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## GEORGIANS AND THEIR MANNER OF DRESS IN THE RESOURCES OF XV-XVII CENTURY ITALIAN AUTHORS

**Abstract:** The article contains valuable information about the Georgian people gathered from the works of Italian authors (travelers, ambassadors, missionaries) of the XV-XVII centuries. The aim of the research is to emphasize the significance of cultural realities seen and described through the eyes of foreigners - against the background of the scarcity of this kind of materials in Georgian resources of that time.

The main focus was on the description of life standards, characteristic features, clothes, appearance and illustrative engravings. It is concluded that foreign references of the XV-XVII centuries helps to recognize Georgia's historical importance and cultural identity of the nation.

**Key words:** Travelers, engraving, Georgian clothing, Italian sources, Georgia, manuscript.

**Language:** English

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### Introduction

Located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, as the successor of ancient Colchis and a small country, which persistently defended Christianity in the surrounding Muslim world, Georgia has always been an object of interest for foreign travelers. Due to the travelers' records Georgia attracted the attention of the European Community and ongoing events were consecutively reflected in the press and various publications. In the XV-XIX centuries, Georgia drew a great deal of interest from the diplomatic authorities of the Vatican Curia and Venice. Thanks to the very reports and memoirs provided by the missionaries and ambassadors we have access to the most valuable

information that can be scarcely found in Georgian resources. The data concerns various nuances, morals and customs, daily lifestyle of the Georgian people as well as their characteristic features, appearance and manner of dress. It's of great significance to take all those important facts seen from the outside through the eyes of a foreigner, but it's noteworthy that mostly religious, ethnic or political bias and partial attitudes had a tendency to give a wrong and distorted picture. Therefore, some foreign travelers admired the Georgian people (thankfully the majority of them) but others seemed to be critical of them. Nevertheless, daily life images, perceived and described through the

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eyes of foreigners, still remain fascinating for the general public.

The manuscript resource – “**Livre des merveilles**” by the Venetian traveler and merchant **Marco Polo** (1254 - 1324) contains some information about the Georgians and illustrative materials [1]. The manuscript is included in an extensive collection dating back to 1410-1412, which combines the stories of the first European travelers to distant China and other Asian countries (works by a total of seven authors).

Marco Polo, who travelled via the ancient trade route, the silk road through Georgia to reach China, along with the description of the mountains regions of Georgia and its capital, the author also writes about the Georgians as follows: “The people are very handsome, capital archers, and most valiant soldiers. They are Christians of the Greek Rite, and have a

fashion of wearing their hair cropped, like Churchmen”. Marco Polo also emphasizes the tradition of making valuable gold silk fabric material in Georgia: “Silk is produced in great abundance. They also weave cloths of gold, and all kinds of very fine silk stuffs” [2, p. 31-32].

One of the miniatures of the manuscript depicts King David-Ulu hunting (fol. 8r) [1, p. 19]. There is a hawk or falcon on the King’s shoulder which is trained for falconry (figure -1). The miniature is made by the Master of the **Mazarine**. Mazarine couldn’t have been an eyewitness and could not have had any instructions from the author about the appearance and clothes of the Georgian king. Therefore, his clothes are of European style and do not look like the hunting clothing, so called “kabarcha” that the Georgian kings and nobles used to wear [3, p. 34].



Figure 1 - A miniature from a book by Marco Polo



Figure 2 - Georgian – Engraving from the book of Cesare Vecelio

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The miniature is valuable as it is the first painting made in Europe. However, it isn't entirely authentic, with the image of a Georgian historical figure – David VII i.e. David Ulu king of Georgia.

Chronologically the following source is by the Venetian merchant, **Josaphat Barbaro** (1413 – 1495), who was a diplomat and a statesman as well. Within 1436-79 he lived and travelled in various countries. He described his long journeys and wrote a book “**Travels of Josaphat Barbaro, Ambassador from Venice to Tanna, in 1436**” based on his experiences. It contains political-economic and ethnographic information about the morals and ethics of different countries, including Georgia and the Georgians: “The people are very handsome and well made, but they have the most horrid manners, and the worst customs of any people I ever met with. Their heads are shaved, except a few hairs all around, like our rich abbots; and they wear whiskers, six inches long. On their heads they wear a cap of various colours, with a feather on the top. Their bodies are covered by a strait-bodied jacket, having tolerably long skirts, which are cloven behind, quite up to their loins, as otherwise they could not conveniently sit on horseback; but I do not blame them for this fashion, as the French wear the same kind of dress. On their feet and ankles they wear boots, but the soles are so strangely made, that when a man walks, his heels and toes only touch the ground, while the middle of the foot is raised up so high, that one may thrust the fist through below; and thence they walk with great difficulty” [4, p. 45].

Within 1473-1477 **Ambrogio Conrarini** (1429 – 1499), a Venetian diplomat travelled twice through Georgia. He was the ambassador of Venice to Persia to Uzun Hassan's court. Conrarini wrote about his travels and diplomatic missions in his work “**Viaggio al signor Usun Hassan re di Persia**”, in which he described Georgia as well. The author gives brief information about the cities of Batumi, Poti (Faso), Kutaisi, Gori and Tbilisi. In general, he refers to the lifestyle and customs of the population, for example, he says that the Megrelians "sell thickish canvas fabric and wax." It should be noted that due to the hardships, illness, robbery (both by the kings and the robbers) and the many sufferings that befell him during both travels, the author was not utterly fascinated by his travels in Georgia, therefore, his story is characterized by the tendency.

He refers to Georgians as foolish, capricious, less hard-working people. It is true that he repeatedly acknowledges the outward appearance of charismatic Georgian men, but he also talks about the strangeness of their behavior and even regards Georgian clothes as eccentric [5, p. 50].

In the beginning of 1539, the Venetian ambassador **Michele Membrè** (1509 - 1594) traveled to Georgia, in particular to Samegrelo, Imereti and Kartli, and was sent by the Venetian authorities to

Persia to Shahtamaz's court. He described his travels in his book “**Mission to the Lord Sophy of Persia (1539-1542)**”. In the report, Membrè covers the trade relations between the Ottomans and Georgia and describes the way the Megrelian peasants and the nobles dress: “The Mingrelians go very poorly dressed, all with short cotton clothes and unshod, which we value for nothing. But it is quite true that all their feet look as if they were scabby. They wear on their heads a piece of felt like a mitre; they are all very small. To the north are many high mountains. The Mingrelian gentlemen wear very long clothes and a pair of boots of sheepskin leather, not having a leather sole but all of that sheepskin; also coloured felt on the head; and they are unbearded, with long moustaches such as the Iberians [eastern Georgians] have...”

Membrè describes the outward appearance and attire of the nobilities in the following way: “And they wear clothes, that is very long stockings of cotton cloth, of very coarse cotton, and cloth breeches, with, over the stockings, boots of sheepskin leather, and a quilted shirt of coarse cotton cloth, and a very long dolman of cotton cloth; and on the head a felt hat with a very long fine top. Which felts are coloured. Their arms are swords, lances, shield, bow and arrows, iron mace, mail coat, cuirassine, half helmet, plate gauntlets, good horses with good silk covers such that an arrow cannot go through them” [6, p. 109; 7, p. 255].

The books by the Italian artist, engraver and publisher **Cesare Vecellio** (1521-1601) with engravings of costumes of the world population mustn't be omitted. The author had been updating, diversifying and re-publishing his works over the years. The 1590 edition “**Habiti antichi et moderni di tutto il mondo**” includes 419 engravings (on wood), of the costumes of the people from different countries all over the world. It also includes a commentary with a more or less complete description of the items of clothing and headwear. 2 pages in the book are dedicated to Georgian costumes [8, p. 453]. One of them describes Georgian clothes and a headscarf, the other presents an engraving with the image of a Georgian man (figure - 2).

The book seems to have aroused public interest, as evidenced by its multiple editions in 1598, 1625, 1859-60, not only in Italian but also in other languages.

General information about Georgian costumes can be found in the Georgian-European diplomatic materials of the XVI-XVII centuries. Especially, a rather extensive document sent by **Marco Antonio Abanio** to Cardinal Santa Severina in Rome contains information about Georgia.

The above mentioned facts were obtained thanks to the ambassador of the King of Kartli- Simon I the great, named Alexander. Apart from the description of geographical location, natural conditions and cities of Georgia, it involves some information concerning



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their way of dressing. "The population is suffering from extreme weather, which is caused by heavy snow that covers the above-mentioned mountains but they enjoy wearing the clothes made of animal skins and bombazine cloth as well. Georgian women wear a variety of fabrics richly decorated with goldthread and silk. They are beautiful and they are brave spirits". The author also emphasizes the abundance of silk in Georgia [9, p. 191].

An engraving with a portrait of King Simon I of Kartli dates back to the same period (figure - 3). The engraving "**Simeon prencipe de Giorgiani**" has the author's last name - **Giovanni Orlandi** and the place of its origin - Rome<sup>1</sup> [10]. This makes it possible to give the graving an approximate age. The author of the portrait, Italian engraver and publisher Giovanni Orlando lived in Rome until 1590 and then in Nepal within 1590-1640. Thus, we can conclude that the graving had been created by 1950 [11].

Italian traveler, historian and diplomat **Pietro Della Valle** provided very interesting information about Georgia and Georgian people. He had never had a chance of visiting Georgia by himself. He just got acquainted with some Georgians while he was staying in Iran and the relationships had a special impression on Pietro. He was so fascinated by their strong character, chivalrous spirit and beauty of Georgian women that he immediately got interested to familiarize himself with the history of Georgia as well as its political situation.

Della Valle wrote about Georgia and Georgian people in regular letters to Naples and in a report to the Pope "**Informazione della Giorgia data alla Papa Urbano VIII l'anno 1627**"<sup>2</sup>, as well as in his works - "**Account of Shah Abbas**" (1628) and "**The Adventures of Signora Maria Tinatin Ziba, the second wife of Della Valle**" (which tells the story of his wife, a Georgian girl - Mariam Tinatin de Ziba (Mariuccia)). It describes the history-geography of Georgian kingdoms and principalities, customs, pictures of life and current political and economic situation. The letters tell the story of King Luarsab, the tragedy of the sons of King Teimuraz I. Della Valle expressed her deepest sympathy for Queen Catherine, who had been at the Shah's court for a long time after her martyrdom, he got the Theatine fathers to send the Queen's sacred parts as relics to Rome which he kept to himself.

The author always found words of praise for Georgians: "I consider Georgians one of the most beautiful nations in the world". They are truly shrewd, sharp-minded, considerate, polite, gentle, decorous, warm-hearted, but proud, arrogant, ruthless and unpardoning at the same time".

Valle precisely perceived the psychological type of a Georgian. He writes the following: Georgians are brave, but less unanimous in an action; they tend to carry out hostile acts and spread hatred among people to kill each other. Generally, they are calm, obedient, kind-hearted, and simple in relationship; "They are not stubborn, liars, two-faced during the negotiations and every good deed can be resolved with them" [12, pp. 29-64].

During the same period, another Italian missionary, **Francisco-Maria Maggio**, was the first to lay the foundation for the scientific study of the Georgian language. Throughout his eight-year missionary service in Georgia, he thoroughly studied the Georgian language and after returning to his homeland, he published a solid research on "**Grammar book**" [13, pp.92-95]. This was an important publication by which European Kartvelologists (Kartvelian studies) received information about the Georgian language until the 19th century.

The Georgian public is also aware of the works of the Italian missionary, Theatine father with the holy order **Arcangelo Lamberti** 1630-1649 and his contributions in Georgia, especially in the principality of Odisha. As he returned to his homeland - Naples in 1653, he published the book "**Relazione della Colchide hoggi detta Mengrella, nella quale si tratta dell'origine, costumi, e cose naturali di quei paesi**". This edition is, in fact, the first extensive work about Georgia. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the political and socio-economic situation, life and culture, local customs and natural resources of the Odisha county and Georgia in general. The whole chapter is dedicated to Georgian attire. He describes people of different rank and clearly illustrates their clothing, headwear and footwear. His description clearly demonstrates extreme hardship of the poor and privileged condition of superior nobilities towards their inferiors. In addition to everyday attire, the author also describes festive attire- with luxurious fabrics (velvet, brocade) with the lining of zibeline and embellished with gold and pearl buttons. He remarks that they have several these kinds of clothes of different fabrics designed for special occasions. Lamberti's attention is not limited to other types of attire, be it the noble ladies' equestrian clothing, the warriors' harness, or the robes of the clergy. The author describes these types of clothes in detail and gives high marks [14, pp. 26-45, 74, 119].

Later, in 1657, Lamberti published a second book - "**Colchide sacra**", which is little known to Georgian readers. It tells the whole story of the

<sup>1</sup> The engraving is currently preserved in the Vatican Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Pietro della Valle's report is kept in the Vatican Library. The document was published by the famous 17th century French writer

and traveler Melchisedrk Thevenot (1620-1692) in his work - "Relations de divers voyages curieux qui n'ont point été publiés".

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Theatine mission sent to Georgia by the Pope Curia in 1631-1649.

The work of the Italian missionary, theatine father with the holy order, **Cristoforo de Castelli**, the same as Teramo Castelli (1597-1659), is very important for the study of Georgian lifestyle of the 17th century. The materials (sketches compiled into seven skeletal albums, visual documents, official reports, etc.) collected by this versatile teacher, which are scattered in Italian libraries and archives, are truly invaluable and provides inexhaustible source to describe any aspect of current Georgian realities. Therefore, we will only touch on it here in general. Castel has not neglected peculiarity of any part of

Georgia. In his work he pays equal attention to the portrait images of kings and a completely lower stratum (figure - 4), the characteristic environment of their existence and activities (feasting, baptism, mourning, burial, agricultural activities, sports competitions, hunting, etc.) designs of buildings, descriptions of clothing and jewelry, scenes of missionary activity, fantastic stories - all seen with his own eyes and things that he experienced himself. Interestingly, when creating portrait sketches, the author is able to fully convey the appearance and character of a person, to describe his features and characterize the clothes. Moreover, he clearly depicts his attitude towards the individuals.

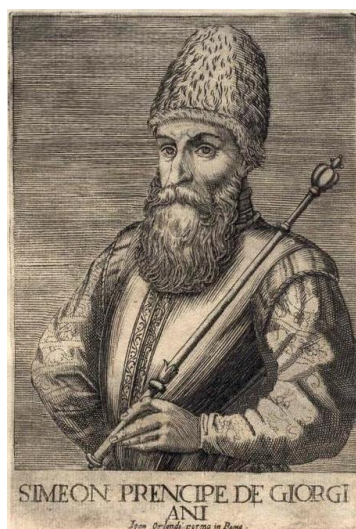


Figure 3 - King Simon I, engraving by Giovanni Orlando



Figure 4 - Pictures from Castel's album: a - King Alexander III of Imereti; b - A peasant woman with a child

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According to what has already been mentioned above, we can conclude that Christopher Castelli, an erudite chronicler, - with his knowledge-education and practical work has contributed greatly to the Georgian historical science [15, p. 458; 16, pp. 29-72; 17, pp. 49-60].

Interesting information about Georgians is contained in a report on a mission in Georgia (**Dionigio Carli da Piacenza Il Moro, 1687, Bassano**) by the Italian Catholic Missioner **Dionigi Carli da Piacenza**. It is valuable source concerning the living standards of Kartli-Kakheti in the 1680s and different aspects of public life. He meticulously described their manner to dress, wedding, mourning, horse riding, "Kabakhi" (old Georgian equestrian game), tennis, etc. The missionary describes in detail the ceremony of putting on a robe presented by the khan. The way to dress had its own rite and the king had to disrobe in front of people gathered on the square to witness how he put on new item of clothing gifted by the Shah. These and other similar

descriptions are indicative of the author's in-depth observation skills [18, pp.160-176].

### Conclusion

Undoubtedly, in the XV-XVII centuries the Italians showed little interest in Georgia. Particularly active are the periods when the Venetian government forged to establish diplomatic relations with the countries of the East, while the Pope's Curia intensively sent missionaries of various orders to Georgia to propagate Catholicism. Their interest today, even after so long, really gains high topicality. Not only because it livens real pictures of the lifestyle, character and appearance of Georgians of the XV-XVII centuries seen through the eyes of Europeans, but also it allows to regard Georgia as a Christian country that retains the cultural identity of the nation.

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