

The “Caucasian Gate” – a Determining Factor for the Emergence and Existence of the State System in Central Transcaucasia

The great mountain range of the Caucasus, one of the most important watershed systems in the world, separates not only Transcaucasia and Ciscaucasia, but also the remote and vast areas of the Middle East and Central Eurasia, representing since ancient times an insurmountable barrier, which separated the nomads of Eurasia from the civilized societies of the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Apparently, in the conflicting interdependence between the inhabitants of Ciscaucasia and Transcaucasia (in the broadest sense of these terms), the first had the function of the aggressor. The main cause of this controversy should have been the property and economical situation of the societies located in these areas; it can be said that ‘wealthy’ sedentary residents were attacked by nomadic ‘dispossessed’. In these different or opposite parts of the world from antiquity were, on the one hand, *Terra Incognita*, ‘unknown, unconscious land’ or ‘the realm of barbarians’ and, on the other hand, *Oikumene* (*οἰκουμένη*), the old civilized world of common interests – ‘the realm of reasonable men’.

Consequently, the need for control of the ‘Caucasian Gate’, or Dariali Passage, would inevitably be on the agenda for the security of *Oikoumene*. Central Transcaucasia, which was immediately south of the ‘Caucasian Gate’, would not be left outside the attention of the creators of the new political order. This explains the interrelation between the fall of the Achaemenian state and the emergence in Central Transcaucasia of the East Georgian (Iberian) statehood. The kingdom of Iberia is in its essence the real product of the Hellenistic world and therefore one of the most important links in the extensive chain of states of the one and same world of *Pax Macedonica*.

The 'Caucasian Gate' is frequently called the *Pillars, Stronghold, or Iron Gate* of Alexander the Great by the Classical (Greco-Roman) authors¹. The connection of Alexander's name of the legend with the emergence of the Iberian statehood, known from the old Armenian and Georgian chronicles, indicates the *raison d'être* of this state, namely to be the outpost of the civilized world in its struggle with the tribes of *Gog and Magog*, who live in the *Realm of Darkness* beyond the *Caucasian Gate*². Thus, the concept of Alexander's *Iron Gate*³ was the reflection of the concrete political function of the Georgian State – the control of one of the most important strategic passes of the world. In this context, the words of the old Georgian chronicle should be taken into account, that Alexander gave the Georgians a king or a ruler and an ideological basis – an essential component of all states: "*And ordered Alexander Azon to honor the sun and the moon and the five stars and to serve the God invisible, creator of the universe*"⁴. In Kartli, in the region of Armazi-Mtskheta, assumptions about the earlier existence of the royal power are contradicted by the data of the ancient Georgian chronicles: "*...and this Aso was the first king of Mtskheta, a son of the king of Arian-Georgians*"⁵, or "*...this Pharnavaz was the first king in Kartli, One of the relatives of Kartlos*"⁶.

1 Cl. Ptol., V, IX, Ptolemaei, *Geographiae*, p. 66; Eusebii Hieronymi, *Epistolae*, LXXVII, 8.

2 Cf., Cary, G. *The Medieval Alexander*. Cambridge: University Press, 1956; Preud'homme, N. J. Ambazoukes and the Gatekeepers of the Darial Pass during Late Antiquity. *International Scientific Conference: The Caucasian Gates – Northern Outpost of Georgia 25-27 June, 2021*, Materials. Tbilisi, 2021, pp. 171-175.

3 Cf., Anderson, A. R. *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog, and the Inclosed Nations*. The Medieval Academy of America. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1932, pp. 15-19.

4 Leonti Mroveli. *Live of Georgian Kings*. In: *Life of Kartli*, vol.I. The text is prepared taking into account all the main manuscripts by S. Qaukhchisvili. Tbilisi: Saxelgami, 1955 (in Georgian) , I,18.

5 *The Conversion of Kartli*. Text prepared for publication by B. Gigineishvili & V.Giunashvili. Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1979 (in Georgian), p.320.

6 Leonti Mroveli. *Live of Georgian Kings*, I, 26.

This function of the state seems to have been one of the main decisive factors that challenged the emergence of the Georgian state in the central part of Transcaucasia in the Early Hellenistic period. The location of Georgia, south of the Great Caucasus, in the contact zone of the Eurasian nomads and civilized societies of the Middle East, had predetermined the constant external pressure from the north, a *Challenge* that in turn caused a *Response* – the creation of a state (the Iberian kingdom) in Central Transcaucasia. The *raison d'être* not only of Iberia, but also of other new states of the Classical period, Albania and Lazica (the successive state of Colchis), should be strongholds of the civilized world (Greek *oikoumene* or Roman *Orbis Terrarum*) in its struggle with the barbaric North. However, there was undoubtedly a difference between the western political orientation (the Greek states, Roman and Byzantine empires) of Iberia and also to a certain degree of Lazica, on the one hand, and the eastern orientation (Persia, Parthia) of Albania (together with Armenia), on the other⁷.

The control of the Caucasian passes could create the most favourable opportunity for the preservation of *Pax Romana* in the Middle East. The Iberians were the main allies of the Romans in the region, having supremacy over the *Caucasian Gate*⁸. The close cooperation between the Romans and the Iberians, based on their common strategic interests as parts of the same *Orbis Terrarum* was the *leitmotif* of their relations. At the same time, the rulers of the Iberian kingdom successfully used the favourable strategic location of their country to balance the pressure of the powers coming from all sides of the world, often changing the direction of their orientation. Already Tacitus noted that the Iberians were “*masters of various positions*” and could suddenly *pour* mercenaries from across the Caucasus against their southern enemies⁹.

7 Kavtaradze, G. L. Georgian Chronicles and the *raison d'être* of the Iberian Kingdom (Caucasica II), – *Orbis Terrarum*, Journal of Historical Geography. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2001, pp. 177-237.

8 *Cf.*, Syväne, I. Military History of Late Rome 284-361, *Pen and Sword*, Sep 9, 2015, pp. 99-100

9 Tacitus, *Annals*, VI, 33; pp. 212-213.

The long-term aspiration of the medieval Georgian monarchy, which probably is going back to the time of the Roman empire, to bring under its sovereignty not only the *Caucasian Gate* but all existing Caucasian passes from the Black to the Caspian Sea, is expressed in the Georgian chronicle of the eleventh century, “The Life of the Georgian Kings”, by the formula of its territorial integrity: “*from Nikopsia to Daruband*”¹⁰, *i.e.* from the north-eastern Black Sea coast to the *Derbent Gate* (the second important pass of the Caucasus) on the western shore of the Caspian Sea. This formula especially emphasizes the northern borderline along the Caucasus, enables us to interpret the main function of that kingdom in a more general context.

Faced with the necessity of effective control of the Caucasian passes, which blocked the way for the northern invaders, the rulers of the states of the Eastern Mediterranean-Middle Eastern area were always eager to have in Central Transcaucasia – in Iberia – a political organization with sufficient strength to fulfil such a defensive function. The concept of the *Caucasian Gate* determined the fate of the Georgian State from the Early Hellenistic time until the beginning of the 19th century, when the annexation of Georgia by Russia meant the loss of this important function of this state. I think this function was the reason why, as pointed out by C. Toumanoff, Georgia is the only country of Christendom in which the socio-political and cultural development from the Classical period to the beginning of the 19th century passed continuously¹¹.

This overwhelming interest of the Near Eastern-Mediterranean societies in Georgia was not only caused by the abstract defensive function of this country, but mainly by its

10 *I.e.*, from *ca* Tuapse to Derbent; *cf.*, *e.g.*, D. Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012, p. 96.

11 Toumanoff, C. Medieval Georgian Historical Literature (VIIth - XVth Centuries). - *Traditio*, I. *Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought and Religion*. New York, 1943, pp. 142, 150ff., 443; *cf.*, Gugushvili, A. The Chronological-Genealogical Table of the Kings of Georgia, - *Georgica*, 1936, vol. 1-3, pp. 109ff.

concrete location on the edge of civilized and barbarian worlds. Although Georgia and Transcaucasia were open to the influences of these two contrasting models of historical development, the factor of the Great Caucasian range determined its destination as a stronghold of the highly developed and prosperous Middle Eastern-Mediterranean *oikoumene* against the vast area of the Eurasian steppes – an embodiment of the powerful and aggressive forces with their slow pace of social, political, economic and cultural development; or in other words, to be the stronghold of the civilized South and West against the barbarian North and East¹². On the other hand, the northern nomads needed a bridgehead for their raids into the Middle East. The territories of Georgia and Transcaucasia offered the best opportunities for this task. The constant opposition between the barbaric and civilized peoples, aggressors and producers, brigands and creators, were two firestones with the help of which the ‘fire of statehood’ south of the central part of the Great Caucasus, in Central Transcaucasia, was kindled.

The current dangerous political situation in Georgia, the violation of its territorial integrity by a hostile force, is mainly due to the desire to destroy the favourable geopolitical position of the country, thus preventing the restoration of the natural since ancient times border that separated the above-mentioned two Worlds. This situation can for a long time deprive Georgia of the opportunity to revive its primary state function, the ‘meaning of its existence’. It is particularly important today when the new ‘fault lines’ between the democratic and the undemocratic worlds are more visible and deep.

12 Kavtaradze, G. L. Caucasian Georgia - A Bridgehead or a Stronghold of the Modern Geopolitical Games. A Look from the Historical Perspective, – *Amirani, Journal of the International Caucasological Research Institute*, vol. XIV-XV, Montréal - Tbilisi, 2006, pp. 134-140.