

## Georgian Literature before the *Weltliteratur*

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**Abstract:** The history of Georgian writing starts much earlier than when Goethe introduced the term “*Weltliteratur*.” It starts from the era of Christianity from the 4th century. Due to the fast spread of Christianity in the Early Medieval period, Georgia was already included in the European net of Christian writing. All branches of Christian spiritual literature were presented. Georgian culture and literature naturally were developing in the frame of the Western European tradition. The period of the 11th-12th centuries was a Golden Era for Georgia, and the heyday of fame for Georgian culture and literature as well. Precisely during this period, “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” was created by Shota Rustaveli. Apart from its aesthetic, philosophical, and worldview depth, it is a first text in Georgian literature as well as in European literature which reflects the clashing of two huge universes in Georgian culture—the West and the East. The Western principles are revealed in the Christian worldview of the text, in the way of thinking of the author and in its genre; however, the 12th century is already a period of strengthening of the influence of Eastern culture and literature in the European part of the Caucasus, and Rustaveli regards with obvious favor the Oriental poetic motifs. Unfortunately, at this stage of European literary history, Georgian literature was separated from the Western European literary process due to tragic political events. As for literature, it was a period of almost three centuries of silence. After the fall of Constantinople, Georgian literature had to move closer to the Eastern area as an historically offered alternative. From the 17th century, the process of the returning of Georgian political and cultural life back within the European frame had been started. Genuine Georgian writers were able to tie Georgian literature to the cultural models of European Classicism and the Enlightenment.

**Keywords:** Georgian literature, European literature, the West and the East

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The term *Weltliteratur* was introduced in 1827 by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his letter to Eckermann (198). Goethe conceptualized poetry as a universal model of cognition of the

universe: “National literature is now a rather unmeaning term, —Goethe wrote, —the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (Damrosch, *What* 1; “Introduction” 1). Since then, this term has undergone a number of explanations and interpretations, the review of which does not represent the purpose of this article; however, I will try to show that Georgian writing was an integral part of international literary processes even before “the epoch of world literature,” and, moreover, it was a bridge laid between the Western and Eastern literary and cultural models.

The intersection of Georgian literature with an international literary and cultural process starts from the era of Christianity, in particular, from the first half of 4th century, when the earliest piece of Georgian writing, *The Life of Saint Nino*, was created. From that period, Georgian literature joins the common European current of Christian literature. However, it does not contradict the fact that Georgian cultural consciousness began to form within the pagan period at the ancient pre-historical stage. Except for the patterns of materialistic culture and traditions, the richest inheritance coming from the pagan period includes the patterns of folklore as well as the information about the existence of the Kolkheti philosophical school.<sup>1</sup> However, for the establishment of the Georgian cultural code and literary canon, a solid ideological support was needed, which was found in the depth of Christian thought.<sup>2</sup> The viewpoint of Georgian scholar Revaz Tvaradze is correct: “Neither Georgian mythos, nor idolatry, nor worship of luminaries, taken from the habitat of the Georgians’ ancestors, nor Mazdeism, imposed from neighboring Persia, i.e. none of these teachings claiming to be the worldview basis of the Georgian pagan culture, could have fulfilled the role that Christianity has played in the arena of cultural rise” (12). The spread of Christianity was preceded by the creation of the Georgian alphabet. The coinciding of these two events contributed to overcoming a long historical process of searching for the self and national identity, and the birth and rapid development of Georgian literature.<sup>3</sup> From the early Middle Ages, Georgian literature was already actively involved in the European network of Christian literature. All branches of spiritual writing were present: bibliology, exegetics, homiletics, dogmatics, polemics, ascetics, mysticism, canons, liturgics, etc. The most prevalent literary genres were hagiography and hymnography.

European poetics of the Early Middle Ages, proceeding from its conceptual objective, which implied the introduction and preaching of Christian worldview principles and interpretation of the biblical text, opposed the poetic tradition established in Classical culture by rejecting the ancient conception of the invented plot. A similar process was observed in early Middle Ages Georgian hagiographic texts dating back to the 4th century. For a long time, it was considered that the first extant piece of Georgian hagiography was *The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik* supposed to have been written in the 5th century by Priest Iakob Khutsesi. Later, it was asserted that the Historical Chronicles of the 11th century, *The Conversion of Kartli*,<sup>4</sup> included a very special text—*The Life of Saint Nino*, which seemed older than the text by Iakob Khutsesi (the text does not have a single author. It is a collection of various authors’ narratives). After reconstructing its prototype and analyzing its ancient layers, Georgian researchers have revealed that *The Life of Saint Nino* can be traced back to the 4th century and declared as the first improved text in the history of Georgian hagiography. Therefore, nowadays, the beginning of the history of Georgian literature is dated back to the 4th century, to the epoch when Georgia was

converted to Christianity. Georgian hagiographic texts—*Martyrdom of St. Shushanik*, *Martyrdom of Abo Tbileli* (written in the 8th century by Iovanne Sabanisdze), *Life of Grigol Khandzteli* (written in the 10th century by Giorgi Merchule), etc. —have a documentary character by means of offering a detailed description of the character's life and martyrdom revealing the features of Georgian cultural-historical reality, and demonstrating its priorities.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that the Georgian hagiographic texts of the early Middle Ages, following the general trend, denied an invented plot, they were able to achieve a high level of creativity; they encouraged structural and poetic determinants of an artistic nature, such as a wide metaphorical system, a diverse gallery of characters, various stylistic models, narrative techniques, artistic speech, metaphorical thinking, etc., which, altogether, provided an exceptional artistic fabric of the text. According to Gérard Genette, “Literary narratology has confined itself a little too blindly to the study of fictional narrative, as if as a matter of course every literary narrative would always at times be pure fiction” (15).

Due to the strong ideological and conceptual background in the early Middle Ages, the Georgian literary canon has been established. It was motivated by the political and ideological markers of Christianity, and we witness not only the formation of Georgian Christian writing, but also the establishment of the Georgian national identity.

It must be admitted that Georgian culture and literature in the early Middle Ages was very much inspired by Byzantine culture and literature. Rivalry with the Byzantine culture was an evident tendency starting from the 8th-10th centuries and became more obvious from the 10th century, when on Mount Athos the first Georgian church of St. John the Evangelist, and soon after, the Georgian Monastery, *Ivironi*, were established (980-983). “Georgians referred to the Mount Athos as the Holy Mount or *Mtatsminda*, and Georgian Fathers, who lived there—*Mtatsmindlebi*” (Khintibidze 208). Ioane Mtatsmindeli, Eptvime Mtatsmindeli, Giorgi Mtatsmindeli, and other Georgian Fathers, who worked in the 10th-11th centuries, transformed the Georgian Monastery into a theological center and the hearth of Georgian bibliophiles. Their activities were directed towards the development of Georgian theological thought and soon spread to different geographical areas: to Antioquia—The Black Mount, Bulgaria—Petritsoni, and Georgia too—Gelati (209).<sup>6</sup> The creation of original texts as well as translation work soon produced an excellent result: Georgians acquired a thorough knowledge of the medieval culture, and new theological and literary strategies, which was very important for the fruitful development of Georgian Medieval literature. Thanks to the great efforts of the Georgian fathers and medieval Georgian authors, the main message of the Georgian culture of a given historical period was voiced: Georgia is a part of Western Christian thinking and writing, since Georgian culture and literature are able not only to absorb the trends of European culture, but also to import original cultural trends adapted to Georgian national identity.

The tendency of the interpretation of Biblical texts, characteristic of European Christian rhetoric, which was aimed at the formation of the tradition of Christian theology and the culture of interpretive diversity of the text, was also successfully adapted in the Georgian literary area. “In the old translations of the New Testament (in this case, Epistles of Paul),” Eliso Kalandarishvili notes, “the terminological nuances are observed which allow us to trace significant processes

occurring on the initial stage of formation of Christian theology—elaboration of theological terminology, laying down the foundations for exegesis as interpretation of the text of the Scripture” (101). The scholar notes that medieval Latin Fathers differentiated strictly the “literal” and “indirect” explanations of the Bible, whereas representatives of Georgian spiritual literature referred to this process by the terms “explanatory” and “metaphorical” (103). The term “metaphorical” was introduced with the meaning of “inner” and “spiritual,” which should have demonstrated the hidden idea of the Bible taking into consideration the real model of the text. The interpretation of Biblical texts was based on the unerringness of the sacred texts.

As well as the tendency of developing the Christian cultural paradigm maintained in the late Middle Ages, the aesthetic principles of literature underwent profound changes. As soon as the objectives of the early Medieval Ages were achieved (the establishment and strengthening of Christian ideology), Georgian literature started to return to the aesthetics of the invented plot. Maka Elbakidze notes:

Ignoring of the principle of historicism should be regarded as one of the merits of late medieval literature, which gave a stimulus to the long process of search for new genres and themes. Great changes in the spiritual life of humanity, the so-called “cultural explosion,” which affected by the mid-XII century almost over the entire civilized world, made its deep imprint on the literary process as well. (158-159)

The reader demanded “more dynamics, more adventure, more romance” and literature moved away from the principle of authenticity: “The above-mentioned became a strong impetus for formation of a new conception, the basic principle of which is rejection of the principle of historicism and moving to the foreground fiction” (159). The dichotomy of the real and the invented again became an obvious feature. From the 11th century, Georgian literature enters a new period, which is affected by the ongoing political and social reforms in the country as well as the secularization process observable in European literature. However, from the very beginning, secularization was not suitable for Georgian literature based upon the original alphabet.<sup>7</sup> The model of the European chivalric novel can be confidently regarded as an influential version of the Western European literature that made a conceptual leap for Georgian literature from the early medieval ideological-type literature to late medieval aestheticism. Therefore, late medieval Georgian literature, as a valuable part of European literature, becomes organically involved in the process of aesthetic innovations. The best proof is a renowned masterpiece of Georgian literature, *Vepkhistqaosani* or *The Man in the Panther’s Skin* by Shota Rustaveli.

Apart from its aesthetic, philosophical, and worldview depth, it is the first text in Georgian literature as well as in European literature that reflects the clashing of two huge universes in Georgian culture, the West and the East. The Western principles are revealed in the Christian worldview of the text, in the way of thinking by the author, and in the genre peculiarity of the text, which corresponds to the genre of the European chivalric romance. However, the 12th century is

already a period of strengthening of the influence of Eastern culture and literature in the European part of Caucasus, and Rustaveli regards with obvious favor the Oriental poetic motifs. However, the meeting of West and East is of “Dialogue-type,” in which the West is an inner necessity, and the East is a result of an external factors such as the geographical location of Georgia, political and economic strengthening of the Eastern countries, etc.<sup>8</sup>

There were/are various approaches toward the problem of the possible meeting of the East and the West; however, over the course of time, contrary to the doubts of some skeptics, the East and the West recognized each other, and despite the inner resistance, achieved effective cooperation, which also was differently interpreted by scholars. The following viewpoint from the outstanding Georgian philosopher of the 20th century, Merab Mamardashvili, is of interest here:

The East and the West—two eternal sides or moments of humanity. Proceeding from their definition/purpose, they cannot intersect with each other and cannot enter into a geographical conflict with each other. But there may be a certain multidimensional space where it may be possible for the two sides to come to the ratio with each other—they can meet and can come into a conflict with each other.

A “non-geographical conflict” is apparently considered by Mamardashvili as a necessary condition for this relationship. Mikhail Bakhtin offers methodological transformation of the concept: he considers dialogue between cultures as the best way to demonstrate the originality of a culture. The founder of dialogic criticism writes:

A foreign culture can demonstrate itself in a more perfect and profound manner only in the eyes of another culture. [...] One idea/essence upon its meeting and contact with another, foreign idea/essence demonstrates its own depths: it seems that a dialogue begins between them which overcomes isolation and one-sidedness of these ideas/essences, these cultures [...] upon a dialogue-type meeting of the two cultures, they do not merge with each other, but each of them retains its integrity and open unity, they enrich each other. (334-335)

It is noteworthy that Rustaveli quite effectively uses the coexistence of Western and Eastern cultural and literary models. His attempt to reconcile the Western and Eastern literary manners creates the first precedent of the meeting of those two different cultural worlds in Georgian literary space and assigns the status of a unique text to *Vepkhistqaosani*; by means of this stylistic innovation, *Vepkhistqaosani* expands the geography of “World Literature”: if for the medieval European authors “World Literature” was unequivocally identified with a European cultural area, for Georgian literature it also implied the principles of Eastern literature. Consequently, Georgian literature found itself involved in a transnational dialogue.

Unfortunately, soon after the great success of Rustaveli’s text, Georgian literature was separated from the Western literary process and, subsequently, from the European Renaissance,

as from the 13th century, the natural path of development of Georgian culture and literature was artificially blocked due to tragic historical events: the invasion and a centuries-old dominance of the Mongols, and soon after, Iran and the Ottoman Empire caused the interrupting of the developing cultural and literary processes in Georgia.<sup>9</sup>

In the 13th-15th centuries, Georgian literature, as well as culture in general, found itself in the captivity of a specific form of colonialism expressed by an alternation of dictatorships of various non-Christian conquerors. They did not allow Georgian literature and culture to choose its individual path of development and aggravated Georgia's separation from the Western cultural area. This resulted in a difficult transitional period for Georgian literature lasting almost three centuries.

In 1453 the fall of Constantinople and strengthening of the Muslim world changed drastically the geopolitical and geo-cultural panorama of the Near East. If in the Middle Ages Georgian statehood and spirituality were an organic part of the Western Christian world, in the 13th-15th centuries, passing through the hazardous transitional period it shifted to a different plane, when the East becomes the "adapted new reality," while the West remains at the status of the "experienced valued past." The poetic outcome of this cultural flexibility was the variability of literary traditions and tastes, abundance of concepts, influences, and parallels, diversity of genres and poetic forms, and functional heterogeneity of stylistic devices.

Georgian literature of this period seems to represent an open cultural construction. In one way, a special place is assigned to the direct Georgian translations of specimens of Eastern, in particular, Persian epics as well as to original versions created under the influence and imitation of Persian poetry. Projection of Eastern literature, which itself is a very broad and unequal concept, in Georgian literature of the 13th -15th centuries and of a later period as well occurs under the aegis of Persian literature. Researchers explain this in several ways: the contagious effect of the chivalrous spirit and pathos of Persian texts (Iv. Javakhishvili); the "secret opposition" of Georgian intellectuals with the Georgian Church (G. Lobzhanidze); the widened areas of literary taste (G. Lobzhanidze). If to the above-listed reasons we add that the Georgian reality of this period was politically and economically dependent on Persian rule, the expansion of Persian culture into Georgia acquires a logical character. Thus, it is not surprising that Georgian literature has adopted several markers typical of Persian literature including analogies of subjects, recurrence of artistic universals, and a tendency towards ornamentation of style by means of many-level metaphors and comparisons (G. Lobzhanidze). Georgian "rendering" of Persian texts was especially flourishing; however, I fully share the commonly accepted view of Georgian critics that the rendering of a foreign work was not a process of mechanical perception, but a process of creative adaptation and adjusting to its own taste and consciousness. The creative genius of the Georgians managed to assimilate the translated literature, processing it in its own ideological and aesthetic consciousness, and melting it in the smelter of its own national activities (Kekelidze 45-62; Lobzhanidze 63).

However, despite the obvious prevalence of the Persian influence, the Western literary tradition as the primary source of Georgian literature continued to exist on the level of the strong genetic memory in order to come to the surface at the first opportunity. Indeed, the changes that



took place in the political and public life of Georgia in the 16th to the 18th centuries turned out to be a decisive factor, as a result of which literature focused on Western aesthetics was revived. The period from the 16th to the 18th centuries must be regarded as the starting point of a new stage of the history of Georgian literature. From this standpoint, activities of Georgian kings—Teimuraz (1589-1663), Vakhtang (1675-1737), and Archil (1647-1713) as well as writers and poets—Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani (1658-1725), Davit Guramishvili (1705-1792), and Besiki (Besik Gabashvili; 1750-1791) are noteworthy,

Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, a priest and a public figure, was given an opportunity to get acquainted with his contemporary European literary processes: by the order of King Vakhtang VI, he traveled to Europe on a special diplomatic mission. Despite the failure of his diplomatic mission, his trip to Europe brought great results for Georgian culture and literature: after returning to Georgia, he created texts that corresponded to the European literary standard, a collection of fables *The Wisdom of the Lie* and *A Journey to Europe*, describing his journey to Europe in 1714-1715. The latter became the best reminder for the Georgians of their European roots and history. Orbeliani not only traveled to Europe, but he facilitated the revival of the European political orientation of Georgia and also was able to convey contemporary European aesthetical views, including the principles of Neoclassicism and the Enlightenment. His work *The Wisdom of the Lie*, despite the author's loyalty to a number of Eastern traditions, from the conceptual, genre, and stylistic viewpoints, represents a refined mixture of late Neoclassicism and early Enlightenment, while another text, *A Journey to Europe*, became a cultural-scientific, geographic, historiographic, and literary-genre phenomenon, but also an intellectual benchmark in his contemporary European culture. Besides, *A Journey to Europe* laid down a foundation for a travel narrative in Georgian literature, and was continued in the 19th century in the works of Romantic poet Grigol Orbeliani (*My Journey from Tiflis to Petersburg*), as well as representatives of Georgian realism—Ilia Chavchavadze (*Letters of a Traveler*) and Aleksandre Qazbegi (*Memories of a Former Shepherd*), and very successfully in 20th-21st century Georgian fiction. The literary and religious, national and political significance of artistic texts, dictionaries, religious works and sermons by Orbeliani are not limited to his time, but they have retained topicality to the present day. This vitality is an indicator of the conceptual and strategic innovation of the literary and state paradigm organized by Orbeliani.

The Western poetic is clearly dominant in the work of Davit Guramishvili, who lived and worked in the 18th century. Guramishvili's *Davitiani*, first published in 1787, is imbued with the Western literary worldview and genre-thematic tendencies: by its historical, didactic, and pastoral motifs *Davitiani* is close to the contemporary standard of Western verse and bears resemblance to it from the conceptual as well as stylistic viewpoints. *Davitiani* finally overcame the influence of the Oriental epics in Georgian poetry. Guramishvili brought back into Georgian literature Christian symbolism; he imbued his verse with the aesthetics of the Beautiful, Sublime, and Great.

It can be noted with confidence that work by Orbeliani and Guramishvili became not only a turning point in the history of Georgian literature, but also determined the subsequent direction and path of development of Georgian literature. Literary works of Orbeliani and Guramishvili cannot

be regarded as examples of pure Classicism or Enlightenment, which were so deeply-rooted in the European literature of that period; they had a rather synthetic character, what is referred to in modern literary studies as an Enlightenment Classicism, which was already functioning in some of the European writings (Lessing, Dryden). Even a contemporary of Gurimishvili, the talented poet Besiki (Besik Gabashvili), who was well-known for his favorable attitude to Oriental versification forms, was striving to produce Western stylistic experiments: Georgian critics consider him to be a poet who introduced and established the baroque style in Georgian literature.<sup>10</sup> In his works, the mythic-poetic structure characteristic of Eastern poetry is being replaced by the historical-genre narrative characteristic of Western poetry (Ratiani 60, 61, 62).

The process of liberation of Georgian literature from the Eastern influence, facilitated by the above-mentioned authors, represented the return of Georgian writing to its natural environment, the European culture and literature to which it genetically belonged. At the end of the 18th century, when Ioane Bagrationi's *Kalmasoba* was revealed, it was obvious that Georgian literature was entering the phase of Romanticism. This was the beginning of a valuable reunion with European cultural and literary space as well as of a search for a new identity. Therefore, the information preserved in the books and textbooks published in the Soviet Union period asserting that the establishment of Romanticism in Georgian literature is linked with the Russian cultural-literary influence, formed at the beginning of 19th century, is groundless. The truth is that the Russian Empire, starting in 1801, gradually occupied the whole territory of Georgia and this enforced political process greatly affected and hindered the political and cultural development of Georgia. Hence, it was very difficult for Georgian authors of the period of Romanticism and Realism not to lag behind European values and to include Georgian writing in the world literary discourse, which was the core idea of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, aiming world literature to become a dialogue-based coherent community. However, this is a matter of another essay.

## Notes

1. The ancient estate of "Georgia" was "Kolkheti" and "Georgians" were known as "Kolkhis." Here I should recall the famous myth of Medea, who was the Kolkhi Princess and ran away from Kolheti to Greece with her lover, Jason. Euripides's tragedy "Medea" is the literary interpretation of this ancient story.
2. The spread of Christianity in Georgia starts from the 1st century and is related to the Apostles—Saint Andrew the First and Simon Cananeus. From the 4th century, during the rule of King Mirian, Christianity becomes an official religion in Georgia; the latest date is considered to be the year 326. The declaration of Christianity as a state religion is related to St. Nino's name.
3. The Georgian alphabet, created in the 3rd century, is among world's 14 alphabets. In 2016, UNESCO added the Georgian alphabet to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
4. "Kartli" is a historical name of Georgia.
5. Hymnographic masterpieces created during the same period occupy an equally worthy place in Georgian and world spiritual poetic culture (hymns by Mikael Modrekili, Ioane Minchkhi, Ioane Mtbevari, Stepan Sananoisdze, and others, and later on works by Euthymius and Giorgi the Athonites, King David the Builder, Prince Demetre, and others).
6. The Gelati monastery is located in the west Georgia region, in Kutaisi. In the 12th century, in the period



of the reign of King David Agmashenebeli (David the Builder), in Gelati was established an Academy as a major educational and scientific center, which preferably promoted the development of theological and philosophical studies. In Gelati Academy the most prominent Georgian philosophers and scientists of that period—Ioane Petritsi and Arsen Ikhaltoeli, etc. —were developing their activities.

7. From the early Middle Ages, the liturgy in Georgian Orthodox Church was recited in the Georgian language, never in Latin. It made the process of secularization of Georgian literature rather painless. Despite the fact, that the Georgian alphabet went through some transformations (Asomtavruli, Nuskhuri, Mkhedruli), it remained sustainable and Georgian literature, created in the Georgian literary language in the 4th century, after 1600 years, is still organic for contemporary Georgian readers.
8. It must be admitted, the “Dialogue-type” correlation in-between two cultures, two universes—the West and the East—in Rustaveli’s texts and afterwards, in different stages of the development of Georgian literature, exists with a permanent condition of overcoming resistance, as Georgian literature, as well as the country itself, constantly exists on the border of inner necessity and external determination.
9. In the 13th century, Mongolians conquered Georgia. In the 14th century the country, led by King Giorgi the Glorious, tried to recover the country, but, by the end of the same century, it was again ruined by Tamerlane. Soon after, the Iranian and Ottoman armies invaded the country. In 1490, Georgia was officially disassembled.
10. See Giorgi Gachechiladze, *Renaissance and Baroque: Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani 350*, Anniversary Collection, Institute of Literature Press, 2009; Irakli Kenchoshvili, *Transitional Mega-Period in Georgian Literature: Contemporary Problems of Literary Criticism*, Institute of Literature Press, 2007; Maia Nachqebia, *Issues of Georgian Baroque*, Institute of Literature Press, 2009 (all works are in Georgian).

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