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Published in the Russian Federation  
European Researcher. Series A  
Has been issued since 2010.  
E-ISSN 2224-0136  
2019, 10(2): 94-100

DOI: 10.13187/er.2019.2.94  
[www.erjournal.ru](http://www.erjournal.ru)



## On the State of Studying the Georgian Written Culture before and in the Digital Era

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### Abstract

Georgia, like many other cultural countries, has passed a long way from the oral culture to the written one and now it has been on the stage of digital culture. This long way includes all aspects of social, intellectual or spiritual lives of Georgia and Georgian people.

The goal of the research is to examine the state of exploring the Georgian written cultural heritage before and after emerging of the new technologies and show how much it is ready to overcome the challenges of the digital culture.

The paper emphasizes that, alongside with the internal favorable conditions, the strong cultural links with the Eastern and Western countries in the ancient and Middle Ages conditioned the high level of the Georgian written culture. In the period of the Soviet era, the cultural and scientific dialogue with the West was interrupted, which was recovered after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Since the 1990s, the new technologies created the new perspectives for research and the new challenges emerged before the Georgian scientists – to implement the technology-based methods in researches.

By reviewing some scientific projects, carried out or running by the Georgian researchers, the paper sheds light on how the Georgian scientists overcame the existing problems and what problems they are facing in the epoch of digital culture.

**Keywords:** Georgian written cultural heritage, digital era, soviet ideology, digital humanities.

### 1. Introduction

Among the cultural heritage created by mankind, the written culture holds the most important place. It comprises a set of aspects, beginning with cultural, social, intellectual or spiritual values, ending with identity. Its origin and development history often determines the place of a nation in a civilized world.

Under the term “written culture” we imply the whole spectrum of human activities created through writing process: alphabet, epigraphic monuments, manuscripts, manuscript books, printed books, electronic books – following the oral culture. Each of them represented the essential means of transferring the textual information in its time. In scientific literature, writing is estimated as a cultural practice, covering many contexts of life (Lyons, Marquilhas, 2017).

Bottéro considers the move from the oral to the written to be a radical transformation, a

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renewed vision of things, a change in the way people communicate and the quality of their messages (Bottéro, 1995). The first step of written culture – writing is associated with the birth of civilization, the start of history (Panosa, 2004). Coulmas sees writing as a result, product and condition of civilization (Coulmas, 1991).

Georgia is pretty rich by its written culture, which represents its visit card abroad. The samples of written monuments are found on the territory of Georgia from the earliest centuries. The Georgian alphabet is among a few number of the world writing systems. Most of the scientists assign the origins of Georgian alphabet to the Christian epoch but in accordance with some research findings, the documentary history of Georgian written culture is likely to begin with the Armazian ligatures of Pitiakhsh Chargasi (dated to the 75 CE), Phlavios Dade, and Bersum Pytiakhshi (dated to the 75-79 CE) (Nimidze, Chelidze). Aleko Tsintsadze argues, that the culture of the alphabet in the territory of Georgia is confirmed even at least by the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC.\*

In 2015, in Graklian Hill, Eastern Georgia, through archeological excavations, by the leadership of professor Vakhatbg Licheli, the oldest inscription was found dated back to the 11th - 10th centuries BC. It has not deciphered yet. The scientists suppose that they are dealing with the track of the oldest civilization.†

In 2016, The three systems of Georgian alphabet were included into UNESCO intangible cultural heritage.‡ Georgia has consistently stepped up the process of keeping and transmitting textual information from ancient epigraphic materials till electronic books. The oldest Georgian manuscripts preserved the translations of the New Testament. Their ancient layer is saved in the palimpsest sheets. According to the recent discoveries, in Dagestan, on the lower stratum of the Arabic palimpsest, the Georgian text, namely, the Gospel written in Asomtavruli was found. Professor Dali Chitunashvili stated that it can be dated to the 6th-7th centuries.§

Ivane Javakhishvili, Akaki Shanidze, Elene Metreveli, Ekvtime Takaishvili, Ilia Abuladze, Valeri Silogava, Thomas Gamkrelidze and many others played a great role in studying Georgian written culture. They examined the issues by the research methods known for their working period.

## 2. Research methods

Our research basically relies on the review of the Georgian written culture and its study before and after emerging of the new technologies. While examining the problem, we used the widespread research methods: historical-comparative, analytical, and creative.

## 3. Discussion

The oldest educational centers in old Georgia prepared the ground for development of the humanitarian thinking. We can name the higher rhetorical school – the Colchis academy – near Phazisi in VI-III BC where the rhetorical arts, philosophy, literature, music and other disciplines were taught. The strong cultural links with the world civilization, particularly, with the Mediterranean countries in the ancient and Middle Ages conditioned the high level of the Georgian written culture and its study.

Georgian-Syrian and Georgian-Palestinian relations were laid the foundation in the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cc. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, 13 Assyrian fathers came from Mesopotamia in Georgia, significantly contributing to the development of the manuscript tradition in Georgia.

From the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when monastic life was significantly strengthened, churches and monasteries became educational and cultural-literary centers, where the bible, chant, philosophy, and the foreign languages were taught.

From the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the monastery centres of Tao-Klarjeti had a close connection with St. Sabas Laura. In one of the Tao-Klarjeti Laura, Oshki, the full text of the Georgian wording of the Pentateuch of Moses was rewritten.

\* [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://expressnews.com.ge/?id=28408>

† [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://sputnik-georgia.com/culture/20160725/232822184.html>

‡ [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://www.parliament.ge/en/media/axali-ambebi/qartuli-anbani-unesco-s-msoflios-aramaterialuri-kulturuli-memkvidreobis-nusxashia.page>

§ [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/დადესტანში-აღმოჩენილი-ქართული-ოთხთავის-თავკადასავალი/29859209.html>

The literate society of Georgia was interested in the profound adaptation of the Byzantine culture. Now the main attention was drawn to the monastic centers of the Empire. From the 9<sup>th</sup> c. Georgians started to serve here, first in Greek, and later in Georgian monasteries.

In the 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, besides the Laura of St. Sabas, the Georgians were serving in Palestine, where the Georgian monastic-literary activity renewed with a new force from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, headed by the Georgian Jvari (Cross) Monastery. Today we know about 160 manuscripts of the Jerusalem Georgian collection.

In the Ulumbo, or Olimpi Mountain a famous Georgian figure Hilarion laid the foundation for the colonization of Georgians. On the proposal of Emperor Basil, Hilarion Kartveli's (Georgian) disciples founded Romana (Hromana) Monastery in the center of the European coast of the Bosphorus Strait near Constantinople, in 876.

In 980–983s, one of the most important monasteries in the history of Georgian written culture – Athos Iviron Monastery was founded, where a special literature-translation and calligraphy school was established. This school, its leaders Ekvtime and Giorgi Athonelies, and the group of literate monks who had gathered around them in the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries, led a wide educational-cognitive direction of Georgian theological writings; they introduced and established all the important achievements of the Western-Byzantine culture and, at the same time, maintained and developed the national content of Georgian literature. Ekvtime and Giorgi took the responsibility of translating theological monuments into Georgian again, which played an important role in the transition of the Georgian Liturgy into the Byzantine Order. They translated the Gospel from Greek to Georgian as well as many other theological and clerical works; this contributed not only to the strengthening of Georgian Orthodox Church and the faith of Georgians, but also to the development of Georgian-Byzantine literary relations ([Chkhikvadze, 2010](#)).

Today, 86 Georgian manuscripts are kept in the Athos Iviron depository. A special attention should be paid to the monastic colonization of the Georgians on the Black Mountain near Antioch, which was intensively activated since the 30s of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

From the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Georgian Colony continued to work on Mount Sinai. Klarjetian and Sinaitic-Palestinian Georgian manuscripts well reflect the greatest role of not only Greek, but also Christian Arabian and Syrian cultures in written texts.

The Georgian scribes had a very close contact with the Greek-Assyrian-Arab circles. In the Georgian manuscripts of the Black Mountain, parallelly with the Constantinople tradition, there was a trace of ancient Syrian culture. In the same period, a nobleman from Tao, Grigol Bakurianistze, who was close to the Byzantine Court, founded a Georgian monastery of Petritsoni in Bulgaria together with a Seminary. With the initiative Ioane Petritsi, here the most important philosophical-theological school was founded.

Georgian manuscript books have sometimes preserved those translations, whose original versions are lost – in Greek, Syrian, Arabic, Coptic, Latin, Armenian or Slavic languages. Over the centuries, the Georgian manuscript book has acquired the experience, which Small, Middle East and Byzantine countries have accumulated in the culture of written words. This experience relates to the cognitive-educational function of a book, as well as its artistic styling and manufacturing processes ([Machavariani, 2005](#)).

In the 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Georgia reached the peak of its political and cultural development, research-educational schools were opened in Gremi and Ikalto, called as Gremi Academy and Ikalto Academy. These centers contributed to the development of Georgian literature and philological thinking, the original writings were created, foreign literature was translated into Georgian.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Georgian King David Agmashenebeli founded Gelati Academy, the scientific-pedagogical and cultural-educational center, gathering the Georgian and foreign scholars there. The academy was put on an equal footing as the world famous scientific centers in that epoch, leading the development of Georgian culture. The philosophical-theological and literary occupation was carried out widely, based on the Christian thinking, led in the first period by great scholars and philosophers – Ioane Petriti and Arsen Ikaltoeli. As Historians evaluate, Gelati became "the second Jerusalem". Gelati Academy became an ideological center of early Renaissance (humanism) in Georgia. Many works were written and translated here, a lot of masterpieces were created in literature, science and art. David Aghmashenebeli knew that it was impossible to

implement a reasonable political course without transformation of the spiritual life. His church reform relied on the humanitarian values which laid the foundation for socio-political upheavals in 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>rd</sup> centuries. The traditions of the modern Byzantine high school were implemented in this school. The Georgian scholars strove for translating the works of ancient Greek and Byzantine writings into Georgian. The academy also gathered the works translated until the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The meaning of the manuscripts created here is beyond the limits of our country. Their scientific value is priceless not only for studying the history and culture of Georgia but also to study the history of the neighboring and nearby countries from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Georgian world-renowned scholars and philosophers of medieval times – Ephrem Mtsire, Arsen Ikaltoeli, Ioane Petritsi, and many others – have played a special role in the development of Georgian written culture, having gotten education in Constantinople, familiarizing with Byzantine advanced humanitarian thinking.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the poem "Knight in the Panther's Skin" was written in Georgia, one of the most brilliant masterpiece of the world literature, putting together the antique and medieval knowledge, especially the humanitarian thinking, outstripping the European Renaissance by two centuries.

Georgians have always respected and appreciated the promoted culture. The manuscripts performed by Byzantine artists or the ornamented Greek manuscripts were very popular in Georgia. Of course, this fact influenced the character of the Georgian manuscripts decoration, whose authors had mastered the Byzantine art of bookmaking and some motives. The authors of the manuscript sometimes changed the Byzantine samples and used certain characteristic signs of ornamentation of the Georgian manuscript book. While rewriting manuscripts, the authors merged the old ones with the new, the foreign ones with the local.

From the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Georgian manuscript book used paper for writing, which was mainly found in the Georgian manuscripts created in the major centers of the East (Black Mountain, Mount Sinai) in this epoch.

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century, paper gradually got the advantage and terminally expelled the parchment. Georgian manuscripts were copied on Italian (15<sup>th</sup>), Persian (15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>), French (18<sup>th</sup>) and Russian (the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup>) papers. In Georgia paper production did not develop.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> cc, the circle of Georgian cultural relations expanded. the Georgian written culture drew its attention to the European knowledge and experience, which was supported by the political relations in this epoch. On the one hand, appearance of Catholic missionaries in Georgia and on the other hand, attempts to establish a political union with Russia, have led to the introduction of the literary experience characteristic to these fields.

The Georgian monks conducted the important textual researches in both the country as well as in the scriptoriums existed abroad, rewriting the copies of manuscripts, compiling them with each other, writing the philological comments and notes in the margins, translating the important Biblical and religious monuments from foreign languages into Georgian. Exactly thanks to their merits in the 5<sup>th</sup> century we already had the translated Gospel, the fragments of which are kept in the lower layers of the palimpsest, dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> -6<sup>th</sup> centuries. They laid the foundation for the development of the textual scholarship, as the humanitarian discipline in Georgia, which took the further step forward for development along with the introduction of the printing press in 18<sup>th</sup> century.

It is particularly noteworthy that in 1708-1709 the Georgian printing press was established. In 1709–1712, the editions of the New Testament, Psalms and the "Knight in the Panther's Skin" were issued by Vakhtang King the 6<sup>th</sup> which were preceded by comparing the number of manuscripts to each other by the Scholars' Commission, establishing the text and commenting on it.

This tradition continued in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. The editions of separate works, for example, "Visramianysas" and "The Knight in the Panther's Skin" were based on dedicated work of such Commissions. With more or less intensity, the Georgian manuscript book preserved the existence until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The relationship with European culture contributed not only to the development of the Georgian engraving manuscript book, but also to the introduction of printing. The first Georgian printed book – "Georgian-Italian Dictionary" was published in Rome in 1629. The book is composed by Stephanie Paolin, with the help of Georgian Nikipore Irbakhi, who was the Ambassador of

Teimuraz I from Georgia in the Western countries. This led to development of the printing occupation through the European way. The Georgian-Italian dictionary was not only the first Georgian printed book but also the first Georgian lexicographical work. With the active participation of Nikipore, not less noteworthy book "The Georgian alphabet with the prayers" was printed. Besides, the Georgian translation of the Catholic prayer and the "Georgian grammar" of Majo was published as well.

Despite great achievements in the field of culture, the history of the Georgian book is far behind of the European tradition, although it has significantly overrun the certain states of the Eastern Europe and Near Asia. One of the first books "Abagar" was published in Bulgarian language in 1651 in the same printing house in Rome where the first Georgian editions were published. Since the 1690s Antimos Iveriel made a significant contribution to the foundation of the printing press in Romania. He contributed greatly to the development of printing press in the Arabic and Greek languages, not to mention his indivisible merit in the establishment of the first printing press in Georgia in 1709. The first Turkish-Arabian printing house in Ottoman was created in Ottoman Empire in 1727 and in Iraq – in 1829 under the auspices of Daud Giorgian (David Giorgi Manvelashvili) (Chikobava, Vateishvili, 1983).

Taking the political situation existing in the nearest East, Caucasus and, namely, in Georgia in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries into account, Niko Berdzenishvili (1979) considers this fundamental change in Georgian culture as a paradox. It is enough to recall the history of Georgia. After the overthrow of Byzantium, Georgia was divided into independent kingdom-principalities, and it was included into the environment of aggressively-disposed Muslim states, which, especially after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, contributed to increasing the invasions of conquerors and deepening the contradictions existing inside the country. The Fields of domination in Georgia were distributed between Persia and the Ottoman Turkey. Since then, the struggle for freedom and independence of the Georgian people was going on under very difficult conditions on the background of fighting between Turkey and Iran to obtain the full power in the Transcaucasia. Therefore, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Georgia "had no longer cultural interaction between the West and the East as was used to be in the old times, but it was placed in the middle of the two abusers and was almost entirely cut off from the Western European Cultural World" (Berdzenishvili, 1973).

In the period of the printed press, the study of the Georgian written culture was at appropriate level, although it suffered the pressure of the Soviet ideology, which prohibited all what was foreign and did not allow scholars to have access to the scientific achievements of the world. The starting point for this ideology was atheism. Because of the strict censorship, the Biblical and religious texts were issued in other names, such as "Mtkheta Manuscript", "Khanmeti Miscellany", and others.

After collapse the Soviet Union, the Georgian scientists were given possibility to cut 'the iron curtain' to the West and catch up with the Western scientific achievements.

Since the 1990s, the new technologies created the new perspectives for research and the new challenges emerged before the Georgian scientists – to implement the technology-based methods in researches. In 1882, O. Walter used the term 'the technologizing of the word' (Ong, 1982), indicating the beginning a new era in the life of mankind.

Since this time on, the Georgian scientists have been trying to keep track of the newest achievements. In 1999, in collaboration with European researchers, by financial support from The Volkswagen Foundation they began to implement the project, aiming at creating the database of the Georgian written cultural heritage, introducing some philological departments of the main scientific institutions of the Republic of Georgia into the framework of the World Wide Web, unifying in the form of the Data Bank ("Armazi").\*

The project "Armazi" unites subprojects and represents the digital resources of the certain materials available at the research-educational institutions participating in the project. In the course of several individual projects, the participating institutes developed and tested methods of providing digital data for a common usage in research and teaching.

In 2003–2007, the Volkswagen Foundation funded the project "Palimpsests of Caucasian Provenance: New Approaches",<sup>†</sup> aiming at deciphering and editing the Caucasian-Albanian

\* [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://armazi.uni-frankfurt.de/framee.htm>

† [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://armazi.uni-frankfurt.de/framee.htm>



palimpsests of Mt. Sinai and the Georgian palimpsest Cod.Vind.georg. 2 of the Austrian National Library with new scientific methods. By applying multispectral imaging, the project partners (J. Gippert, W. Schulze, Z. Aleksidze, J.-P. Mahé) succeeded in reading or reconstructing up to 98 % of the lower texts of the palimpsests.

The scientific partnership project “The Georgian National Corpus” (GNC) is a product of digital culture. It was created on the base of International project “The Georgian National Corpus – creation of the technological framework”, implemented from 2012, by financial support from Volkswagen Foundation. It aims to develop a comprehensive corpus which makes the Georgian language in all its diachronic and synchronic diversity accessible to scientific investigations from various perspectives (linguistics, literary studies, history, political and social sciences etc.).\* Supporting resources of the project are the following projects: ARMAZI, TITUS,<sup>†</sup> GDC, Corpuscle.<sup>‡</sup>

Since 2015, Iliia State University has been carrying out the collaborative project “The Epigraphic Corpus of Georgia”,<sup>§</sup> aiming at documenting the epigraphic legacy preserved or found in the territory of Georgia, according to the standards of EpiDoc, the digital heir to the Leiden Convention. In the framework of the project, besides the Georgian, the digital publication of the corpora of the Urartian cuneiform, Aramaic, Greek, Jewish, Arabic, Persian and Armenian inscriptions are also being prepared.\*\*

The monuments can be found on the project website by place, date, text category, monument type and numbering. The digital edition combining the critical and diplomatic editions, is supplied by map showing the places where the epigraphic material is preserved.

By digital publishing of inscriptions of Georgia, the scientific team expects to preserve the epigraphic material of Georgia and the editions of these inscriptions made by Georgian scientists since 1930s, but only few of them were published in international scientific journals.

From 2016, they have been preparing the new project on documenting and digital publishing of the cuneiform inscriptions of Georgia, published by Giorgi Melikishvili, the author of a grammar of Urartian (1963).

But this is a drop in the sea. Due to the limited use of digital technologies, the ancient Georgian cultural monuments, including manuscripts, are still inaccessible to world science, that have attracted the attention of foreign scientists since old times. We need to implement as much as possible the new technologies in the researches.

### 3. Conclusion

The research confirms that the development and refinement of the Georgian written culture and its study, alongside with the internal supporting factors, was promoted by the cultural relations with the civilized states of old times, Byzantine (Eastern Roman Empire) and the whole Christian Western or Eastern world. The high level of Georgian written tradition in the Middle Ages was achieved thanks to these links. Georgian culture was adopting all the best from foreign cultures all over the world and implanted it on its own ground, giving it the national, original character. The past experience teaches us that scientific networks with West and entire civilized world are extremely important for us to fill out the gaps in the researches with the modern methods and get back the international level, we always had. The scientific projects fulfilled in the nearest past or running now in collaboration with foreign scientists give us hope that technology-based researches in the direction of study the Georgian written culture will successfully continue in Georgia.

### 4. Acknowledgments

The work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSF) [Grant #DP2016\_18, ‘Textual Scholarship and Editorial Studies’].

\* [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://gnc.gov.ge/gnc/page?page-id=gnc-project>

† [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/indexe.htm>

‡ [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://clarino.uib.no/korpuskel/page>

§ [Electronic resource]. URL: <http://epigraphy.iliauni.edu.ge/en-US>

\*\* Principal Investigator Nino Dobarjginidze.

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