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The Antiquity and the Ancient Georgian Literature

Interest in Classical and Byzantine cultural heritage had a centuries-old tradition in Old Georgia. There are two factors serving to explain the emergence of this tradition the significance of Greek culture, and the close Greek-Georgian contacts, particularly those of the ancient Georgian population with its pre-Hellenic counterpart, reflected in the mythology, literature and numerous historical sources of these countries.

After Christianity became the established religion in Old Georgia, most favourable conditions were created for the relations with Byzantium - the direct inheritor of the Greek culture.

On the basis of the achievements of the modern scholarship it must be stated that Georgians made a certain contribution to the formation and further development of Byzantine literature. Two great Byzantine writers of the 4th century - Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, representatives of the so-called Cappadocian theological school - must have belonged to one of the Kartvelian peoples of the Black Sea area. The theology of the Cappadocian Fathers was fundamentally based on classical philosophy and it exerted a great influence on the final formation of the principal dogmas of Christianity. Peter the Iberian, Georgian by origin, played an important role in the hagiographic life of Byzantium in the 5th century. Sh. Nutsubidze and E. Honigmann identify Peter the Iberian with Dionysius the Areopagite, the author of the *Corpus Areopagiticus*, which became the philosophical basis of Christian dogma in the Middle Ages. Its trace is obvious at each stage of the development of Old Georgian literature.

Those ages witnessed intensive translations of hagiographical pieces and theological treatises from Greek into Georgian. Prolific literary work was carried on at many centers of learning. Ekvtime, Ioane and Giorgi Mtatsmindeli flourished at the time. Their contribution to Byzantine

culture is of special significance. The philosophical literary school on Mount Athos as well as a new intellectual system was founded. Intensive literary activity was in progress and new methods were evolved in the sphere of translation. The cultural values, created by the representatives of the Athos School, were enriched by the works of Ephrem Mtsire, Arsen of Iqalto and Ioane Petritsi. There appeared the so-called "Petritsi style". Georgian scholars and writers not only translated specimens of Byzantine literary works from Greek into Georgian, but they made their own contribution to the development of Byzantine literature, thus enriching its culture.

The new conception of Christian ideology was based on Christian dogmatics, the *Bible. The Old and New Testaments*, clergymen's writings, Georgian translations of the Biblical Books were the first specimens of Old Georgian literature.

Georgian social-philosophical and literary thought of the 11th-12th cc. reaches its peak in the poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* by Shota Rustaveli. In his poem Rustaveli does not make direct reference to Greek authors and characters. His literary and philosophical conception is based on Classical thought, which does not mean that he is an apologist and follower of Hellenic thought. Like in European Christian thinking of the late Middle Ages or the early Renaissance epoch, in Rustaveli's poem the new world outlook is formed, taking into consideration Classical thought. In his work there is a pronounced tendency towards a novel revival of Classical ideals.

Academician Sh. Nutsubidze suggested a theory of the Eastern, mainly Georgian Renaissance. Although his theory was not widely accepted, it was acknowledged by A. Losev, one of the distinguished scholars of the 20th c. In his work *The Aesthetics of the Renaissance* (1978) he considers that Neoplatonism and Proclus' philosophy laid the foundation of the theoretical basis of the Georgian Renaissance, which preceded European Renaissance for more than two centuries. The above-mentioned theory makes the question of Georgian-Greek contacts more important.

When dealing with the adoption of the Classical cultural heritage in Old Georgia, some of the common Greek-Georgian popular traditions should be taken into account. These are primarily the various aspects of the formation of literary works and their spread in Georgian lore. From this point of view, the specimens discussed in the present work allow to identify a number of compositional and content similarities in the ancient Greek and Georgian literary heritage. The explanation of such typological similarities should be sought in the general and regular phenomena that

played a decisive role in the formation of the folk heritage of ancient nations.

Old Georgian literature was well acquainted with Homer, the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Reference to Homer was made in hagiographical as well as in early historical writings, through which the Georgian reader conceived of Homer as an inimitable writer capable of masterly depiction of major events and personalities. Homer and the characters of his poem were quite frequently referred to in comparing them with concrete historical personalities.

However, the analysis of abundant historical data and the Georgian translation of Homer's six hexameters, preserved in literary monuments, do not provide enough proof to assert that in Rustaveli's time – the classical period of Georgian literature – there existed a Georgian translation of Homer's epic. Despite the fact that Rustaveli's poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* does not contain any direct reference to Homer (among ancient Greek authors only Plato is mentioned in Rustaveli's poem) some typological similarities are nevertheless noticeable. Contrary to the opinion of some scholars, this fact can not be taken to mean that Homer's work had any direct influence upon the Rustaveli's poem.

Homer's influence is felt in the Georgian literary pieces of the later period, such as in *Archiliani* by the poet and King Archil, Timothy Gabashvili's *Pilgrimage*, Besarion Gabashvili's *The Battle of Rukhi*, etc.

After Georgia was incorporated into Russia in 1801, favourable conditions were created for rendering into Georgian the best pieces of Greek as well as world literature via the Russian language. There appeared I. Garsevanishvili's (1792-1864) translation of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in prose. Although these translations were devoid of artistic merits, the very fact of translating these works points to the later interest in Classical Greek culture in Georgia. Numerous translations of Homer's works have been made since then.

When translating Homer's poems, Georgian translators made use of *Bistikauri*, a twelve-syllable verse, as well as its variety – a nineteen-syllable verse and the sixteen-syllable verse known as *Shairi*.

Besides Homer, other Greek authors, such as Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Menander, Aesop were frequently mentioned in Old Georgian literary pieces. There are also cases of Georgian renderings of less popular Greek authors, such as the comedist Plato (4th c. AD). In the transitional period of Georgian literature Racine's well-known tragedy *Iphigenia* was translated from Russian into Georgian by D. Choloqashvili. The translator offered a different conceptual and

compositional interpretation of the subject of the Classical tragedy, bringing it close to the contemporary historical background. A subject similar to *Iphigenia* is given in Giorgi the Athonite's (11th c.) *Great Synaxary*.

An echo of the fascinating story of Alexander the Great can be traced in Old Georgian literature. *The Alexandriani* was immensely popular in Georgia and stories related to Alexander the Great have been presented in a number of Old Georgian manuscripts. Classical mythology found its way into Old Georgian literature – via original and translated as well as Byzantine religious literature.

Ephrem Mtsire's (11th c.) translation of the *The Stories of the Hellenes*, widely popular in Georgia, presents a significant literary piece containing elements of ancient Greek mythology. Mythological characters occur in the Georgian translation of John of Damascus's *Legend*, in George Hamartolos's *Chronicle*, as well as in Ioane Petritsi's *Interpretation of Proclus Diadochus and Platonic Philosophy*. Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, Teimuraz Bagrationi and Ioane Bagrationi in his *Kalmasoba* also paid tribute to mythological heroes. Many of the definitions in Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani's *Dictionary* stem from *The Stories of the Hellenes*.

The above-mentioned literary sources provide information on Greek mythology with varied completeness and intergration. The Gelati metaphor is an original Old-Georgian piece commenting on of the name of Homer's *Iliad*. The footnotes of Deacon Constantine's exegetic work contain stories of Pandion, Proclus, Philomella, Niobe, etc. unknown in Old Georgian literature. In the 18th-19th centuries there existed quite a number of collections containing Greek mythological legends, part of which have been studied.

The mythological *Thesaurus*, compiled by the well-known Georgian public figure David Bagrationi (1768-1819), is of particular importance. It reflects a belated interest in ancient Greek culture that has had centuries-old traditions in Georgia. *Mythology*, according to David Bagrationi himself, was translated from the Russian into Georgian in 1797, and seems to have been based upon Sh. Chulkov's *Concise Mythological Dictionary* (1767, 1788). Prior to its appearance several books containing mythological literature had been published in Russia (M. Lomonosov, M. Popov, etc.).

Chulkov's *Dictionary* is an attempt to create a Russian national mythology with account of the Classical heritage. A juxtaposition of the extant Georgian manuscripts of the *Mythology* with Chulkov's *Concise Mythological Dictionary* has shown that David Bagrationi made use of the definitions of the *Dictionary* only in a few cases.

David Bagrationi frequently made use of Ephrem Mtsire's translation of *The Stories of the Hellenes*. He as well as copyists of the *Mythology* seems to have made use of the version of *The Stories of the Hellenes* contained in the A-109 manuscript.

Bagrationi's *Mythology* is also significant from the viewpoint that it helps restore some of the damaged and so far undeciphered parts of the text of *The Stories of the Hellenes*.

Bagrationi's *Mythology* introduces a number of Classical Greek stories and motifs. It abounds in information about Greek writers and philosophers. Mythological heroes are rendered in Roman redaction. *Mythology* is an original Georgian monument presenting data about Ajantes, Aurora, the hero of the Trojan war – Alastor, Peleas's daughter Alcestis, etc.

When investigating David Bagrationi's works more attention should be paid to his *Mythology*, for it vividly speaks of the author as not only an outstanding writer, public figure and intellectual, but also reflects one of the most noteworthy aspects of his multifarious literary activities. Next to *The Stories of the Hellenes* and *Kalmasoba*, *Mythology* is a significant Georgian literary monument acquainting the Georgian reader with the Classical Greek mythology, philosophy and literature, as well as with the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. *Mythology* is a convincing proof of the fact that Georgian literature of the transitional period generated even greater interest in the Classical heritage. Ioane and Teimuraz Bagratians deal with Classical themes. They often suggest a specific interpretation of Classical myths and legends, give original definitions of various terms and notions, showing profound knowledge of the Classical Greek and Byzantine cultural heritage. They confirm the fact that Georgian literature of the transitional period evinced growing interest in the rich Classical heritage.

In Old Georgia numerous collections of various genres were created, containing much information on Classical and Byzantine culture.

Whereas at the earlier stage of Georgian literature the Classical Byzantine cultural current penetrated into Georgia mainly from originals and by means of direct contacts, later on information came from Arabic, Armenian, Russian and other literary and historical sources. It is of particular importance to note that the above-mentioned sources were enriched by interpretations based on Georgian traditions.