



Georgia and Iran: Three Millennia of Cultural Relations An Overview

Fatema Soudavar Farmanfarmaian

Abstract

When Georgia was incorporated into the Russian Empire, the rich background of interaction with Persian culture, the result of centuries of contact, was lost to the scholar whose interest in Georgian history came to depend on Russian historiography with its focus on the period under Russian rule and its misreading of anything prior to that. Western scholarship, often oblivious of the far reach of Persian culture, devoted too little attention to the subject or gave it short shrift. Owing largely to the recent work of Georgian scholars, a century of neglect is now being reversed, but an overall picture of the breadth and depth of Georgian-Iranian interaction is still lacking. This paper proposes to offer a general overview from the third millennium BCE to the Russian conquest of Georgia, when Persian influence began its decline.

Keywords

Georgia, Georgian-Iranian relations, cultural interaction, Persian influence

According to family lore, the good looks of Hāj Kāzem Malek-al-Tojjār, this writer's great-grandfather, were attributable to his mother, a Georgian princess converted to Islam upon her marriage to Āqā Mehdi of Tabriz. The latter, who was a battle companion and treasurer of the Crown Prince 'Abbās Mirzā, had taken custody of the princess when she was a little child and did not marry her until much later, probably in 1837, the same year he received the title of Malek-al-Tojjār by a decree of Mohammad Shah.¹ This was by no means an unusual union. The reputed good looks of Georgians had long attracted Iranians. This is especially true of the elite, apparently beginning with the Achae-menids who, according to Herodotus, requested that a gift of a hundred boys and a hundred girls be sent by Colchis every four years (Braund, p. 123).²

¹ Āqā Mehdi Tabrizi was the first recipient of the title *Malek-al-Tojjār-e Mamālek-e Mabrusa* 'The King of Merchants in the Protected Lands [of Persia]' under the Qajars (the decree is kept at the Malek Library in Tehran). The date of marriage is not known, but since the Georgian princess was renamed Malaka Khānom, it is to be presumed that they were married soon after he became Malek-al-Tojjār. Unfortunately her original name is not preserved.

² Braund believes that the young boys and girls sent as tribute were not necessarily Colchians;

Over two millennia later, the Qajar Fath-'Ali Shah's favorite wife was the influential Georgian Tāvus Khānom (later Tāj-al-Dowla), for whose marriage to the shah the famous Peacock Throne was made by jewellers in Isfahan (Bāmdād, I, p. 368; Pitiurishvili, p. 82). Georgian girls were also coveted by other segments of Iranian society, in large enough numbers to make a British historian of the early Qajars opine: "Their [= Georgians'] children, for ages, brought in large numbers into Persia and Turkey, have, by their intermarriage with the people of these lands, been the means of changing tribes, at first remarkable for their ugliness, into handsome and pleasing-looking people" (Watson, p. 82). Apart from good looks, Georgian blood seems to have imparted to the offspring of such unions a phenomenal energy and an unshakeable morale, reminiscent of Gibbon's description of "those who have breathed the keenness of the Scythian air."

But there was more than good looks and vital energy to the history of relations between Iran and Georgia. The very geography of Georgia dictated a game of musical chairs between several worlds, which explains the recurrent pattern of alliances and counter-alliances, alternating with periods of fragmented autonomy, blighted by internal rivalries. By simply switching the names of the actors, one obtains similar situations repeated over time, with Iran a major player throughout. Even though Georgian princes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cannot have been aware of the wealth of reciprocal contacts in antiquity, the residual effects were integrated into so many aspects of their lives that they cannot be ignored in an overview such as this, any more than they can within the context of Iran proper.

Historical Relations since Antiquity

The connection between the two nations goes back to prehistoric times. Archaeology has established similarities between Georgia and the Iranian Plateau already in the Early Bronze Age, the first manifestation of which is the 'Kura-Araxes' culture that embraced the area south of the Caucasus, north-western Iran, and eastern Anatolia (Curtis and Kruszyinski, pp. 2f.). Though generally believed to have been a localized culture with links to the civilizations of the Near East, one should not discount the general trend observable in much of Eurasia in the Bronze Age, when a quantum leap was made in technology, arts and crafts. The ongoing revision of prehistoric cultures in the

they may have been sent as slaves, just as Colchians were traded with Greece as slaves and eunuchs (Braund, pp. 49f., 67f.)

light of the discovery of the 'Jiroft culture' and its role in the transmission of goods and technologies should warrant another look at the Early Bronze Age.

For now, the earliest evidence of known Iranian-Plateau elements on Georgian territory shows up in the metal and clay artefacts of the second millennium BCE, including a bronze rhyton believed to have been brought from the Plateau, and in objects with similar features made in local workshops (Tsetskhladze, p. 470). Other objects of the same period, such as the well-known Trialeti goblet of 1500 BCE, continue to display symbols and rites associated with the Near East, including the Tree of Life (Lang, 1983, p. 533). As one moves forward to the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, Iranian influence, as represented by Luristan bronzes, picks up noticeably and gains the upper hand, especially on a number of bronze belts and belt clasps that continued to be used by the northern mountain tribes of Georgia and their steppe neighbors into the Christian era (Curtis and Kruszyński, pp. 50-58, 71-83; Braund, p. 210). Painted pottery, weapons, and personal and equine ornaments were also often derived from Iranian models, possibly through the mediation of Urartu or of migrating Scythian tribes (Tsetskhladze, p. 472), both of whom were transmitters in both directions, as established by Stronach for monumental architecture (Lang, 1983, p. 506) and by the study of Scythian burial mounds.

The scant information on the Median period is legendary or late. In Herodotus' account, which smacks of myth, Medea is considered to be a Mede, as her name suggests, though his allegation is based on the fact that the Persians are said to have regarded her removal from Colchis as "a wrong against themselves," the second one, no less, that gave rise to war against the mainland Greeks (Braund, p. 9). Information from Strabo postdates the period by several centuries but is highly relevant in that it emphasizes the similarity of customs and lifestyles among the Medes and the Armenians, including, as quoted by Lang, "their zeal for archery and horsemanship, and the court they pay to their kings," and their dress which included trousers and "the tunics with sleeves reaching to the hands"³ (Lang, 1983, p. 525). And the people of the plain of Iberia are said to have followed "both the Armenian and Median fashion." The same is confirmed in later periods, as evident from sculpture and numismatics. Strabo, however, makes a clear distinction between the Iberians and the warlike people who inhabited the mountainous territory to the north and who had more in common with their Scythian and Sarmatian "neighbours and kinsmen" (ibid). The same differentiation is reported by Greek

³ As worn by the Qajars in the nineteenth century and even nowadays, by Central Asian tribes.

historians for the Achaemenid period. Herodotus mentions the eighteenth and nineteenth satrapies of the Persian empire, which are believed to have involved southern proto-Georgian tribes, as distinct from Colchians, while Xenophon refers to aggressive northern neighbors who successfully resisted domination (Hitchins, p. 464).

Due to its riches and its strategic position on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, Colchis or western Georgia turns up in historical sources, including Urartian and Assyrian ones, earlier than eastern Georgia, wrongly named Iberia by the first Greeks who set foot on its shores. Greek traders had been attracted to the eastern coast of the Black Sea which, to them, was “the farthest voyage” and as such well suited to myth (Braund, p. 3). Greek colonists, however, did not settle there as early as supposed; nurtured by myth, the first ones arrived in the sixth century BCE, shortly before Cyrus the Great’s conquest of Lydia (idem, pp. 16, 73-118). As the land of Prometheus, Jason and the Argonauts, the Golden Fleece, the Dioscuri and Medea, Colchis would hold a special place in Greek and Roman perception, whether there was an active presence or not.⁴ Evidence, however, does not show any significant exploitation of gold in the land of the Golden Fleece before the fifth century, coinciding with the Achaemenid expansion into Georgia (idem, pp. 24, 124-26). The Greeks may have traded there earlier, as attested by pottery remains, but the first period of prolonged prosperity and stability is associated there with Achaemenid hegemony in the fifth and fourth centuries (idem, p. 122).

Well positioned to act as a buffer state on the periphery of the Persian Empire against the unruly northern tribes whom Darius I, as known from his disastrous Scythian campaign, was unable to subdue, Colchis became the recipient of luxurious gifts which, in turn, impacted local workmanship in bronze, in precious metals and clay (Tssetskhladze, p. 474). In addition to the quadrennial supply of young boys and girls, the Colchian élites regularly provided infantry contingents to the Persian army, including to Xerxes’ Greco-Persian campaign, as did all the satrapies of the Caucasus (Braund, p. 123). The fact that Colchis “acknowledged the Great King’s authority” but was not “officially a satrapy administered by Persian governors” (L. Allen, p. 95) suggests that its role in the empire was a loose and fluid one. That does not preclude cultural influence, as attested by telltale signs including a growing corpus of archaeological objects in the Achaemenid style, the use of the Aramaic script for inscriptions and of the *parasang* (called ‘pauses’) for measuring distance (Braund, pp. 126f.), in addition to what Strabo mentions and more.

⁴ In the first chapter of his book, Braund gives an excellent account of how those myths evolved over time.

The rich trove of grave goods from Vani in the hinterland of former Colchis that was recently displayed in Washington and New York (2007) and at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (2008) includes, in addition to Greek vases and the granulated goldwork of Colchis, magnificent examples of Achaemenid provenance or inspiration. That this was not fortuitous, but a calculated and systematic adoption, is attested by the fact that the metrological standards of the Persian Empire are proven to have been applied by local workshops (Kacharava and Kvirkvelia, p. 94 fn. 8). Through a large number of typically Achaemenid silver and gold phialae (used for drinking wine undiluted in the Iranian manner); through the silver goat-topped handle of an elegant ladle; through a wide range of bracelets with animal-head terminals; through an imported and locally modified pectoral in Iranian Egyptianizing style; through the gold bracteates once sewn onto cloth (including two large ones in the form of the stylized Iranian eagle of the royal standard); and through the gold or silver tiaras of local workmanship with Iranian combat motifs engraved on plaques, the Achaemenid style is overwhelmingly present in Colchis in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and even beyond, in Graeco-Persian version.⁵

Not on display were the round bridle ornaments “with schematic depictions of Ahurā Mazda” from the site of Sairkhe (Tsetskhladze, p. 474; Braund, p. 126). More than a borrowed icon, they indicate an adoption of Iranian religious symbols coexisting with indigenous rites at a time when assimilation was common in the ranks of some of the most cosmopolitan deities ever known (Lang, 1983, p. 532). In Colchis, two female deities reigned supreme (Kacharava and Kvirkvelia, pp. 35, 97-110). One of them, Leucothea, is likely to have incorporated aspects of Anāhitā (or Nana), associated in Asia Minor with the Greek Artemis and the Anatolian Cybele (Braund, p. 190). Only a shift in the focus of studies from a Western-oriented viewpoint to a more comprehensive one, such as is occurring in archaeology, will be able to tell. This is not to deny Greek influence, especially in the Hellenistic period from the third century, but nor does the latter invalidate the importance of the Achaemenid impact, especially in the Colchian hinterland, as the sites of Vani and nearby Sairkhe have shown (Kacharava and Kvirkvelia, p. 56). At the latter site, coexistence with the animal-style art of the Scythian steppes (Braund, pp. 130f.) once again places Georgia at a crossroads where cultures met and blended.

⁵ It is noteworthy that the contributions to the catalogue of the exhibition downplay the Persian input to emphasize the local and the Greek (Lordkipanidze, in Kacharava and Kvirkvelia, pp. 24, 26).

More unexpected, even for the hinterlands, is the presence of elements of Achaemenid architecture in Vani and Sairkhe, in the form of Persepolitan bull-protome capitals and bell-shaped lotus-leaf column bases, indicating “the presence of Achaemenid architects who decorated buildings for the local elite in the style of the Persian court” (Tsetskhladze, p. 474)—an obvious case of direct albeit rather crude imitation in a land blessed with timber and an established tradition of log architecture. Also interesting is a narrow kohl container made of thick glass, which is rightly said to be from northwestern Iran where glass containers for cosmetics and scents go back to early Achaemenid times (illustrated in Kacharava and Krikvelia, p. 61).⁶ The example from Vani, which is shown together with several contemporary glass jugs from Rhodes, is one of many glass vessels from Iran, including glass bowls from the two Colchian sites and many more kohl and cosmetics containers from archaeological contexts in eastern Georgia (Tsetskhladze, pp. 473f.)

Graeco-Roman authors, on whose writings much of scholarship has been based, ignored or neglected the extent of Persian influence in Colchis and Iberia, if only because the Romans, who penetrated south of the Caucasus as of Pompey’s wars against Mithridates of Pontus, were notoriously uninterested in local culture or its sources (Braund, p. 216). That limited perspective is increasingly challenged by archaeological finds. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the Achaemenid period is rather atypical of Colchis which, being the other, Graeco-Roman face of Georgia, was to be drawn ever more, by virtue of geography, into the Roman, Pontine, Byzantine and much later, Ottoman spheres, and therefore does not figure as prominently in subsequent Iranian-Georgian relations except in the mid-Sasanian era.⁷ While Colchis looked mostly west in the direction of the Black Sea, Iberia tended to look towards the Iranian Plateau with some nods to the west, whenever required, to assert independence. In the Achaemenid period, eastern Georgia was firmly within the Iranian sphere. The treasures from the Akhagori and other large hoards confirm that Iberia must have been a full satrapy where conscious and skilfully executed imitations of Achaemenid-style rhytons, phialae and vases with animal-shaped handles were manufactured in large numbers by craftsmen in precious metals or in less costly painted clay imitations (Tsetskhladze, pp. 474f.).

The Persian influence in the architectural remains of Iberia is by now well established. Especially frequent is the Persepolitan theme of bull-protome capitals and bell-shaped bases from Tsikhiagora and Dedepolis Mindori (one

⁶ On glass containers of different shapes being first produced in northwestern Iran in the seventh-sixth centuries BCE, see F. Soudavar Farmanfarmaian, p. 301 fn. 62.

⁷ The rulers of Pontus were of Iranian extraction, as is clear from their names (esp. Mithridates).

of the earliest excavated) which were used in palatial architecture and in fire-temples dating from the late Achaemenid to the Parthian periods (idem, pp. 475f.). The most important discovery of recent years is one of a series of Apadana-style columned halls that are known to have been built throughout the area stretching from eastern Anatolia to the Caucasus, “to mirror Persian palace architecture” (L. Allen, p. 95). The one at Gumbati, in eastern Georgia, dates from the fifth century BCE, and probably housed the local satrap’s palace, with “a deliberate parallel... that strikingly recalled an Achaemenid *āpādānā*,” complete with sculpted column bases “imitating those found at the Iranian palace centres,” and was then apparently “new to the building traditions of the area” (ibid.).⁸ It is not unlikely that Colchis borrowed its stone capitals from Iberia rather than by a more direct means.

The life-cycle of these styles continued beyond the end of the Persian Empire, as attested by a post-Achaemenid six-columned *āpādānā* great hall unearthed at the important site of Armazi, high above Tbilisi (Lang, 1987, pp. 416f.). Nor does it stand alone; recent discoveries that clearly demonstrate Persian architectural influence include a fire temple within a fortified enclosure, and a probable Anāhitā temple, dating to the turn of the Christian era, with archaic features traceable to Susa, indicating a deeply-rooted penetration of art forms from Iran. That fire temples attracted ordinary people as much as pagan images was witnessed by Saint Nino, the patron saint of Georgia, as related later in the story of her life (Lang, 1983, p. 534). Also significant is a Parthian *ayvān* in the rock-hewn site of Uplistsikhe which, dating from the late first century CE, must surely be, together with the palaces of Hatra and Ashur in northern Iraq and the remains of Mansur Tepe near Nisa (now in Turkmenistan), one of the earliest examples of a Parthian architectural theme that was to become the primary and most elegant feature of Iranian architecture in the Islamic period⁹ (Akhvlediani and Kimshashvili, pp. 9f.). The widespread use of the *ayvān* and the evidence from Armazi, which includes a Greco-Aramaic inscription, is in keeping with what is known from recorded evidence about Georgia in the Seleucid and Parthian periods, based on the two key names that form the foundation stones of a sovereign Iberia.

The first of these two names, as recorded in chronicles and inscriptions, is that of Armazi—the first capital of Iberia (or Armaz-tsikhe, i.e. citadel of Armazi or Mtskheta-Armazi), which, like the Aramazd of the Armenians “took its name from the local embodiment of the Zoroastrian deity Ahurā Mazda”

⁸ For more information on Gumbati as well as another recent excavatoin at Dedepolis Gora, see Florian Knauss and Iulon Gagoshvili, in Inge Nielsen, ed.

⁹ Professor David Stronach traces back the origin of the *ayvān* to the Median temple-palace structure at Nush-i-jān (oral communication).

(Lang, 1962, p. 23). Armazi thus headed the Georgian pantheon, in a syncretistic cult that maintained some local pagan gods and probable vestiges of the past influx from the Near East, as well as incipient Greek influence that would grow with Roman and Byzantine intervention (Lang, 1983, pp. 532-36). Nor was Iranian religious influence limited to orthodox Zoroastrianism. Mithraism and possibly Manichaeism also made their way into Georgia. Silver bowls depicting a horse standing ready for sacrifice before a Mithraic fire-altar, dating mostly from the second century CE, confirm that Mithraic rites were well known as they were in neighboring Armenia where the brother of the last Orontid King was Mithra(s), the chief priest of the Temple of the Sun and Moon at Armavir (*ibid.*)¹⁰ A native cult of the Sun did exist in both Colchis and Iberia, and their rulers had long prided themselves on being sons of the Sun. But Iranian Mithraism, introduced by the Achaemenids, if not by the Medes, must have reinforced pre-existing beliefs, long before the Roman cult of Mithras was born in the borderlands between Rome and Iran. Rayfield recognizes the signs of a Mithraic cult in the imagery of the dream of the first king of Georgia (sun, deer and dew), without making clear which Mithraism is meant (Rayfield, pp. 60f.) Nonetheless, some Georgian scholars (and even Braund) link the Mithraic imagery to the (Roman) cult of Mithras, despite the presence of Middle Iranian inscriptions on some bowls (Tsetskhladze, p. 477).¹¹ At a time when murky attributions were made all too lightly and even the name of Armazi was believed to be derived from the Hittite moon-god Arma (Gvelesiani, 2008, p. 175), the connection to Iranian Mithraism was evidently misunderstood.¹²

Georgian scholars are treading on hitherto unexplored ground to explain solar symbols as they should have been doing, but were not. Gvelesiani has unveiled the long overlooked significance of the Sun and its association with sacral kingship, in the name of the first Georgian king, Pharnavaz (P'arnavaz), the second of the two crucial names that went into the making of Georgia. Gvelesiani, who had earlier broached the subject (Gvelesiani, 2004), rightly links Armazi with the concept of *xvar(ə)nah* or *farr*, the Divine Light of Glory, by the bestowal of which Ahura Mazda legitimates the rule of monarchs who

¹⁰ The name appears as Meherr in the later Armenian national epic, thus indicating its link with the Iranian Mehr.

¹¹ Salia makes the absurd claim that the cult of Mithras was borrowed by the Achaemenids from Western Asia and spread to Georgian lands (Salia, p. 93).

¹² It is to be hoped that Albert de Jong's fourth volume of the late Mary Boyce's *magnum opus* on Zoroastrianism, a large chapter of which will be devoted to Georgia and Armenia, will shed more light on the subtle interplay of Iranian religious beliefs with local ones and their later blending with Greek or Romanized cults.

can also be divested when deemed to be unfit. The concepts of *xvarnah* and sacral kingship had an enduring career in Iran with many offshoots beyond. It was only natural that the impact should have been strongest in those lands that were directly affected by Persian culture and its concept of divinely sanctioned kingship. Avestan concepts such as the *xvarnah*, and the supremacy of Ahura Mazda, arguably two of the three primordial aspects of Zoroastrianism (together with dualism), were introduced into Georgia by the Achaemenids (or even the Medes), as attested by the existence of fire temples, and were rooted enough to justify their association with King Pharnavaz through the god Armazi. Basing her argument on dreams attributed to both Cyrus the Great and Pharnavaz, which in both cases feature a divine ray of light emanating from the Sun, Gvelesiani interprets the otherwise inexplicable words attributed to Pharnavaz—“For in Persian they called Pharnavaz Armaz”—as signifying the *xvarnah*, and thus avoids elusive attempts at etymological justification for the identification of Pharnavaz with Armaz (Gvelesiani, 2008, pp. 175-81).

Pharnavaz is reported to have reigned at about the time of Alexander, in the third century BCE. Much myth has crept into his story, as known from the extant version of his life in the first Georgian Chronicle, *Kartlis tskhovreba* ‘Life of Georgia,’ the core of which dates to the fifth or sixth century CE, by which time the country was largely Christianized. Brosset, basing his assertion on Georgian and Armenian sources, affirms that Pharnavaz was the son of a Persian woman (from Isfahan) and of the brother of Samara, the governor of Mtskheta at the time of Alexander. Armenian sources make his mother Persian and a sister of the same Samara “which would destroy the Georgian origin of the character,” as Brosset concludes with a hint of regret. Orphaned as a child, Pharnavaz imposed himself as king of Georgia with the help of Antiochus, i.e. Soter (Brosset, pp. xxvii f.) Nonetheless, both his name and the incestuous union of the parents imply that he was a follower of Zoroastrianism. The name and the culture of Pharnavaz, as well as the account of the liberation of Georgia from the Macedonians speak in favor of a Parthian Arsacid origin, even though his alleged descent from Kartlos who gave to the country its Georgian name, Sakartvelo, suggests intermarriage with native nobility, perhaps over an extended period (Lang, 1983, p. 514). Brosset, who mentions an Arsacid link at a much later date, does not refute the Georgian perception of an uninterrupted monarchy through three dynasties in over two thousand years, thanks to intermarriage between various branches of the Georgian royal line, but always going back to the first king, Pharnavaz (Brosset, p. xlvi). One might argue that the glue that ensured continuity may have been the lingering idea of the *xvarnah* more than lineage and blood. A divine legitimation was

essential after Pharnavaz allegedly liberated Georgia from the Macedonian yoke and set out to rebuild that which was “destroyed by the enemy” and establish dynastic rule by adopting administrative structures “like the Persian Empire” (Gvelesiani, 2008, pp. 175f.).

Since Alexander never reached Georgia, the legends associating Pharnavaz with his name are spurious, though stubborn and persistent. Alexander’s name commonly figures in events that postdate his short life and Georgian legends have not remained immune to the fascination of association with his myth.¹³ Nor does Seleucid rule seem to have extended into Georgia (Lang, 1983, p. 514). The legend of Pharnavaz would make no sense if it did, unless the dates are wrong. The existence of Greek coins and Greek inscriptions or epitaphs side by side with Aramaic ones (in so-called Armazi script) neither confirm nor negate Seleucid rule. Bilingual inscriptions prove very little, since they were just as common in early Parthian Iran, where the Parthian-speaking élite was well acquainted with Greek.¹⁴ Pharnavaz was obviously more at home with the Persian legacy both in religion and in administration than with anything Greek. In reorganizing the army, he appointed a commander-in-chief from the royal line as *spaspet*, not as *strategos* (ibid). That implies the use of Parthian rather than Greek as the common tongue, together with Georgian which was unwritten as yet.

At any rate, the system adopted paid off. Under Pharnavaz and his successors Iberia came into its own as a distinct entity and thrived, so well that it is said to have been a land of “eye-catching” prosperity in the first century CE when it began to attract the attention of Rome (Braund, p. 205). The “spasmodic” Roman incursions which resulted in “varying degrees of success or disastrous failure” (Lang, 1983, p. 516) did little to erase the strongly Iranized

¹³ Georgian tradition, which, as in many places, may be derived from the popular Alexander Romance of pseudo-Callisthenes or one of its later redactions, holds that Alexander invaded Iberia and left a Macedonian by the name of Azo to rule (Braund, p. 141). Braund shows how the myth of Alexander inspired the Romans to venture into South Caucasus, not least because Alexander was believed to have reached the ‘Caspian Gates’ (idem, p. 225).

¹⁴ Braund does not seem to appreciate the impact of ‘Imperial Aramaic’ on the formation of later variations of the scribal script devised in Achaemenid Iran for addressing provinces in their own language with a single uniform script. It survived well beyond the empire and evolved into local variations for Parthian, Middle Persian, Sogdian, Gandhari and even Sanskrit and Brahmi. In describing Georgia’s ‘Armazic’ script, he makes a confused and erroneous reference to “a lost script from which Parsi and Pahlavi also originated” (Braund, p. 213). Rayfield, in referring to the Georgian legendary tradition of a script invented in 200 BCE, seems to have an intimation of the mechanism by which Imperial Aramaic functioned, when he says that the prevalent Aramaic script of pre-Christian Georgia may have been read in Georgian translation (Rayfield, p. 20). See also Rosenthal.

culture of eastern Georgia.¹⁵ That the legacy of Pharnavaz continued is evident from the preponderance of Iranian theophoric names indicating some form of commitment to the Zoroastrian faith. That those who bore such names may have nevertheless not gone unopposed, is suggested by the fact that a Pharnajam was killed for having replaced idolatry with the religion of the Magians (Brosset, p. xxix). But the continuing prevalence of Iranian theophoric names, such as Pharasman (Pharasmanesh), Mihrdat/d (Mithridates), Adarnase (Adur Narseh), Baaman (Bahman), Trdat (Tirdād), Mirian (Mehran), and others tend to indicate that any such opposition was probably sporadic or isolated (Chkeidze, p. 487).¹⁶

Equally popular in Georgia were Iranian epic names which, though said to have made their entrance later with the *Shahnama*, may in some cases have made an earlier appearance through other channels. Gvelesiani cites Triton (later Pridon; cf. Av. Thraetona, Pers. Faridun) as an example of an epic name transmitted by Scythian or Alano-Ossetian tribes to the north. The same may be true of the names of two well-known Georgian princes, Asparukh and Hamazasp (Gvelesiani, 2008, p. 181 fn.).¹⁷ Purely historical names, such as Peroz, Khosro, Arshak (Ashk/Arsaces), Papak or Artashir (Ardashir), together with epic names such as Spandiat (Esfandiar/Spendadates) and Kekapos (Kaykavus), may have also gained in popularity through tales spread by the *mgosani* (*gōsāns*), the roving bards who sang the exploits of warriors, heroes and kings (Lang, 1983, p. 536; Gavkharia, 1995, p. 441). Even in later Christian Georgia, Iranian names stand out, though their origin may have been forgotten by then; for example, Vakhtang, which Gvelesiani, quoting the historian Juansher (who gives Varan-Khuasro-Tang), traces back to the Avestan god, Verethraghna (Gvelesiani, 2008, p. 175).

There is irony in the fact that the momentous change from 'idolatry' to Christianity should have occurred under the aegis of a prince with the distinctly Iranian name Mirian (Mehran), though the sacred link was provided by the revered figure of Saint Nino and her miraculous healing powers which she attributed to her faith in Christ. The story goes that the miracles triggered the conversion of Mirian and his consort, so that "they and all the people were [...] converted from Zoroastrianism and paganism to Christianity" (Lang, 1962, p. 6). "The people" included Jewish Georgians who had brought

¹⁵ Braund (chapters 5-9) gives a detailed account of Roman and Byzantine involvement in the Caucasus, from the Mithridatic Wars to the war in Lazica.

¹⁶ See Chkeidze for an extensive, though not exhaustive, list of Iranian names.

¹⁷ One must therefore insist on 'Iranian' rather than Persian, since some names are derived from Parthian, Scythian or Alano-Ossetic.

the loincloth of Jesus from Palestine and revealed its hiding-place to King Mirian when he was ripe to convert. The origin of the story is attributed to Rufinus, a church-chronicler in Jerusalem, as heard from a Georgian royal, Bakur. Braund gives the full version of the miracles wrought and their effects to show how the story integrates Greek and Persian symbolism, the latter including the royal hunt, the bull, and especially the stag which figures prominently in graves and grave goods in Georgia and is associated with the sun, not to mention the theme of darkness versus light in the episode that convinces Mirian (Braund, pp. 248-56).¹⁸

Without the conversion of the royal couple, Christianity would not have been able to impose itself in Georgia institutionally. That makes the issue of Mirian's identity both important and controversial. Was he really the son of a King Ardashir, usually equated with Ardashir Bābakān? Here's what Brosset has to say about it: Georgians, who sometimes made incursions into the territories of Iran in periods of weak rule, apparently did so for the last time during the transition from the Arsacids to the Sasanian dynasty. As soon as the founder of the latter, Ardashir I, had consolidated his rule, the kings of Georgia asked him to send them one of his sons, so the seven-year-old Mirian, born of a concubine, was dispatched to Georgia with the recommendation to persist in the *culte du feu* but to allow the Georgians the freedom to adore their own idols, including their god Armazi.¹⁹ Mirian went on to found the Khosroid dynasty of eastern Georgia, and then, in his fortieth year, claimed the throne of Persia, but was rejected because of his mother's lowly birth (Brosset, xxxiii-xxxviii). For a long time it was believed, on the basis of his name, that Mirian may have been a Mehrānid, i.e. from the same illustrious Parthian clan as the rebel Bahrām Chubin (Lang, 1983, p. 520).

The tale of a rebel choosing a rival faith to spite his opponents would be plausible, were it not for the fact that Georgian versions give two different genealogies, one making Mirian the son of Rev the Righteous, and the other the son of a King Ardashir. Contrary to Brosset, most Georgian scholars give preference to Rev, while those who embrace the other version insist on the fact that Mirian was a bastard son of Ardashir. They need not be concerned: a recent revision gives satisfaction to both camps with a new interesting twist.²⁰

¹⁸ Braund only mentions the Georgian association of the stag with the sun, going back to Pharnavaz. He fails to attribute it to its well-known Scytho-Sarmatian origins as known from many Eurasian burial mounds (kurgans). The Georgian name Sagdokht refers not to the dog, but to the stag in the Iranian language of the Scytho-Sarmatians.

¹⁹ The unfortunate misperception of Zoroastrianism as fire worship or fire-cult continues among Georgians as well as European scholars. It seems to have originated in the martyrologies and hagiographies of early Christian times.

²⁰ Before the recent revision, a Russian-based Georgian scholar confided in private conversation

Manana Sanadze has convincingly demonstrated that both genealogies are actually correct—that Mirian was the son of Rev, that Rev was the son of Ardashir, that the Mirian of the one genealogy and the Vacha of the other are one and the same (Vacha being equated with the Persian *bachcha* ‘child’ and thus with seven-year-old Mirian), that Ardashir was in fact Hormozd-Ardashir, the son of Shāpur I and King of Armenia, and that his son Rev was sent to Georgia to become king (Sanadze, pp. 91f.). This still means that the canonized St. Mirian, who succeeded his father as King of Kartli, was not only a Sasanian prince, but a direct descendant of the high priests of Persis.²¹ So in Georgia, as in Armenia, the descendant of a Magian was responsible for establishing the new Christian faith.

This revised genealogy does not affect the sequel, namely that Mirian applied to the Byzantine emperor, Constantine, and requested him to send a bishop and some priests, and at a later date, asked for a piece of the newly-discovered true cross (Brosset, xxxiii-xxxviii). The culture of Mirian was clearly Iranian, as attested by the tenth-century work about the conversion of Georgia, which makes him declare, after mighty pagan idols in bronze, silver and gold are destroyed by a hailstorm, in mutilated Persian, ingeniously corrected by Georgian scholars: *rāst mīgūī khojasta bānū wa rasul-e pesar-e īzād* (Gvakharia, 2001, pp. 481f.).²² Could *khojasta bānu* have been applied to the goddess Anāhitā and later diverted to the Virgin Mary in yet another transfer of older rites to which reluctant converts clung? At any rate, if Mirian’s words, which must have been originally uttered in Parthian or Middle Persian, were transmitted in the very new New Persian that evolved in Iran, that language must have been sufficiently widespread among Georgians in the period following the Arab occupation to justify its use for a text meant to be comprehensible to all Christian Georgians (Rayfield, p. 58). This is confirmed by Gvakharia who says that “already from the 10th century, the Georgians were acquainted with New Persian (Paris-Dari), even though it “intensified and strengthened in the 12th century” (Gvakharia, 1995, p. 242).

Zoroastrianism and Mithraism had a long tradition as did local paganism, and the conversion of Georgia did not happen without a struggle, as attested by the many martyrologies and hagiographies that constitute the bulk of the

to this author, at the ASPS conference in April 2004, that her peers were reluctant to admit that Mirian was a Sasanian prince.

²¹ Kartli will be used hereafter instead of the ‘Iberia’ coined fancifully by the Greeks. Eastern Georgia essentially consisted of Kartli and Kakheti, but the core was Kartli where both Mtskheta and Tbilisi were located and which was the seat of the throne of Eastern Georgia.

²² This long-ignored text, in its surviving version, is in Georgian letters. The mutilated transcription of the original Persian was finally deciphered by using a Georgian translation. For the corrupted version, see Gvakharia.

earliest known Georgian literature (Rayfield, pp. 40-62). The tug-of-war between Zoroastrianism and Christianity did not end there, because Sasanian rule did not end. If anything, it gained ground and spread to Lazica—the former Colchis where the Georgian Lazi had established hegemony slowly but surely and made the country prosperous through trade with Rome after a prolonged period of decline (Braund, p. 280). Lazica had retained enough Persianness to have a ‘significant’ pro-Iranian and pro-Zoroastrian faction at court, where there was “more than a whiff of Persia” (idem, pp. 272, 308). One would hardly know it by reading Procopius, the Byzantine historian who wrote his own version of events and attributed the worst of intentions to Khosrō I, not validated by historical facts (idem, pp. 297f.). The pro-Iranian faction was in turn opposed by a Christian one, with an avowed distaste for Zoroastrian customs. It was the abominable behavior of Byzantine commanders that eventually offset their revulsion and tipped the scales in favor of Sasanian rule.

The first period of Persian presence in Lazica lasted from 470 CE, when the Sasanians resolved the conflict with the Kidarite Huns on their eastern border, until 522. The second one, under Khosrō I Anushiravan, was relatively brief. By that time religion had become a political tool used effectively by both Byzantium and Sasanian Iran, with back-and-forth conversion of rulers to match and a great deal of suspicion on the part of each of the two powers regarding the intentions of the other and their shifty vassals. And in the background were Sarmatians and Huns waiting to raid or to be recruited by one of the two camps, as well as Abasgians and Suanians who welcomed Sasanian attempts to weaken Lazica by backing the autonomy of such small vassal states (Braund, pp. 268-314). Pro-Persian loyalties feeding upon disenchantment with Byzantium literally opened the way for Khosrō I, when the Lazi themselves guided his forces over the Surami ridge that made passage from eastern to western Georgia a very arduous task (idem, pp. 295f.). The problem of distance and therefore of supplies was a major one for the Sasanians, only partly alleviated by their building the first ever proper road over the ridge. Ironically, the Sasanians thus facilitated the later unification of Georgia under one rule (idem, p. 302).

The other factor that played against the Sasanians was active proselytizing by Byzantium among the discontent Lazi rulers who tended to switch from one camp to another as the situation required. To play off the one power against the other became a way of life for tributary rulers who were, as a result, regularly suspected of treason by one side or the other. So, once again, we witness the sort of bizarre situations that dot Georgian history: a Lazi ruler escaping the Sasanians only to be murdered by a Byzantine commander (Braund,

p. 308); or the odd spectacle of a Christian king with the Persian name Gobazes (Qobāḏ or Kavād), turning up at the court of Byzantium in full Persian costume, complete with bejewelled boots, and an escort of Persian-style royal bodyguards (idem, p. 272). Sasanian rule was not likely to last on the shores of the Black Sea. It ended without leaving the Lazi any happier with Byzantine rule.

In Kartli, the situation was rather different. Soon after the Sasanians seized power and set out to retrieve the former territories of the Achaemenids, Shāpur I claimed Wirzhan—the term used for Kartli in his inscription at Ka'ba-ye Zardosht. As of then, a Georgian royal was appointed to rule not as vassal, but as viceroy or *pitiash* (*bidakhsh*)—corresponding to the later position of *vāli*. The title became hereditary in the lower house of Kartli and gave another boost to Persian culture without ending religious competition between the new and the old (Hitchins, pp. 464f.). For a time Zoroastrianism and Christianity lived in peaceful symbiosis, though at times uncomfortably, as recorded in the first work of Georgian literature, *The Passion of Queen Saint Shushanik*, about the wife of a *pitiash*, who converted to Christianity and was tormented to death by a husband bound steadfastly to Zoroastrian beliefs (Rayfield, pp. 42-44). Shāpur's high priest, Kartir, was to blame. He devoted his energy to the propagation of orthodoxy in *Ērān ud Anērān*, and the suppression of heresies, including Christianity and Manichaeism, both of which he abhorred. This resulted in devastating wars, cruel deportations and the antagonism of the very people whom it was intended to maintain within the folds of orthodoxy. Such a policy was bound to backfire. The Sasanian emperors, left to their own devices, were more pragmatic, as they tried to redirect Georgian, Armenian and Albanian (Arrani) Christianity towards a unified Monophysite Church that would bring them closer to the Christian church of Iran (Hitchins, p. 465). It worked better for Armenia than for Georgia.

Meanwhile, Byzantium used its own ploys to bring together religion and expansion in one and the same diplomatic package, mainly in Lazica but with ripples that crossed into Kartli to become waves of unrest (Braund, pp. 280, 286f.). The 'semi-legendary' King Vakhtang I Gorgasa(r)—thus known because of his wolf-shaped helmet—reacted and led a revolt that championed the unification of the two parts of Georgia at the height of Sasanian hegemony in Lazica.²³ His death in battle earned him a hagiography

²³ The correct name in Middle Persian is Gurg(a)sar (Rayfield, p. 6). Gorgasan 'wolf-lion' is a later Turkicized form. That this king should be considered 'semi-legendary' is probably due to the fact that he is only mentioned in the Georgian chronicles which, like Persian historiography, confuse facts with myth.

written by the eleventh-century Georgian historian Juansher (Jovānshir; idem, pp. 282f.). Yet, even though Gorgasa(r) had used the church to combat the hated 'Persian Christianity' and assert independence, he himself was married to a Persian princess. Indeed, the early part of his career had been devoted to guarding the northern passes for the Sasanian Empire and to Sasanian campaigns against Byzantium and Sind (possibly against the Hephthalites in 474-76). His and his successors' failure to unite Georgia resulted not so much from the protracted struggles between two empires as from frequent rivalry between the ruling house of Georgia and the landed nobility (Lang, 1962, pp. 27f.).

Another revolt in 523 CE against the imposition of Zoroastrianism by Yazdegerd II (439-57), probably with backing from the prime minister Mehr-Narseh, was led by Gourgenes (Gurgen) who fled to Byzantium with a plea for assistance in that same year (Braund, pp. 282f.). The revolts he fomented from afar led Hormozd IV, generally considered a friend of the Christians of the empire, to depose the Georgian monarchy and appoint a *marzbān* instead of the *pitiaxsh*, thereby making Kartli a full province of the Sasanian Empire, with the Zoroastrian flame restored on locally-minted coins instead of the Christian cross (Lang, 1983, p. 512). This was done with the complicity of the scions of Georgian nobility who hoped to manage their affairs without any interference (idem, p. 530). It did not work out that way. Finally Emperor Maurice and Khosrō Parviz II agreed, in 591, to end their warfare and divide up Kartli. Tbilisi, the new capital founded by Gorgasa(r), retained Persian rule, while Mtskheta, the old capital associated with Christianization, fell to Byzantium. This corresponded to the reality of Georgian society which always had a strong pro-Persian element in opposition to a pro-Roman one. A brief attempt in the early seventh century to reunite all of Kartli with Iranian help was foiled by Emperor Heraclius shortly before the Arab invasion which did not spare Christian Georgia any more than it did Zoroastrian Iran (Hitchins, p. 465). As in Iran, it came to an end in about two centuries, but, contrary to Iran, it left little imprint except on language (Rayfield, p. 46).

The cyclical pattern is interesting to note. Much the same scenario would be re-enacted from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, with slight variations of sequence and names, but including major *leitmotifs* such as the divided loyalties of the Georgians themselves, the participation of a Georgian monarch in Iranian campaigns in Anatolia and India, and punitive expeditions sent by Iranian rulers to Georgia in retaliation for the refusal to submit, followed by reconciliation until another power stepped in.

The Christianization of Georgia may account for the fact that the long period of Sasanian rule has far less to show than the Achaemenid period in terms of the artistic influence from Iran. The main finds consist of hoards of

silver *derhams* minted in Iran, which, as in the Parthian period, coexist with a few Roman coins. In addition, there are some silver dishes or bowls sent as gifts to loyal nobles who invariably bore Sasanian names such as Papak or Bahram. There are oddities among the silver dishes. One bears the portrait of Bahrām II with his wife and son on a silver kylix of Greek form.²⁴ Another is a Sasanian silver bowl with a Parthian inscription on the reverse, suggesting perhaps that Parthian speech persisted in Georgia in defiance of both the Sasanians and the Christian Church (Braund, pp. 237, 242f.). It is very little, by comparison with the number of Sasanian silver dishes found in the Black Sea region and the Urals, access to both of which is likely to have been through Georgia. One can only surmise that plundering has taken a heavy toll or that future excavations have yet more to reveal, unless Sasanian art simply had a lesser appeal. However, the fact that Sasanian motifs found their way into Georgia's Christian art, in syncretism with Byzantine iconography, suggests that a significant quantity of silver bowls must be lost to us. Motifs such as lions and other beasts carved on friezes and stone capitals of Christian churches in Georgia and Armenia are clearly of distinct Iranian descent. Even Church architecture, with its cruciform domed plan, is somewhat reminiscent of the Sasanian *chahār-tāq*, though a direct transmission seems a little far-fetched (Lang, 1983, p. 532). In every other respect, the long period of Sasanian hegemony reinforced the legacy of Pharnavaz.

Christianity imposed a different world-view, but did little to change rooted institutions that were not in its way. The Georgian annals and the early lives of the saints "all point to a profound influence exerted by Arsacid and Sasanian Persia on the evolution of Georgian institutions in pre-Mohammedan times" (Lang, 1957, p. 37).²⁵ The Persian institutions established by Pharnavaz may have done no more than restore the earlier Achaemenid precedent. That included not only administration, but landholding patterns and feudal structure. Indeed, what the first Western observers of Georgia viewed as astonishingly similar to medieval European feudal structures was a combination of Sasanian and Byzantine institutions, with some allowance for local traditions, according to Lang (1962, p. 27). His enumeration of their common features demonstrates how the Georgian feudal structure could have been confused with medieval European feudalism (Lang, 1983, p. 528).

The institutional framework derived from Iran also included the equally medieval principal punishments meted out by law to Georgian wrongdoers,

²⁴ This is the earliest depiction of a Sasanian royal portrait on a silver dish.

²⁵ Lang fails to mention that in Mazdean eschatology, the molten metal ordeal is meted out only to sinners in hell.

such as blood money (*wergild*), the ordeal of single combat and that of boiling water or molten metal employed to establish innocence. The first Russian scholars of Georgia had presumed such customs to have been introduced from the Frankish kingdoms of the Crusaders in the Levant (Lang, 1957, pp. 34-43).²⁶ Lang recognized that they dated back to “when Georgia was under the sway of Mazdeist Persia” (*ibid*) and traces the ordeal of boiling water, as invoked in the judgement of Mithra, to the Achaemenid era, but attributes the ordeals of fire and molten metal to the Sasanians. Such punishments continued under the aegis of the Christian Church, as witnessed by Chardin in seventeenth-century Georgia, where single combat and the associated ritual was considered to be a reliable test, no less than “going to the tribunal of God” (Chardin, I, p. 289; cf. Lang, 1957, p. 35). Some of them survived into the early eighteenth century, when they were incorporated by King Vakhtang VI into the mix of precedents that went into his reformed code of law and remained in force until Russian rule put an end to Georgian archaisms (*idem*, p. 37). No matter how harsh such punishments and worse may have seemed to foreign observers, Lang does not give the moral high ground to Europeans when comparing them with what went on in Georgia:

[...] the system compares favourably with the savage and senseless penalties inflicted at that time in countries reputed socially and politically more advanced [...]. Georgians [...] at least remained free of the shadows of the dungeon and the galleys, the rack, the wheel and the knout, which were such grim features of life in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Lang, 1957, p. 48).

Nor did Christianity erase other vestiges of Iranian religions and popular lore (Lang, 1983, pp. 535f.) The words for ‘sin’ and ‘hell,’ to name just two, are Georgian versions of their Iranian counterparts; interestingly, *eshmak-i*, from the name of the Zoroastrian demon of rage, Aeshma (Pers. *xashm*) denotes the ‘devil’ in Georgian (Chkeidze, p. 488). Inevitably biblical names came to the fore, but the most popular Iranian epic names survived (Rostom, Zal, Luarsab, Zurab, Ketevan, Taimuraz, etc.) and did so long after most of them had fallen into disuse in Iran except in an epic context, until the Safavids decided to bestow ancient Iranian names on Georgians of high rank in their administration, for the latter—rather than the Qizilbash *amirs* or the Shi‘ite clergy—were deemed to represent the glories of ancient Persia which the dynasty wished to resurrect (Babaie et al., p. 37).²⁷

²⁶ Lang also mentions non-codified punishments that were commonly practised, such as burning alive, mutilation, amputation and blinding.

²⁷ Chkeidze gives an extensive list of such names, and points out that Eskandar Beg did not recognize Luarsab as the Georgian equivalent of Ferdowsi’s Lohrasp (Chkeidze, pp. 487f.) In the

Influence on Georgian Literature

Georgian nationalism, promoted by a new dynasty, the Bagratids (Bagrationi), came back with a vengeance after the end of Arab rule in the ninth century. Yet these promoters of a Georgian Christian state had Iranian links too, other than their claim to descent from Pharnavaz. The name of the eponymous founder of the dynasty, Bagrat, is Iranian (Old Pers. *Baga.dāta* 'God-given'), and his ancestry went back to Achaemenid Iran. Little is known about Bagrat himself, but his origin can be traced to the Armenian Bagrationi who were the coronants of the Armenian Arsacids. The latter were, in turn, an offshoot of the Orontid satraps of the Achaemenids in eastern Anatolia, and later became kings of Armenia with an uninterrupted genealogy going back to 555 CE. They too claimed descent from a solar deity, and judging by the monumental statues of another offshoot of the Orontids, the rulers of Commagene in Anatolia, this deity combined features of Mithra and his Greek counterpart Helios (Toumanoff, pp. 419-22).²⁸

When the Christian Church reattributed the origin of the Bagrationi to the biblical David, it effaced the memory of their historical roots. Such reattributions were not specific to Georgia alone; invented genealogies and myths of legitimation are a means of imposing a new rule and usually supersede facts by spreading a new truth. The usual version of Bagratid accession to power in Georgia has it that, after Smbat VII of Armenia was killed in battle against the caliphal forces, his brother, Vesak, moved to Georgia some time after 775. Their descendant, Ashot I, founded the dynasty which, from being tributary to Byzantium, evolved into the Golden Age of the three illustrious successors of Ashot I, namely Bagrat III (r. 1008-14) who unified all of Georgia, David the Builder (1089-1125) and especially the fabled Queen Tamar (1184-1213), who ruled by 'divine right' over a pan-Caucasian empire that stretched to Ganja, Shirvan (Sharvan), Erzerum and Trebizond in one direction, and Tabriz and Qazvin in the other (Lang, 1957, p. 8; Gabashvili, p. 35). Branches of the same dynasty continued to rule over different provinces of eastern and western Georgia as semi-autonomous potentates until their deposition in 1801.

With Iranian princes or princes tributary to Iran, regardless of the creed they embraced, had come not only names, institutions and customs, but also the related vocabulary. But after two centuries of Arab rule, followed by the

early Qajar period, however, Donboli (pp. 90f.) clearly recognized Teimuraz as the Georgian version of Tahmurath.

²⁸ The dynasty of Commagene claimed dual descent from the Iranian Orontids as well as the Seleucids. See Weiskopf. For illustrations of the monumental statues of the dual-identity deities of Commagene, see Ghirshman, pp. 57-67.

Christian nationalism that succeeded hard on its heels, eventually leading to a brilliant Golden Age, one would expect the Iranian components in Georgian culture to have weakened, if not become almost extinct. Yet, in spite of the linguistic changes brought about by Church literature and the creation of a Georgian script in the fourth century CE (Rayfield, pp. 19-25), the number of surviving Iranian/Persian loanwords, though not on a par with Armenian, remains substantial to this very day. Georgians had been borrowing from Iranian languages since the first millennium BCE, from Median, Old Persian, Parthian, Middle Persian, some of it through Armenian and, to a lesser extent, through Scythian or Ossetic, but the bulk of it by means of direct contact. In addition to titles, terms designating social rank or lineage, terms relating to military and commercial affairs and communications, Iranian loanwords cover almost every aspect of daily life, from animals (including mythical beasts) to plants and produce, to items of clothing and furnishings, and more. New Persian added more over an extended period, from the end of Arab rule to the end of Safavid rule. As with names, however, some Georgian expressions have lost the memory of their origin, for example, *ga-biabru-eba* ‘humiliated, disgraced’ (from Pers. *bi-āberu*), which gives expression to a concept shared with Iran and one that a European would be at pains to understand (Chkeidze, pp. 486-90).

This is why, during the apogee of Georgian national consciousness, deeply intertwined with its Christianity, Persian literature, then at the height of its poetic production, made major inroads into Georgian literature, providing the latter with its greatest classics. Gvakharia cites Marr, the founder of scholarly research into Persian-Georgian interrelations, as to why Persian literature had such a great appeal, namely because “Georgian feudal life, with its war prowess and chivalrous dealing, proved highly receptive to Iranian legends or romantic and heroic content” (Gvakharia, 1995, p. 241). Such was the attraction of fine Persian poetry that it left a long-lasting legacy for many centuries to come. It did not flourish on barren land, however; there was a precedent for the explosion of talent that took Persian literature as its model. The tradition of epic writing in Georgia goes back to the Sasanian chronicles, the *Khwadāynāmag*, or related works, as initially suggested by Brosset (Brosset, p. xix) and now reconfirmed. The revealing passage in the *Kartlis tskhovreba* that indicates that “the author was familiar with a Persian literary work similar to the *Xwadaynamag*” (Gvakharia, 2001, p. 481) was detected by diligent Georgian scholars engaged in the study of the common origin of Georgian and Persian epic traditions:

And then Iranians from the side of the sunrise [i.e. Khorasan], the kin of Nebrot, became strong. And there appeared among them one man, a hero named Afridon,

who put Bevarasp, the master of snakes, in chains and tied him to a mountain inaccessible to human beings. All this is written in the *History of the Persians* (ibid).²⁹

The last title can only refer to the *Khwadāy-nāmāg*. Since the literary tradition of pre-Christian Georgia was oral, it is difficult to establish the exact date of the penetration of Middle Persian literature into Georgia. It is likely that the *mogsani* or bards had a role in transmitting Iranian legends and chivalrous tales long before Sasanian rule, and blending it with local folktales that attracted commoners as well. During the period of Sasanian hegemony, the periodically updated *Khwadāy-nāmāg*s as well as Avestan texts and possibly other seminal works would have been made available to Georgians for their edification, though with serious competition from Christian literature as of the fifth century. Initially, most of the Georgian translations of church literature were made in other Christian centers, including Jerusalem (which has the oldest known text in Georgian), the Sinai monastery of St. Catherine's and Mount Athos in Greece (Rayfield, pp. 20f.). The huge amount of work that had gone into ecclesiastical translations eventually led to the flowering of a Georgian literary tradition, with the composition of creative works in the form of hymns, homilies and hagiographies (idem, pp. 27-55).

Among the most famous lyrical poets was Ioane Zosime, who wrote in Palestine in the tenth century and compiled his hymns "for learned persons" in an anthology called *iadgari* that also contains his testament or *anderdzi*. The first word is Persian for 'souvenir/memoir,' while the second suggests that Sasanian *andarz* or wisdom literature was known and read in Georgia. Thus the imprint of Middle Persian and New Persian are detectable in the unlikely place, namely in some features of the compositions of the Georgian Christian diaspora abroad, while other shared aspects, such as the virtuoso device of acrostics, in which, for example, the first letter of each verse spells out a key word or the revered name of a saint (Rayfield, pp. 32-38), may be due to a parallel development or to a fashionable mannerism that knew no borders but would still allow poets to relate to each other across the thick line of faith.

Prose literature, consisting of hagiographies, martyrologies and religious polemic that targeted not only 'fire-worshippers' and Jews but, as of the bitter schism with the Armenian Church in 607, even more vehemently attacked Armenian Monophysites, shows the persistence of Georgian connections with Iran in the second phase of indigenous creations as opposed to mere translations.

²⁹ Bevarasp (cf. Av. *baevar-*, MPers. *bēwar* 'ten thousand', which gave rise to Georgian *bevri* 'many') is the epithet of Avestan Azhi Dahāka ('master of snakes' in the Georgian version). See Gvakharia, p. 481.

Martyrology, by nature, exaggerates the plight of victims to throw as dark a light as possible on the oppressors, as the many imitations of Maxim Gorki's *Mother* would do for Communism many centuries hence. The expression 'fire-worship' used to denounce Zoroastrianism and its practitioners in a land that had long practised that faith is an example of denigration, unfortunately picked up by later historians and commentators without scepticism. The *Passion of Saint Shushanik*, referred to above, is the earliest example, with imagery meant to shock the reader, as when her husband, the *pitiaxsh* "ripped off Shushanik's veil [...] cursed her seed and race and blamed her for ruining his family" (Rayfield, pp. 42ff.), then ordered her to be bound with shackles around her feet. It had its counterpart in the *Passion of Eustati*, a Zoroastrian Persian who converted in Mtskheta after marrying a Christian woman, and with eight other Persian apostates was sent to the *marzbān* in Tbilisi "for refusing to celebrate a Zoroastrian festival" (ibid).³⁰ "Traditional Byzantine accusations," i.e. political propaganda, against what is called 'fire worship' in derogatory terms, continue with the *Passion of Abibos*, who extinguishes the sacred flame in front of the Persian *marzbān*. This may indicate that Christianity was tolerated, barring flagrant sacrilegious acts (idem, p. 51).

When the focus shifted to Islam and to the Turkic slave generals of the Caliph, the Persians receded into the background, though one still comes across a Georgian appointee of the Caliph by the name of Nerse in another *Passion* that features "a miraculous flaming star" above the river into which the beheaded body of a convert was thrown (Rayfield, pp. 46f.). Anti-Persian sentiment is best demonstrated in Juansher's *Life of King Vakhtang Gorgasali*, one of several books in the *Kartlis tshkhovreba*. Juansher's authenticity has been doubted, in part because of its inclusion in a collection rich in legends and myths. The first Georgian chronicle, *The Conversion of Georgia*, was built around the tale of the 'legendary' Saint Nino and the conversion of Mirian, with a prelude that introduces the 28 pagan kings who are said to have ruled up to the time of Constantine the Great. The book is the first of several that would go into the making of *The Life of Georgia (Kartlis Tshkhovreba)* as written in the eleventh-century by the multi-lingual Leonti Mroveli. In a work that is "secular, albeit, fanciful" (idem, p. 60) he follows the pattern, well known to Persian historiography, of mixing semi-historical facts with myth and fables, beginning with the Creation and continuing with "ancestors and kinfolk, the making of Kartli, the history of the pagan kingdom" (ibid) and finally the conversions of Nino and Mirian, and continuing beyond, "until Vakhtang

³⁰ It is interesting to note that Shushanik wore a veil and refused to share meals with men.

Gorgaslan drove the Persians out and installed a dyophysite catholicos" (ibid).³¹ More than adhering to a scriptural model, it seems to have drawn upon the *Khwadāynāmag* and the *Shahnama*. Three parts are devoted to the life of Gorgasa(r), including his fighting for the Persians in Sind, allegedly written by Juansher Juansheriani, while the last two parts are about the Bagratid king David the Builder, who may have commissioned the work, hence the emphasis on the Creation and on Pharnavaz. It may have been David's desire to emulate Persian semi-legendary historiography as a means of establishing his legitimacy as the head of a nationalistic state that could then afford an outreach to other cultures (Rayfield, pp. 59-62; Vivian, p. 7). Later, the chronicles would gradually come to reflect historical facts more than myths, but the basic formula provided by the *Khwadāynāmag* and the *Kartlis Tskhovreba* continued to provide the framework up to the last ones written about the Mongol invasions (Rayfield, pp. 91-94) That these, too, would not be immune from Persian influence is evident from their use of such terms as *Chin-Machin* for Greater China (idem, pp. 92f.)

The *Kartlis Tskhovreba* opened the way for non-religious literature, the development of which had as its starting point a well-known transnational medieval work with roots in Buddhist India, *The Tale of Varlaam and Iosaphat*, probably the most widely diffused text since the Alexander Romance in both East and West. It so happens that the Greek version was translated from the Georgian which, in turn, may have been transmitted not from Syriac nor from Arabic, but from a sixth-century Middle Persian version, as the discovery of fragments of the story in Manichaean Middle Iranian and Old Turkic from Xinjiang would tend to confirm. In that case the Georgian *Balahvariani* may well have been the mediator to the West of an Indian legend via Middle Persian (Rayfield, p. 63).³² These early works set the stage for the further

³¹ Rayfield, having no acquaintance with Persian historiography, sees in that pattern the more remote model of the Scriptures. The Persian model as inspiration is all the more likely that Movreli is said to have been conversant with Persian as well as Armenian and Greek.

³² What Rayfield sees as modern Iranian loanwords, namely *pasukhi* and *dasturi*, are derived from Middle Persian, as attested by the use of *dastur* for a Zoroastrian priest. Lang (1956, p. 46 fn 70) clearly says that *dastur-i* had been used long before, in Old Georgian for 'trustworthy person' or 'minister', and in new Georgian for 'agreement, consent' (from MPers. *dastwar* 'judge, priest'). Rayfield obviously did not seek advice from an authoritative source, as also demonstrated by his alternating 'Persian' and 'Farsi' for no obvious reason, and calling Mir Ali Shir Navā'i an 'Uzbek', and more gravely, referring to Nezāmi without the suffix *i* which he probably assumes to be the Georgian pronunciation in need of correction. Also puzzling is his assertion, allegedly based on elements of narrative and phraseology, that the full Georgian version of *Balahvariani*, found in Jerusalem, was translated from a non-Christian Arabic text which must have been translated from the Persian versions. He thus contradicts the conclusion to which his own arguments lead (Rayfield, pp. 64-66).

development of secular Georgian literature that harked back to an oral culture imbued with Iranian influence and now destined to be further enriched by contemporary Persian literature, thanks in part to the close relations of King David the Builder with the court of Shirvan which patronized Persian poetry, from Rudaki to the Khorasani school. Georgians thus became acquainted with the best of Persian literary production early on. Distinguished scholars of Persian such as Gvakharia and Todua are well aware that the inspiration derived from the Persian classics of the ninth to the twelfth centuries produced a 'cultural synthesis' which saw, in the earliest stages of written secular literature in Georgia, the resumption of literary contacts with Iran, "much stronger than before" (Gvakharia, 2001, p. 481). Ferdowsi's *Shahnama* was a never-ending source of inspiration, not only for high literature, but for folklore as well. "Almost every page of Georgian literary works and chronicles [...] contains names of Iranian heroes borrowed from the *Shahnama*" (ibid). Ferdowsi, together with Nezāmi, may have left the most enduring imprint on Georgian literature, but the work of other great Persian poets also came to be known and appreciated, including Khāqāni who calls himself *gorji-guy* 'Georgian speaker' and after visiting Georgia in the suite of the Shirvanshah, wrote about some of the places he visited there. Another poet of Shirvan, Falaki, wrote an elegy to commemorate the death of a Georgian king, while Nezāmi, who lived in neighboring Ganja, could hardly have avoided mentioning Georgia which he called 'Abkhaz' (ibid). Very few translations of Persian literary works have survived, but they are major ones in terms of popularity and enduring influence on Georgian literature.

Persian epic and myth, which had found their way into folktales, are reflected in the two major Georgian literary monuments of the twelfth century that paved the way for Rustaveli. The first great epic, *Amirandarejaniani*, "speaks for a connection with Caucasian folklore" which "had already absorbed elements of the Shah-Nameh, perhaps through a literary translation now lost" (Rayfield, pp. 69f.). It is typical of Georgian syncretism that while Amirani, the chained demigod of the story, is reminiscent of Prometheus, other episodes of the tale would ring familiar to one acquainted with Persian epic poetry, especially that of Ferdowsi and Nezāmi. The text is replete with Persian and Arabic names (including the by then outdated Aspan) as the author, Mose Khoneli, "was saturated in Persian literature," and his plot evolves in a land without borders where many nations, unhampered by religion, mix and move. The reader is taken to India, to Balkh and, oddly for Georgia, to the Yemen which had been under Sasanian rule in the last decades of the dynasty and is mentioned in the *Shahnama* as the home of the treacherous stepmother of Siāvush. The popularity of *Amirandarejaniani* eventually led to its versification

and to the interpolation of new episodes in the seventeenth century (idem, pp. 70-72).

The second work, known as *Visramiani*, is a direct translation of Gorgāni's *Vis o Rāmin*, whose origins may be traced to the Parthian period on the basis of the number of Parthian words it contains in Gorgani's original redaction, though an Indian precedent cannot be excluded offhand.³³ Earlier Georgian acquaintance with the original *Vis o Ramin* is likely, since other pre-Islamic Iranian literary works, such as *Ayadegar-e Zareran*, are said to have been known in Georgia (Gvakharia 1995, p. 241). It is therefore plausible that Georgians were acquainted with the oral version of the romance at a time when Persian, far from being "a mortal danger to Georgian culture," as Rayfield suggests, was an enriching factor. It is the only Persian work of that early period which has survived in a complete prose translation, and one so close to the original as to have been used for amending the generally defective late redactions of extant Persian manuscripts, while also helping to determine pronunciation and vocabulary as they were in Gorgāni's time. The explicitly sexual scenes of the romance were equally shocking to a strictly monotheistic environment where its very popularity prevented it from being printed until the nineteenth century, in both Georgia and Iran. Georgian manuscripts were destroyed for being ungodly, but that did not obliterate the appeal of the romance. The Georgian translation by an author, who also wrote *The Story of the Chorasmians*, is of such a fine quality that, much like Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyām, it came to be regarded as a masterpiece in its own right and made such an impression on Rustaveli that he mentions it thrice in terms that indicate that he had read the original by Gorgāni, as has now been confirmed (Rayfield, pp. 72f.; Gabashvili, pp. 35f.). One is left to wonder if the Georgian version could have travelled on to Europe, perhaps in a Greek translation, to influence Tristan and Isolde, as is generally believed.

A major masterpiece was in the offing and it soon appeared in the form of Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Panther Skin* (and perhaps other lost works). Not much is known about the author whose masterpiece is dated only approximately to the reign of Queen Tamar, some time between the late twelfth and the early thirteenth century (Rayfield, pp. 76f.). It is more Neo-Platonic than religious in ideology, pointing perhaps to interaction with Nezāmi or to Sohravardi, or at least to the same sources of inspiration, including the Greek Neo-Platonists (Vivian, p. 8).³⁴ It also makes winks to the Zoroastrian Persian

³³ This was confirmed by Professor Dick Davis at a talk entitled "Who's Afraid of Vis or Rāmin and Why?" delivered at SOAS in London on November 19, 2008.

³⁴ Vivian mentions a Georgian by the name of Ioane Petritzi who, at the time of David the

past with names such as Parsadan and Pridon, as well as with “oaths in Zoroastrian and pagan formulas, invoking the sun or the four elements” (Rayfield, p., p. 77). Both of his predecessors, the authors of *Amirandarejaniani* and *Visramiani*, influenced his style or his plot or both, as did Ferdowsi and Nezāmi and probably also Onsoni (idem, p. 81). The overall effect was to make “a Georgian contribution to a Persian canon” (idem, p. 82).

It is now generally accepted that Rustaveli was well acquainted with the Persian language and was therefore able to read and appreciate its poetry without having to resort to faulty translations. Indeed, this icon of Georgian identity, who left an indelible mark on the evolution of future Georgian literature, is believed to have composed Persian verse (Rhineland, p. 70). Any attempts to look to the West for the source of inspiration is therefore misguided or driven by preconceptions that do not apply, especially in view of the revelation Rustaveli makes in the prologue: “The telling tale I found in the Persian tongue”—a possible reference to Nezāmi’s *Leyli o Majnun* with which it shares similarities, as confirmed by Rustaveli’s claim that the Georgian *mijnuri* ‘lover’ has an Arabic origin (Vivian, pp. 11-14).³⁵ Apart from his masterpiece, there are apocryphal attributions to Rustaveli’s pen, including the *Tamariani*, a panegyric in praise of Queen Tamar. The latter is, however, generally recognized as a composition by the somewhat obscure figure of Shahrughadze, who gave his name to a new virtuoso verse-form known as *chakhrughauli* (Rayfield, p. 83). Vivian has him travelling thereafter to Iran and to Arab lands, to follow Sufi inclinations (Vivian, p. 10). She also detects traces of Sufism in the work of Rustaveli and finds parallels with the Arthurian legends, Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, and the Ramayana as well as with troubadours and Minnesängers who were the European equivalents of the *mgosani* or the later *asheqs* (idem, pp. 11-15).³⁶ Rustaveli’s work was destined to be much copied though never equalled.

While Georgia had avoided Saljuq hegemony thanks to the Bagrationi, it suffered invasions and occupation by the Mongols and by Timur, as a result of

Builder, studied in Athens and in Constantinople, where he translated Neo-Platonist works that shocked the Georgian Church. His greatest influence in his own country came later, in the eighteenth century.

³⁵ Khāqāni does not seem to have enjoyed the same popularity as Nezāmi, possibly due to the difficulty of his verse and to the absence of adventure and romance so loved by the Georgians (Gvakharia).

³⁶ The Arthurian cycle has been said to have a Sarmatian connection (see Littleton and Malcor) and Eschenbach is also believed to have been influenced by Eastern sources. Vivian attributes the tradition of *fotowwa* to early Islam, without mentioning its earlier antecedents in Partho-Sasanian chivalry and the Ayyārs of Iran. The Arabs adopted it and may have passed it on to medieval Europe.

which literary production almost come to a halt, and many of the originals of former Persian-inspired literature were lost, except in references preserved in Rustaveli, *Kartlis Tskhovreba* and *Tamariani* (Gvakharia, 1995, p. 242). The only significant work of the fifteenth century was a medical treatise called *Karabadini* by a physician named Tsitsishvili who is said to have built it on anonymous Georgian compendia of Galenic medicine of the eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE (Rayfield, p. 97). Greek influence is undeniable in medical works postdating Galen, but the title of the Georgian treatise is undoubtedly a deformation of the title of works by Rāzi (Rhazes) and his followers.³⁷ The *Karabadini* was in turn “superseded by the ultimate compendium of Hellenic and Avicennian medicine” (idem) written by the exiled King David Bagrationi in the sixteenth century. By that time, Georgian literature, still driven by the memory of its heyday, was experiencing a revival that focused primarily on further translations of the *Shahnama*, especially of the early mythical parts. The culmination of that process was the cumulative *Rostomiani*, the original version of which began with Zāl and ended with Kay-Khosrō, but was incrementally added to by later authors, such as Parsadan Gorgijanidze, on the basis of offshoots of Ferdowsi’s *Shahnama*, such as the *Bahman-nāma* (Georg. *Bahmaniani*).³⁸

Ferdowsi’s epic would continue to be a prolific source of inspiration for translations and pastiches of varying quality thereafter (Rayfield, pp. 96-98; Gvakharia, 2001, p. 483).

This was to last well into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, up to the time when Georgia began to look west and north for a new direction. Meanwhile, the combined damage caused by the Mongol cataclysm, the invasion of Timur and the fall of Constantinople in 1453 left Georgia fragmented, with each of three parts ruled by a rival branch of the Bagrationi. That opened the way for the Ottomans and Safavids to determine the course of Georgian history for the next three centuries.

From the Safavids to the Russian Manifesto of 1801

The Safavid invasion of Georgia and the integration of Georgian nobility into the highest spheres of the Safavid administration were to enhance the already well-entrenched cultural ties to Iran. Judgements on Safavid relations with

³⁷ The Arabized term is derived from the Greek *graphidion*, but the mere fact that the former, rather than the Greek word, was adopted by Georgians is indicative of the source material used.

³⁸ Interestingly, the earliest *Shahnama* fragments in ‘New Georgian’ have turned up in mural inscriptions in Vani (Gvakharia 1995, p. 242).

Georgia range from positive to highly negative, depending on the perspective of writers who have devoted to this period in Georgian-Iranian relations more attention than to any previous ones, precisely because of the closer links involved. Georgia's love-hate relationship with the Safavids is so well-documented that, even though a revision is long overdue, the focus here is on the continuation of an intensified cultural interaction. However one views Georgian-Iranian relations in the Safavid period, the Safavid attitude towards Georgia and Georgians can hardly be said to have been 'hostile,' as many historians term it.³⁹ Had that been the case, it is hardly likely that Georgian communities would have remained in Iran as loyal citizens, while retaining aspects of their cultural origins.⁴⁰ There is no doubt that Georgia was very much coveted by the Safavid dynasty, with whatever harshness that may imply in terms of military campaigns led by the brutal Qizilbash tribes, especially in Kakheti, or reprisals against resistance and religious pressure on the Georgian administrators of the Safavid state to adopt the official Shi'ite creed of Iran. Georgia was also haplessly caught in the crossfire of rivalry between the Safavids and the Ottomans. But Georgians also came to be seen as a highly desirable third force of the Safavid Empire and a necessary counterbalance to the power of the Qizilbash. This remained true to the last days of the Safavid Empire, when Georgian viceregal governors led the suppression of Afghan rebellions in Kandahar, albeit ultimately unsuccessfully and at great cost to themselves and to the dying Safavid state.

The history of Georgian-Iranian relations under the Safavids is fraught with the vicissitudes of imperial rule, but, whether one views the Safavids as friend or foe of the Georgians, there is no denying that significant cultural links were forged on top of an already impressive legacy from earlier times. While the pre-existing cultural background made the integration of Georgians into the state apparatus of Safavid Iran easier, the Safavid connection in turn strengthened those ties, even among those Georgians who resented the Safavid occupation. That complex and often misunderstood relationship has perhaps been best described by Roemer: "Great was the attraction of this land for the Safavids, the difficulties confronting them were no less daunting [...]" (Roemer, p. 245). So attractive, in fact, that Tbilisi was known to Iranians as *Dār-alsorur* (Beradze, p. 210). The term 'hostility' can hardly apply to a land so attractive to Iranian rulers that they desired Georgian women to mother their heirs and rule over their harems, and were keen to have Georgian noblemen

³⁹ The term 'hostile' has become such a cliché that some Georgian scholars copy it blindly even when their arguments run counter to its use. See Gabashvili, pp. 36f.

⁴⁰ For more on this subject, see Rezvani, 593-623.

serve in the highest positions as special royal guards or army leaders—against both internal and external foes—and govern their sensitive frontier provinces. Father Sanson, a French missionary of the late seventeenth century, reported that “The greatest posts of the empire are today in their [Georgian] hands, and those who do not hold any of these have their places at the royal table and emoluments from the Treasury” (apud Lang, 1957, p. 57).

It is true that prestige came at the cost of forced conversions—inevitable within the context of a Safavid Shi‘ite state pitted against Ottomans and Uzbeks who brandished the banner of Sunni orthodoxy to pursue the agenda of their own ambitions. Genuine conviction or manifest displays of piety do not seem to have been required of the Georgians in Safavid service and no one was duped about the commitment of converts to the faith they were made to embrace, either voluntarily or following threats (idem, p. 21). Chardin says that converted Georgians only embraced the Mohammedan faith externally to obtain positions and pensions from the court, or for the honour of marrying their daughters to the king or have them serve the harem (Chardin, I, p. 286). Conversion was no more than an expedient, a façade, although exceptionally reasons other than state policy came into play. On the other hand, conversion was rarely expected of the inhabitants of Georgia proper, unless appointed to hold office in the name of the shah. Shi‘ite Islam generally kept a low profile in Georgia and religious persecution, when carried out, was usually done so on the personal initiative of an overzealous official, much the same as under Sasanian rule (Lang, 1957, p. 86). Eventually, Iran would come to see the advantage of “preserving long-term dominance in Kakheti and Kartli through a Christian ruler obedient to the shah” instead of “Islamized Khans who enjoyed less confidence among the broad strata of society” (KIM). Such was not the case with the Ottoman Turks who tried to impose Islam systematically in their Georgian conquests (Lang, 1957, p. 76).

In Georgia itself, as usual, there were two schools of thought with respect to Iran, not the least as a result of internal rivalries. Some Georgians elected a dual identity with remarkable success. For example, Khosrow Khan (later named Rostam Khan), “an illegitimate scion of the K‘art‘lian royal family” and “certainly one of the most accomplished of the later Georgian kings.” (Lang, 1957, pp. 12-13) had escalated the rungs of the administrative ladder in Isfahan all the way to the top, and taken back Baghdad from the Ottoman Turks. Here was a convert who alternated between the mosque and the Capuchin Mass in Isfahan and who, back in Kartli as *vāli*, married the daughter of a Georgian aristocrat in a dual ceremony (Christian and Muslim), who combined Iranian and Georgian styles at his court and in his administration, received people of both nationalities and faiths “on an equal footing”, and

guided Georgia towards a a period of peace and prosperity (Lang, 1957, pp. 12-17, 83; Chardin, pp. 284f.). At the other extreme was Prince Vakhsh (a natural son of King Vakhtang VI) who, brought up by Catholic missionaries in Georgia, displayed a puritanical attitude in the name of patriotism. Ignoring no doubt that his own name was from Avestan *vahishta* (Pers. *behesht* 'heaven'), he criticized Rostam Khan's introduction of Persian customs such as 'luxury and high living', 'love of pleasure', 'dishonesty', 'unchastity', as well as 'baths' and 'lute and flute players' (Lang, 1957, pp. 13, 81).

Just as not all the people in Georgia approved of the influence of Persian culture spreading in their midst, so not all factions in Iran looked kindly upon Georgian appointees running their affairs. Apart from disgruntled Qizilbash, Georgians in Iran had to contend with envious courtiers. An imported Shi'ite clergy and an imported Caucasian élite was an explosive mix exploited by the Qizilbash and the Afghan warlords. It was a difficult wager to combine an avowedly Shi'ite state with the requisites of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-denominational imperial state which not only included Georgians and other Caucasians, but also Sunni or heterodox viziers, such as Fath-'Ali Dāghestāni and Shaikh 'Ali Khan Zangana. Something had to give and ultimately it was the empire, whose reach was to shrink under the Qajars. That the Georgian role at the top of the pyramid should have lasted as long as it did was an achievement for both parties concerned. One cannot imagine a Muslim, even converted to Christianity, reaching such heights of power at a European court of that time, nor a convert serving an alien court as loyally as Georgians served Iran. The few exceptions include Vakhtang VI (r. 1711-14, 1719-23), who refused to rescue the Safavids and their capital in their greatest hour of need.

None of this impacted the devotion of Georgians to Persian culture. A literary revival that looked to Iran for inspiration had already begun before Shah Tahmāsp's incursions into Georgia. It manifested itself in growing interest in Jāmi's poetry, culminating in the translation of an early version of his *Yusuf o Zuleikhā*, including by King Teimur I (Rayfield, p. 99). With Kartli and Kakheti once again under Iranian rule and with Georgians occupying the highest positions in the Safavid state, Persian literature once again proved to be the main source of inspiration for Georgian authors. Nezāmi's undying popularity was confirmed with several translations, imitations and adaptations of *Haft peykar*, resulting in *Bahramguriāni*, which, adapted from both the Persian original and the Chaghatay translation, is regarded by some as the best adaptation of a Persian literary work (ibid).

The *Qābusnāma* and *Kalila u Dimna*, in their present versions, were introduced to Georgia by Bagratid princes, either through their own translations or

through their patronage of authors, though it is believed that earlier translations of these works as well as of the *Shahnama* may have fallen victim to the Mongol invasions (KIM). Even Vakhtang VI, who turned against Iran due to pressure to convert and, for the first time, appealed to the West for help, was no less addicted to the attraction of Persian literary works. No fewer than three versions of *Kalila u Dimna* were produced, including a literal translation by Vakhtang VI himself, whose edition was later revised by his learned uncle and tutor, Sulkhan Saba Orbeliani, on the basis of Wā‘ez Kāshāni’s *Anwār-e Soheylī* (Gvakharia, 2001, p. 484). Vakhtang VI was an enlightened and progressive king who reformed the legal code, installed the first printing press, encouraged European science, laid the groundwork for modernizing the Georgian language and had the Georgian chronicles collected and updated, yet the school for translation he founded focused mainly on Persian literature (Vivian, p. 16) and he himself translated works on astronomy and astrology, including one on the astrolabe by Nasir-al-Din Tusi and the *Zij* of Ulugh Beg, and he also wrote a book on alchemy while residing in Iran (KIM).

These efforts bore fruit, though not so much in the form of scientific works. They resulted in a spate of Georgian versions of popular Persian folktales, parables and Sufi lore such as the *Bakhtiār-nāma*, *Bahrām o Golandām* (*Baram-gulandamiani*), *Mehr o Māh* (*Miriani*), *Qessa-ye chahār darvish* (*Chardarvishiani*), and many others (Gvakharia, 2001, p. 484). As for Orbeliani, a Catholic convert who travelled to the West on behalf of Vakhtang VI, he wrote *The Book of Wisdom and Lies*, derived “from the common fund of Near Eastern traditional stories” (including Armenian and Persian fables and Georgian folklore) in which Sufi traces as well as the educational didacticism of *Kalila u Dimna* can be detected (Vivian, p. 5; Lang, 1957, pp. 124-26). Although considered more typically Georgian, another work of that period, the *Rusudani*, is said by the author himself to have borrowed much from Persian and Arabic sources, including new loanwords, but with names and settings adapted to a Christian country (Rayfield, pp. 100f.).

Few scholars deny that, while Georgians are gifted for poetry to which their language lends itself, “Georgian writing owed much of its excellent quality to the extraordinary Persian models of literature to which it had, up to 1801 and even afterwards, an easy access [...] unique in the Western world” (Rhineland, pp. 33, 270). Few of them, however, are qualified to give it its deserved due. Lang, for example, agrees that secular painting and literature owed much to Persian styles. He lauds “the poetic gifts of the Georgian people,” and gives credit to “the enlightened patronage of the Safavid shahs,” but nonetheless makes a distinction between the “two main [i.e. opposing] trends in Georgian poetic tradition,”—that of Rustaveli and his imitators, as opposed to “the

foreign influence of exotic Persian romance” (Lang, 1957, p. 121). Surely Persian romance was by no means ‘exotic’ to the average Georgian, literate or illiterate, who, like his counterparts in Iran, recited poetry by heart in a language little changed since Rustaveli, himself a product of interaction with Persian authors (Rhineland, pp. 341f.). Lang’s judgement may be based on criticism proffered by King Archil of Imereti (western Georgia), no great friend of Iran’s, about the ornate Persian style and “artificial mannerisms” favored by the Georgians (Lang, 1957, pp. 122f.). Yet Archil himself started off with the “conceits, forms and themes inspired by Persia,” and imitated the poetry of the hapless Teimuraz whose life story he wrote (Rayfield, pp. 107f.). What neither Lang nor Rayfield appreciate is that the ornate ‘Indian style’ did not last long in Iran either and was destined to be reformed by the *bāzgasht-e adabi* ‘literary revival’ movement of the nineteenth century.

Painting, not requiring a knowledge of language, is more within the reach of Western historians, though few may be aware of the role of Georgian artists at the Safavid and Mughal courts as well as at the courts of the Deccan. The spectacular careers of three Georgian artists, the sublime Siavush Beg and his brother Farrokh Beg as well as ‘Aliqoli Jobba-dār, prove that Georgian talents seized upon the opportunities offered by the royal ateliers of the Safavids, and, in the case of Farrokh Beg, were invited to put their talent at the service of the Emperor Akbar and the Sultans of the Deccan (A. Soudavar, pp. 55-60).⁴¹ While these Georgian artists were working for Safavid and Mughal patrons, other Georgians were busy illustrating Georgian translations of Persian works with miniatures in the Persian style of Behzād; these include two manuscripts of Rustaveli. As early as the eighteenth century, however, the influence of Western art was to displace Persian miniature styles (KIM). We are far from the days when Georgian Christians praised Empress Theodora for “freeing the whole Greek lands of the madness of iconoclasm” (Rayfield, p. 48).

Georgians in Iran were also patrons of art and architecture. Allāhverdi Khan, who came from a feudal Georgian family, the Undiladze, became the Georgian governor of Fārs and as such collaborated with the English to liberate Bahrain from Portuguese occupation. The most beautiful bridge in Isfahan was named after him, and he also launched the construction of the Khan *madrassa* in Shiraz, associated with Mullah Sadrā (Babaei et al., pp. 64, 93), and commissioned some of the frescoes of the Chehel-sotun Palace in Isfahan (KIM). Tragedy befell his son, however, when, after being honored in every possible way, he fell afoul of envious courtiers who framed him and succeeded

⁴¹ Concerning the career of Siyavush Beg and Jobba-dār, from captive to court painter, see Babaei et al., pp. 118f.

in having him executed together with his own sons (Babaei et al., p. 64). In spite of the Safavid 'openness to talent,' for every honor, there is a tragic tale of woe. Such were the pitfalls of finding favor.

Poetry, rather than art, was the medium chosen by most Georgian princes to express distress, and none did so better than Teimuraz I, whose melancholy disposition and ill health were aggravated by miseries inflicted on members of his family by Shah 'Abbās (Rayfield, pp. 102-06). Yet he borrowed his imagery and style from the Persian speech he found so sweet that it, in his words, "urged me to compose the music of verse." His poetry included *monāzeras* 'disputes' such as those between spring and autumn or the wine and the lips, and especially a pentad or *khamasa*, with typically Persian titles for the first four parts (*Iosebzilkhaniani*, *Shamiparvaniani*, *Varbulbuliani*, *Leilimajnuniani*), though not for the fifth, the *Ketevaniani* which is a poignant account of the tragic martyrdom of his mother, Queen Ketevan (from Pers. *Katāyun*), in 1624 (Gvakharia, 1995, p. 243). The latter, devoutly Christian, had refused every plea by the shah to convert in order to become his wife. Not even torture would weaken her resolve and she went to meet her maker clinging to her faith (Gvakharia, 2001, p. 484). Lang says she was kept as a hostage to guarantee the loyalty of her son and as an extra incentive, was offered marriage (1957, p. 83). Chardin, however, gives an amorous twist to the story by citing the shah's unrequited passion for a not so young but still beautiful woman who had grown up with him (I, pp. 273, 278f.). Though it hardly makes the crime more pardonable, it does give a more human face to a tale of piety, passion and revenge. Georgian women were undoubtedly considered beautiful and thus were much desired. Chardin (op. cit., p. 275) mentions the case of a Georgian wife of Shah 'Abbās I, Peri (or Pari), whose extraordinary beauty was sung by the Persian poets of the time. Ketevan preferred monastic reclusion and, if necessary, death.

Whatever the real motive of Shah 'Abbās in condemning Ketevan to a cruel fate, Teimuraz was deeply affected by his mother's death and the castration of two of his sons, as well as other miseries, not all of them attributable to the Safavids. His ultimate plight is symbolic of the nascent dilemma faced by Georgia in late Safavid times, for he died in exile at Astarabad after disillusionment with Russian hesitations to offer him help. Throughout his ordeals, his love of poetry kept him alive and he excelled at it, making "the enemies' tongue an integral part of his own" (Rayfield, p. 105). It was the quality of his poetry that inspired many a later Georgian to imitate him and write about the martyrdom of Ketevan with all the pathos of the story of Queen Saint Shushanik (ibid). Literary testimony of high quality has a powerful effect on historical judgment and the prominence given by literature to the tragic fate of Ketevan

has contributed in no small part to the negative image of Georgian-Iranian relations under Shah ‘Abbās. Yet none fared worse under him or his successors than their own next-of-kin, many of whom were blinded or strangled when paranoid suspicions were aroused.

Persian influence extended into many other fields. A manuscript preserved at the Kekelidze Institute of Manuscripts in Tbilisi contains a portrait of King Teimuraz I and his wife in Safavid dress, complete with a voluminous turban for him and a feathered and bejewelled *jiqa* for both (KIM). And we have Chardin to thank for the most complete picture of Persian customs and lifestyles in Georgia under Safavid rule. Court ceremonial had remained Iranian-inspired from the Achaemenids to the Sasanians and beyond, as further confirmed by Chardin’s timeless descriptions of Persian ceremonies in Georgia. His accounts of the welcoming ceremony for visitors, or of prostration upon the first meeting with the king (Chardin, I, p. 290), of Persian-style mansions and the banquets held therein have no parallel in other travel writing. He mentions the Persian style of noble mansions and of public spaces. They even sat and ate and slept in the Persian manner, he says (*idem*, p. 268). He attended a wedding banquet on a terrace with a fountain in the middle, covered with a marquee on five poles (presumably such as those seen in miniatures), lined with velvet, gold brocade and painted cloth, and the whole lit by tall gold and silver torches weighing forty pounds each. The feast included a vast variety of dishes, including *pilo* in different colors, downed with wine pouring from the Georgian drinking horn (equivalent to the ancient ritual rhyton). Reminiscent of the Achaemenid period were silver and gold cups, some of which were enamelled and/or encrusted with precious gemstones (*idem*, pp. 303-05).

One aspect of Persian influence that Chardin could not fully appreciate was language, of course, though he must have been aware that Persian was “the lingua franca of Georgian statesmen, scholars and merchants, the rich Persian culture their model,” and it showed in Georgian speech (Rhineland, p. 33). The number of administrative words borrowed from Persian rose considerably under Safavid rule. Terms such as *mdivani beg* (< *divān*), *ketkhuda*, *mehmandar*, and Turko-Persian titles used in Safavid Iran such as *eshik āqāsī*, ‘master of ceremonies’ and *qurchibāshi* ‘head of the armoury’, would have been known to Georgian princes (Lang, 1957, pp. 23, 55, 61-66, 72). Even Vakhtang VI’s reformed code of law, with all its nationalistic pretensions, was called *dasturalamali* (*idem*, p. 46). One reason for the increase in Persian administrative terms in Georgian was that, as of the 1555 Treaty of Amasya by which the Ottomans recognized Safavid rule over Eastern Georgia, all documents issued by the *wālis* became bilingual (Hitchins, pp. 490f.), no small

contribution to the knowledge of the Persian language and script. And since 1600 the coins used in Georgia, except for the low-denomination copper ones, were exact replicas, in design and value, of the Safavid *'abbāsi*, *tomān*, *mahmudi*, and *shāhi*. The terms for the coins survived even after the names of the kings and the captions were replaced by Georgian ones (Lang, 1957, p. 29).

The defection of the Georgians who “inspired awe all over Persia” was a blow from which the Safavids did not recover. Georgia, in turn, was invaded by the Ottomans who deposed the ruling house of Kartli (idem, p. 95). Yet it did not end there. Indeed, the cultural factor may have been responsible for the new lease on life given to Georgian-Iranian relations time and again. Just when prospects seemed the bleakest, another joint venture would reaffirm those ties. It happened under the Afsharids, thanks in part to the Ottomans who stepped into the void left by the Safavids, and in part to conversion no longer being required of the *wāli*, thus making it easier for King Erekle II to join Nāder Shah’s Ottoman and Indian campaigns (idem, pp. 141-43). Erekle is even said to have learned the art of war with Nāder Shah, a lesson that was soon to serve him well (Malcolm, p. 59). Despite the oppressive exactions that alienated the Georgians as much as they did Iranians, Nāder Shah’s nephew and successor, ‘Adel Shah, married Ketevan, the granddaughter of Erekle I, and remained on the friendliest terms with Georgia until he was dislodged by his brother who fomented a revolt in favor of a rival Georgian line, only to be deposed by Nāder Shah’s grandson, Shāhrokh, who, in turn, appointed King Teimuraz II, father of Erekle, as viceroy for Azarbaijan and central Iran (Lang, 1957, pp. 146-48).

When a change of orientation did occur in the name of religious affinity, the greater attraction for Georgians was the Russian adoption of progressive European ways. Yet, even after the Russian Military Highway over the Daryal Pass transformed geopolitical prospects, travellers’ reports give testimony to the endurance of Persian customs, language and literature as late as the early nineteenth century. Erekle II still favored the tall Persian shawl-wrapped hat he is shown wearing in his famous portrait at the Shalva Amiranashvili Fine Arts Museum (idem, p. 189). And Georgian “Dowry Books” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mention clothes made “from fabrics manufactured in Iran, e.g. daraia of Yezd, wool of Kerman, daraya of Gilan, wool of Rizayih, sheidish of Yezd and of Khar, as well as zarbab [i.e. *zarbāfi*], daraya-bavt and diba” as well as turquoises from Nishapur, rubies from Badakhshan and pearls from the Persian Gulf (KIM).

Despite flirtations with Russia which culminated in the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk under which Georgia came under Russian protection, Erekle’s reign saw the introduction of more Persian manners, for he loved pomp and

entertainment of the kind described by Chardin, though this did not exclude concessions to new European manners adopted in Russia since the time of Peter the Great, such as knives and forks, dining table and chairs (Lang, 1957, pp. 188f.). “Eating with utensils was a mark of civilization; eating with fingers, a remnant of Georgia’s Eastern and ‘barbaric’ past”, says Rhineland (p. 50) who adds that “the old idea of arrogance and independence. . . had no place among a civilized people,”—i.e. in the eyes of the Russian overlords. (Rhineland p. 50). Although Georgian princes looked seriously at the Russian option, the aura of the crown of Iran had not yet lost its lustre and attracted a host of contenders for a much disputed throne (Lang, 1966, p. 34). Few of these were feared and respected as much as Erekle II, for Georgian arms still inspired fear and respect “throughout Persia” (Lang, 1957, p. 157).⁴² Meanwhile he had become the uncontested king of a united Eastern Georgia, and set out to establish the first pan-Caucasian empire since Queen Tamar, though his army behaved no better than that of the Safavids or of Nāder Shah (idem, pp. 171, 175).⁴³ His successes to the north of the Araxes, where several khanates had come under his suzerainty, with the approval of Karim Khan Zand, could only have added to his rising prestige (idem, pp. 152f.). Might one conjecture that, were it not for the narrow outlook of the Shi’ite clergy, Erekle might even have stood a fair chance among the contenders had he chosen to stake a regency claim in the name of the legitimate Safavid heir? Favoring Erekle was a unique suitability that included his assimilation of Persian culture; and yet it was in his reign that change came about when he agreed, in 1783, to sign off Georgia to Russia as a protectorate, thus opening the way for the 1801 Russian Manifesto which formalized Georgia’s incorporation into the Russian Empire and the abolition of its old monarchy.

Change did not become manifest overnight. Georgian princes had begun to settle in Moscow in the seventeenth century, but massive emigration only took place when Vakhtang VI, who had helped Peter the Great in his Caspian campaigns, abdicated and migrated to Russia “with a suite of some 2000, a government in exile composed of members of the élite of Georgian society” (Rhineland, p. 29). Those who settled in Russia were “thoroughly Russianized,” with their own regiment, their estates with serfs in the Ukraine; they were “accepted into the highest circles of Russian society” and even married

⁴² Erekle did not trust the Russians, since the family of Vakhtang VI, his rival, were living under the protection of the Tsar in Russia (Lang, 1957, pp. 171, 175).

⁴³ Lang adds that his army was allowed to “ravage the land at will” and the mountaineers of Tusheti, sent, according to their custom, “several hundred noses of slain Lezghis, neatly threaded on string, as a trophy to Erekle.”

into it (*ibid.*).⁴⁴ Many of the nobles in Vakhtang's suite had reached high positions in Russia and fought in its wars.⁴⁵ One of them was the grandfather of the later terror of the early Qajars, General Tsitsianoff, who came from an older branch of the Bagrationi. Tsitsianoff was a product of Russian schooling, devoted to Russia's interests more than to those of Georgia. Russianization had bred in him a demeaning arrogance towards everything Eastern, an attitude that would cost him his life (*idem*, p. 84).⁴⁶

The likes of Tsitsianoff had little sympathy for the undeniable fact that "Georgian culture at the end of the eighteenth century was an intricately woven web, the strands of which derived from a distinctively non-Western past" (Rhineland, pp. 268f.). With the Russianization of part of the élite, the two rival cultural trends in Georgian society were reaffirmed, with the one looking towards Russia, and a minority obstinately looking towards Iran. Under Erekle II, matters came to a head. Keen on attracting European technology and science, Erekle turned reluctantly to Russia only as a means to achieve that end. But, for some time yet, "Persia could not be ruled out; indeed, over the next two generations she would strenuously contest Russia's supremacy" (*idem*, p. 19) and the battleground would be the Caucasian provinces so dear to Iran. "It could be expected that any sovereign of Persia, once peace and order was established, would attempt to recover Georgia—a fine province," Sir John Malcolm rightly judged (Malcolm, p. 59).

It is interesting to note that, in one of his rare conciliatory moods, Āqā Mohammad Khan envisioned Erekle precisely in the role the latter had craved, namely as viceroy of a pan-Caucasian entity, but tributary to the crown of Iran; accordingly, he offered him Ganja, Erevan, Qarabagh, Shaki, Shirvan, and "the government of Azerbaijan" (W. Allen, p. 213). The Russians, who by then were active on both sides of the Caspian Sea as far south as Astarabad, would have had none of it, had Erekle envisioned to accept the offer. Embittered and old, Erekle died in 1798, having witnessed the assault on Tbilisi, without any attempt on the part of Russia to send relief. Georgia had hoped for some improvement under fellow Christians, but it would take more massacres before Russia changed its ways. Suvorov's slaughter of the Nogais and, later, Yermolov's massacre of Chechen and Daghestani tribes in genocidal

⁴⁴ After an unsuccessful appeal to the French, Vakhtang reluctantly accepted to become a Muslim, while appealing to the Russian ambassador, Volynskii, to invade Iran.

⁴⁵ These included a General Bagration who fought at the Battle of Borodino, and Prince Vakhusht, who ferociously criticized Rostam Khan, and who later became a Russian senator (Lang, 1957, pp. 118f.)

⁴⁶ Tsitsianoff was also given to insulting the rulers of Daghestan: "Shameless sultan with the soul of a Persian," "Yours is the soul of a dog and the understanding of an ass," "I shall only long to wash my boots in your blood" (*apud* Lang, 1966, p. 48).

campaigns that spared neither women nor children were, if only because of their calculated intent, worse than the savagery of the Qizilbash troops (Idem., pp. 209f.; Kelly, p. 54). But the die had been cast and the compass was pointing clearly to the north.

Stubborn Survivals and Radical Change

As of 1803, with the arrival of Tsitsianoff as commander-in-chief of the Russian forces, most of the Georgian royals were sent off to an honorable but prolonged Russian exile. Their mere presence in Tbilisi meant that they could become a focus of resistance, as they did indeed in 1831-32 when the last plot, in the name of Prince Aleksandre, the *vāli in absentia* living in Iran, was nipped in the bud. Of the few princes who escaped, most of them ended up in Iran, and stayed for periods ranging from a few days to several years, except for Aleksandre who was to die in Iran. Some of them would cross the border to engage in a skirmish and end up inside Iran, while others took refuge at the welcoming court of Crown Prince ‘Abbās Mirza in Tabriz to join him in resisting the inexorable Russian advance. Apart from dynastic rivalries and the humiliating abolition of the Georgian monarchy by the Russian occupation, as well as the growing disillusionment of Georgians with Russian rule, it was the magnetic pull of cultural affinities that made these princes join those of their compatriots who had integrated and remained in Iran from earlier times.

Georgian nobility had grown up living a Persian-style life, both indoors and outdoors. “From the time King Erekle united eastern Georgia under his rule to the time of the Russian incorporation, Persia remained the major source and the Persian language the medium, of intellectual stimulation for the educated elite in Georgia” (Pakravan, 67-68). By contrast, the cultural impact of Russia was still insignificant except among the Russian-based élite, hardly among those still living in houses with painted woodwork “à la mode d’Ispahan”:

Assez de goûts communs les rapprochaient de ces féodaux pour apprécier l’hospitalité de leurs demeures, raffinées et primitives à la fois [...]. Plusieurs siècles de suzeraineté persane et des échanges d’amitié ou d’intrigues avaient passé dans leur sang. Ils aimaient les grandes battues, les longues nuits d’été passées à boire et à disserter, les incursions rapides auxquelles le pillage n’était pas étranger (Pakravan, pp. 67f.)

Western cultural currents admitted under Erekle were growing stronger, while “Persia’s cultural authority decreased” (Rhineland, pp. 268f.). At the height

of the taste for all things Persian, a change in aesthetics and lifestyle had become perceptible in pockets through the mediation of the Russian-educated Georgian princes. It picked up considerably after 1801. The pro-Russian camp, led by Russianized officers such as Tsitsianoff or Russian-oriented intellectuals like Griboedov's father-in-law, the poet Alexander Chavchavadze, tended to look down on everything Oriental as moribund and backward. Contrast what one of the princes Orbeliani was saying then: "En Asie, on n'est pas capable de construire des palais et des jardins aussi admirables [que ceux de Pétersbourg]" (Urjewicz, p. 211, apud Lashkashidze),⁴⁷ with another Georgian's ravings about King Vakhtang's new palace in Tbilisi less than two centuries before: "By Heaven, I have seen none finer, not even in Persia!" (Lang, 1957, p. 54). Nevertheless, Persian aesthetics would continue to dominate the Georgian scene well into the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the large number of paintings in Qajar style in the Shalva Amiranashvili Fine Arts Museum. The 'progressive' faction were, thankfully, also unsuccessful in trying to 'purify' the Georgian language of all traces of Persian and Arabic—a quasi-impossible task that was never fully implemented.

That change was slow to come is attested by Mrs. Freygang who passed through Tbilisi in 1812. "Persian is in vogue among the nobles and to be acquainted with it is looked upon as a genteel accomplishment, for they consider it good style to follow the customs of the Persians" (Letter xxii).⁴⁸ In another letter she describes her visit to the bath vaults where "reclining on couches, women dye their hair and nails, paint their faces red and white" and "torture themselves to make their eyebrows join"—absolutely essential, she says, as it was in Qajar Iran and in Central Asian cities at the time (Letter xxiv). The portrait of Queen Darejan at the Fine Arts Museum of Tbilisi corroborates Freygang's description of cosmetic fashions in Tbilisi. Porter, writing a few years later, also noticed that the face of the women was so covered in enamel that the surface was rendered stiff and unable to show emotion except through the eyes (Porter, pp. 122f.) Freygang also noticed that the bazaars were full of Persian goods: carpets, silks, shawls and turquoises, and *Abbasees* still remained in use for transactions in the bazaar (Letter xxiv).

⁴⁷ It translates as follows: "In Asia, they cannot build such admirable palaces and gardens" (Urjewicz, p. 211).

⁴⁸ The author wrote fully thirty years after the Treaty of Georgievsk. On the whole she viewed the Turks as 'savage', and believed that if "the Persians had had the same communication with Europe, they would have made greater progress in civilization," because "Turks despise all other nations: Persians respect scholars and esteem Europeans." But the Persians, though less fanatical and more affable, had degenerated.

More surprising is that Porter saw women wearing the *chadre* (the Persian *chādor*) on outings outside the home, a custom that had spread among town-dwellers, together with greater seclusion of women, at about the time of Chardin. By contrast, Porter mentions the “immodesty of Georgian women in baths in front of male visitors” (pp. 122f.) Even more surprising is the *cadeau de la vue du visage*, referred to by Brosset (cf. *runemā* in Persian), in other words the custom of the bride refusing to show her face to the groom until offered a present in cash or in kind, or even a whole village, if she were a princess.⁴⁹ In earlier times, this custom had even been imposed on the rare Russian suitor, as when, in the seventeenth century, the Russian envoy Tatichtchef had to pay the *runemā* before the daughter of Giorgi X could marry the son of Tsar Boris Godounof (Brosset II/3, p. 535).

Sanikidze has recently written of bazaars “with broad and high arched passages,” of caravanserais filled with the goods described by Freygang, of city quarters, streets and public parks with Persian names, of which the Mujtahidi Park still survives in name. Persian-style courtyard houses were built by masons from Iran who were regarded as the best. At least one institution had survived in the form of the *amkari*, headed by an *ustabash*, equivalent to the *asnāf* and its hierarchy, but possibly going back to the Ayyārs or even earlier, as suggested by the expression Karachokheli-Jomardi (*jovānmardi*). The citadel was in ruins in the nineteenth century, but Sanikidze’s sources confirm that there had always been only one Shi’ite mosque inside, in addition to a Sunni one destroyed by Āqā Mohammad Khan (Sanikidze, pp. 164-68). According to Chardin, that was in agreement with the stipulations of a little-known treaty concluded by Shah ‘Abbās, once Georgia was secured, in a bid to conciliate the population (I, p. 293).

The Treaty of Turkomanchai of 1828, which ended the Second Russo-Persian War and annexed the rest of the Caucasus (and more) to the Russian Empire, was the decisive turning-point, since it effectively eliminated Iran “as a factor in Caucasian politics” (Rhineland, pp. 341f.). When even “the tribes of Daghestan were cut off” and “the Muslims of the Caucasus were to look to the Turks alone for support,” there was little chance for Persian customs to survive. Even though Russian administrative procedure may have been “thoroughly out of tune with the inhabitants’ attitudes and way of life,” there was no escaping Russian administration and its derision of anything that was not derived from the West. The relatively enlightened Russian prince-governor, Vorontsov, speaks of the “semi-barbarous sounds of Persian music,” which

⁴⁹ “Quant à ‘la vue du visage’, on sait que, le soir des noces, une mariée géorgienne reste couverte de son voile jusqu’ ce que son époux, en lui offrant un cadeau proportionné à sa fortune, l’ait engagé à se montrer à lui” (Brosset II/3, p. 535).

illustrates “the limits of Vorontsov’s appreciation of a foreign cultural environment”; he “shared with his Russian imperialist predecessors a narrow-minded viewpoint of Persia’s and other Middle Eastern countries’ cultural legacy” (ibid). Rhinelander, who believes that a full portrayal of Georgia is not possible without knowing Persian and Turkish, suggests that “the same lack of knowledge of the Middle Eastern civilization” is what may have made “the Russian imperialists feel culturally superior to the Caucasians” (p. 7), and perhaps why Georgia remained “a foreign land within the Russian empire” (p. 14).

That errors can plague even one so well disposed is illustrated by Rhinelander’s mention of the Persian *tamāshā* as “a traditional Georgian ceremony, a staged battle fought between two groups of native warriors”—a performance not appreciated by Russian authorities (pp. 263f.). The blending was at times so thorough that the demarcation line was blurred, invisible to the visitor even to the Georgians themselves. The worst damage was the irrecoverable destruction of Persian architecture as whole quarters were razed to make way for ‘civilized’ building styles favored by the new occupiers. To see beauty instead of backwardness, they did not need any linguistic skills; a different frame of mind, more difficult to come by, would have been enough. But as physical evidence gradually disappeared, so did its conscious memory also fade.

Did Russianization inevitably entail “an irreversible break with the past” (Rhinelander, pp. 341f.)? History can never be entirely effaced. Persian cultural influence waxed and waned—though not always in tune with political trends, but its flow was never completely turned off. Of all the foreign currents that went into the making of Georgian culture, the Persian component was the most enduring one, and therefore unlikely to vanish, never to return again. A century after the Manifesto of 1801, Georgian, Armenian and Iranian dissidents were joining forces to fight for political independence and social and economic reforms. That chapter of history has been studied and told.⁵⁰ And now an independent Georgia, rooted in its strong identity, has the confidence to admit to its long-standing debts to other cultures. The best of Georgian scholars have now put their Iranian colleagues to shame with their remarkable work. They are rediscovering dusty manuscripts on library shelves, translating contemporary Persian literary works and arousing renewed interest in cultural ties with Iran after a protracted eclipse that has hopefully effaced lingering resentments to better reveal the positive effects (cf. Gvakharia, 2001, p. 484). And they are legion. The next important step is to recognize “the significance of Georgian versions for the study of Persian literature proper” (Gvakharia, 1995, p. 244).

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Cosroe Chaqueri, *The Russo-Caucasian Origins of the Iranian Left*, London, 2001.

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