

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Southern Caucasus Literatures –Ancient Period

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POETRY

Comparisons. Prior to the invention of the Armenian alphabet in the 5th century, Armenians wrote in Greek, Latin, Middle Persian, and Pahlavi. Although it was arguably the first dominant language of written literary expression in the Caucasus, Greek existed alongside a flourishing oral tradition. Minstrel poets known as *gusans* kept the poetic tradition alive by traveling through Armenian lands, singing songs in many different genres. They performed at funerals, weddings, harvest festivals, and religious holidays. Meanwhile, in Georgia oral poetry flourished, particularly in the mountainous regions of Pshav-Khevsureti, Megrelian, Svan, and Racha. In Azerbaijan, a similar pattern can be observed; the figure of the *ashiq* is the Turkic counterpart to the Armenian *gusan*.

Georgian.

Pre-Christian poetry Pre-Christian Georgian poetry is informed by a pagan pantheon which includes a supreme deity (*morige ghmerti*) and a number of subordinate gods. Many of these subordinate deities have been merged with Christian saints, such as St. George (Giorgi), often depicted as a knight on horseback and a slayer of dragons, St. Barbara, who is (re)configured as a goddess of fertility and a healer of illnesses, St. Mary, a protector of women, and Jesus Christ, who presides over the world of the dead. All of these figures feature in Georgian folk poetry.

Pagan deities: Dali Coexisting with these reconfigured Christian saints are traditional heroes of the pre-Christian pagan pantheon, including the Svanetian hunter goddess Dali. Dali is most frequently encountered in folk poetry as a seducer of hunters, whom she destroys due to jealousy. It was believed that a hunter's luck depended on whether or not Dali wished him to succeed. Some scholars have interpreted the predominance of Dali within the Georgian folk pantheon as evidence of the matriarchal origins of pre-Christian Georgian culture. Yet another type of creature who features in Georgian folk poetry are the *kajis*, a race of demons with magical powers. *Kajis* are often depicted as enemies of St. George, who battles and defeats them in order to protect humanity from their malign influence.

Historical figures In addition to pagan deities and Christian saints reconfigured as pagan deities, historical figures from Georgia's past are also incorporated into the pantheon of Georgian folk poetry. The best known such figures are Queen Tamar (r. 1184-1213), who presided over Georgia's so-called Golden Age, and her son Giorgi IV (1191–1223), who is known in Georgian folk poetry as Lasha Giorgi.

folk poetry Although early Georgian folk poetry lacks full rhyme, it abounds in slant rhyme, in which words that have similar, but not identical, sounds are repeated according to a pattern. It is distinct from much written poetry in Georgian in that it is composed to be performed with music, often an instrumental accompaniment, and sometimes as part of a dance. The epic ballads of the Khevsurs and Pshavs of northern Georgia were performed with a traditional Georgian three-string plucked instrument called the *pandori*. Another aspect of Georgian folk poetry that is a function of its oral status and which connects it to the *ashuq/gusan* tradition found throughout the Caucasus is improvisation. The fixed form of ballads and other poems was mediated by the performance context, in which new improvised compositions were composed by individuals engaged in poetry competitions called *shairoba*, after the Arabo-Persian word for verse, *shi'r*.

Majama One device used by both Georgian oral folk poetry and written Georgian poetry is *majama*, whereby homophonous words or phrases occur in the rhyming portion of the line like a refrain. This device would later be described by the early modern poet Teimuraz I as “that which is conjoined / selected orthographies brought together as one.” A simpler rendering of the term would be “pun,” in which the same sound is used in different ways to signify different things. Often, in the folkloric tradition in particular, it was not so much specific words that were repeated as sounds and sound clusters.

Written Poetry The exact beginnings of written poetry have not been established for any literature of the Caucasus. The inscriptions on the walls of the Ateni Sioni Church near the city of Gori in eastern Georgia at the confluence of the Mtkvari and the Liakhvi River are the oldest known examples of rhymed verse in Georgian. They have been dated to the second half of the 9th century. Early Georgian religious poetry is influenced by Byzantine hymnography, among other sources. It was only towards the end of the 11th century that rhymed poetry became commonplace in Georgian literature. Although rhyme became a ubiquitous feature of subsequent Georgian folk poetry, the folk poetry of Svan continues to lack rhyme.

Armenian. Like written Georgian poetry, the beginnings of written Armenian literary culture were closely linked to the role of the Church, which was the primary force behind the spread of literacy in this region. Scholars accept that pagan oral literature in Armenia predates the invention of the Armenian alphabet, but early Christian priests did their best to erase any traces of such a tradition.

Hayk and Bel The trajectory of ancient Armenian poetry mirrors that of Georgian in many respects, not least in terms of its mountainous provenance. In the Armenian highlands, the earliest poetry evolved around an epic narrative in verse called *Hayk and Bel*. This narrative has been traced back to historical events relating to the Kingdom of Urartu (9th–6th centuries BCE). Just as the protagonists of ancient Georgian folk poetry were also deities, so too was Hayk descended from the first gods according to Armenian mythology. These gods spawned a race of giants, who arrogantly set about constructing a tall tower (reminiscent of the Tower of Babel). Suddenly, a wind sent by the gods who were angry at the arrogance of these giants scattered the building into pieces. Languages multiplied and the giants lost the ability to understand each other.

Hayk the hero Hayk was among this group. He was famous as being the bravest and strongest, as the one most respectful of others’ freedoms. His name is highly symbolic, since Hay is what Armenians call themselves. The country of Armenia is called Hayastan in the Armenian language. Hayk opposed the tyranny of Bel. When Hayk’s son Aramanyak was born, he assembled a group of three hundred people, mostly from his own family and servants, and travelled to Mt. Ararat. Hayk built a residence at the foot of the mountain, which he gave to his grandson Cadmos. Hayk also built a village that he called after himself, Haykashen, and settled there. When Hayk refused to acknowledge Bel’s sovereignty, Bel sent his infantry to the land of Ararat in order to attack Cadmos and his family and pressure them into submission. Cadmos fled before Bel reached Ararat and warned Hayk of Bel’s approaching army. Hayk assembled his sons and grandsons together and instructed them in the art of war. Miraculously, they prevailed over Bel’s army.

Hayots Dzor The battle ended when Hayk shot Bel with an arrow and killed him. It is believed that the village of Hayots Dzor (“valley of the Armenians”) is named in honor of this event, for Hayk is said to have built a villa here, on the site of the battle. Hayots Dzor is currently part of the modern state of Turkey and is called Gürpınar. As a foundational figure in the creation of the Armenian people, Hayk is worshipped as a god in the area around Lake Van. Intriguingly, the constellation of Orion, which is named after a hunter in Greek mythology, is called Hayk in the fifth-century Armenian translation of the Bible. Hayk is also identified with the Urartian god Khaldi.

King Aram Related to the story of Hayk and Bal is the story of King Aram. Although mythical, this narrative documents historical events and processes, such as the eastward expansion of the Armenian kingdom to the borders of the Medes, Assyria, and Cappadocia. Aram’s story is also tied up with the fate of the Armenian language, since he ordered everyone in the lands over which he ruled to learn Armenian.

Artashes and Satenik A second cycle of epic poetry is based on historical events that transpired from the 6th century BCE under the Yervanduni dynasty to year 11 of the Common Era under the Artashesian dynasty. This cycle involves a number of protagonists who were involved in the conflict between Tigran and Azhdahak, the king of Media during the 6th century BCE. Among the featured characters are Artashes, king of Armenia, and Satenik, an Alan princess. The Alans were a nomadic people who lived in the steppe region of the northwestern Black Sea. They aligned with the mountaineers of the northern Caucasus as well as with half of the Georgian population and plundered the Armenian people.

Artashes In this second epic cycle, the Armenian king Artashes waged war on the Alans and captured the king's son. The king of the Alans was stricken by grief and offered peace with the Armenians and to stop all raids onto their territory, if his son would be returned. Artashes refused. The king's daughter Satenik then approached Artashes and requested that her brother be released from captivity. Artashes was overwhelmed by Satenik's beauty and decided to try to marry her. In exchange for her hand in marriage, he offered a peace treaty with the Alans and promised to free her brother from captivity. Her father agreed. Satenik became Artashes' first wife and bore him many sons, including Artavazd. Unfortunately, their marriage ended tragically. Satenik fell in love with one of Artashes' rivals named Argavan, who was himself a descendent of the dragon Azhdahak.

Tork Angegh Non-human characters, such as the giant Tork Angegh, are also included in the second cycle, as is the tale of Sanatruk and Yervand, which tells of how an infant prince becomes king after he is saved by a nurse. The tale of Anushavan and Sosanever reveals much about pagan practices among pre-Christian Armenians. In this story, the rustling of leaves and the direction in which the leaves move when blown by the breeze is a form of divination.

Armenian lyric tradition Alongside oral epics, an ancient Armenian lyric tradition is extant only in fragments. Armenian epic poetry also includes many lyrical passages that celebrate the birth and marriage, and lament the death, of their protagonists. The tale of Artashes and Artavazd has for example preserved verbatim quotations from the songs sung by Armenian minstrels. In these poems-within-poems, nature plays an overwhelming role. During the birth of the god Vahagn for example we are told that "smoke curled out of the reed / a flame leaped out of the reed / and out of the flame, a fair child came forth." Alliteration, rhyme, and repetition are common featured of ancient Armenian lyric poetry.

Grigor Narekatsi, The Book of Lamentations Poetry was not a dominant genre of classical (written) Armenian until the 10th century, with the poetry of St. Grigor Narekatsi (also known as Gregory of Narek, 951-1003). This poet, monk, and theologian passed his life on the southern shores of Lake Van. His best-known work, *The Book of Lamentations* (Լաւրելազոյի), also known as *Narek*, consists of ten thousand lines divided into ninety-five chapters, all of which are addressed to God. It is a work of mystical poetry that has been described as a monologue, a personal lyric, and a confessional poem. The centrality of the *Book of Lamentations* to Armenian culture is reflected in the fact that it is a staple of many Armenian households, and is regarded as being the second most popular work of Armenian culture, after the Bible. Physical copies of the book are regarded as having miraculous properties, including the ability to cure diseases. Like the Georgian poet Rustaveli a few centuries later, Narekatsi inspired countless poets within his own tradition, including his most direct literary successor, Grigor Magistros (discussed below).

Azerbaijan

Although there is no extant Turkic-language poetry from the ancient period, the region of Azerbaijan coincided with the territory of Caucasian Albania, which had a written literature and likely a vibrant oral tradition as well, practically none of which is extant. Poetry in Udi, the language of Caucasian Albania has not reached us.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What are the earliest extant examples of poetry in ancient Georgian and Armenian?
- 2) What were the most popular genres of poetry in ancient Georgian and Armenian?
- 3) How did religion interact with culture in fostering the development of written poetry in Georgian and Armenian?
- 4) What was the written tradition of the region of modern Azerbaijan in antiquity?

DRAMA & THE PERFORMING ARTS

Armenian Theatre. Armenian theatre is among the most ancient dramatic traditions in all of Eurasia. Its beginnings are linked to its contacts with ancient Greece. The prominence of theatre in ancient Armenian culture is also linked to its urban centers, for it was in the capital cities equipped with theatres, such as Artashat and Tigranocetra, that the dramatic arts flourished the most. Ancient Armenia had a range of different types of professional performers, including singers of laments (*voghbergus*) and comedians (*katakagusan*). In 69 BCE, the Armenian king Tigran the Great (95-55 BCE) built a public theatre in the city of Dikranagert (Diyarbakır).

King Artavazd II King Artavazd II (r. 55-34 BCE), who succeeded his father Tigran, was the first recognized Armenian playwright as well as a theatre director. He composed tragedies as well as histories in Greek, both of which were praised by Plutarch. These tragedies were lost in antiquity. Artavazd II built the second Armenian theatre in the city of Artashat, and also served as its director. Among the plays produced in this theatre were Menander's comedies and Euripides' *Bacchae*. The Roman statesman and historian Dio Cassius records a memorable performance of the *Bacchae* at the Artashat theatre in 53 BCE, which was supervised by King Artavazd II, in which the skull used when the Theban princess Agave enters the stage was in actuality that of the Roman general Crassus.

Georgian Theatre: Berikaoba. Georgian theatre has similarly ancient origins. The ancient Georgian cave town of Uplistsikhe has theatrical spaces that date to the 3rd century BCE. Theatrical traditions are also manifested in many performance contexts, including in the masquerade folk theatre known as *berikaoba*, which is performed during the winter solstice. *Berikaoba* coincides with the beginning of the new year. While the root word for this practice, *beri*, means child, it is also the epithet of the fertility deity who was seen to preside over the festival. This deity is often represented as a goat engaged in ritual plowing. This form of folk theatre is closely tied to pagan festivals of fertility and rebirth. The *berikaoba* performance has been compared by Georgian scholars to the cult of Dionysus. The villagers select the actors for the *berikaoba* performance, all of whom are men. The men then disguise themselves as animals and dress in skins made of animal hide, as well as tails, feathers, horns, ribbons, and bells. The animals they represent are totems with deep significance in pagan Georgian culture, such as bears, boars, goats, and wolves. Sometimes the actors also cover their faces in coal or smear themselves with mud. They go from house to house, plundering villagers' homes. Since this is part of a ritual, the attacks are not actually menacing, and the actors are treated at each home with bread, wine, honey, money, meat, and other food.

Berikaoba's plot During each performance, a young man tries to persuade a young woman (whose role is played by a man) to marry him. The woman agrees. The couple arrange to get married. Their wedding is accompanied by a feast which is interrupted by a Tatar or Arab invader who attacks the groom and kidnaps the bride. As they try to bring the groom back to life, the villagers spread the news that the bride has been kidnapped. The groom is suddenly revived by the news. He searches for the kidnapper and rescues his bride. Eggs are thrown at the defeated enemy and the food which they plundered is taken from them. The performance concludes with a celebratory feast, known as *saberiko supra*, which lasts several days. The culture of feasting has great importance in Georgian culture beyond this specific festival as well, and Georgian toasts are an elaborate art form in themselves.



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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sculpture_in_თბილისი_Tbilisi.jpg

Woman-Led Berikaoba. In Eastern Georgia (Kakheti), the *berikaoba* tradition is connected with the story of a female Georgian folk hero named Maia Tskneteli, who, according to legend, killed a local land owner who was making unwelcome advances on her. Hoping to evade detection and therefore punishment, Maia cut her braids off after killing the man. She became the leader of a group of outlaws who, in classic Robin Hood style fashion, stole from feudal landlords and gave what they gained to the poor. In the eponymous Soviet film (1959, directed by Rezo Chkheidze) which is based on Maia Tskneteli's story, a young girl disguises herself as a boy in order to defend her country from foreign invasions. Alongside its debt to the *berikaoba* tradition, Maia Tskneteli can be seen as a female counterpart of the noble bandit (*abragi/abrek*), a figure discussed throughout this study guide and particularly in the section on fiction, in connection with Koroghlu and Arsena Odzelashvili.

Qeeonoba. While the *berikaoba* tradition emerges from a world in which the Muslim Tatars were seen as the main invaders, another tradition, called *qeeonoba*, alludes to Russians as the unwelcome invaders, and was widely performed in 19th century Tbilisi. The term is derived from a Georgianized version of the word for khan (Turkic for "ruler"), who both presides over the ritual and collects money from the population.

Lipanali. In another, even more mysterious ritual, called *lipanali* or *sulebis gadabrdzaneba* ("sending off the spirits"), tables are covered for the *berikas*, while the head of the family would serve them with his head uncovered in a sign of humility. The ritual is performed in silence. Prayers are said for dead ancestors, who briefly surface from the underworld to pay a visit to their living relatives. In preparation for seeing off these dead ancestors, the head of the family prepares a glass of wine, meat, and a slice of bread. He guides the dead ancestors out the door, while pouring wine on the ground as a libation, until the glass is empty. He then hurries inside without looking back. Such rituals formed an important part of premodern Georgia's theatrical culture.

Readings

Nino Abakelia, "The Spaciotemporal Patterns of Georgian Winter Solstice Festivals," *Folklore* 40 (2008): 101-116.

S. Amaglobeli, *Gruzinskii teatr: osnovnye etapy razvitiia* [Georgian Theatre: The Main Stages of Development] (Moscow: 1930).

V. Arvanian and L. G. Murad, *Two Thousand Years of the Armenian Theater* (New York: The Armenian National Council of America, 1954).

Djaba Ioseliani, *The Comic and Georgian Mask Comedy* (Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1982).

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How was Armenian dramaturgy shaped by ancient Greek theatre?
- 2) How were historical events and the experiences of foreign invasions transmuted into Georgian theatrical culture?
- 3) What is the evidence for the earliest beginnings of Georgian theatrical culture?

FICTION, LEGENDS, MYTHS

Comparisons. Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan all have rich oral traditions that long preceded written beginnings in these languages, even though Armenian and Georgian pre-Christian literary heritage was deliberately erased by the Christian church. Legends overlap considerably with drama and the performative arts as well as with poetry, which can make it difficult to erect firm and clear boundaries around these categories. Some of the texts and narratives mentioned elsewhere in this study guide will be presented here from a different point of view.

Georgian. Although all literatures and cultures of the Caucasus region influenced each other, Georgian folklore and mythology are most closely intertwined with the folkloric traditions of the northern Caucasus. Georgian is an Ibero-Caucasian language, while Armenian is Indo-European and Azeri is a Turkic language. This genealogy partly explains why Georgian folklore is so heavily

engaged with the traditions relating to mythological giants known as *narts* that abound in Chechen and Circassian folkloric traditions but which are not found in Armenian or Azeri folklore. These mythological *nart* legends point to a common pantheon that Georgians shared with Caucasus peoples to the north. Georgia's conversion to Christianity in the 4th century and the conversion of northern Caucasus peoples to Islam in later centuries has contributed to the fracturing of these shared traditions, yet the shared origins are evident to anyone who inquiries into the history of these cultures.

Armenian-Persian Connections. While ancient Georgian mythology looked northwards and engaged with the mountaineers of the Caucasus, Iranian mythology predominates in Armenian mythology. Other influences include Greek, Roman, Urartian, and Anatolian deities. The influence of Iranian mythology on Armenian mythology begins with Zoroastrianism which reaches Armenian peoples during the Achaemenid era. Although both Iranian and Armenians worshipped the god Mazda, they each considered the other to belong to a different religion. Some gods, such as Aramazd (Ahura Mazda), were superimposed onto Armenian gods, such as Vanatur. Yet these superimposed gods often retained features of the Armenian deities that they replaced. In other cases, such as that of Anahita, an Armenian and Persian god might be identically named yet wholly divergent in practice. When Armenia formed part of the wider Greek empire, Armenian and Greek gods merged. Aramazd was identified with Zeus; Artemis was aligned with Anahit; and Vahagn was connected to Heracles. After Armenia's conversion to Christianity, Christian saints were merged with popular Armenian gods. For example, St. John the Baptist acquired the features of Armenian gods such as Tir and Vahagn.

Armenian. The oldest known oral Armenian epic, *Hayk and Bel*, has been dated to the 9th-7th centuries BCE. *Zruys* are another important ancient Armenian literary genre, which Moses Khorenatsi drew on in his fifth century *History of the Armenians*. Moses Khorenatsi also relied on *araspels*, a genre of legends that he considered less reliable, although they sometimes confirmed the historical events he was recording. Finally, Moses drew on two more versified genres of legends: storytellers' songs (*yergk vipsanats*) and metrical songs (*tvelatsyn yergk*). Both of these versified genres include heroic poems and chronicles of kings and princes and were sung by minstrels to a musical accompaniment. Metrical songs were also performed through dancing.

Folktales Arguably the richest repository for Armenian legends, and certainly the one that provides the greatest insight into daily life, is folktales. Armenian folktales provide a rich source of insight into the daily lives of Armenians in antiquity, into their religious system, and their contacts with the wider world. These stories began to be committed to writing towards the end of the 19th century by scholars who travelled from village to village, recording the words of local storytellers. The tales offer poignant narrations of the lives of everyday Armenians, including peasants, as they navigate poverty, romantic love, family tensions, especially in connection with their parents-in-law, and face their own mortality and that of their loved ones.

Arabic, Persian, and Turkic names Many protagonists in Armenian tales have Arabic, Persian, and Turkic names, or use epithets taken from these languages. For example, one common refrain that occurs even in these Armenian-language tales is "By Allah!" Armenian folklore also shares in common with Persian folklore monstrous creatures called *devs* (*divs*). Also found in the Avesta, *devs* share a common origin with Indians *devas* (gods). The original *devs*, found in the Avesta, the sacred Zoroastrian scripture that influenced both Iranian and Armenian culture, were not evil or synonymous with demons, although they later acquired this association.

Devs In Armenian tales, *devs* have a quasi-evil and semi-divine status roughly analogous to their status in Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*. In physical terms, Armenian *devs* have humongous heads, and their eyes are the size of bowls. They come in white and black varieties, and sometimes have only one eye. Modern Armenian writers have incorporated *devs* that appear in ancient Armenian tales into their modern reworkings of this genre. One such example is "The Flower of Paradise (Եղեմական Ծաղիկը)" by poet and translator Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869–1923), the title of which derives from the fact that the *dev* in this story serves as a guard to a flower garden. As in much ancient folklore, animals speak in these tales, sometimes guiding the hero and helping to solve their problems, including their battles against the *devs*.

King Zarzand's Daughter. One of the longest stories in the Armenian folkloric repertoire, "King Zarzand's Daughter," features many of the classic tropes of this genre, as well as resonances with other works of world literature, such as the account of the kidnapping of Sita by the demon king

Ravana in the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*. The hero of the story is an orphan named Zurab. When his mother dies during a plague, Zurab is adopted by a well-to-do neighbor and tasked with pasturing his sheep and cattle. While out in the fields watching over the sheep, a wolf creeps up as if from out of nowhere and seizes a lamb. As the wolf attempts to get away with a lamb, his exit is blocked by other shepherds and their dogs. Zurab confronts the wolf, presses on him with his knees, and grabs him by the throat. The wolf lies limp and prone on the ground. Everyone watching the scene is amazed by Zurab's ability to subdue the wolf. They decide to call him Aslan, meaning lion, in recognition of his bravery.

Aslan becomes a man When Aslan became a man, his responsibilities as a shepherd increased. He was entrusted with herding the entire flock of sheep, and was often away for days as the flock travelled miles away from their village. After herding the sheep during the day, he would place them in a cave and sleep in front of the entrance with his water and bread hoisted above him, while the dogs kept watch. One morning, Aslan woke up with the sense that a visitor had covertly consumed his bread and water while he had been sleeping. This pattern repeated itself for several nights until one morning it was evident that half of his loaf had gone missing during the night. Aslan stayed awake the next night, anticipating his visitor's return. The visitor turned out to be a vision: a beautiful girl stood before him like a *houri*, the story reports, using the Perso-Arabic term for the feminine creature who awaits devout Muslim men in paradise. Later we learn that her name is Simizar. Aslan wishes to embrace Simizar and to make her his wife, but she warns him that he will be cursed if he touches her. She then explains to him how she ended up in this state.

Simizar kidnapped Several years earlier, Simizar's father King Zarzand became embroiled in a war with seven other kings. In the tumult of the conflict, she was kidnapped by a giant dev named Tepegöz, and transported to his realm. (The giant Tepegöz appears elsewhere in world literature, in the Turkish *Book of Dede Korkut*, as a cyclops and ogre.) A battle raged for several days, during which her brothers tried to rescue her, and ended by dying in the conflict. When the *devs* prevailed over those fighting on the side of King Zarzand, Simizar was taken to the castle of the giant Tepegöz and pressured to marry him. He promised her all the wealth of his kingdom if she would obey his wishes. She resisted him for forty days, while the eye at the top of his head expanded until it was the size of a watermelon. It was in this condition that Simizar escaped one night to locate Aslan and beg for his help in securing her release. After telling her story, Simizar disappears into the ether and Aslan vows to secure her freedom. Aslan sets off on his mission on the following morning, at the break of dawn. The sheep he has been shepherding return of their own accord to his master's fields. He asked his master to pay the wages due to him and quits his job so that he can devote himself wholly and exclusively to rescuing Simizar. Then he sets off on his quest. After a long day of wandering, Aslan reaches a cottage with an elderly woman inside, who is lighting a candle. Aslan asks whether he can stay there for the night. The old woman agrees and prepares a couch for him to sleep on.

Speaking animals The story is filled with magic creatures and speaking animals. When Aslan awakens the next morning, he sees a nest of sparrows and prays to God that he be granted the power to understand the language of the birds. Suddenly, the birds begin chirping and, when he strains his ears, he can understand what they are saying. The birds recognize Aslan from the days when he gave them crumbs while herding sheep. The birds then impart the instructions Aslan needs in order to proceed with his journey: he must kiss the hand of the mistress of the cottage three times and say, "Thank you, good grandmother." She would then tell him how to rescue Princess Simizar from the Tepegöz's Castle.

Aslan's journey The next morning, Aslan does exactly as he was instructed and received from the old woman what he needed for the next stage of his journey: fourteen hazelnuts, two walnuts, a water bottle, and a handful of flour. Each of these items has a specific role in his quest to defeat the one-eyed ogre Tepegöz. Aslan eats one hazelnut during every day of his journey, and each of them is as filling as an entire sheep. In this way his hunger is satiated without him needing to eat normal food. As soon as he cracks open the walnut, a horse appears, with a silver saddle on its back. When he cracks the second walnut, a steel spear emerges, along with a shield. After seven days journey on his horse, newly armed with a sword and shield, he arrives at the castle of the *devs*. Finally, he approaches the cave where Simizar is held captive. Before he can reach it, Tepegöz and Tepegöz's mother hurl towards him. Aslan manages to cut off one of Tepegöz's heads and thrusts a lance into his single eye. Tepegöz fell down dead, but his mother survives the battle and tries to attack him. Just as she is approaching, forty bushels of wheat suddenly appear, blocking Aslan's escape path. His horse

advises him to pluck three strands of hair from his mane. A bridge forms from the horse's hair on the surface of the lake, enabling Aslan to escape the wrath of Tepegöz's mother with Simizar intact. This horse also flies when this turns out to be the only reliable way of reaching King Zarzand in order to return to him his kidnapped daughter.

Happy Ending Like a classic fairy tale, the story ends happily, with King Zarzand's daughter rescued from the dev Tepegöz and married to her beloved Aslan. In the final scene, the old woman who had housed Aslan in her cottage observes a snake crawling along the ground towards the sleeping Zarzand. She strikes the creature dead with an iron weapon, piercing the top of its head, after which it is revealed to be Tepegöz's mother, making a last-ditch effort to prevent Aslan and Simizar from getting married. Once the snake has been killed, the couple marry. Soon after their marriage, King Zarzand abdicates his throne to Aslan, whom he calls King Orphan Aslan. Such tales emphasize that virtue is rewarded, courage honored, just kings rule the world, and goodness prevails.

The Tale of Salman and Rostom. Whereas "King Zarzand's Daughter" bears the imprint of Persian and Turkish culture through its names (Simizar, Tepegöz), the Armenian tale of Salman and Rostom overlaps significant with a major work of Persian literature: Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*. We need not assume that the Armenian tale is borrowed from Ferdowsi, as it could be that both works emerge from a common mythological repository. Rostom is a major figure in the Persian epic and leads the battle against the Turanians who are sometimes aligned with modern Turks. Salman does not appear in the *Book of Kings*, and his Arabic name suggests non-Persian origins. Rostom's father is named Zal in the Persian version and Chal in the Armenian version. Interestingly, in the Armenian version, Rostom's father is referred to as a brigand rather than as a hero. The Armenian version claims out that the land ruled over by Chal is the only land in the realm which did not pay tribute to Salman.

Persian parallels Although the characters are familiar from Persian tradition, there is no known or extant precedent for the precise event narrated in the Armenian tale. In this story, Chal decides to find out what kind of man Salman is. He encounters Salman on the road, and the latter fails to recognize him. Keeping his identity to himself, he simply says that he is from the country of Chal. Not knowing that he is Rostom's father, Salman requests that he send the famous Rostom out to fight him in battle. Salman is convinced that he will emerge victorious from such a battle. Soon after Rostom's father explains to his son what happened, Rostom leaves for a fight with Salman, accompanied by his cousin Vyjhan.

Vyjhan Vyjhan is another mysterious character who appears in the Armenian tale with apparent—but not established—links to the Persian tradition. Vyjhan does not share the same family history as does Bijan in Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*, in which he is the grandson of Rostom. Yet even in the *Book of Kings* Bijan is said to have Ashkanian origins, meaning that he belonged to the branch of the Arsacid Parthian dynasty that ruled over Armenia from 12 to 428 of the Common Era. This may explain the apparent congruence between the Persian Bijan and the Armenian Vyjhan. Further, the name of a Daylamite commander, Vihan, may help to account for the transformation of Bijan into Vyjhan. As they journey towards Salman's kingdom, Vyjhan and Rostom reach a meadow on the edge of the town ruled over by Salman. They set up camp and fall into a deep sleep. Vyjhan is awoken by a group of people running around lamenting that Salman has demanded seven years of tribute from them. They are unsure about who should deliver the tribute, since the one who delivers it may be killed by Salman. Vyjhan volunteers while Rostom is still sleeping. He hurries towards the city ruled over by Salman, carrying the tribute money. Suddenly, Rostom is awakened from his sleep by Vyjhan's screams. Vyjhan is pleading for help and explaining that Salman is carrying him away. Rostom hurries on his horse towards Salman's tent to save his cousin. The tale calls their clash the "most terrible duel that has ever been recorded in the history of the world." The two fighters become entangled in each other's hair. They keep fighting, and, according to the story, are still struggling. The storyteller explains that their clash is the origin of the word earthquake, since the earth quakes when they shake each other violently. The tale of Rostom and Salman reads like a tale without a clear beginning or end. It may be a fragment of a longer cycle, and was perhaps drawn from the same material that served as the basis for Ferdowsi's famous epic.

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What aspects of Caucasus mythology do southern Caucasus peoples (such as Georgians) share in common with the peoples of the northern Caucasus?
- 2) What features are shared between ancient Armenian and Iranian folklore and mythological systems?
- 3) How are the Armenian story of Rostom and Salman and Ferdowsi's Persian epic, the *Book of Kings*, related?
- 4) How do the themes and plot of "King Zarzand's Daughter" resonate with other works of world literature?

LIFE-WRITING

Georgian. Biographical and autobiographical literature has been part of Georgian literature from its earliest beginnings. This is due in part to the role of the church, which encouraged hagiographies and martyrologies of Christian saints who died in conflict with pagan rulers, or while refusing to obey foreign invaders' demands that they convert to Islam. With biographical and life writing traditions also developed in Armenian, such compositions flourished later in the evolution of its literature. Since Turkic does not have a developed written literature until the later medieval period, examples of life writing in Azeri during antiquity are similarly absent. Needless to say, oral literature covered some of these gaps through dastans, songs, and other oral narratives which are covered in the sections on poetry, fiction, and performance.

The Life of St. Nino. Arguably the earliest example of Georgian life writing is the biography of St. Nino, who is responsible for the conversion of Georgia to Christianity. Nino's biography is incorporated into the 10th-11th century historical compendium, *The Conversion of Kartli* (მოქცევაჲ ქართლისაჲ *moktsevey kartlisay*) as *The Life of St. Nino* (ცხოვრება წმიდა ნინოსი, *ts'xovreba ts'mida ninosi*). In the story of St. Nino's conversion of Georgians to Christianity, the stimulus is a miracle performed on a child. Nino was an immigrant to pagan Georgia from Cappadocia in east-central Anatolia (present-day Turkey). She settled among Georgians as a Christian missionary with the intention of converting the Georgian people to Christianity. One day, a Georgian mother was carrying her sick son through town, hoping to find someone who could heal her child. She knocked on Nino's door during this search. Nino informed her that, although no human could cure her son, Jesus could restore him to health. By way of proving her claim, Nino picked up the boy, laid him down on the

hair shirt on which she had been sitting, and recited a prayer over him. The boy was miraculously healed.

Nino's Reputation Grows The news of the healing spread through town, and Georgians began to look on Nino with awe. Nino quickly acquired a reputation throughout Georgia as a healer. When the Georgian Queen Nana fell sick, she learned about Nino's reputation as a miracle-working healer and requested that Nino come and pray for her just as she had done for the Georgian mother's son. Nino followed the same procedure that she followed to heal the queen as she had done for the child. She laid the queen down on a hair shirt, prayed to Jesus Christ, and the queen's health was suddenly restored. This miracle persuaded the queen to convert to Christianity. Christianity was adopted by King Mirian and Queen Nana as the state religion of their Eastern Georgian kingdom in 337. In 523, Christianity was officially embraced by the Western Georgian kingdom. The Georgian church achieved autocephaly in between these events during the 5th century, and the leader of the Georgian church held the title of Catholicos Patriarch of all Georgia. Some time did pass of course before the religion was fully accepted by the Georgian people.

The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik. The Armenian noblewoman Queen Shushanik, whose martyrdom at the hands of her Zoroastrian husband was first narrated in Georgian, is yet another figure in Georgian hagiography who is distinguished by her love for children. Purporting to have been written between 476 and 483 and attributed to Iakob Tsertaveli, *The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik* (წამებამ წმიდისა შუშანიკისი დედოფლისაჲ / *Tsameba tsmidisa Shushanikisi dedoplisa*) was for a long time regarded as the earliest surviving work of Georgian literature. Scholars have recently begun to question whether the text is as old as it claims to be, since the oldest manuscript of this text dates back to the 10th century. The 10th century version was copied in Parkhali (Turkish Barhal), a village built by Davit III Kurapatat (c. 961–965), located in the territory of modern Turkey's Artvin Province, and contains a medieval Georgian monastery and cathedral church. In the narrative of her life, Shushanik becomes known for her abilities to give children to the barren, to heal the sick, and to restore sight to the blind.

Genre Some scholars have categorized *The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik* as a novel; such a classification is arguably anachronistic. This label also elides the fact that the text purports to be a historical report, and the claim to bearing witness is central to its authenticity. It does however usefully register the innovativeness of this text from the point of view of genre, for it appears that no text like this had ever before been composed in the Georgian language.

Armenian Translation At the same time as this earliest extant manuscript was copied, the martyrdom narrative was translated into Armenian. It is unsurprising that the text was of interest to an Armenian audience, since it dealt with an Armenian noblewoman who was killed by her husband for refusing to renounce Christianity and convert to Zoroastrianism, a religion that at that time was the state religion of the Sasanians. Shushanik was the daughter of the Armenian military leader Vardan Mamikonian, who also died a martyr, and she inherited his courage. She was tortured and imprisoned for years for refusing to renounce her Christian convictions. A quarter century prior to her death (c. 475) her father had been killed at the Battle of Avarayr (451), which ensured Armenians' freedom of religion.

The Passion of Gobron. Several centuries later, 10th-century Georgian Orthodox church hierarch Stepane Mtbevari (also known as Stephen of T'beti) composed a biography entitled *The Passion of Gobron, Who Was Abducted from Qveli Fortress* (წამებამ წმიდისა მოწამისა გობრონისი, რომელი განიყვანეს ყუელის ციხით / *ts'ameba ts'midisa mots'amisa gobronisi, romeli ganiqvanes qvelis tsikhit*). Other works are attributed to Stepane Mtbevari, including *The Life of Grigol of Khandzta*, but only *Passion of Gobron* is extant. This work was commissioned by the Georgian Bagratid archduke Ashot Kukhi (d. 918). It tells the story of the Georgian general Gobron's role in the Siege of Q'veli (914). This was a military engagement during which the Saljuq ruler Yusuf ibn Abi'l-Saj (also known as Abu'l Qasim) besieged the Q'veli fortress, conquered the Georgian army, and executed Gobron who led the resistance. Just prior to this battle, Abu'l Qasim had captured and executed King Smbat of Armenia (r. 890-914). However, Abu'l Qasim's victory was short-lived. He was ultimately forced to retreat in the face of stiff resistance from local Georgians. From a literary perspective, the *Passion of Gobron* is somewhat formulaic in nature. The work also reflects the emergent sectarianism of Christianity in the Caucasus: Armenians are condemned for following the Monophysite teaching, and the author claims that they deserved their cruel fate. (Stephane calls the

Monophysite teaching a heresy, even though most Georgians had subscribed to it during the sixth century.) In his narrative, Stephane tells of how the conquerors initially offered Gobron the chance to convert to Islam in order to avoid execution. Far from abandoning Christianity, Gobron welcomes martyrdom for loyalty to his faith. He refuses to convert and rejoices that he was chosen to become a martyr. He is then beheaded.

Translation The life writing tradition in Georgian literature was also stimulated by translation. One translation of particular importance, for which the Arabic original is no longer extant, is *The Passion of Mikael of Mar Saba* (9th-10th centuries). This narrative reports on a tense meeting between monk Mikael and the wife of the local *amir* (ruler) in Jerusalem. The woman orders the monk to be bound and tortured with whips.

Biographies Alongside the above-named martyrologies, there were also numerous biographies of leaders in the Georgian church who did not face martyrdom but lead pious lives. *The Lives of the Thirteen Assyrian Fathers* is one such work, which gathers together. This collection tells of nineteen missionaries who travelled from Assyria to Georgia in order to spread the Christian faith. Among these individuals were missionaries who would establish Georgia's most famous early monasteries, including David Garesjeli and Shio Mghvimeli. Other works in this biographical tradition include *The Life of Shio Mghvimeli*, *The Life of Davit Garesjeli*, *The Achievements and Passion of Saint Abibos, Bishop of Nekres*, and *The Life of Ioane Zedazneli*. These works are all dated between the 7th and the 10th century. In the biography of Abibos, the Christian saint vocally denounces the fire worshipping practices of the Zoroastrians. As a result of his criticisms, Iranian Zoroastrians attack him with stones.

The Life of Davit Garesjeli. *The Life of Davit Garesjeli* tells of a Syrian Church Father from the 5th/6th century who established asceticism in Georgian. Composed in the 10th century by Catholicos Arsenius II, the work abounds in vivid descriptions of the natural world. In the forest where David resides with his disciples, deer and their fawn share milk with the hermit. David rescues a deer attacked by a dragon and saves a partridge being attacked by a pagan hunter. The hunter initially threatens to kill the saint, but when he is overcome by the saint's power and incapacitated, he is struck by the presence of God and begins to believe in the saint's teachings and in his holiness. He asks Davit Garesjeli to heal his son, who is unable to walk. Davit Garesjeli agrees and the hunter returns home. He is greeted by his son, who formerly had only been able to move by crawling on four legs. This time, the son greets his father by happily walking. The hunter is overwhelmed with joy and gratitude to God and to the saint. He loads his donkeys with bread and vegetables and takes his entire family to Davit Garesjeli to receive his blessing. In the end, the hunter's entire family is baptized and converts to Christianity. As with the story of St. Nino's conversion of Georgia to Christianity, the trigger for this conversion is the miracle of healing performed by a Christian saint on a child.

The animal world Other saints are depicted as having a uniquely symbiotic relationship to the animal world, including to animals typically classified as dangerous to humans. Shio Mghvimeli uses a domesticated wolf to herd his donkeys. Ioane Zedazneli is on good terms with bears. Basil Zarzmel's *The Life and Achievement of Our Divinely Inspired Blessed Father Serapion (Tskhovreba Seraapionisi, c. 910)* is another important example of Georgian biographical literature, composed by the subject's nephew. The work abounds in references to many other works in the Georgian hagiographic tradition, and it is notable for its evocative descriptions of the natural beauty of the Samtskhe–Javakheti region in southern Georgia.

The Lives of the Children of Kola. Alongside animals and saints' symbiotic relationship with them, the innocence and miracle-performing powers of children is an important theme in Georgian hagiography. *The Lives of the Children of Kola*, set in the region of western Georgia known as Colchis in antiquity and from the 11th century onwards as Lazica, is entirely focused on children. *The Lives of the Children of Kola* describes an event that occurred in the 4th century, when nine children were martyred. Even to this day, the site where the children are buried, near a spring called Aiazma, is a sacred site. Georgian Orientalist Nikolai Marr published a brief summary of *The Lives of the Children of Kola* in 1903. As recorded in this narrative, nine pagan children were drawn to convert to Christianity in order to participate in the Christian liturgy alongside their Christian playmates. They were baptized on a cold winter night, away from public view. After they were baptized, these formerly pagan children moved into Christian homes. When they learned what had happened, the parents hurried to the Christian houses where their children were staying, and angrily beat them "black and blue" (as the text records). In desperation, the parents tried to compel their children to eat food

sacrificed to idols. The pagan parents then approached the local governor, who assured them that they as parents had the right to do whatever they wanted with their children. The parents then decided to toss their children into a hole until their skulls broke open. Some of the parents also stoned their children.

Martyrdom of Eustace of Mtskheta. The anonymous 6th century work *Martyrdom of Eustace of Mtskheta* (also known as *Martyrdom of Eustace the Cobbler*) is an extraordinary short text that reveals a great deal concerning ancient attitudes to religious conversion, as well as tensions between Christian Georgia and Sasanian Persia during this period. It tells the story of a young man named Eustace who is born to a Zoroastrian family in a province of Sasanian Persia but decides to convert to Christianity. The story is set during the reign of Khusrow Anushirvan (531-579), at a time when the Caucasus was an outpost of the Sasanian empire.

Eustace arrived in Mtskheta, a city regarded as the birthplace of Georgian Christianity, at the age of thirty with the intention of becoming a shoemaker. While residing in Georgia, he becomes fond of the Christian faith and enjoys watching Christians celebrate. He decides to convert to Christianity, marries a Christian woman, and receives baptism. One year, the Persians living in Mtskheta invite Eustace to celebrate in their Zoroastrian festival. Eustace refuses and insists on the superiority of his Christian identity. His fellow Iranians then report on Eustace to the Sasanian commandant of Mtskheta fortress, complaining that he lacks respect for the sacred fire that Zoroastrians worship and derides their religion in favor of his own Christianity.

Marzban Eustace and seven other Christian converts from Iranian lands who were now residing in Georgia were brought before the *marzban* (leader) of the Zoroastrian faith in Georgia, who at that time was Arvand Gushnasp. The *marzban* was effectively the local judge and ruler, and it was up to him to decide the punishment that awaited these apostates. He gave them the chance to renounce Christianity and return to Zoroastrianism, the faith of their fathers, and thereby avoid punishment. Two of the eight accepted this offer. The remaining six, including Eustace, stayed faithful to Christianity. They were imprisoned and sentenced to death until the Catholicos of Georgia and several Georgian princes requested their release. Their request was granted, and the six Christian converts returned home.

When the new *marzban*, Vezhan Buzmir, replaced Arvand Gushnasp, the same Persians who had earlier denounced Eustace complained about him again. They reminded the *marzban* that he had the authority to determine their fates. Buzmir summoned the two converts of the original group who were still living: Eustace and Stephan the Assyrian. Stephan's Assyrian acquaintance attested that he came from a Christian family, and his father, mother, brothers, and sisters were all Christian. This attestation saved Stephan from persecution, since he couldn't be blamed for adhering to the religion into which he was born. Eustace had a different fate. During the meeting with the *marzban*, he recounted in detail the story of his conversion, and his search for an alternative to Zoroastrianism. Eustace includes an important speech from a Christian archdeacon whom he met in his hometown and who recounted to him the principals and history of the Christian faith as well as of Judaism. After recounting this speech and all he learned about Christianity, Eustace expresses shame for the faith of his fathers, into which he was born.

Opportunity to recant Even after this denunciation of Zoroastrianism, the *marzban* urged Eustace to recant, for the sake of his wife and children. Eustace points out that he has endured torture for the sake of his Christian faith and says that he will not be dissuaded from his faith. The *marzban* then orders that Eustace be taken to prison and his head be cut off in the middle of the night, when no one is watching, in order to avoid the risk of Christian observers later attempting to sanctify Eustace's martyred body. The *marzban* then instructs that Eustace's corpse should be carried outside the city, to be consumed by beasts and birds. The subordinates of the *marzban* initially hesitate to carry out his orders. However, fear overtakes them. They realize that if they refuse to execute Eustace, they themselves will be killed. So they strike his neck with a sword and cut off his head. Before he was taken away to prison, Eustace had already made arrangements with Stephan the Assyrian to have his body carried back to Mtskheta, where he would be buried. When Eustace's corpse was taken outside to be eaten by animals, local Christians retrieved it and carried it to Mtskheta, where it was buried in the holy church. Ever since, the sick visit the grave of St. Eustace's in order to be healed of their maladies.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What role did biographies of women saints play in the development of Georgian life writing?
- 2) How did autobiographical and biographical texts and their associated stylistic conventions reflect tensions among the religions of the premodern Caucasus?
- 3) What role did miracles performed on children play in establishing the credentials of Georgian saints within the hagiographic tradition?

ESSAYS AND LEARNED PROSE

Armenian. Like many literatures that are inaugurated by a people's religious conversion, Armenian literature begins as a scholarly enterprise, with translations and commentaries.

Translation of the Bible According to the chronicler Moses Khorenatsi, the oldest work of written Armenian literature is the translation of the Bible, which was done from Syriac by a certain Isaac in 411. Soon afterwards, John of Egheghiatz and Joseph of Baghin travelled to Edessa (modern day Urfa in southeastern Turkey) in order to produce a new translation of the Bible. They reached Constantinople, then the capital of the Byzantine empire, and acquired copies of the original Greek version of the Bible known as the Septuagint. They supplemented this with copies of the Bible from Alexandria, also in Greek, and produced a new translation into Armenian of the Greek version of the Bible. Interestingly, this translational activity occurred at a time when Armenia itself was under foreign domination, and divided between Persia and Byzantium.

Classical Armenian historians Alongside religious literature, Armenian historiography flourished soon after the invention of the Armenian alphabet. While it is impossible to list all of the major classical Armenian historians here, the ten most important names should be mentioned: 1) Agathangelos, 5th century author of a *History of the Armenians*, which tells the story of the conversion of King Trdat and the life of St. Gregory the Illuminator; 2) P' awstos Buwzand (also known as Faustus of Byzantium), author of a *History of Armenia*, covering the period 330-87; 3) Movses Xorenats' i, author of a *History of Armenia*, which begins with the pre-historic period and ends with the death of Mashtots in 440, and draws on a wide array of works in many languages, including the Alexander Romance, Josephus, and Gregory Nazianzen's *Orations*; 4) Pseudo-Sebeos, author of a work called the *Primary History*, a short work comprising genealogies of kings, including those relating to the Parthians' assumption of Seleucid power; 5) Sebeos (Eusebius), whose history relates events from the beginning of Sassanian rule over Armenia to the Islamic conquest of 661, and whose date can be ascertained by his participation in the Ecclesiastical Council of Dvin in 645; 6) Movses Dasxurants' i, whose *History of the Caucasian Albanians* (Aluans, linked to the modern Udi people) is discussed below; 7) the theologian and translator Eznik of Kolb, whose work *Against the Sects* describes the religious practices of Zoroastrians belonging to the Zurvanist sect during the Sassanian period; 8) Lazar P' arbets' i, the first historian to report on conflicts he witnessed first-hand between Armenians and Sasanians, which was composed c. 500 CE and describes the years 387-448; 9) Eise, whose 6th century hagiographical collection *On Vardan and the Armenian War* incorporates earlier writings by Abraham the Confessor on Armenian Christians martyred by Persians and a manifesto on the Zurvanist sect of Zoroastrians attributed to an Armenian *marzpan* (military commander in charge of border provinces); 10) and Anania Shirakats' i, who compiled traditions relating to the Iranian calendar.

Historiographies Like many works of premodern history, these historiographies combine memories of traditions with fictionalized legends. Of these above works, five are of particular importance for the early history of the Armenian church: Agathangelos, Lazar P'arbets'i, Elishe, Movses Xorenats'i, and Faustus of Byzantium. Yet many of them are unreliable when it comes to their chronological placement. Agathangelos claims to be a witness of the conversion of King Tiridates III to Christianity in 301, an event he narrates in detail—even claiming to be the King's Roman secretary—but scholars now believe that the work was not composed until the 5th century. Although Movses Xorenats'i work's purports to have been written by a pupil of Mashtots, scholars now believe that this work was composed in the 8th century.

Georgian learned prose The trajectory of Georgian learned prose mirrors that of Armenian in many respects. Like Armenian, classical Georgian was established through the translation of religious texts from Greek, Armenian, and Syriac. The earliest extant texts in Georgian are lives of Christian Georgian martyrs such as *The Passion of Saint Queen Shushanik* (წამებაჲ წმიდისა მუშანიკისი დედოფლისაჲ/ *tsameba tsmidisa Shushanikisi dedoplisa*, c. 470), a work attributed to Iakob Tsurtaveli. The 10th century witnessed the composition of numerous biographies of Church Father, discussed in the article on life writing.

Georgian historiography Alongside religious writings, historiography was another genre in which both Georgian and Armenian writers excelled. Among the major works of early Georgian historiography are *The Life of Georgia* (ქართლის ცხოვრება/ *kartlis tskhovreba*), compiled in the 11th century by Leonti Mroveli, and the anonymous *Conversion of Georgia* (*moktseva kartlisa*), which is dated to 950. This latter work focuses in particular on the activity of Alexander the Great's in the Caucasus and the foundation of the kingdom of eastern Georgia up to its conversion to Christianity. A third important work is *Life of King Vakhtang Gorgasali* (ცხოვრება და მოქალაქეობა ვახტანგ გორგასლისა/ *tskhovreba da mokalakeoba vakhtang gorgaslisi*), attributed to Juansher Juansheriani. The authorship of all of these works is highly disputed, since they were redacted over the centuries, and different portions of them made their way into other chronicles, and little is known about the authors. Hence, these works are regarded as sources that provide insight into particular eras and which often mix mythological and history, rather than as precise chronicles of specific events.

Translation Even amid the production of original literature in Georgian and Armenian, translation continued to play a vital and even central role. Both Georgian and Armenian performed a role similar to what Arabic did on a larger scale, as the medium through which Greek and Syriac texts for which the original is no longer extant were preserved in translation. Hippolytus' *Commentaries on the Benediction of Moses*, the first part of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, which is the primary source for the history of early Christianity from the Age of the Apostles to 324, and Pseudo-Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance*, all fall into this category.

Caucasian Albania While literary culture in the Caucasus was dominated by Armenian and Georgian, there are traces of a written culture among high-ranking administrators of Caucasian Albania. The earliest evidence of written culture in Caucasian Albania dates to 65 BCE. Classical Greek and Latin sources (Plutarch, Dio Cassius, Paulus Orosius) refer to an exchange of letters between Ohod, the king of Caucasian Albania and the Roman general Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus that took place during this year. Four centuries later, the Armenian King Tiridates (Trdat) invited the king of Caucasian Albania and his retinue to his court to celebrate a Christian holiday. Notwithstanding this evidence for a written culture in Caucasian Albania, traces of writing from this empire has not survived. Scholars assume that this written culture used the Aramaic script, as was the case throughout the Near East, including Armenia.

Caucasian Albanian writing Although little is known concerning these early instances of Caucasian Albanian written culture, we have firmer knowledge for the beginnings of Caucasian Albanian writing in a 5th century script designed by the same Mashtots who invented the Armenian alphabet. Working alongside Albanian priest and translator Benjamin and with the support of the empire's King Aswahan and the Bishop Jeremy, Mashtots created an alphabet for the Caucasian Albanian language, that is called Gargarean by Armenian historians such as Xorenats'i. Albanians and Gargareans were two different but closely related peoples who spoke different dialects of the same language, not unlike Ingush and Chechens. According to Armenian sources, the Gargarean dialect was chosen as the basis for the Caucasian Albanian alphabet in the interest of imposing a

unified literary culture across the multilingual and multinational geography of Caucasian Albania, which according to Strabo (citing Theophanes of Mytilene) had at least twenty-six different languages or dialects. Mashtots himself did not know Albanian but he worked closely with Benjamin, whom Xorenats'i refers to as a "gifted translator" and who communicated with Mashtots in Armenian.

Literacy Following the creation of the alphabet, schools were opened for teaching it, and religious texts, including the Bible, began to be translated into the Caucasian Albanian language using the new script. Mashtots' 5th century biographer Koryun reports in his *Life of Mashtots* that, as soon as the alphabet was created, King Aswahan and the Bishop Jeremy issued an order requiring that all children across the Caucasian Albanian empire be taught to read and write in it. In the past few decades, new religious texts have been discovered in Caucasian Albanian which support these accounts, including a lectionary (book containing portions of the Bible appointed to be read on particular days of the year) comprising passages from the Old and New Testaments.

Caucasian Albanian alphabet Caucasian Albanian writing fell into disuse following the collapse of the empire in the 8th century CE, which coincided with the Islamic conquest of Sasanian Persia in the mid-7th century. Hethum, a historian of Cilician Armenian, referred to it in 1307, but there are few traces after that. The script was "rediscovered" in 1937 by Georgian professor Iliia Abuladze in an Armenian manuscript at the Matenadaran Institute of Ancient Manuscripts dating to the 15th century. The Caucasian Albanian alphabet was depicted in this manuscript alongside other ancient alphabets, including Georgian, Coptic, Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Syriac. According to Abuladze, the Caucasian Albanian alphabet was based on the Georgian alphabet. More examples of the Caucasian Albanian alphabet were discovered throughout the 1940s and 1950s on tiles, vessels, a stone altar, and candlesticks. Georgian scholars attribute the creation of the of the Caucasian Albanian alphabet not to Mashtots but to the Georgian King Pharnavaz I of Kartli (Iberia), in the late 4th or early 5th century CE. Since the 1950s, Azerbaijani academics and political leaders have replaced the names of Armenian historians, writers, and political leaders with names from Caucasian Albanian history. According to Russian historian and anthropologist Victor Schnirelmann, these replacements were part of a project to erase all traces of Armenian history and culture from Azerbaijani history. The trend of revisionist scholarship was initiated by Ziya Bunyadov in the 1950s and continued by his student Farida Mammadova.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

- 1) What were the most important influences on the development of Armenian and Georgian written literature?
- 2) What were the most significant genres of early Armenian and Georgian prose?
- 3) What types of written culture from Caucasian Albania are extant and how were they discovered by later scholars?