

## THEORY AND HISTORY OF CULTURE



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Original Theoretical Research



### The Contribution of the Abbesses of the First Convents to the Development of the Sociocultural Space of the North Caucasus

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#### Abstract

**Introduction.** The study presents the role and influence of the abbesses of the first women's convents on the formation and development of the socio-cultural space of the Caucasus region. The main focus is on their spiritual leadership, social initiatives and educational activities. Based on archival materials, the author examines the establishment of educational institutions in the monasteries and the variety of crafts activities.

**Materials and Methods.** The work is written with the involvement of archival materials of the State Archive of Stavropol Krai. Descriptive, historical-comparative and chronological methods are used.

**Results.** It is argued that nunneries in the North Caucasus have supported the education and training of girls for decades, providing a wide range of educational opportunities. Classrooms, libraries and other infrastructural facilities were established and operated in the monasteries to maintain a decent level of education.

**Discussion and Conclusion.** It is shown that monasteries were actively engaged in the education and upbringing of girls, providing them with a wide range of educational opportunities. Inside the monastery walls, classrooms, libraries and workshops were created to develop the creative abilities of female students in craft and artistic disciplines. Abbesses actively developed the mastery of needlework, icon painting, weaving and other skills, which contributed to the development of education and culture both in the monastery and in society.

**Keywords:** Russian Orthodox Church, North Caucasus, monasticism, women's monasteries, abbesses, charity, enlightenment, education, Black Sea Mary Magdalene Women's Desert, St John and Mary Women's Monastery

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Оригинальное теоретическое исследование

### Вклад настоятельниц первых женских монастырей в развитие социокультурного пространства Северного Кавказа

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#### Аннотация

**Введение.** Представлено исследование роли и влияния настоятельниц первых женских монастырей на формирование и развитие социокультурного пространства кавказского региона. Основное внимание уделяется их духовному лидерству, социальным инициативам и образовательной деятельности. Опираясь на архивные материалы, рассматривается создание обучающих учреждений в монастырях и разнообразие ремесленных видов работ.

**Материалы и методы.** Работа написана с привлечением архивных материалов Государственного архива Ставропольского края. Используются описательный, историко-сравнительный и хронологический методы.

**Результаты исследования.** Обосновывается, что женские монастыри на Северном Кавказе десятилетиями поддерживали воспитание и обучение девушек, предоставляя широкий спектр образовательных возможностей. В монастырях были созданы и функционировали учебные классы, библиотеки и другие инфраструктурные объекты для поддержания достойного уровня образования.

**Обсуждение и заключение.** Показано, что монастыри активно занимались обучением и воспитанием девушек, предоставляя им широкий спектр образовательных возможностей. Внутри монастырских стен создавались учебные классы, библиотеки и мастерские, где развивались творческие способности учениц в ремесленных и художественных дисциплинах. Настоятельницы активно развивали мастерство рукоделия, иконописи, ткачества и других навыков, что способствовало развитию образования и культуры как в обители, так и в обществе.

**Ключевые слова:** Русская Православная Церковь, Северный Кавказ, монашество, женские монастыри, настоятельницы, благотворительность, просветительская деятельность, образование, Черноморская Марие-Магдалинская женская пустынь, Иоанно-Мариинский женский монастырь

**Для цитирования:** Шаликашвили Е.Н. Вклад настоятельниц первых женских монастырей в развитие социокультурного пространства Северного Кавказа. *Научный альманах стран Причерноморья*. 2024;10(4):48–53. <https://doi.org/10.23947/2414-1143-2024-10-4-48-53>

**Introduction.** In the history of Russian spirituality and culture, women's monasteries occupy an important place. They served not only as places of spiritual solitude and prayer, but also became centres of socio-cultural life, actively influencing the formation of social and cultural traditions of their time. An important figure in this process was the abbesses of the monasteries, whose role was far from being limited to the management of economic and administrative aspects. In their hands were concentrated not only spiritual values, but also social initiatives aimed at the development of the local community, education, charity and the preservation of cultural heritage. Being involved in this creative process, through the expansion of the socio-cultural space of the region they realised the task of incorporating the population into the unified space of the empire [1, pp. 38–44].

The abbesses of women's monasteries, possessing unique power and influence, became a kind of link between the church and secular spheres, facilitating the integration of spiritual and socio-cultural practices. Their leadership and enlightenment activities created preconditions for the formation of new social interactions and the strengthening of cultural identity, which necessitates an in-depth study of their contribution to the development of the socio-cultural space of the North Caucasus.

The main attention in the work is paid to the first women's monasteries: the Black Sea Marie-Magdalene Women's Desert and the St. John and Mary Women's Monastery, as they were the only officially recognised women's monasteries in the North Caucasus until the 1980s, when the system of socio-cultural relations in the Russian Empire changed.

**Materials and Methods.** The aim of the research in this article is to analyse the contribution of individual abbesses to the development of the first women's monasteries in the North Caucasus, using the collected archival material and material from the Caucasian Diocesan Gazette. The methods used are descriptive, historical-comparative and chronological.

**Results.** The history of St John and Mary Convent begins in the 40s of the 19th century. Founded as a cholera shelter for helpless widows and orphans of the clergy, later it was transformed into a women's community, and in 1859 by decree of the Synod the St. John-Mary's community was transformed into a second-class monastery [2, L. 59]. The change of status did not change much the organisation of the internal way of life in the monastery, like other women's monasteries of the Empire, its main attention was focused on the forms of various charitable practices, one of which was the organisation of educational and educational direction.

Abbess Theophila played a special role in the development of the educational system of the monastery, initiating the construction of a new room for the monastery school. The old one was located on the ground floor of the building, consisted of two rooms and could accommodate up to 30 children. In the school, young nuns taught the children church and secular reading, writing and singing according to the daily routine. Children were brought to the school by their parents for education and training. As time passed, the number of those wishing to be educated at the school increased considerably, and it became obvious that the small and inconvenient monastery school was no longer able to accommodate all the pupils. Thus, the need to expand the premises and the range of subjects taught became inevitable.

The new building was designed for 45 people, with an annual maintenance of 100 roubles. 300 roubles were allocated for the teachers' salaries. For the work done in 1891 the abbess of the monastery Theophila was honoured with gratitude and archpastoral blessing [3, p. 66].

Another abbess of the Stavropol monastery, Apollinaria, was convinced that the main task of the Church in the state was to educate society. Therefore, she decided to create a parochial school where teachers would be trained. At the beginning of the 20th century, the abbess asked Bishop Agafador's blessing to build a second-class women's parochial school, which would produce teachers – spiritually developed individuals, brought up on the Gospel morals. Already soon on the territory of St John and Mary cloister was built and opened a magnificently equipped school, only the building for which cost more than 30 thousand rubles [4]. According to the project the school had two floors: on the ground floor there were a dormitory for 40 girls aged from 10 to 15 years old, a dining room, a scullery, a kitchen, a warm changing room, a washroom, a flat of one of the teachers, a storeroom and a crafts class. On the first floor there were all classes, library, teachers' room and recreation, with a warm washroom and for convenience a flat of another teacher [5, L. 1–1 ob.].

On 15 September 1902 there was a solemn consecration of the school building [6, pp. 1076–1077]. The head and teacher of the school until 3 November 1909 was a priest of the St. John-Mary Convent Leonid Dmitrievsky, who was soon ordained and moved to the priestly place in the village of Armavir. His responsibilities for the conduct of the subject and supervision of the educational process were transferred by the bishop's decision to the appointed priest Michael Gorokhov [7, L. 3].

From the day the school was opened, the head teacher was A.G. Leshchenko, who had completed courses at the Stavropol Diocesan Women's College. She taught Russian language, penmanship and was in charge of the school economy and hospital. The teacher Maria Vasilievna Kvasnikova, who graduated from the Glukhov women's gymnasium, taught arithmetic, information about objects and phenomena of nature, geometrical drawing with surveying, hygiene and was the school treasurer. Another teacher – Tatiana Alexandrovna Buturova – who graduated from the church-teacher's school, taught didactics, Church Slavonic language, national history, geography and was in charge of the library. The teacher of singing and needlework was Anastasia Petrovna Kutuzova, who also managed the school choir.

The trustee of the second-grade school was Abbess Archelaya of the Stavropol St. John-Mary Convent. Abbess Archelaya was very attentive to the needs of the school: she made gifts to the children for the holidays of Christmas and Easter, provided rooms in the convent hospital for sick pupils and appointed sisters of mercy to care for them. In addition, she used her own money to keep three schoolgirls at the convent, who were unable to pay the prescribed fees for the school dormitory.

In 1909–1910 school year there were 89 girls studying at the school. By the end of the year 82 remained, as some dropped out for family reasons, and one pupil was expelled by the School Board for embezzlement. In terms of age, the pupils of the school were ranked as follows: 13–14 years – 10 girls, 14–15 years – 13, 15–16 years – 46, 16–17 years – 12, 17–18 years – 4, 18–19 years – 4 girls. Based on their class belonging, 34 girls came from the bourgeoisie, 39 from peasants, 15 from the Cossacks, and only one of them belonged to the nobility. At the same time, all the girls, except for one of the first class who was an Old Believer, professed Orthodoxy [7, L. 1–4 ob.].

By 1910 there were 75 pupils living in the dormitory of the second-grade school. The pupils paid 75 roubles for living in the dormitory, and 10 roubles for the use of textbooks and writing materials. The other 7 pupils lived either with their parents or close relatives, or in a convent. Those who lived with their parents or relatives paid 25 rubles each for the maintenance of the school building and the use of textbooks and writing materials [7, L. 1].

The daily routine at school was strict. The pupils got up at six o'clock in the morning. At seven o'clock they had morning prayer and tea. At eight o'clock lessons began, which lasted until half past two. At half past two they had lunch and until evening tea (four hours) they rested, read books, from five o'clock to nine o'clock they were engaged in preparing lessons, at nine o'clock they had supper, and at half past ten, having made evening prayer, they went to bed. Some girls, mostly of the older classes, were sometimes allowed to stay in class after prayer for an hour to prepare lessons and read books. At the evening prayer, besides the teacher on duty, the head of the school was always present. Lessons, lunches and dinners began and ended with prayer. It was obligatory for the pupils to attend divine service on Sundays and feast days, as well as the day before them. The girls themselves read and sang during the service.

Special attention was paid to the education of pupils. In order to better supervise and influence the pupils, each class was assigned a class teacher, who led her class until the end of the course. The teacher - class teacher lived the same life with her class, knowing perfectly well the peculiarities of each pupil's character, her abilities, advantages and disadvantages, the environment in which she grew up, her financial security and therefore could influence the girls more than others. The class teacher monitored the reading of books by the pupils of her class and helped them to understand what they had read.

A separate place was given to needlework classes. In the first and second grades the girls were taught fine needlework: knitting, embroidery, stitching, and in the third grade they were taught cutting and sewing. Materials provided by the school were used, but children were not forbidden to use their own materials. The items made from school materials were sold before the Christmas and summer holidays, and the proceeds were used to buy new materials.

In order to accustom children to labour and housekeeping, a number of duties were established in the school: a corps duty officer, a canteen duty officer, a classroom duty officer, a cellar duty officer, and a storeroom duty officer. They took care of the cleanliness of the premises, issued and received provisions by count and weight, supervised the preparation of food, set and cleaned the tables, that is, they managed, under the supervision of the teachers, the whole school housekeeping.

The second-grade school paid special attention to reading. According to the report for 1910 the school library had 1283 copies of books. Including liturgical – 31, religious and moral content – 113, fiction – 736, historical – 69, geographical – 45, as well as a number of books on the Law of God, Russian language – 97, didactics – 33, hygiene – 9, singing – 20, arithmetic and physics – 41, as well as on agriculture – 53. During the year the library received another 280 copies, some of them donated by the School Board at the Holy Synod, and some of them purchased with school funds [7, L. 1–1 ob.].

It is important to note that the St. John and Mary Convent not only implemented programmes of classical education, the additional classes included developed the creative abilities of female students. Through involvement in art, music and craft workshops, they learnt the skills of needlework, icon painting, singing and other necessary practices. Thus, the pupils of this school received not only a good theoretical basis, but also a fairly broad training in applied crafts and handicrafts. As a result, they relayed the experience and knowledge they had gained within the walls of the monastery to the local population, competed successfully with graduates of classical educational institutions, and made a significant contribution to the development of the socio-cultural space of the North Caucasus.

The St John and Mary Convent is a vivid example of an institution where, since its foundation, there has been an active development of various types of needlework. Special attention was paid to the mastery of artistic sewing, including the use of gold, silver and beads, as well as to lace-making, knitting and spinning. Under the guidance of the abbesses, the mastery of crafts in the monastery was constantly improved. In the 1870s, Abbess Serafima initiated a number of activities aimed at the development of the monastery's artistic industries, which contributed to the monastery's status as a significant centre of education and culture in the region.

Abbess Seraphima paid special attention to the expansion of white embroidery and the use of such materials as silk, chenille, silver and gold. To achieve these goals, a pious nun from Moscow, Sister Theophany, was invited to the monastery to teach new craft techniques not only to the nuns but also to the students of the parochial school. Through the joint efforts of Abbess Serafima and Sister Feofania, the novices' products became known throughout the Caucasian (Stavropol) diocese. The monastery began to receive orders for church paraphernalia decorated with gold embroidery.

Abbess Theophila supervised the construction of a two-storey building designed for the manufacture of a wide range of wood, bone, and metal items, as well as for painting and gold embroidery. This building was also intended for the manufacture of various items of church utensils and part of the clergy's vestments, including priests' belts, bails, airs and shrouds. In addition, woven and embroidered icons were made here, which were decorated with chenille, silver and gold. These icons were even presented to the royal court. Carpet makers who created carpets and footstools made of dyed wool also worked in the building. Marvellous tablecloths, towels, napkins and rosaries were also made here. Various religious items such as richly decorated caskets, carved cypress icons, crucifixes and even embroidered portraits of Russian emperors were famous throughout the Caucasus for their craftsmanship [8, p. 35].

Similar educational activities were carried out in the Mary Magdalene Convent in the Kuban region. Since there were no funds to establish a school, the abbess Mitrofanina educated girls in the spirit of Orthodoxy. According to the report of the Military Board for 1862, 40 girls were brought up in the monastery. The total number of nuns was 200 girls and women. The monastery was famous for the fact that it could provide not only spiritual and moral education of novices, but also had almost all kinds of women's handicrafts [9, p. 464]. At the same time the abbess of the monastery gave the priority right to enter the number of novices from girls to the representatives of the Cossack class of the Black Sea (Kuban) Cossack Army. Even female members of the army clergy were restricted to enter the monastery [10, pp. 330–331].

In 1861, the military commander Count N.I. Yevdokimov, in his report to the leadership, drew attention to the usefulness of the Mary Magdalene Convent for the education of girls. In this context, he expressed concern about the potential consequences if many of them rejected worldly life and took monastic tonsure, thus depriving Cossacks of potentially better wives. To educate girls from Cossack families, it was decided to establish a village school modelled on the Don Cossack army. Before the establishment of these schools in Kuban, the Caucasian Committee allowed girls to be brought up in monasteries until the age of 16, after which they were to be taken home by their parents or relatives [9, pp. 464–465].

Before Bishop Agathador's visit to the Mary Magdalene Women's Desert in 1893, there was no primary school in the monastery. The abbesses, focusing on spiritual and moral education and teaching needlework to girls, tried to solve the problem of teaching the basics of literacy without creating a special educational institution. The bishop, noticing that there were more than 50 girls of school age in the monastery, suggested to Abbess Mariam not to organise a separate room for the school and to arrange the building in such a way that it could house the iconostasis, gold embroidery and carpet

workshops. In the same year a literacy school for girls began to function in the monastery, which was located in the flat of the teacher Anna Ivanovna Kholyavko. Anna Ivanovna was a novice of the monastery, it was to her that Bishop Agafodor entrusted all the organisational issues related to the arrangement of the new school, as she was a graduate of the Mariinsky Ekaterinodar Gymnasium and had the right to teach. Anna Ivanovna worked at the school for free, while providing a salary from her personal funds for her assistant at the school [9, p. 467].

For the first time in the history of the Stavropol diocese, missionary courses against sectarians were held at St Mary Magdalene Monastery with the support of the abbess Priskila and the council of the elder sisters. From 28 February to 11 March 1911, with the permission of Archbishop Agafodor, the district missionary priest N. Rozanov conducted these courses for the nuns of the monastery, as well as for clergy and laymen. In total, more than 40 believers and clergy took part in the training. During the classes various religious and moral topics were touched upon in accordance with the teachings of the Church [11, p. 96]. The initiative started in the monastery was successfully extended to other monasteries of the diocese.

As part of its missionary activities, the monastery continued to improve the organisation of the educational process. At the school of Mary Magdalene Kuban correctional asylum was opened a dormitory for girls, which in 1912 housed 32 students. Their daily life was centred around the school curriculum, handicrafts and training in housekeeping at the convent [12, p. 38].

**Discussion and Conclusion.** The monasteries of the North Caucasus functioned on the basis of the principles of self-sufficiency and adhered to the dormitory statutes. This predetermined the active involvement of monasteries in economic activities. Women's monasteries, in addition to traditional agriculture, were also actively engaged in various handicrafts, which depended on the specifics of a particular locality, the character of the abbess herself, and her past experience and knowledge. The crafts and trades practised in nunneries not only contributed to the generation of additional income, but also enabled the preservation of cultural traditions and, through the education of women and children, retransmitted these skills into the popular environment. This undoubtedly affected the socio-cultural life of the region, making a significant contribution to its development and the preservation of the values of traditional culture.

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