



The Holy Martyrs of Atchara (Feast Day - May 29)

The Holy Ajarian Martyrs of Georgia

Atchara has been a Christian stronghold since apostolic times. It was through this region that St. Andrew the First-Called entered Georgia, preaching the Gospel for the first time in the Iberian land. On this land, in the village of Gonio, the holy relics of the martyred Apostle Matthias are buried.

Since the 16th century Atchara has been subject to constant assaults by the Turks. Having attained a victory in the Ottoman-Persian War, the Turks gained a large part of southern and western Georgia: Samtskhe, Atchara, and Chaneti were declared Turkish provinces. The invaders knew well that, in order to completely conquer the Georgian people, it was necessary to uproot Christianity. Thus they instituted a systematic campaign of forced conversion to Islam.

When they failed to achieve their goal with bribery and deception, they resorted to violence. In his work *The Islamization of Georgia, or the Spread of Islam in Western Georgia in the 17th–18th Centuries*, the renowned early twentieth-century scholar Zakaria Chichinadze retold a story he had heard from one elderly Atcharan man:

“In Atchara the implanting of Islam faced a powerful opposition. Many of the elderly men and the majority of women stood firmly by the Christian Faith, and even challenged and debated the Turkish mullahs... The number of these aged men in Atchara was considerably high. In the end an

order was issued: to arrest all dissidents, forcibly convert them to Islam, and execute those who resisted. Before long all the elderly Christians of Atchara were arrested and cast in prison. Then they were led to the River Atcharistsqali, to a 12th-century bridge known as the 'Bridge of Queen Tamar'. On that bridge the Ottomans erected a guillotine. They chopped off the heads of the elderly people, sent the ends of their tongues to the pasha, and threw their bodies into the river. This happened one hundred years ago, in the year 1790.”

Gallows and a guillotine were erected in the villages of Atcharistsqali, Keda, Chakvi, Khulo, Machakhela, and Gonio. The documents preserved in the manuscript collection at Akhaltsikhe Museum describe in even more horrific detail the martyrdom of the Atcharan Christians: “The human tongue is powerless to describe the tortures that the Georgians suffered in those years for confessing Christianity. While they were still alive their flesh was stripped and their bodies quartered; they were slashed to pieces with swords, their bellies ripped open; they were roasted over campfires. They were pierced with flaming rods, thrown into cauldrons of boiling water; molten lead was poured down their throats; they were tossed into pools of hot lime....”

The Georgian Apostolic Church has numbered among the saints all the holy fathers and mothers of Atchara who sacrificed their lives in defense of the Christian Faith.

Source: <http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2010/05/holy-martyrs-of-ajaria-in-georgia.html>