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## SEVERAL ASPECTS OF GEORGIAN-BYZANTINE CULTURAL CONTACTS

Byzantium was a multinational empire, which determined the fact that many peoples besides Greeks contributed to the formation and development of the Byzantine culture. Suffice it to say that the celebrity of Byzantine hymnography - Romanos Melodos (VIc) was Syrian by nationality and the chief authority of Byzantine dogmatics - John Damascene (VII-VIIIcc) was Arabian.

Today it is beyond any doubt that Byzantine literature is not a slavish imitation and pale reflection of the classical literature. It was the convergence of four cultures - Hellenic, Roman, Oriental and Christian - that determined the original, creative development of the Byzantine literature in the period of Byzantinism<sup>1</sup>. It is also proved that Byzantine-Georgian literary contacts were not unilateral. Georgian element interestingly contributed to the development of Byzantine literature. As far as political interrelations are concerned, present western Georgia from time immemorial till IX century was a part of first the Roman, and then of the Byzantine empires. The cultural process that had penetrated into Georgia via Greece, as might be expected, attracted the Georgian element intensively. Therefore, the theory and hypothesis of the Georgian origin of several Byzantine authors are not groundless. Recent studies have attested the assumption that two great Byzantine scholars of IVc - Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa, representatives of so-called Cappadocian theological school - must have belonged to one of Kartvelian peoples of the Black Sea basin<sup>2</sup>. There are several arguments that prove this opinion: 1. Basil the Great and his ancestors came from the regions of eastern Pontus that were inhabited chiefly by Kartvelian peoples; 2. Besides Kartvelian peoples, there also lived Greeks and Armenians. Primary sources attest that Basil and his brother Gregory were neither Greeks nor Armenians; 3. Biographers of the period called Basil the Great Cappadocian, and IV-Vcc Byzantine historiography identifies Cappadocians with Meskhians. From the historical point of view, Meskhians belong to Kartvelian ethnicity. But the point to make is that regardless of the position of Byzantine historiography, Basil and Gregory (and also their biographers) believed they were Cappadocians, which means that they considered themselves Meskhians. 4. Gregory the Theologian, the best friend and biographer of Basil the Great, also believed that relatives and ancestors of Basil were the heirs to the Kingdom of ancient Colchis. Thus, ancient Colchian myths, so popular in the classical literature, must have described heroic deeds of the saint father's direct ancestors<sup>3</sup>. Recent investigations testify that Basil's ancestors were ancient inhabitants of Pontus and belonged to the local ethnicity<sup>4</sup>.

According to Georgian scholars, Gregory the Theologian, the great Cappadocian writer and the ecclesiastic of the fourth century, Basil the Great's (as well as his brother Gregory of Nyssa's) best friend and like-minded person, must have been closely related to the Georgian world<sup>5</sup>. This viewpoint is attested by the fact that Gregory the Theologian belonged to the Cappadocian school and was Cappadocian by origin.

However, supporters of the contrary opinion believe that Gregory the Theologian's Cappadocian origin is not a convincing proof to attest his close relations to the Georgian world. This question needs a detailed study of primary sources that concern the great holy father's life. However, Gregory the Theologian's attitude to Greeks, his close links to the Cappadocian world, unusually close relations to Basil's kin, may lead us to the idea that he belonged to the same nationality as Basil.

<sup>1</sup> S. Kaukhchishvili, *History of Byzantine Literature*, Tbilisi, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> E. Khintibidze, *On the Origin of Basil the Great*, Moambe, Tbilisi, 1962, № 3.

<sup>3</sup> E. Khintibidze, *On the History of Georgian-Byzantine Contacts*, Tbilisi, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> A. Fedwick, *Chronology of the Life and Works of Basil of Caesarea*, Toronto, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> A. Gregoire, *The Iberian Monastery and the Role of Georgians of Mt. Athos*, "Tsiskari", 1968, 3.

Evagrius Ponticus, an outstanding Byzantine writer-mystic of the fourth century was the junior contemporary and follower of great Cappadocian fathers - Basil the Great, Gregory Cappadocian and Gregory of Nyssa. Some Georgian scholars believe that Evagrius was Iberian by nationality (K. Kekekidze). This opinion is based on the information preserved in several copies of *Lavsaiconi* by Palladi Hellenopolitan, Evagrius Ponticus' disciple, which says that Evagrius was from Pontus, the city of Iberians.

The theology of Cappadocian fathers was fundamentally based on the classical philosophy. Their works served to the ultimate formation of the principle dogmas of Christianity. It is believed that the final formation of the Trinity Orthodox doctrine in the Oriental christology is connected with the activities of Cappadocian fathers - Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and Gregory of Nyssa, while in the West, it was St Augustine who contributed to this process (E. Honigmann).

Evagrius Ponticus developed Cappadocian dogmatics in respect of mysticism. It is noteworthy that the classical literature, particularly philosophy played a significant role in the creations of Evagrius Ponticus and Cappadocian fathers. Suffice it to mention Basil the Great's special treatise addressed to the youth, which explained how to use the Pagan Greek literature (Mygne, P,G,T. 32, 219-1110).

Gregory the Theologian so frequently applied pagan mythological images, and alluded to the characters from the classical literature, that special comments were written in Byzantine literature to give their definitions. One of such works was translated into Georgian by Ephrem Mtsire in XI c. The writings by Cappadocian fathers were very popular in Medieval Georgia, which is testified by a large number of their Georgian translations as compared to those by other Byzantine authors.

Georgian-Byzantine relations are of special significance in the history of Georgian culture. It is quite comprehensive and embraces political, ecclesiastic-religious and cultural-literary aspects. Georgia tried to strengthen political alliance with the Byzantine empire, which naturally resulted in close cultural-literary contacts and spiritual revival. It is noteworthy that protection of Orthodox principles was a common problem for Georgian and Byzantine churches. Since Jerusalem, driven in Muslim encirclement, had lost its old significance, and the church of Constantinople acquired the supreme position, the striving of the Georgian church for contacts with the West became obvious<sup>6</sup>.

In the IX-Xcc, Byzantine culture enjoys a renaissance. Byzantine authors create the whole epoch not only in the history of Byzantine literature, but in the history of the Christian literature in general. Intensive literary and educational activities are in progress, and Byzantine literature achieves worldwide fame. Byzantium becomes the center of Christian literature.

Byzantine social-philosophical and literary thought of XI-XII cc reached its peak, which later formed the theoretical basis for European Renaissance. Naturally, the interest of Georgians in Byzantine culture increased. Georgian scholars profoundly studied it to benefit their own, national culture. Many of them carried out prolific literary work in numerous centers of Georgian culture in Byzantium, which contributed to the rise of their personal authority and national dignity. Suffice it to recall Euthemius the Athonite to realize the glory of Georgian monasteries of the period. As mentioned above, a large number of profound studies prove that Georgian-Byzantine relations were not unilateral. In this regard, K.Kekekidze wrote: "has Georgian translations of the Greek literature preserved the manuscripts that fill lacunas in the history of Greek-Byzantine literature? - Yes, and their number and significance is great."

As far back as IV-V cc, not one Georgian had taken part in the political life and cultural-literary activities of Byzantium. The interest of Georgian scholars in Byzantium has been increasing since IX c. According to George Merchule, Gregory Khantsteli (759-861) was among those who aspired to absorb the West, for he decided to visit Constantinople and the sacred places of Greece and took Sabah Ishkhneli and his other disciple with him. Later in 864, Ilarion Kartveli (882-875) founded a Georgian monastery on Olympus in Asia Minor. The establishment of the monastery Romana in Byzantium (876) is also connected with his name. From then on, both monasteries served as centers of prolific literary work.

With respect to the Greek-Byzantine and Georgian relations, we should by all means mention the Xc Georgian philosophical and literary school on Mt Athos. Via the Georgian monastery on Mt Athos, our country got acquainted with the cream of the Byzantine culture. Distinguished Georgian fathers of the monastery stimulated the surprising development of XI-XIIcc Georgian literature. They translated and rewrote bulk of invaluable literary pieces, worked out new methods of translation, and founded a spe-

<sup>6</sup> L. Menabde, *The Centers of Old Georgian Literature*, II, Tbilisi, 1980.

cial school for literature, grammar and calligraphy. The significance of Athos lavra for Georgian culture exceeds that of other monasteries.

Byzantine writers provide considerable information about Georgian culture. According to Themistios, an outstanding philosopher and rhetorician, there existed a rhetorical school in Colchis near Phasis (Poti). This is how Themistios addresses a young man: „Ἐγὼ τοίνυν καὶ αὐτός, ὃ χρεστὲ νεανία, ἐν πολυ τοῦδε ἀρανεστέρῳ χωρίῳ τοὺς ῥητορικοὺς λόγους ἀνεδρεψάμην, οὐδὲ ἐν ἡμέρῳ καὶ Ἑλληνι, ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ ἐδχατιᾷ τοῦ Πόντου πληθίων Φάσιδος ὄπου καὶ τὴν Ἀργὴ σωθεῖσαν, ἐκ Θεσσαλίας ποιηταὶ τε ἐθαύμασαν... Ἀλλ' ὁμως οὕτω βάρβαρον καὶ ἀνήμερον χωρίον...

Ἑλληνικὸν τε ἐποίησε καὶ ἀνάκτορον τῶν Μουσῶν..."

Evidently, both Themistios and his father Eugenius, who was a distinguished philosophy teacher in Constantinople, had been educated in that very school. Naturally, besides students from Byzantium, the school also educated locals. According to S. Kaukhchishvili, Aetes and Partaz, Lazians (Colchians) of noble descent, must have received education in the same school. Agathias Scholasticos's *History* preserved their speeches made in 554 at a confidential meeting held on account of the treacherous murder of King Gubazi of Lasians. The speeches are considered the best specimens of oratory.

Christianity was received by the Greek philosophy with hostility. However, the new religion developed in the Greek-Roman cultural environment, and gradually "accustomed itself" to the classical culture and philosophy. Christian scholars studied the works of Greek writers and philosophers. Basil the Great (IVc) wrote a special treatise, which explained what the young should read from the pagan literature and how.

Byzantine-Georgian relations are of special significance for Georgian culture. Close contacts with the Byzantine world stimulated the adoption of the classical cultural heritage by Georgians. Those ages witnessed intensive translations of classical literature. Special interest should be paid to the works of Euthemius, John and George of Sacred Mountain, Ephrem Mtsire, Arsen Ikaltoeli and John Petritsi - brilliant representatives of the Georgian philosophical school.

"In a word", as acad. I Javakhishvili remarks, "Georgians enjoyed the taste of ... Hellenic creations and began to absorb life-giving Hellenism, the profound and detailed study of which laid the foundation of so-called "Renaissance" in the western Europe"<sup>7</sup>. Translated literature testifies to the links of a nation with another cultural world and the exchange of cultural values. Such relations will never cease to exist. The history of human society has no evidence of absolutely isolated cultural development. The culture of one nation has always been enriched by the cultural achievements of other nations.

Gelati and Ikalto academies, as well as other Georgian educational centers greatly contributed to the protection of the cultural heritage. Besides, Georgia had close contacts with Georgian monasteries abroad - on Mount Sinai, Black Mount in Syria, Athos and in Petritsoni.

Georgian-Byzantine contacts resulted in intensive translating activity. Biblical books were the first specimens of Old Georgian literature. Via original or translated Byzantine writings, classical mythology and literature found their way into Georgian culture. Old Georgian authors frequently referred to such celebrities as Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato and Aristophanes. Ephrem Mtsire's (XI c) translation of *The stories of the Hellenes*, widely popular in Georgia, is a significant literary piece with elements of ancient Greek mythology. The translation, for the first time in Georgian reality, includes citations from Homer's *Iliad* (VI song, 506; XII song, 5). We can also trace Homer's six hexameters in Georgian translations of the period. There are many original and translated hagiographic and historical pieces containing a large number of classical elements. Among those is the chronicle *The life of Kartli*. It has a number of typological similarities with Homer's *Iliad*. In *Iliad* we read: "ὥστε κρήνη μελάνυδρον", "like dusky water". Agamemnon suffers Greeks' defeat and is going to retreat. He convenes a meeting and while addressing the audience, bursts into tears, which resemble "dusky water". "κρήνην μελάνυδρον" is also mentioned in *Odyssey* (20,158).

At the dawn of XII c, the *Chronograph* by George Amartolos was translated into Georgian. It also contains a considerable information about classical authors. In this respect, the analysis of historical data found in Georgian sources provides enough proof to assert that a steady flow of classical reminiscences found its way from Byzantium into Georgia<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> I. Javakhishvili, *The History of Georgia*, II, Tbilisi, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> V. Asatiani, *Classical and Byzantine Traditions in Georgian Literature*, Tbilisi, 1996.