

AMIRANI, A GEORGIAN FOLK HERO

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The Georgian¹ folk legend which follows is taken from the basic work on the subject, Amirani Enchained, by the Soviet scholar Mikhail Chikovani.² His research is devoted to the links between and the possible mutual influence of the Greek myth of Prometheus and the Georgian legend about Amirani, a hero who was chained to a mountain crag. Together with an analysis of ancient and modern works of history, archaeology, and folklore, the book contains sixty-eight versions of the legend recorded in various regions of Georgia during the period 1848-1945. Our choice of version has been guided by the words of the author who indicates that the Svan³ legend is one of the most ancient.

After the publication of Amirani Enchained, Chikovani returned several times in his articles and books to the questions he posed in this work. His conclusions are the following: 1) Amongst the legends about folkloric giants who were enchained, that of Amirani is closest to the Promethean myth in plot structure and philosophical content; 2) the legends connected with the name of Amirani are of more ancient origin than the antique myth; 3) the Greeks adopted several motifs from the mythology of the Colchian tribes of the Black Sea littoral; 4) the folkloric and literary developments of the figures of Prometheus and Amirani occurred independently of one another in Greece and Georgia.⁴

What grounds did the Georgian scholar have for comparing the Greek and Georgian myths? What research has been conducted into the legend of Amirani? These are the questions to which we will attempt to provide a brief answer in the following paragraphs.

Students of antiquity are well acquainted with the works of the classical poets (Hesiod, Homer, Aeschylus) and the historians (Herodotus, Strabo and Apollonius of Rhodes) which bear witness to the Greeks' familiarity with the culture of several Caucasian tribes. As early as the pre-Homeric era, the Greeks in all probability knew of the existence of Colchis, as they called the land along both banks of the River Phasis⁵ (modern Rioni), and the Colchians, the inhabitants of that land. In the sixth century, B.C., Greek colonies already existed there. According to the antique myth it was there, on the snow-covered summits of the Caucasus, which give rise to the River Phasis, that Zeus enfettered Prometheus for his rebellious act. It was to this fabulous land, to the estuary of the Phasis, that Jason brought his ship the Argo to seize the Golden Fleece from King Aeëtes. After a long and arduous journey the ship reached the eastern shores of the Black Sea. "Soon the Caucasus Range towered above the Argonauts, and they entered the mouth of the broad Phasis river, which waters Colchis. First pouring a libation of wine mixed with honey to the gods of the land, Jason concealed the Argo in a sheltered backwater, where he called a council of war."⁶ Jason achieved his purpose with the aid of Medea, Aeëtes' daughter: "She offered him a flask of lotion, blood-red juice of the two stalked

saffron colored Caucasian crocus, which would protect him against the bull's fiery breath; this potent flower first sprang from the blood of the tortured Prometheus."⁷ Now he could without fear carry out any task the king might set. As we see, Medea did not have far to journey to find these magical flowers that "sprang from the blood of tortured Prometheus."

By the middle of the last century many Russian and Georgian scholars had expressed opinions on the probability of the Greek myth having a Caucasian origin. In 1883 the Russian folklorist Vs. Miller in his article "Caucasian Legends About Enchained Giants" wrote:

-The firmly held belief of the Greeks that Prometheus was enchained somewhere in the Caucasus must necessarily have some foundation.... It is inconceivable that mere imaginative whim bore off to Asia, to the Caucasus, a national god, in whose honor every year torch races were held in Athens, and whose myth, connected with the early cultural progress of the Hellenes, was so popular that it served as the subject for the famous trilogy by Aeschylus.⁸

However, if the figure of Prometheus has stirred the minds of European poets and thinkers for many centuries, the name of Amirani is known only to a small group of specialists. The hero of the ancient Colchian myths never was to find his Aeschylus.

The first literary treatment of the Georgian legend of Amirani dates from the twelfth century, A.D. The medieval writer Mose Khoneli created a monumental knightly epic *Amiran-Daredzhaniani*.⁹ This extensive work (more than seven hundred pages long) is a typical heroic adventure tale. The author employed many motifs from Persian folklore, the imitation of which, according to the artistic norms of Georgian poetry of the day, was a requirement of the high style. Prior to the appearance of this epic no literary monuments existed (or rather, up until now none have been discovered) which prove the indigenous origin of the Amirani legend. This gave reason for several scholars to doubt its initial appearance in the Georgian folklore tradition. Some even thought that the legend spread amongst the Georgian tribes only after the composition of *Amiran-Daredzhaniani*. However, this thesis was soon rejected. Although Amirani is the central hero of the epic, the themes from the folk legend do not occupy a central position in the work. If one isolates the episodes relating to the legend, they do not make up a compositional whole. They are uncoordinated and weakly linked, reflecting only separate themes from the legend, and, consequently, could not be responsible for the extensive dissemination of such compositionally complete variants. Moreover, recently discovered archaeological materials confirm that the legend was known amongst the ancient Georgian tribes before the eighth century, B.C.¹⁰ A structural linguistic analysis of the texts of the legends themselves points to their pre-Christian origin.¹¹

-It is interesting to note that in several variants of the legend Christ appears as one of the characters, usually the godfather of Amirani. The latter wishes to be the strongest man in the world and several times asks Christ to increase his physical powers. Twice Christ accedes to his request, and, granting his

wish a third time, says to him: "I know that you will misuse it [his strength]. You will squander it on evil and bring great shame upon yourself." Indeed, this is what occurs: Amirani grows conceited and challenges his godfather to a trial of strength. Christ twice plunges a stick into the earth and each time Amirani pulls it out with ease. The third time the Almighty commands the stick to change into a tree "with roots girdling the earth and a crest reaching the heavens." Amirani struggles vainly to tear it from the earth. As punishment for his insolence, Christ chains his godson to the tree and covers it with an icy summit of the Caucasus.¹² This episode bears the obvious traces of the pagan myth's assimilation by the Christian moralistic tradition.

In the Svan version, which we present here, Christ is also mentioned. Amirani thrice swears by his name to keep his word, and breaks it all three times, revealing his heathen nature. It is perhaps worth mentioning the similarity of two of the legend's episodes with incidents in the Bible. The first involves the abandoning of the child in his cradle by the river and his subsequent discovery and adoption, which is reminiscent of the story of Moses. The second is Amirani's delivery from the stomach of a dev, or in some variants a whale-dragon, which somewhat distantly parallels the misadventures of the prophet Jonah. However, these themes are not necessarily derived from the Christian tradition. The scheme, a child (usually a boy)--a trunk (basket, cradle etc.)--water, is one of the most ancient motifs in the trials and sufferings of a mythological hero. The spring as a meeting place, or a place of recognition or discovery is not only a most important element in Georgian folktales, but also of everyday life. As recently as twenty years ago one often encountered the Georgian joke (not without a good deal of truth to it, incidentally), that no radio or newspaper will ever replace the village well. As for the whale-dragon, it has deep roots in the culture of the Caucasian tribes. Stone engravings and sculptures of fish, considered by historians to be idols of the pagan era, have been found in Georgia and are dated as belonging to the second millenium, B.C.¹³ The motif of the whale-dragon who swallowed the sun is very common in Georgian folklore. Most likely the extraordinary popularity of St. George in the country owes itself to the tradition of his having killed a dragon. The Christian story must have echoed something primordially Georgian.¹⁴

From the twelfth century onwards Amirani becomes a byword for strength and courage in Georgian literature. However, the first record and study of the folk legend per se dates only from the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1848 Teimuraz Batonishvili, a Georgian scholar, published in St. Petersburg his history of Georgia.¹⁵ The author presented several variants of the legend, linking them for the first time with the myth of Prometheus, and thus laying the basis for subsequent research into the possible links between the Greek and Georgian myths. In 1892 the famous Georgian writer Georgij Tsereteli published a long article "Caucasian Myths on Georgian Soil,"¹⁶ offering an interesting interpretation of the names of the characters in the legend, employing the mythological theory. For example, Sulkalmakhi (in some variants the father, in others, the brother of Amirani) means "trout-spirit" and in the symbolic sense, "mountain air." Badri (Amirani's brother) means "full moon," and by extension, "snow white." Kamar-Ketu is the beautiful princess whom Amirani abducts. The first part of her name signifies "the firmament," whilst the second is derived from the Svan word khathkathi, the verb "to shine, glitter." Amirani's name

Tsereteli links with the ancient Georgian mere, mereni, "river," "rivers." "Thus," he concludes, "Amirani in the figurative sense represents the plural concept of rivers, which in the myth becomes an eponym, a symbolization."¹⁷ These derivations are still obvious in modern Georgian, with the exception of Amirani.

From the end of the nineteenth century interest in the legend grew not only amongst scholars but also writers and poets. There was a particular historico-political reason for this: a strengthening of the feeling of national consciousness in Georgia. At this time, Russian was declared the official language. Georgian was banned in all institutes of learning. In the gymnasias and the seminary in Tbilisi, the reading or speaking of Georgian was forbidden. Only with great difficulty was permission obtained from the Russian government for the publication of a single Georgian newspaper Iveria. The Georgian intelligentsia rallied to this newspaper, attempting to foster interest in the national culture, language, and history, and to counteract the Russification of the country. It is easy to imagine what an inspiration the legend of a Georgian Prometheus provided: the story of a hero enchained on the cliffs of the Caucasus, who, as several variants had it, would sometime break his chains and take revenge upon his enemies. Amirani became the subject of many stories, poems, and plays. Particularly popular was the verse by the outstanding Georgian poet Akakij Tsereteli, "Amirani." It contains the following lines:

Amirani, chained to the Caucasian peaks,
Is Georgia herself,
And the ravens (tearing at his breast)
They are her enemies.¹⁸

Even nowadays the legend of Amirani is extraordinarily popular throughout Georgia. In many villages the inhabitants will relate to you his heroic deeds in both prose and verse; they will show you the mountain to which he was fettered. There are many such sites of his punishment. One of them in the southwest of Georgia is named Amiran-mta, which means "Amirani's mountain." The name Amirani is often given to boys even today. The expressions, "as bold as Amirani," "he will be a real Amirani," "he fights like Amirani," are to be heard amongst town and country populace alike. How meaningful for the people the legend still is nowadays can be judged from an interesting account quoted by Chikovani.¹⁹ In 1936 a variant was published which had only recently been recorded in one of the western areas of Georgia. The narrator characterized Amirani as a diligent student who graduates with honors from high school, and loves to read newspapers and magazines. It is in the press that he learns of the existence of a beautiful princess and immediately falls in love with her. "Amirani went to the library and read the newspaper. In the newspaper it said: There is an Eastern king who has a beautiful daughter. He keeps her locked up in a castle with nine locks. The castle is surrounded by a huge army, so that no one can steal away the beautiful maid." The story fuses the real and everyday with the make-believe and fantastic elements in a most fanciful way.

The popularity of the legend amongst city dwellers is to a great extent explained by the fact that it is part of the school program. At an early age, children learn by heart verses about the hero who is "like a great black

thunder cloud about to burst into streams of rain."

Amirani contrasts sharply with the heroes of the epic The Knight in a Tiger Skin, created by the great twelfth century poet of Georgia, Shota Rustaveli. For Amirani the idea of service to God, a sovereign, or a lady, so important even in early medieval literature, is completely foreign. The motifs of his deeds are determined far more by tribal and familial relations than by religious faith or loyalty to a monarch. He returns his eye to his stepfather, abducts the girl he falls in love with, saves his brothers. He even hunts, delighting in his own strength and daring. For him the concepts of good and evil do not exist, just as they did not exist for Adam and Eve before their expulsion from Paradise. He employs his boundless strength without regard for any moral precepts. He does not hesitate to break his word, which for a medieval knight would be a shameful defiling of his honor. Without so much as a thought, he kills a youth simply because he sees in him a future rival. Even the rescue of the sun, when swallowed by the dragon, is devoid of any feeling of an intentional, premeditated act in the name of mankind, which is so important a consideration for the Greek Prometheus. Amirani, however, is a more spontaneous figure. He is as unpredictable, as indomitable, and as splendid as nature herself. Each of his deeds is the action of a free man, yet one who has no conception of freedom. He is as wayward as a mountain stream which chooses its path in the onrush of its waters, yielding only before the physically impassable. Perhaps Tsereteli's interpretation connecting his name with the idea of a river best explains Amirani's essential nature.

NOTES

1. Georgia is one of the trans-Caucasian republics of the U.S.S.R. In 1801, by decree of Tsar Alexander I, it became part of the Russian Empire. After the Revolution of 1917, it became independent. In 1921 it was joined to the Soviet Union as the Georgian Socialist Republic.
2. Midzhachvuli Amirani (in Georgian) (Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University Press, 1947).
3. The Svans are the descendants of the most ancient Georgian tribes. They live in the northwest of the country, on the southern slopes of the Caucasian range. As a result of the isolation of their way of life, dictated by the rugged nature of the terrain they inhabit, they have to this day preserved many ancient traditions. Until recent times it was extremely difficult to reach the Svan villages by road. For six months of the year the inhabitants were cut off from the outside world by snow.
4. In the oldest versions of the Greek myth, the episode of the chaining to the Caucasian mountain ridge is missing (Hesiod), as is also the hero's imprisonment in a cave (Hesiod, Aeschylus). See M. Chikovani, "Vzaimootnosheniya mifov o Prometei i Amirani" [The Interrelationships of the Myths of Prometheus and Amirani], Literaturnye svjazi [Literary Connections] (Tbilisi: Metsniereba), 1969, pp. 52-53.

5. Some historians consider that this river gave its name to the "Phasian bird," or pheasant. See, for example, D.M. Lang, The Georgians (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966), pp. 67-68.
6. Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, vol. 2 (Great Britain: Penguin, 1969); p. 235.
7. Ibid., p. 238.
8. Quoted by M. Chikovani in Midzhachvuli Amirani [Amirani Enchained], pp. 19-20.
9. Translated by R. H. Stevenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).
10. Chikovani, Midzhachvuli Amirani, pp. 57-88.
11. Georgia was Christianized in the fourth century, A.D. According to the legend, the teaching was brought by St. Nino of Cappadocia. The cross, said to have been made by St. Nino herself at this time, was made from the stem of the grape vine bound with woman's hair. It is still preserved in one of the Georgian State museums.
12. Version number 24 in Chikovani, Midzhachvuli Amirani, pp. 312-327.
13. Chikovani, Midzhachvuli Amirani, pp. 83-88.
14. The name "Georgia" was explained by Westerners (mistakenly) as being connected with this saint. It is in fact derived from the Persian names for the Georgians, "Kurj" or "Gurj." The Georgians call their country "Sakartvelo," which means "land of the Kartvels," the Georgians' name for themselves.
15. Kartlis Tskhovreba (in Georgian) (Sankt-Peterburg, 1854).
16. In a Russian language newspaper Kavkaz, nos. 73-74 (Tiflis, 1892).
17. Chikovani, Midzhachvuli Amirani, pp. 21-22.
18. In A. Tsereteli, Rcheuli Leksebi (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1968), p. 53.
19. Chikovani, Midzhachvuli Amirani, p. 11.