

ONE ASPECT OF RUSTAVELI'S WORLDVIEW
(The connection between the knight in
The Knight in the Panther's Skin and the tragedy of Prince Demna)

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Abstract: The reality of the 12th century and the severe political crisis of the same era are carefully hidden in the allegorical stories created by Rustaveli. On the creative canvas, the poet's contemporary historical processes take the form of allegories, metaphors and symbols. In our opinion, the poet envisions King George III [1156-1184] as the focus of Farsadan's attention, while the character preceding Tariel represents Prince Demna (Demetre), the son of David V. In Georgian scholarly literature, the vices of the Indian king in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* have been repeatedly noted, but in this regard, research in this direction still remains relevant.

We believe that the reference to the beginning of the tale of India is especially important to confirm the proposed assumption. Farsadan, saddened by not having a son, views Tariel as the future ruler of all of India. He considers him the Lord of the country and army [“The King said: ‘I will raise him as my own son, he is of my own lineage’ (84, 313)], but after the birth of Nestan-Darejan, it seems that he changes his political decision and clearly states his position during the council about bringing a Khwarazmian groom. It is precisely at this point that it becomes clear that King Farsadan creates an insurmountable barrier for his ‘adopted son’ on the path to the Royal Throne.

The historical source of Stephanus Orbeliani, which provides a fertile ground for drawing parallels between the poem's context and historical reality, seems quite valuable. A direct parallel can be made between the hero of the epos and the orphaning of Prince Demna, as well as the decision to raise him as a future king. According to the historical source, it is revealed that King George III convinced the nobles and Ioane Orbeli to support the idea of crowning his nephew as king. The same source also indicates that later, George III deceitfully went back on his promise to his brother. In this part, we find the historian's distortion of the facts groundless, as in the poem, indirectly, though fictionally, a similar situation occurs. The coincidence between historical reality and the development of the poem's plot is unlikely to be accidental. The historical and literary facts are that George-Farsadan is an autocratic king, while Demna-Tariel, raised in the family of an Amirspasalari, is a young man deceived by the King (his uncle), who does not realize the King's deceit for a long time. The poet's commentary on his contemporary era or tragedy, in our view, is covered by fiction context and the destruction of Demna (Demetre) Prince's ability to inherit the male line of succession is depicted in the image of the crying lad with the black horse.

Keywords: Knight in the Panther's Skin; historical reality; fictional reality.

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Introduction: No matter how controversial a question raised before the tribunal of scholarship may be, we believe that it should still be expressed. Especially if we consider that the matter concerns *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* and Rustaveli's worldview and that „it is impossible to accept uncritically the opinions of researchers working on it“ (Khintibidze, 1993, p. 32). It has long been noted in Georgian scholarly literature that „it is not difficult to relate the artistic reality portrayed in *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* to

historical reality“ (Kekelidze & Baramidze, 1987, p. 249). We think that in this direction, much more remains to be researched and comprehended, so that a firm foundation may be established for understanding Rustaveli’s political and social positions as of one of the most important witnesses and participants in the historical events of the 12th century. However, the picture drawn when relying on Armenian historical sources is not entirely favorable with respect to the political climate of Rustaveli’s era. Mkhitar Gosh (12th–13th centuries) writes: „When King Demetre died [Demetre I – I.S.], he was succeeded by his son David, a man of sound judgment“ (Gosh, 1968, p. 46). Furthermore, Mkhitar Gosh notes that, for reasons he identifies as religious in nature, the Georgian nobility – „especially the lineage known as the Orbeliani“ – became consumed by jealousy and **gave King David a fatal poison and killed him**. A profound and long-lasting grief befell both the Georgian and Armenian realms. His brother Giorgi was enthroned in his place“ (Gosh, 1968, p. 47). Vardan likewise describes the collaboration between the Orbelians and Giorgi III in the assassination of David V. The historian writes: „Some claim that **[he was killed] through the deceit of Sumbat and Ivane Orbeli... they had conspired with Giorgi¹**, the brother of David, so that [he] would appoint them as commanders“ (Vardan, 2002, p. 145). It is clear that the latter half of the XII century was marked by severe political turmoil, filled with obscure episodes concerning succession to the throne. In terms of dynastic continuity, the situation could only be considered highly unfavorable; the Demna-Orbeli revolt of 1178 stands as further evidence. Armenian sources (relied upon here due to gaps in Georgian historiography) present a striking picture: the killers of his father (Giorgi III and Ioane Orbeli) oversaw the upbringing of David V’s son, Prince Demna and even arranged his marriage to the daughter of Ioane Orbeli, the Amirspasalar implicated in David V’s murder. Such a political maneuver effectively foreclosed Demna’s legitimate claim to the throne. Thus, the political crisis in XII century Georgia represents a crucial element of Rustaveli’s worldview and shapes the ideological and narrative framework of *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*, manifesting across multiple layers of the poem.

Methods: In this study, the discussion is developed primarily through critical approaches and analytical methodology, supported by a selective examination of historical sources and literary material. Furthermore, by integrating descriptive and comparative methods within a coherent logical structure, a well-grounded scholarly conclusion has been formed. Drawing upon the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge for the analysis of the topic, key research questions have been posed and corresponding arguments and evidence have been identified – both from Georgian historiography sources and from the narrative structure of *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*.

Discussion: The political and social realities of the 12th century – along with the troubling internal turbulence of the age – seem to produce in Rustaveli such profound tectonic shifts that his poetic narrative becomes a continuous source of allegorical and symbolic meaning. This includes his construction of King Parsadan: a character who, we argue, is modeled with Giorgi III at the focal point. The elaborate theatrical „set,“ the royal „costume“ (primarily Parsadan’s staged „wisdom“), and all the crafted dramatic effects may easily mislead the audience unless perception is guided by thoughtful scrutiny. To understand how Rustaveli conceptualizes kingship – and how the Indian monarch reflects or violates those ideals – an important scholarly insight must be considered. As N. Sulava observes, in *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*: „The king is a being created in the image of God – a notion Rustaveli expresses from a biblically grounded perspective: ‘From Him is every sovereign, in His very likeness.’ The King must lead the state according to biblical principles. He is obliged throughout his life to read and study the Book of Law, upholding every word and command within it as the guarantee of stability and success for his reign and his heirs... He must overcome human weakness to stand righteous before his people and govern worthily the land entrusted to him by God.“ – (Sulava, 2009, p. 112) Thus, the expectations placed upon a ruler, defined by moral responsibility and knowledge, can be summarized

¹ Words underlined in Armenian sources are ours – I. S. .

in a straightforward maxim: „*You are King – therefore act accordingly.*“ Divine will cannot be ignored if one has ascended to the throne through divine ordination. But does this operate as intended in Rustaveli’s portrayal of India? What conclusions emerge when we examine the narrative gradations that the poet so deliberately constructs? Although Georgian scholars have already commented on the moral shortcomings of the Indian king, our research pursues a more specific direction – interpreting Parsadan as an embodiment of hypocrisy – and our conclusions will be shaped accordingly.

Within the poem, the King’s conduct seems entirely contrary to what a sovereign – created in God’s image – is expected to represent; the biblical imperative toward doing the good appears abandoned. It is no overstatement to argue that Parsadan’s spiritual nature stands in marked deviation from divine foundations. To substantiate this interpretation, we shall refer to a specific passage in the poem.

The childless King and Queen begin to raise Tariel as the future ruler of India. As the Indian young man, seated with his tunic loosened, tells Avtandil: „They raised him as master of the full army and the land.“ In this line, the qualifying term „full“ is noteworthy. It indicates that, by Parsadan’s own decision [“The King said: ‘I will raise him as my son; he is of my own lineage’“ (Rustaveli, 1966, p. 84, l. 313)], Tariel is designated as the heir to the throne, as well as the future master of the Kingdom and army. The question arises: when did Parsadan depart from his original plan? Presumably, the queen’s pregnancy [“The queen became pregnant“] and the birth of a female heir [“birth of a daughter“] prompted the Indian monarch’s change of heart. Clearly, a contender emerged for the royal throne and the fostered Tariel, raised as a „son,“ found himself at the center of political conflict. Parsadan appears to have carefully concealed his true intentions until revealing his plan to have Nestan get married, a subterfuge that the orphaned and inexperienced Tariel could not perceive, owing to his naïve trust in his foster father. On the surface, such betrayal from a foster parent may seem unimaginable; yet in the context of political power struggles, it is unsurprising that Parsadan pursues treacherous measures alongside decisions advantageous for his daughter. We suggest that the early narrative of India reflects Tariel’s initial childhood and subsequent adolescent inexperience. Notably, Tariel shares his experiences with the Arab Spaset and, described as „unbuttoned,“ presents his confession in a seemingly candid form to the audience – a narrative that contains multiple layers [“Unbuttoned, he sat to speak, he laid bare his shoulders“ (Rustaveli, 1966, p. 82, l. 303)]. Rustaveli, as a master of artistic expression, likely employed the epithet „unbuttoned“ to convey the openness of a prince exiled from his own kingdom, rather than as mere visual decoration.

In this part of the story, attention is drawn to a piece of information preserved in historical sources. It should be noted in advance that the work of Stepanos Orbelyan -regarded as an Armenian historian and translated into Georgian in the early periods – has been considered a subjective account of the Orbelians’ uprising [1178] due to the dominance of members of that family. There is little point in debating this, as it is an indisputable assessment; however, the question remains whether the fact recorded by Stepanos Orbelyan deviates from historical reality – a fact that provides fertile ground for drawing a direct parallel between the orphaning of the epic hero and Prince Demna and the decision to raise him as a future king. According to the source, David V – described as strong and wise (“the man powerful and wise“) -, at the time of his death, summoned the Catholicos, the „great“ nobles, his own brother Giorgi, and the „minor prince“ Demna to witness his testament. We read:“And you, my brother Giorgi, shall take my place and exercise authority over the realm and let a portion of the inheritance which my father gave you be yours, until my boy has grown.“ He summoned Ioane Orbeli, son of Sumbat and charged him to oversee the boy in accordance with the terms of his testament (Orbelyan, 1978, p. 41). Giorgi, wishing to be the King, persuaded the nobles and Ioane Orbeli „as soon as my brother’s son becomes of age, I shall not reject him, rather, in accordance with my brother’s testament, I established him upon the royal seat.“ For this reason, he was crowned King (Orbelyan, 1978, p. 42)¹; subsequently, however, he treacherously

¹ R. Metreveli writes regarding Stepanos Orbelyan’s source: „Before his death, David V appointed his young son Demetre under the guardianship of Giorgi III and entrusted him with the administration of the kingdom until he reached full age. Subsequently, Giorgi was to cede the throne to Demetre... Giorgi III revealed his own desire to reign only belatedly and seemingly convinced the nobles that his assumption of the royal throne was temporary“ (Metreveli, 1991, pp. 71-72).

deviated from the promise he had made to his brother. It should also be noted that Ivane Javakhishvili mistakenly considers Stepanos Orbelyan's account of David V's testament to be false, on the grounds that „David and Demetre I—Giorgi were in such disagreement with one another that it would have been impossible for David to appoint Giorgi as the executor of his testament“ (Javakhishvili, 1983, p. 243). According to Stepanos Orbelyan's source, the matter concerns an oral testament or promise, rather than a written document. Georgian historical sources provide no factual information regarding the conditions or circumstances surrounding the death of David V. We believe it is possible that the politically cornered, presumably dying son of Demetre I was compelled to request that the younger brother be allowed to ascend the throne – namely Demetre-Demna – when the proper time arrived, that is, when Demetre reached full age. s

The fact that David V took from Giorgi III the promise regarding Demna's accession to the throne in the presence of the nobles should primarily be explained by distrust toward his brother; therefore, in this part, we consider the chronicler's falsification of the event to be unfounded. Indeed, does this entry in Stepanos Orbelyan's work allow us, despite the author's bias, not to believe this part of the historical account when we move into the epic's artistic framework – a field deliberately loaded with intrigue and secrecy? It is during Saridan's lifetime that the childless Parsadan decides to raise Tariel as the future ruler of India, entrusting the prince to the wise men „to study the behavior and deeds of kings“ [“He gave him to the wise to study the behavior and deeds of kings“ (Rustaveli, 1966, p. 64, l. 314)], while Saridan is given the title of Amirbar; from the poem, we also know that „even Amirbar of India holds the office of Amirspasalar“ (Rustaveli, 1966, p. 64, l. 311). Stepanos Orbelyan likewise reports that „in the following days the boy was distinguished in the house of Ioane, and he learned and was raised“ (Orbelyan, 1978, p. 41). Thus, it is precisely Ioane Orbeli – the country's Amirspasalar – to whom the underage Demna was entrusted for upbringing. He is educated in Ioane Orbeli's feudal household (Rustaveli calls them „the wise“), yet in which part of the governance of the country is he master? He is a powerful minister and a highly influential figure in the kingdom. Ioane Orbeli holds the title of Amirspasalar, just as Saridan does in the artfully composed poem, and after the death of the father, Tariel assumes this role. The convergence of historical reality and the development of the poem's plot should not be considered accidental.

It amounts to little if the artistic conditionality and the synthesis of real figures do not leave the effect of a photograph or a mirror-like reflection. What matters is that the contours of real figures gradually emerge and in such a way that the Amirbar-Amirspasalar relationship sends an alarming signal. On the path to the struggle for the royal throne, two opposing political camps become apparent – that of Giorgi III and Ioane Orbeli and in the poem – that of Parsadan and Tariel. In any case, our research follows this logic and this approach is by no means unknown to scholarly circles (Tsereteli, 2014, pp. 7–27; Chiladze, 2014, pp. 42–201). The historical and literary facts are that Giorgi-Parsadan is an autocratic king, while Demna-Tariel, raised in the Amirspasalar's household, is a young man deceived by the King [or uncle], who, being underage, cannot fully comprehend the cunning of the King's plan. Tariel would have understood even less at the time of his father's death [“my father died“] and after spending a year in darkness [“I spent a year in darkness, sorrowful and abandoned“ (Rustaveli, 1966, p. 66, l. 328)]. What is this „sitting in darkness“ – a mourning custom of forefathers, or the darkness of incomprehension that further embittered the life of an already „sorrowful and abandoned“ heir? V. Nozadze, discussing „darkness“ in his *On Color Symbolism*, notes that in the text of *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, the word „dark“ is sometimes used instead of „black“ to mark mourning... This is a sign of grief: the mourner would sit in a dark room, as, for example, Tariel did after his father's death (Nozadze, 2001, p. 68). The synonymous use of „black“ and „dark“ in the poem as artistic markers of mourning and sorrow is indeed indisputable, but does Rustaveli confine himself only to depicting the mourner, or does he intend to convey something more? Certainly, the interpretation here must also be metaphorical – the darkness (“dark“) signifies not only the general state of grief but also ignorance of something important, a kind of bewilderment afflicting Tariel. The mourner's state was undoubtedly exacerbated by Giorgi–Parsadan's

hypocrisy and deceit, examples of which are abundant in the poem [“For his departure, they prepared a celebration for the rulers of India, / they met me from afar, kissed me with respect as if I were a parent” (Rustaveli, 1966, p. 87, l. 330)]. It is a fact that Rustaveli’s passages or individual artistic contexts never allow for empirical judgment of historical matters. In the „unbuttoned“ narrative of Tariel, there are far more significant knots than may appear at first glance. The poet’s commentary on his contemporary epoch or tragedy is veiled in artistic context – Prince Demna (Demetre), for reasons connected to the 1178 uprising, becomes engulfed in its inferno, is cruelly punished and is forever denied the royal throne of Georgia, which, by the strict feudal law, belonged directly to the male line of inheritance: the firstborn of David V and the grandson of David the Builder. Giorgi III’s judgment is merciless: „And Demetre was thrown from the Rock Gates, his hands and feet were bound, and he was killed and buried at Mtskheta“ (Chronicle, 1955, pp. 364–371).

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Conclusions: Rustaveli’s poem encompasses numerous significant contexts that allow us to perceive the historical events of second-half 12th-century Georgia. Of course, a literal interpretation of the poet’s artistic conventions would be misguided, but it is equally incorrect to ignore the primary features of real historical figures in the poem. Among these, we believe that Parsadan’s artistic depiction, the Amirbar–Amirspasalar relationship, and the question of Tariel’s removal from the royal throne provide unmistakable hints. On the path of the struggle for royal power, two opposing political camps emerge – in reality, the resistance of Giorgi III and the Orbeli–Demna faction, and in the poem, that of Parsadan and Tariel. Ioane Orbeli holds the title of Amirspasalar, just as Saridan does in *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*, and after the father’s death, Tariel assumes this role. In our view, such a coincidence between historical reality and the development of the poem’s plot is unlikely to be purely spontaneous. A comparison of historical and literary facts shows that Giorgi III–Parsadan is an autocratic and usurping King, while Demna–Tariel, raised in the Amirspasalar’s household, is a prince deceived by the King [or uncle] and removed from the royal throne.

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