

Georgian Travel Literature in the Context of Europeanism

Abstract: One of the main characteristics of Georgian travel literature is that authors try to represent Georgia in the context of the European civilization. At this point present we discuss the travel genre texts which describe journeys to Europe proper: “Journey to Europe” by Sulokhan-Saba Orbeliani (1713-1716), “Journey from Petersburg to Vilno” by Grigol Bagrationi (1815), “My Journey to Various Places of Europe” by Teimuraz Bagrationi (1836). These European “journeys” are remarkable examples of spiritual journeys of the authors to the world of European values. Before the Georgian readers a path opens along which they should pass together with the author in order to gain an insight into these values. In these texts Europe appears as seen and interpreted from the viewpoint of an educated, well-read Georgian person. At that time, this was a purposeful attempt of Georgian writers to reintegrate Georgia into the Western-Christian and, in particular, European thinking area, to “return” it to Europe.

Key words: European civilization, Sulokhan-Saba Orbeliani, Grigol Bagrationi, Teimuraz Bagrationi.

One of the main characteristics of Georgian travel literature is that authors try to represent Georgia in the context of the European civilization. From the first quarter of the 18th c. the political as well as cultural and intellectual powers of Georgia were prepared to the extent that the country, which after the fall of Byzantium had found itself in the aggressive Muslim isolation, was able to break this isolation and to start a well-organized and purposeful process of involving in life - common to all mankind. Travels of Georgian figures abroad became frequent, which was due to different reasons and served different purposes (visiting holy places, familiarization with foreign countries, finding out the international situation, carrying out diplomatic missions, for military and trade purposes, discovering Georgian antiquities, etc.). On the basis of the materials obtained during such journeys, a number of public figures enriched Georgian literature with works that are noteworthy in many respects.

At this point present we discuss the travel genre texts which describe journeys to Europe proper: “Journey to Europe” by Sulokhan-Saba Orbeliani (1713-1716), “Journey from Petersburg to Vilno” by Grigol Bagrationi (1815), “My Journey to Various Places of Europe” by Teimuraz Bagrationi (1836). These European “journeys” are remarkable examples of spiritual journeys of the authors to the world of European values. Before the Georgian readers a path opens along which they should pass together with the author in order to gain an insight into these values. In these texts Europe appears as seen and interpreted from the viewpoint of an educated, well-read Georgian person (it should be noted that in Georgia the impressions and viewpoints of foreigners about Georgia are studied better than those of the Georgians about the foreign countries). It is also noteworthy that all the three works discussed in the article deserve a special study from the historical-political, geographical, culturological, artistic-literary viewpoints, etc. At this stage our objective is to present the above-mentioned texts from the viewpoint of Europeanism and to offer basic conclusions arrived at during the study in this direction. At the sources of the travel genre in Georgian literature is Sulokhan-Saba Orbeliani (1658-1725), who traveled to Europe (Italy and France) on a political-diplomatic mission. Based on the materials of the travel, the writer and diplomat created a brilliant example of documentary prose - “Journey to Europe” - and thereby laid the foundation for an essentially new genre in Georgian literature.

S.-S.Orbeliani is the first author to introduce Western Europe to the Georgian readers, but he is also the first from the viewpoint that he is an outstanding representative of this genre. By means of this work S.-S.Orbeliani facilitated the formation of the political orientation of Georgia, turning of the Georgian thought towards the Western tendencies.

“The special contribution of Sulokhan-Saba Orbeliani to the cultural and political life of Georgia is determined by a number of significant factors: Orbeliani not only remained loyal to his own social principles, but facilitated the formation of the political orientation of Georgia in a quite difficult and contradictory period. He not only traveled to Europe, but also reconstructed the Europeanistic thought in Georgia...His text “Journey to Europe” proved to be not only a cultural-scholarly, geographical, historiographic and literary-genre phenomenon, but also an intellectual landmark in his contemporary European culture” (Ratiani 2009: 7).

“Journey to Europe” by Sulokhan-Saba Orbeliani is a specimen of Georgian documentary prose, which is noteworthy in many respects. Orbeliani, as a writer and traveler, is interested and closely observes everything. He often conveys his opinion, impression, subjective mood. The old age and illness often prevented him during the journey: “I was an old and sick man, and the period was bad, it was hot”, - the writer notes. He was also unable to visit many sites due to the busy schedule.

The experienced writer’s eye sees and notices everything. His attention is focused on geographical information, description of cities and various places. Of the cities he describes Rome, Genoa, Alicorna, Florence, Monaco, Syracuse, Constantinopol, Trabzon... Malta and Sicily, the description of Volcano Etna is remarkable, etc. The writer was especially impressed by Rome: “Believe me, Rome is like this, even if a man walks a hundred years, it will be impossible for him to get through its wonders, or to see them completely. But what it will be possible for me to see, I will record everything truthfully” (Orbeliani 1959: 170). In general, this text offers rich material for the history and archeology of Rome.

The “Journey” contains a detailed geographical description of areas, nature, cities, customs of the people, occupation of the population, political and state structure of the country, historical sites, churches and monasteries (with a detailed description of their architecture and relics preserved there). In addition, legends and traditions on various saints are included the text. The writer describes asylums and libraries in Rome and Florence (“book houses”, where he could not find a single Georgian book). Sometimes, along with specimens of Christian culture, the so-called “pagan temples” are also described (in Rome the temples of the god of wine, the god of truth, the god of the sun...). Several museums are described, among these, even a zoological museum. Sometimes geographical names are also attached with the information on the longitudes and latitudes. It is interesting to note that S.-S.Orbeliani was the first to use in Georgian literature the term denoting “republic” (“poplik” – republic), with respect to “Genevia” (Genoa – D.M.). However, he regarded absolute monarchy more acceptable as compared with the order of “Genevia”.

During the journey to the remote countries, Sulokhan-Saba Orbeliani never forgot his homeland. The writer often thought of Georgia and dreamed of its better future: “May God will so that after me my country witnesses a better period”. Sometimes the places and people he saw and met reminded him of the homeland; visiting Monaco reminded him of Metekhi, Alicorna – of Odiishi, Malta was reminiscent of Uplistsikhe, Sicilian wine resembled Ateni wine, the writer recalls Sioni Theotokos and Khakhuli Theotokos... And what is the most important, he never forgets the readers: “Believe me, I will not write what I have not seen”, “Who will believe, I have seen this with my own eyes, and who will not, it is up to you”, - he convinces the reader.

According to the great scholar K.Kekelidze, Sulokhan-Saba Orbeliani’s journey proved to be “politically useless, but fruitful from the literary viewpoint...The “Journey to Europe” was the first, so to speak, manual in the Georgian language, by means of which the Georgians familiarized with Western Europe” (Kekelidze 1966: 470-473).

A journey to Europe is described in the work “Journey from Petersburg to Vilno” by Grigol Bagrationi (1790-1830), son of Prince Ioane. Due to the known historical circumstances, Grigol Bagrationi together with other princes was exiled to Russia. In 1815 he participated in a military campaign against Napoleon and the impressions of exactly this campaign are rendered in the “Journey”. The work is written in 1815, it has survived only in one manuscript (H-2178). Apparently, Gr.Bagrationi intended to describe the entire campaign (the surviving manuscript is a diary and contains only five pages), but this desire remained unrealized.

It is obvious from the text that the author was distinguished by the keenness of observation and versatile interests. He offers a comprehensive description of the places and cities visited by him. For example, the city of Vilno is presented quite completely, where the author spent 3 days. Gr.Bagrationi describes the city, its sites, outskirts, the theatre, which he did not like as compared with the Petersburg theatre, and especially the people. “In the above-mentioned city of Vilno the people are very beautiful, – Grigol notes – I daresay, I have not seen better anywhere.” But in addition to the beauty of Vilno, the author also notices how these people live, how they are dressed...At the same time, Grigol Bagrationi compares everything to what he has seen and heard in his homeland. When describing the river Narva, he notes:” This river divides the city in two parts and in the middle of the city there is a hill, with an ancient castle built on it, and although the city is small, it is very beautiful, whereas this river is twice as large and deep as Mtkvari”.

Grigol Bagrationi narrates in detail everything what is alien and surprising for him. He offers a detailed description of the catholic cemetery that he visited, his meeting with a dwarf, Iamburg church, etc. The prince especially liked Poland and the Poles, who always greeted him cordially.

In his “Journey”, the writer tries to describe conscientiously all that he saw and that produced a special impression on him. In our view, these are fragments, notes made under the influence of a direct impression of the seen or experienced, the raw material which is generally jotted down in a notebook by a person visiting a foreign country. A “journey” is created on the basis of further processing of such notes. It cannot be said whether Grigol Bagrationi managed to process these materials, as, unfortunately, it is not known either if he continued writing his diaries.

In general, striving to cultural integration is one of the main characteristics of the Georgian literature of the 18th-19th cc. This was a purposeful attempt to reintegrate Georgia into the Western-Christian and, in particular, European thinking area, to return to Europe. Beginning with S.-S. Orbeliani, numerous public figures were involved in this process, of which Teimuraz Bagrationi (1782-1846) should be mentioned specially. He is credited with the formation of scholarly Kartvelology and arousing the interest of its leader, Marie Brosset, in Georgia. Teimuraz Bagrationi was aware that relationship with civilized Europe was a necessary and inevitable process for Georgia. The educated prince viewed the cultural integration into Europe as a two-way process - what Georgia was taking into Europe and what it was to accept, learn and adopt from Europe. In one of the letters to M. Brosset he stressed: “The Europeans... nobody knows for certain... that the Georgian language and literature should not have been ignored. [Europe should] learn and judge what the Kingdom of Georgia was like”.

In the context of cultural integration into Europe, “My Journey to Various Places of Europe” (1836) by Teimuraz Bagrationi deserves special attention. This work essentially is a diary – in the form of fragmentary notes. The text reflects clearly the author’s erudition and broad interests. He describes the countries and cities he visited (Estonia, Poland, Prussia, Bohemia, Berlin, Karlsbad, Marienbad), the way of life, customs, traditions of the people, nature, etc. Teimuraz Bagrationi often associates European impressions with the Georgian reality, however, he notes: “How can I compare to the free people the enslaved nation”.

Teimuraz Bagrationi’s text shows Europe seen from the viewpoint of an educated Georgian person. At the same time, the author, having emigrated forcedly to Russia a long time ago, does not forget for

a moment the glory of his native country and its ancient culture. And he sees the future of Georgia in the integration into Europe.

Although the above-mentioned authors lived in different periods and different geographical and political environment, they have much in common – they describe the impressions received in Europe, their objective is not only to record various facts, but to offer the author's commentary on one or another event, to give a clearly outlined tendency and sometimes to show even the publicistic pathos, to generalize facts and view developments on a large scale. Accordingly, the author tries to exert influence on the readers and make them like-minded participants and companions of the "journey", which above all is aimed at broadening of the readers' mental outlook, perfecting their worldview. It is obvious from the texts that the authors, on the one hand, try to introduce Georgia and the Georgians in the European countries as comprehensively as possible, and, on the other one, to familiarize Georgian readers with the European mode of life, traditions, values, etiquette, etc. So, these "journeys" are oriented on the reader and, I think, even the Georgian realia, not infrequently occurring in them, are often cited exactly in order to enable the writer to bring closer to the reader what he saw and experienced in Europe (in this regard, the above-mentioned works are noteworthy as historical sources as well, however, regrettably, none of these works are translated in the countries described by the writers).

Study of the above-mentioned "journeys" in the context of Europeanism gives interesting material for revealing the worldview discourse of their authors. The intention is obvious – to regard Georgia in the context of the European civilization, so that the Georgian readers could see their country not as oppressed and humiliated by Persia, Ottoman Turkey or Russia, but realize that Georgia is a part of the great European civilization and its place is to be sought exactly in the European cultural area, an opportunity to visit which the authors had had. At that time, this was a purposeful attempt of Georgian writers to reintegrate Georgia into the Western-Christian and, in particular, European thinking area, to "return" it to Europe.

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