

GEORGIAN LITERATI WOMEN¹

KETEVAN TATISHVILI

PhD in Philology, Senior Research Fellow at Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Center of Manuscripts

E-mail: ketevantatishvili@hotmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-8398-9795

Abstract. For many centuries, both in Georgia and around the world, the only arena for women's fulfillment has been the family and has been limited to reproduction, child-rearing and family and kinship relations. At the same time, there are reports of women stepping out of this traditional female role and in some cases making significant contributions to society through their work and skills. After all, it is believed that our country experienced its best period during the reign of a woman, Queen Tamar. In order to increase the role of women in the public arena in society, to bring about changes in terms of gender equality, and to form a civil society, it is necessary to study more widely the role of women in Georgian culture, history, and sources. We are interested in the extent to which literary sources, Georgian manuscripts, have preserved traces of women's work in non-family spheres, what these traces testify to: whether they realized their potential and talents in any way, or they had the opportunity to influence historical and social events, and in what form. It is manuscripts that have brought us information that Georgian women have been active patrons of the development of Georgian literacy, cultural and educational activities for centuries. We have female poets, scribe calligraphers, buyers (commissioners) of manuscripts, renovator-decorators, manuscript rescuers, patrons, bibliophiles-collectors. There were many hard times in the history of Georgia and many manuscripts were destroyed, so it was very important to reproduce, restore and protect the manuscripts. Interestingly and pleasantly, women were also actively involved in these activities. Information about scribe activities of Georgian women can be found in manuscripts, for example, there are more than a hundred scribes, the number of authors, of course, is much less, but all of them are outstanding. For example, Mariam-Makrina Bagrationi, whom Korneli Kekelidze still considers akin to the outstanding Byzantine hymnographer Kassia.

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Introduction. For centuries, both in Georgia and around the world, family has been the primary sphere for women's self-realization. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence suggesting that women occasionally transcended this traditional, gender-prescribed role making significant contributions through their work and skills. As early as the seventeenth century, Arcangelo Lamberti wrote about the education of Georgian women: „Georgian literacy would have perished today if women had not preserved it. If anyone wishes to learn to read, they must turn to a woman for instruction“ (Lamberti, 1938 : 164).

To enhance women's participation in the public sphere and promote gender equality, it is crucial to study the role of women within Georgian culture, history, and primary sources in greater depth. Particularly valuable are the records preserved in manuscripts, which demonstrate that for centuries, Georgian women have actively contributed to and supported the development of literacy, culture, and education in Georgia.

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Numerous women patrons are known to have commissioned, renewed, or embellished manuscripts, as well as redeemed, collected, and preserved them. Some were also scribes and readers, though fewer served as authors. Due to the passage of time, the names of certain female scribes are all that remain, with no surviving literary legacy, such as Phominisia Beridze, whose image was preserved by the missionary Cristoforo Castelli in his album (Asatiani, 1936: 15). Nevertheless, the names of many such women have reached us.

At various times, Georgian scholars have dedicated research to these women, scribes and patrons (Asatiani, 1936; Gachechiladze, 2011; Gachechiladze, 2019:311–317; Kekelidze, 1957:202–216; Kekelidze, 1957: 227–251; Kavtarria, 1977: 202–242; Kapiashvili, 1994, etc.).

However, the discovery of new material combined with the diversity of the sources and the necessity of analyzing them from new perspectives, have made further research essential.

Methods. Our research integrates philological, historical, textological-codicological, iconographic-comparative, and artistic-stylistic methods to provide a comprehensive analysis.

Discussion. Throughout Georgia's history, there have been numerous periods of hardship during which many manuscripts were destroyed. Consequently, the reproduction, restoration and preservation of these works became matters of utmost importance. It is both noteworthy and gratifying that women were also actively involved in these efforts.

Information about the literary and scribal activities of Georgian women can be found in manuscript colophons and marginal notes. For instance, there are references to more than one hundred female scribes. The work of some of them has been studied to varying extents, while research on others is currently being carried out within the framework of our ongoing grant project.

So far, it is considered that the earliest known female scribe was *Asthandari*, the „daughter of the King of Kings,“ who lived in the sixteenth century. She copied part of a compendium (H 972, fols. 166r–215v) in elegant *nuskhuri* calligraphy. According to Ia Gachechiladze (Gachechiladze, 2019: 311–317), Asthandari was the daughter of Constantine II, King of Kartli and sister to David X, George IX, Bagrat Mukhranbatoni, and Dimitri. Asthandari's husband is identified as Manuchar I Jaqeli, the brother of Atabeg Qvarqvare, with whom she presumably had a son mentioned in the signature of a document (Ad 91) as „Manuchar (the son).“

Notably, compelling evidence indicates that some Georgian women were bibliophiles and book collectors who also occasionally engaged in manuscript copying. One such figure was Anna Eristavi-Maqashvili. Four manuscripts copied by her – H 168, H 169, H 453, and A 381 – are preserved at the K. Kekelidze Georgian National Center of Manuscripts. Interestingly, Anna also tried her hand at poetry: she composed her testament in verse for the copy of Petre Laradze's Georgian translation of Derzhavin's poem „*God*“ that she transcribed (H 453). At her initiative, a family library was established in the Maqashvili household in the village of Ikalto (Gachechiladze, 2011: 159–175).

As early as the 12th century, there were female patrons, women who commissioned manuscripts. One Gospel manuscript (A 516) preserves the name of its patron, *Mana, the daughter of Makhaveli*. In later centuries, several noble Georgian women likewise initiated the compilation and transcription of manuscripts. Evidence of this can be found in the versions of *History of Georgia* (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*) prepared under the patronage of Queen Ana and Queen Mariam – Queen Ana being the wife of King Alexander I of Kakheti (r. 1476–1511), and Queen Mariam the consort of King Rostom Khan (r. 1632–1658).

It is also important to note that there were instances in which Georgian women sought to enrich the national literary tradition by commissioning new translations. For example, Princess Ana Bagrationi, the daughter of King Kaikhosro and niece of King Vakhtang VI, who accompanied him to Russia, commissioned translations of foreign works. In 1777, at her order, Rector Gaioz translated *The Wisdom of China, or The Doctrine of a Happy Life* (*Kitaiis sibzrne anu stsavla bednierad tskhovrebis*, manuscripts

S 176, S 525, A 1416, Q 168, Q 251, etc.). Later, in 1786, Dimitri Bagrationi, at her request, translated Samuel Rabin's *Golden Order (Oqros Aghnakvsi)* which is preserved in numerous manuscripts (H 213, H 454, H 1009, A 1011, Q 743, and others).

Georgian women occasionally also participated in the exact sciences. In the nineteenth century, the first known female Georgian cartographer, Maia Chikovani, produced copies of the maps of Prince Vakhushti Bagrationi (Zardalishvili, 1966: 87–93). It should also be noted that in 1817, Maia Chikovani transcribed Anselm's *Aesthetic Discussions (Estetikebri Gansjani)* (H 333).

As noted at the beginning of this article, women were not limited to manuscript copying or patronage alone. Several female authors are known, most of whom were poets. In this paper, attention will be focused on only a few of them.

Among Georgian women writers, one of the most distinguished figures is Mariam-Makrina Bagrationi, whom Korneli Kekelidze (Kekelidze, 1957:246–247) compared to the renowned Byzantine hymnographer Kassia. Mariam-Makrina was the daughter of King Erekle I (Nazar-Ali Khan). Was widowed early in life and later took monastic vows. Exceptionally gifted and well educated, she left behind several manuscripts and historical documents that bear her name.

Mariam-Makrina drafted royal charters, historical records and donation registers that display a highly skilled hand, attesting to her expertise as a calligrapher. Of particular note is the copy of Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani's Dictionary (H 1740), to which she appended an acrostic hymn to the Virgin Mary. She also compiled and copied a canonical collection, extant in later eighteenth-century manuscripts. There is evidence that she authored a historical work about Giorgi Saakadze (Kavtarria, 1977: 212–214).

However, Mariam-Makrina's most significant contribution lies in her hymns dedicated to St. Ioseb of Alaverdeli. More precisely, she composed the Rite for this saint – comprising two major hymns, several shorter chants, and a synaxarion. The earliest manuscript preserving Makrina's hymn is the collection of Catholicos Bessarion (S 3269), dated to the 1720s. From that time onward, her canon to St. Ioseb of Alaverdeli was incorporated into nearly all Georgian festal books and acquired canonical status.

Mariam-Makrina's work was shaped by the influence of the David Gareji Literary School (Kavtarria, 1977: 213–218). Her literary talent was held in high regard by Catholicos Anton I, who, despite composing new hymns for almost all Georgian saints in his own Feast Hymn Book (S 1464), included Mariam-Makrina's Canon for St. Ioseb of Alaverdeli almost unchanged, merely adding a few brief hymns of his own composition.

As noted above, the synaxarion (hagiographic life) of St. Ioseb of Alaverdeli is also believed to have been written by Mariam-Makrina herself, indicating her contribution not only to hymnography but also to hagiographic literature.

Another talented poet from the era of King Erekle II was Salome. From her poetic legacy, the work titled *The Praises to Alphabet of Sorrow (Mtukhrebisa Ambatk'ebani)* as the poet herself called it (A 598), has survived. Salome is also the author of several alphabetic poems (*anbantk'ebani*). Her writings reveal her to have been a gifted and educated woman, well acquainted with the Bible, as well as the works of Rustaveli, Chakhrukhadze and other classical authors. L. Asatiani offered the following assessment of her work:

"In any case, Salome, with her original themes, poetic potential and artistic quality, is the strongest and the most significant poet among Georgian women writers of the eighteenth century." (Asatiani, 1936: 22).

Another poet of the same period is Maia Gabashvili, whose alphabetic poem survives in a single manuscript (S 1582, fols. 1v–5v). This poem belongs to the form known as *The Praise to Alphabet -Anze sit mokhval*, which was introduced and popularized by Dimitri Orbeliani, the brother of Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani. This poetic form was a test of the author's wit, artistic taste, and poetic mastery and it required deep knowledge of history, geography, flora and fauna (Kapiashvili, 1994:115).

Of course, there were many more Georgian women authors and manuscript patrons than those mentioned here. However, this article highlights only a small portion of them. The essential point

remains that Georgian women made a substantial contribution to the development of Georgian literacy and literature, even though many of their names may have been lost over time.

Another noteworthy observation is that certain manuscripts contain marginal notes written by women, indicating that they were readers of the manuscripts themselves. This suggests that, in historical Georgia, reading was a passion shared by many women.

Conclusions. The research demonstrates that the contribution of Georgian women to the country's literary and cultural heritage is indisputable. They were actively and productively engaged across various regions of Georgia and even abroad. Among them were female authors, scribes-calligraphers, patrons, restorers, embellishers, manuscript redeemers and bibliophile collectors. In summary, the intellectual and creative activities of Georgian women within the manuscript tradition were remarkably diverse and multifaceted.

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