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## **Virgilio Corbo, Terra Sancta Museum and Georgian Cultural Heritage in Palestine**

DOI: 10.24412/2587-9316-2021-10018

The article describes the main events in the life and work of the outstanding Italian archaeologist and explorer of the Holy Land, prof. Virgilio Canio Corbo. As a result of numerous archaeological excavations, he revealed such remarkable Christian monuments as Herodion, Macherus, Magdala, Capernaum, etc. The rich material he found during excavations deserves a prominent place in the exposition of the Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem. The excavations carried out by V. Corbo in Bir el-Qutt (Palestine) turned out to be extremely important for Georgian culture. Here he discovered the ruins of a Georgian monastery from the Byzantine era. The ancient inscriptions (V–VI cent.) found here are of great importance for the study of the origins of Georgian monasticism in the Holy Land. In the article, the author separately deals with the issue of relations between Prof. V. Corbo and the Georgian Scientific Society, talks in detail about the existing problems in establishing contacts between the sides, etc.

Keywords: Virgilio Corbo, Eugenio Alliata, Jerusalem, Palestine, Bir el-Qutt, Georgia, Franciscans, Terra Sancta Museum.

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For citation: Khurtsilava B.V. Virgilio Corbo, Terra Sancta Museum and Georgian Cultural Heritage in Palestine. *Christianity in the Middle East*, 2021, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 34–43.

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## Вирджилио Корбо, музей Терра-Санкта и грузинское культурное наследие в Палестине

DOI: 10.24412/2587-9316-2021-10018

В данной статье изложены главные события из жизни и деятельности выдающегося итальянского археолога и исследователя Святой Земли, проф. Вирджилио Канио Корбо, который в результате многочисленных археологических раскопок выявил такие замечательные христианские памятники как Иродион, Махерус, Магдала, Капернаум и др. Найденный им при раскопках богатый археологический материал по заслугам занимает видное место в экспозиции музея Терра-Санкта в Иерусалиме. Раскопки, проведенные В. Корбо в местечке Бир ель-Кут (Палестина) оказались чрезвычайно важными для грузинской культуры. Тут он обнаружил руины грузинского монастыря византийской эпохи. Найденные здесь древние надписи имеют большое значение для изучения истоков грузинского монастицизма на Святой Земле. В статье автор отдельно касается вопроса взаимоотношений проф. В. Корбо и грузинского научного общества, подробно рассказывает о существующих проблемах в деле налаживания контактов между сторонами и т.д.

Ключевые слова: Вирджилио Корбо, Аллиата, Иерусалим, Палестина, Бир ель-Кут, Грузия, францисканцы, музей Терра-Санкта.

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Для цитирования: Хурцилава Б.В. Вирджилио Корбо, музей Терра-Санкта и грузинское культурное наследие в Палестине // Христианство на Ближнем Востоке. 2021. Т. 5. № 3. С. 34–43.

The name of the Italian archaeologist Virgilio Corbo became known in Georgia at the turn of the 40–50s of the last century due to his discovery of the remains of the previously unknown Georgian monastery in Bir el-Qutt, near Bethlehem (Palestine). After that, all Georgian scientists who in their works touched upon such topics as the early Georgian monasticism in the Holy Land or the life of Peter the Iberian or the history of Georgian writing, certainly noted the fact of Virgilio Corbo's service to the Georgian culture. Before we talk more about his accomplishments, it will be useful to look at the highlights of his interesting biography.

### **An eminent archaeologist and explorer of the Holy Land**

Virgilio Canio Corbo (1918–1991), a Franciscan priest and professor of archeology, was born on July 8, 1918, in Avigliano, Italy. At the age of ten, he arrived in the Holy Land and became a student at the philosophical-theological seminary at Custodia Terra Santa.

In 1940, the representatives of the British Mandate in Palestine arrested 22-year-old Italian Canio Corbo and held him in captivity until the end of World War II. During this difficult time for him, young Canio Corbo received an excellent archaeological education from his compatriot and cellmate in prison, professor of archeology Bellarmino Bagatti. During the same period (1940–1943), he received his first field experience by participating in the excavations of the Franciscans at Emmaus el-Qubeiba, where the British were releasing him once a week. On July 12, 1942, Canio Corbo was ordained a priest in Bethlehem, and from that day he was called Virgilio. Later, in 1956–1959 V. Corbo was the abbot of the Franciscan monastery in Gethsemane. Earlier, at the end of World War II, he was sent to study in Rome, at the Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, where in 1949 he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Christian Orientalist for his thesis: "Excavations of Khirbet Siyar al-Ghanam /Shepherd Valley/ and nearby monasteries" (*Gli Scavi di Khirbet Siyar el-Ghanam /Campo dei Pastori/ e i monasteri dei dintorni*).

In the 1950s, V. Corbo took part in various activities: he taught at the minor seminary of Emmaus el-Qubeiba and at the major seminary in Jerusalem (Bible School); Organized the pavilion of Terra Santa for the Missionary Art Exhibition; He was the director of the magazine *La Terra Santa*; Person responsible for the restoration of the various chapels in the Custodia Terra Santa; an assistant to the architect Antonio Barluzzi (1884–1960); a consultant for the film project about Terra Santa. At that time, the academic positions of archeology at the SBF Museum were already held by three world-famous

Franciscan scientists — the American Sylvester John Saller (1895–1976), the Italian Bellarmino Bagatti (1905–1990) and the Dutchman August Spijkerman (1920–1973). But suddenly, the leadership allowed him to begin his archaeological excavations in the status of a state scholar of the Custodia. Over the next 40 years, V. Corbo became the most successful archaeologist in the history of the Custodia. In 1984–1990, when J. Saller and A. Spijkerman was already dead, and B. Bagatti fell seriously ill, V. Corbo, being a professor of Christian archeology, began to teach at SBF (Studium Biblicum franciscanum — “Biblical study of the Franciscans”).

The archaeological career of Virgilio Corbo is truly impressive. He identified archaeological sites using written sources. Thus, he localized the monasteries of Fnistmos, Jeremiah and Phirmino, the New Palestinian Laura and the monastery of Zannos. In 1959, he conducted archaeological research on the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane. In 1962–1967 Virgilio Corbo, together with Stanislao Loffreda, excavated the fortress city of Herodion. The archaeological excavations of the interior of the Byzantine basilica on Mount Nebo in Jordan are also associated with his name. In 1968, together with S. Loffreda, he excavated Capernaum, and in 1971–1977 — Magdala. In 1978–1981 V. Corbo excavated another fortress of Herod the Great — Macherus. He also conducted archaeological excavations at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. In 1983, the Vatican appointed V. Corbo as the main commissioner for the protection of the cultural heritage of the Holy Land in the event of an armed conflict. No one has been awarded such a title and responsibility either before or after [Musholt, 1992. pp. 9–11].

V. Corbo rightfully earned the name of the great archaeologist who excavated the largest number of objects in the Holy Land, while doing it with excellent academic quality. During the excavations, V. Corbo, together with graphic and photographic material, wrote everything down in field notebooks, and then published them in scientific journals and academic monographs. Contemporaries characterized him as a purposeful and persistent person. For the sake of big discoveries, he was often willing to take risk. The same colleagues often noted the simplicity of V. Corbo’s personality. Hardly any outsider could have guessed that the man, constantly dressed in field work clothes or the robe of a Franciscan monk, was in fact an Internationally renowned scientist. In connection with this, funny curiosities sometimes happened to him, which are interestingly told in his memoirs by the inseparable friend of V. Corbo, archaeologist S. Loffreda [Loffreda, 2001].

The Italian V. Corbo, who came to Jerusalem at the age of ten, spent the rest of his life in the Holy Land. He died at the age of 73 on the morning

of December 6, 1991, after a short illness. His grave is in Capernaum, in the “City of Jesus”, near the house of St. Peter, which he himself excavated.

Where the stones tell us about the merits of glorious people (Terra Sancta Museum in Jerusalem)

Terra Sancta Museum is located in the Old City of Jerusalem, on the site of the Catholic monastery of the Savior. It was founded as a Franciscan Museum in 1902 in the Catholic monastery of San Salvatore (which, incidentally, stands on the foundations of the former Georgian monastery of St. John the Theologian). The first director of the museum was the Frenchman Prosper Weaud. In 1924, the Archaeological Museum under the auspices of the SBF was founded within the Flagellation Catholic monastery and was headed by the Italian archaeologist Gaudenzio Orfali. In 1931, the museum was headed by the American archaeologist Sylvester John Saller, who was replaced in 1954 by the Dutch numismatist Augustus Spijkerman. For the longest time, in 1974–2008, the museum was headed by the Italian archaeologist Michele Piccirillo. From 2009 to the present, the director of the museum is an assistant of V. Corbo, an Italian archaeologist, Prof. Eugenio Alliata.

Since the very beginning, the museum’s collection has been constantly replenished with unique materials obtained as a result of 150 years of continuous archaeological excavations in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, Magdala, Tabgha, on Mount Nebo and other important places of the Holy Land. The names of prominent Franciscan archaeologists are associated with this museum — Sylvester John Saller, Bellarmino Bagatti, Augustus Spijkerman, Virgilio Corbo, Stanislao Loffreda, Michele Piccirillo, Eugenio Alliata and others. An important part of the archaeological collection of this magnificent museum is the rich material that V. Corbo discovered in his time as a result of his intensive searches in the bowels of the Holy Land. We can say that his spirit wanders a lot in this museum [Piccirillo, 1984; Alliata, 2011].

After a short pause, on June 27, 2018, the renovated Archaeological Department of the museum reopened its doors to visitors. It was symbolically named as “Via Dolorosa”. A little earlier, in 2016, the multimedia section of the museum was presented to visitors in an updated form. In general, after the completion of the reconstruction work, the museum exhibition will consist of three parts — multimedia, archaeological and historical, where visitors will have the opportunity to learn the continuous history of the Holy Land from biblical times to the present day, from the time of the Franciscan Order of the Holy Land. In total, this unique museum complex has an area of 2573 m<sup>2</sup>.

The renovated archaeological section of the museum has 6 exhibition halls displaying wall paintings, ceramics and sculptures, ancient coins,

mosaic fragments from the Byzantine period, architectural elements from the Crusades, sarcophagi and ossuaries from the Canaanite period to the time of the Crusaders. Visitors can also see collections from Egypt and Mesopotamia.

In the exposition of the archaeological section of the museum, a notable place is occupied by the material discovered by Virgilio Corbo in Bir el-Qutt, including Georgian mosaic inscriptions.

### **Virgilio Corbo and the Georgian world**

The name of Virgilio Corbo became known in Georgia even before he became a recognized scholar of the Holy Land. The fact is that he managed to find the ruins of an unknown Georgian monastery near Bethlehem, on the hill of Bir el-Qutt. A Franciscan archeologist, besides other interesting artifacts, also found the oldest Georgian inscriptions there. At that time, these were the oldest samples of inscriptions in the Georgian language, previously found on the monuments of the Holy Land. Moreover, at least two of the four inscriptions found were at least half a century older than the oldest known epigraphic monument in Georgia, the inscription of the Sioni Church in Bolnisi.

V. Corbo promptly published a preliminary report on the results of excavations in Bir el-Qutt in the Franciscan journal *La Terra Santa*. A deeper analysis of this activity was made in his doctoral dissertation: “Gli scavi di Kh. Siyar el-Ghanam (Campo dei Pastori) e i monasteri dei dintorni”, published in the XI issue of the *Colectio Maior SBF* in 1959, before he gave a lecture on Eastern monasticism at the Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies. So, willingly or unwillingly, the “Georgian theme” was associated with the entry of V. Corbo into the scientific arena.

Information about this discovery, together with the name of its author, became widespread in Georgia for a number of reasons. It coincided in time with the publication of the theory of Nutsbidze-Honigman on the question of the identification of Peter the Iberian with the personality of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. In the inscriptions found by V. Corbo at the site of the Georgian monastery in Bir el-Qutt, the specialists immediately identified the names of Peter the Iberian and his closest ancestors. They suggested that the excavated object in ancient times was known as a Monastery of the Lazians, which was built by Peter together with his friend John the Laz.

The first analysis of the text and paleographic features of the inscriptions found at this place showed that two of the four were the oldest among those Georgian inscriptions that were previously found in the Holy Land, and in Georgia itself. The very type of the excavated monastery (with elements

of the economic life of its inhabitants) did not find analogues among other famous monuments of the Judean Desert of that time. These moments turned out to be quite enough for the discovery of V. Corbo to receive international recognition. Needless to say that this unexpected discovery made a huge impression on the Georgian scientific community.

Later, a part of the work (Chapter VIII) of V. Corbo, directly related to the excavations of Bir-el-Qutt, was published as a separate book, translated into Georgian and Russian [Chachanidze, 1974]. The brief information about the place and circumstances of the discovery of ancient Georgian inscriptions, along with illustrations, were included in the books of the Georgian language and the History of Georgia. The theme of the most ancient inscriptions, discovered as a result of archaeological excavations at Bir el-Qutt, had a certain significance in the study of the problem of the origin of Georgian writing. All this objectively determined the knowledge of the name Virgilio Corbo among Georgians from an early age. This fact is not only remarkable, but in some way even unique.

V. Corbo himself did not have direct contact with Georgia for objective reasons. The first Georgian with whom he had a documented contact was Michael Tarkhnishvili (1896–1958). V. Corbo asked him to help in reading the Georgian inscriptions from Bir el-Qutt. Then he included M. Tarkhnishvili's competent research on this issue in a separate subsection of his famous book published in Jerusalem in 1955 [See: Corbo, 1955. pp. 135–139; Tarkhnishvili, 1954. pp. 12–17].

Due to the difficult political situation prevailing at that time in the Holy Land, Georgian scientists were limited in their ability to establish close relations with V. Corbo. This was hampered by the fact that the Soviet Union, which included Georgia at the time, did not have diplomatic relations with Israel. In such a situation, it was almost impossible for the representatives of Soviet Georgia to get to the Holy Land. And if such cases nevertheless sometimes occurred, even then they were not always given the opportunity to meet face to face with the Franciscan archaeologist. For example, Georgian academicians George Tsereteli (orientalist), Akaki Shanidze (linguist) and Irakli Abashidze (writer), who in 1960 went in search of a portrait of Shota Rustaveli in Jerusalem, ultimately left Israel without meeting V. Corbo.

More successful was the group of Georgian documentary filmmakers sent to Jerusalem in May 1966, consisting of Guram Pataraiia, Ilia Rurua and Givi Melkadze. The members of this group were the first Georgians to visit the archaeological site at Bir el-Qutt. They also visited the Franciscan Museum in Jerusalem, where the camera captured ancient Georgian inscriptions

and an episode of the long-awaited meeting with V. Corbo. The footage of this visit was included in their scientific documentary “The Secret of Palestinian Antiquities”, which was later seen on TV screens throughout Georgia. This meeting was also described in his book one of the members of the group, the writer I. Rurua [Rurua, 1973. P. 129]. From his records it follows that information about the finds in Bir el-Qutt and about V. Corbo itself was known in Soviet Georgia, but some details about the personality of the Italian archaeologist were still unknown there. In turn, V. Corbo himself did not have information about the latest studies of Georgian scientists. The reason for this was the lack of communication between the parties. For the same reason, in Georgia, with a great delay, it became known about the Georgian inscriptions of V century from Nazareth, which B. Bagatti discovered there during his excavations (1959–1971) in the Catholic Church of the Annunciation [Bagatti, 1969. pp. 156, 212–218]. Ilia Rurua in his book wrote the following: “We visited Jerusalem and photographed an archaeologist who, with his discovery, made such a great contribution to the history of Georgian culture. Corbo turned out to be a priest. We took with us from the author’s personal library a copy of the book by G. Tsereteli — “Georgian Inscriptions from Palestine” [Tsereteli, 1960], which was written mainly on the basis of materials from the excavations of Corbo. It turned out that the Italian archaeologist knew nothing about the existence of this book, and he immediately got acquainted with the summary of the book. We had no other choice but to leave Corbo the book on behalf of the Georgian scientist, which he was very happy about” [Rurua, 1973. P. 129].

V. Corbo died before the artificial obstacles erected before Georgian scientists on their way to the Holy Land would have remained in the past. Unfortunately, V. Corbo did not live to see that day. However, before that there was still one memorable episode: in October 1987, during his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, presented V. Corbo with a commemorative coin dedicated to the 1500th anniversary of the Evangelization of Georgia, as a sign of his great contribution to the study of the Georgian monastic tradition in the Holy Land. This award was a testament to the sincere gratitude and respect of the Georgian side for the merits of the Franciscan archaeologist.

In 2011–2019, we had the opportunity to visit the Franciscan Museum in Jerusalem several times. On several occasions, through the halls of the museum, we were accompanied by its director, Prof. Eugenio Alliata. It is his personal merit that two ancient Georgian inscriptions found in Bir el-Qutt are now presented together in the exposition of the renovated museum.



“What you, Georgians, value, is also valuable to us,” said Prof. E. Alliata in a private conversation with us, conveying in this short phrase the content and nature of the attitude of the Franciscan scientific community of the Jerusalem to universal values. Recently, the interest of Georgians in the archaeological site Bir el-Qutt has increased significantly. In the spring of 2018 Prof. E. Alliata received an unusually large group of visitors from Georgia at the archaeological site of Bir el-Qutt (he was so pleasantly surprised by this precedent that he later joked that “such an incident probably happens once in a thousand years”). In the near future, it is planned to resume archaeological and conservation work at this place, which will give us a more complete picture of this monument, important for Georgian culture, and will give it the status of a full-fledged tourist facility. At one time, V. Corbo transferred only 2 inscriptions in the museum, and the rest of the inscriptions, together with spacious fragments of mosaics, he buried in the same place where they were discovered by him. So, in case of renewal excavations at Bir el-Qutt, in addition to new discoveries, that buried material also awaits archaeologists there.

The rare photographs from the archives of the Terra Sancta Museum are attached to this article. They were made in 1952 during archaeological excavations at Bir el-Qutt. We thank Dr. Eugenio Alliata, the director of the museum, Dr. Daniela Massara, the head of the archeology department, and Dr. Alessandro Cavicchia, the secretary of the technical department, for providing this remarkable material.

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