophetic insight, “If he is alive in soul, you are both alive, both he and thou. If you are both dead in your spirit, that enquiry of thine needs to be addressed to thyself.” But the man dared not answer her. St. Shushanik, however, insisted and questioned him urgently, until the man told her the truth, saying, “Varsken has renounced the True God.”

**W**hen the blessed Shushanik heard this, she fell upon the ground and beat her head on the floor and said with bitter tears, “Pitiable indeed has become the unfortunate Varsken! He has forsaken the True God, and embraced the religion of fire and united himself to the godless.” And she arose and left her palace and went into the church, filled with the fear of the Lord. With her she took her three sons and one daughter and brought them before the altar and prayed. And when the evening service was over, she found a small cottage near the church, and went into it, filled with grief, and leant against the wall in a corner and wept bitterly.

**N**ow the bishop attached to the Pitiakhsh's household, whose name was Aphots, was not at hand, having gone to the house of a certain holy man to consult him about some question. And I too, the confessor of Queen Shushanik, was with the bishop. Suddenly a deacon came to us from home and told us all that had occurred: the arrival of the Pitiakhsh and the conduct of the queen. We were filled with sorrow and wept abundantly, being weighed down by the consciousness of our sins. But I got up early and went to the village where the blessed Shushanik was and when I saw her afflicted with sorrow, I also wept with her.

**W**hile we were conversing, a certain Persian arrived and came in before the blessed Shushanik, and said in lachrymose tones, “How so? A peaceful household has become miserable, and joy has turned to grief!” But he had actually come on a

secret errand from Varsken, and said this as a ruse to ensnare the blessed one. But the saint recognized his cunning intention, and became all the more firm in her resolve.

Three days after, Varsken the Pitiakhsh came. And the Persian spoke to him privately and said, “I gather that your wife has left you. I would advise you, however, not to speak harsh words to her. After all, women are always liable to be unreasonable.”

The next day, the Pitiakhsh summoned us priests as soon as he had got up, and we went to him. He received us agreeably and said to us, “Be at your ease and do not shrink away from me.” In reply we said to him, “You have brought damnation on yourself and on us also!” Then he began to speak, and said, “How could my wife allow herself to do such a thing to me? Now go and tell her that she has degraded my person and sprinkled ashes upon my bed and forsaken her rightful place and gone elsewhere.”

To this St. Shushanik replied, “It is not I who either exalted your person or degraded it. Your father raised up sepulchers for the martyrs and built churches, and you have ruined the deeds of your father and destroyed his good works. Your father invited saints into his house, but you invite devils. He confessed and believed in the God of heaven and earth, but you have renounced the True God and bowed clown before the fire. Just as you have despised your Creator, so I pour contempt upon you. Even if you inflict many tortures on me, I will have no part in your doings.”

We reported all this to the Pitiakhsh, as a result of which he became angry and bellowed with rage. Then the Pitiakhsh commissioned Jojik his brother and Jojik's wife, his sister-in-law, and the bishop attached to his household, and told them to speak to her in the following terms: “Get up and come to your rightful place, and give up these notions of yours! If not, I shall drag you back by force.”

So they came and entered in before the queen and spoke many reassuring words to her. Then St. Shushanik said to them, “O wise men! Do not think I was nothing but a wife to him. I had imagined that I could convert him to my faith, so that he would acknowledge the True God. And do you now try to force me to act thus? Let this never happen to me! You, Jojik, are no longer my brother-in-law, nor am I your sister-in-law, nor is your wife my sister, since you are on his side and take part in his doings.”

And as they were pressing and urging her excessively, the saintly and blessed Shushanik arose to go. Taking her copy of the Gospels with her, she said with tears, “O Lord God, Thou knowest that I am resolved in heart to meet my death.” When she had spoken these words she went with them and carried her Gospel with her, as well as the holy books of the Martyrs.

When she came into the palace she took up her residence not in her apartments, but in a small chamber. And St. Shushanik raised her hands to heaven and said, “O Lord God! Not one merciful man, neither priest nor layman, has been found among this people, but they have all handed me over to die at the hands of Varsken, that enemy of God.”

Two days later that wolf came into the palace and said to his retainers, “Today, I and Jojik and his wife are dining together. Do not allow anyone to come in to us.” And when it was evening they called Jojik's wife and decided to bring the holy Shushanik to dine with them too. When they had wearied her with their insistence, they obliged her to accompany them to the palace, but she had no appetite for anything. Jojik's wife, however, offered her wine in a glass, and tried to make her drink a little of it. St. Shushanik said to her angrily, “Whenever has it been the custom for men and women to dine together?” And stretching out her arm, she flung the glass in her face, and the wine was spilt.

Then Varsken began to utter foul-mouthed insults and kicked her with his foot. Picking up a poker, he crashed it on her head and split it open and injured one of her eyes. And he struck her face unmercifully with his fist and dragged her to and fro by hair, bellowing like a wild beast and roaring like a madman.

Jojik his brother rose to protect her, and came to grips with him and struck him. After her veil had been torn from her head, Jojik dragged her from Varsken's hands, like a lamb from the claws of a wolf. St. Shushanik lay like a corpse upon the ground, while Varsken abused her kinsfolk and called her the defiler of his home. And he commanded her to be bound and chains to be attached to her feet.

When he had calmed down a little from his outburst of rage, the Persian came to him and urgently begged him to free St. Shushanik from her chains. After insistent pleading, he ordered her to be unchained and taken to a cell and carefully guarded. She was to have one servant, and nobody else would be allowed to visit her, neither man nor woman.

When it was dawn, he asked her servant, “How are her wounds?” He said to him, “They are past healing.” Then he himself went in and looked at her, and was greatly astonished at the size of her swelling. And he directed the servant not to let anyone come and see her. He himself went out hunting.

But I got up and went and said to the guard, “Just let me in by myself to have a look at her wounds.” But he said to me, “What if he finds out and kills me?” I said to him, “Miserable man, did she not bring you up and educate you? If he kills you for her sake, what have you to regret?” Then he let me in secretly.

When I went in, I saw her face all slashed and swollen, and I raised my voice and wept. But St. Shushanik said to me, “Do not weep for me, since this night has been

for me the beginning of joy.” And I said to St. Shushanik, “Let me wash the blood from your face and the dust which has fallen into your eyes, and apply ointment and medicine, so that please God you may be cured.” But St. Shushanik said to me, “Do not say that, Father, for this blood is for the cleansing of my sins.” But I gently forced her to take some food, which had been sent by Bishop Samuel and John, who secretly watched over her and saw to her welfare. St. Shushanik said to me, “Father, I cannot taste anything, because my jaws and several of my teeth are broken.” Then I brought a little wine and bread, and dipped it in, and she tasted a little. And I made haste to go out. Then St. Shushanik said to me, “Father, shall I send him back this jewelry of his? Even if he does not require it, I shall have no more use for it in this life.” But I said, “Do not hurry, let it remain in your keeping”.

**W**hile we were discussing this, a boy came in and said, “Is Jacob here?” And I said, “What do you want?” He said, “The Pitiakhsh is calling for you.” And I was surprised and wondered why he called for me now, so hurried to go. He said to me, “Do you know, Priest, that I am leaving to fight against the Huns? I have no intention of leaving my jewelry with her, now that she is not my wife. Someone else will have to be found to wear it. Go and bring whatever there is of it.”

**S**o I went and told this to St. Shushanik. She was very glad and thanked God and handed everything over to me, and I delivered it all to the Pitiakhsh. He received it from me, inspected it and found everything complete, and again said, “At some later time, someone will be found to adorn herself with it.”

**A**nd when the Great Fast was come, the blessed Shushanik came and found a small cell near the church, and took up her abode in it.

**O**n Monday in Bright Week, the Pitiakhsh returned from fighting against the Huns. The Devil animated his heart, and he arose and went to the church and said to Bishop Aphots, “Give me my wife! Why are you keeping her away from me?” And he began to curse and utter violent maledictions against God. But a priest said to him, “Lord, why are you behaving like this and uttering such evil words and cursing the bishop and speaking with anger against the saintly Shushanik?” But he struck the priest in the back with his staff, so that he dared not say anything more.

**S**o St. Shushanik was dragged out by force through the mud and over the thorns from the church to the palace, just as if they were dragging a corpse along. And he ordered her to be tied up and beaten, and reviled her saying “Now you see that your Church is no help to you, nor those Christian supporters of yours, nor that God of theirs! “ Three hundred blows they struck her with a stick, without any moan or complaint passing her lips. After this St. Shushanik said to the impious a Varsken, “Unhappy man, you have had no pity on yourself, and cut yourself off from God, so how can you have pity on me?”

**When he saw the blood flowing abundant from her tender flesh, he ordered a chain to be fastened round her neck, and commanded a chamberlain to take St. Shushanik to the castle and imprison her in a dark dungeon to die.**

**A certain deacon belonging to the bishop's staff stood near St. Shushanik when she was being taken from the palace, and tried to encourage her to stand fast, when the Pitiakhsh cast his eye on him. He only managed to say, "Stand . . .," and then was silent and hastily took to his heels and ran away.**

**Then they took her out. St. Shushanik was led barefoot, with her hair disordered, like some woman of the common folk. Nor did anyone dare to cover her heads because the Pitiakhsh followed on horseback behind her, cursing her with much foul language. With the saint was a great mob of women and men, countless in number, following behind her, and they raised their voices and wept, and tore their cheeks and shed tears of pity for St. Shushanik. But St. Shushanik looked upon the crowd and said to them, "Weep not, my brothers, my sisters and my children, but remember me in your prayers now that I am taking leave of you from this world. For you will not see me leave the castle alive."**

**When the Pitiakhsh saw the mob and dire lamentation of men and women, old and young, he charged at them on his horse and forced them all to run away. When they reached the castle bridge, the Pitiakhsh said to St. Shushanik, "This is all the walking you will ever do, for you will not come out alive, until the time comes for four bearers to carry you out." When they had entered the castle they found a small dark hut to the north of it, and there they locked up the saint. They left her with the chain still fastened round her neck, and this the impious Varsken stamped with his seal. Then he left the castle.**

**On the third Sunday, he summoned a jailer and asked him, "Is that miserable woman still alive?" He replied, "Lord! She appears nearer to death than to life. She is likely to die from hunger alone, since she will eat nothing." To which he answered, "Never mind, leave her alone, let her die."**

**Then the Pitiakhsh went off to Chor. Jojik his brother was not present when these things were done to St. Shushanik. When Jojik arrived, he hastened after the Pitiakhsh, caught up with him on the borders of Hereti, and implored him to have her released from her fetters. After he had greatly importuned Varsken, he ordered her to be unchained. When Jojik returned, he removed the chain from her neck.**

**But St. Shushanik was not released from her shackles until her death. For she remained six years in the castle, and blossomed forth with her asceticism, ever fasting, keeping vigil and watching, in unwearying adoration and assiduous reading of holy books. The entire castle was made radiant and beautiful by the lyre of her spirit.**

**From now on, her works became renowned throughout all Georgia. Men and women used to come for the fulfillment of their vows. Whatever they had need of was bestowed on them through the holy prayer of the blessed Shushanik, namely a child to the childless, healing to the sick, and to the blind, restoration of sight.**

**They told St. Shushanik, “Your children have been converted to Mazdaism.” Then with many tears she began to worship God and beat her head upon the ground and groaned, saying, “I give thanks to Thee, O my Lord God for they were not mine, but gifts from Thee. As Thou wilt, Thy will be done, O Lord. Save me from the schemes of the Evil One.”**

**Then the Pitiakhsh sent messengers and said, “Either do my will and return to the palace, or if you will not come home, I will send you under guard to Chor or to the Persian court.”**

**St. Shushanik, however, answered, “Wretched and stupid man. If you send me to Chor or to the Persian court, who knows if some good may not come to me and this evil be averted?”**

**The Pitiakhsh pondered over these words which she had uttered, “Who knows if some good may not come to me?” Which he took to mean, “Perhaps one of the princes then “might take her to wife.” From then onwards, he sent no one to her.**

**Later, however, the Pitiakhsh deputed her own foster-brother to bring her back to the palace. When he said to her, “Listen to me and come back to the palace, and do not leave your home desolate,” then St. Shushanik replied, “Tell that godless man this: You have killed me, and hast declared that I should never come out of this castle on my feet alive. And now, if you can raise the dead, first raise your mother who is buried at Urdi. For if you cannot raise her up, neither can you bring me out of here, unless you drag me by force.”**

**When she had passed six years in this prison, excessive weariness from her feats of courage and devotion brought sickness upon her. Furthermore that place was incredibly infested with fleas and lice. In the summer time the heat of the sun burns like fire, the winds are torrid and the waters infected. The inhabitants of this region are themselves afflicted with various diseases, being swollen with dropsy, yellow with jaundice, pock-marked, withered up, mangy, pimply, bloated of face and brief of life, and nobody attains old age in that district.**

**When the seventh year had begun, the holy and thrice blessed Shushanik was afflicted with an ulcer of the flesh. As a result of her tireless acts of piety, her feet became swollen, and pustules broke out on various parts of her body. The ulcers were very large and infested with worms. One of these she held out in her hand and showed it to me, and gave thanks to God, saying, “Father, do not let the sight of this**

upset you. There (i.e. in Gehenna) the worm is greater, and never dies.” When I saw this worm, I was afflicted with inexpressible distress, and wept greatly. But she retorted sharply, “Father, why are you sorrowful? Rather than being eaten by those immortal worms, it is better to be consumed here in this life by mortal ones!”

**When** Jojik heard that the blessed queen St. Shushanik was near to death, he went out and brought with him his wife and children and his servants and retainers, and came to the castle to see the saintly Shushanik the martyr. Then she blessed Jojik and his wife and children and his servants and retainers and all the members of his household, and bade them walk in the ways of God. And she took leave of them and sent them away in peace.

**After** Jojik there came Archbishop Samuel and his friend Bishop John, who had encouraged her and taken part in her good works. Likewise there came the grandees and noble ladies, the gentry and common folk of the land of Georgia. Their eyes were filled with tears as they said farewell to her, and they offered the praise of their lips to God for her glorious works, and then they left the castle and departed.

**Then** came the day when she was to be called away. And she summoned the bishop attached to her household, Aphots, and thanked him for his kindness which equaled that of a father and a foster-parent. She called for me, sinner and wretch that I am, and committed to us the relics of her bones, commanding us to bury them in that place from which she was first dragged forth. And she said, “Though I am but a worker of the eleventh hour in the vineyard, if I have found favor with the Lord, you shall all be blessed for ever and ever.”

**Then** she gave thanks to God, saying, “Blessed is our Lord God, for on Him I will lay myself down and sleep in peace.” And she entrusted her soul to the Lord, who receives all mankind in His mercy.

**The** beginning of the torments of St. Shushanik was in the month of January, on the eighth day, being a Wednesday. Her second beating took place on Monday in Bright Week. And her death was in the month of October, on the seventeenth day, being the festival of the blessed saints and martyrs Cosmas and Damian, and it was a Thursday. This anniversary we set apart for the commemoration of St. Shushanik, and for the praising of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to whom belong glory for ever and ever, *Amen*.

**This is the Faith of the Apostles:  
This is the Faith of the Orthodox:  
This Faith hath established the world.**

Icon of Saint Shushanik

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