

# CULTURAL, ETHNOGRAPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF GEORGIAN FOLKLORE

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*The culture of Georgia is rooted in the ancient religions which is traceable in the ethnographic data of the present day. The people who inhabited this area worshipped the star Arcturus in the Bootes constellation. This connection to Arcturus is reflected in the local folklore about the ploughman, oxen, dog and wolf.*

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## Introduction

In the middle part of Georgia, south of Trialeti ridge on the left bank of the river Algeti lies the Manglisi district and a small urban settlement of Manglisi. Historically, Manglisi - or Manglisi gorge - was bounded in the east with Didgori Valley and Bender-Bendenimountain sides, in the west with Arjevani - Kadkaia-Kachai mountain ridge and Sakrisimountain, in the south - with Bedeni Mountain Ridge, and in the north - with Didgorimountain. Among Russian speaking inhabitants of this territory Sakrisimountain was known as "Yellow Mountain" or "Bears' Ravine".

On the mountain of Sakrisi (Bears' Ravine) is located the megalithic complex of Gokhnari. In his book Meliksed Beg says<sup>1</sup> that the crystal castle in the Georgian myths about Ami(h)rani (originates from the God of Mihra, Mithras), which Ami(h)rani found the entrance to following the first beam of the rising Sun, implies this megalithic complex of Gokhnari.

In 2000 BC<sup>2</sup> the well-known "international style" epoch was widely spread in South Caucasus. On the archeological sites of South Caucasus cylinder seals of both Elaborate and Common Mitanian glyptic styles were found. Today, the seals of the Mitanian styles discovered in the

Caucasus number about twenty items. Most of the seals were found in Trialeti and they were of the Common style. Nine cylinder seals were discovered on Sapar-Kharababurial ground, seven of them have geometrical ornament<sup>3</sup>. Scientific literature often makes mention of the typological and functional similarity between the South Caucasian (II BC) and Anatolian standards (III BC). All these aspects indicate that in the ancient epoch inhabitants of this territory were well-developed and had cultural, economic, and religious relationship with the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Mitanian civilizations.

## ***Ethnographical and Cultural Data and Their Correlation with Celestial Bodies***

There is a question about whether the beliefs of ancient humans were based on respect for mystical, spiritual and unknown astronomical and weather phenomena or whether they worshipped the life-giving powers of these, which they used in their daily life and practical activities. The movement of the Sun, the phases of the Moon, the appearance of twinkling stars - all this must have been obscure, mystical, and beyond comprehension for ancient people; therefore, they venerated, deified and worshipped the luminaries.

The ancient man observed and studied celestial bodies (which were perceived to be gods) and used the received knowledge in his daily life for his benefit. In our opinion, this is one of the reasons for the worship and admiration

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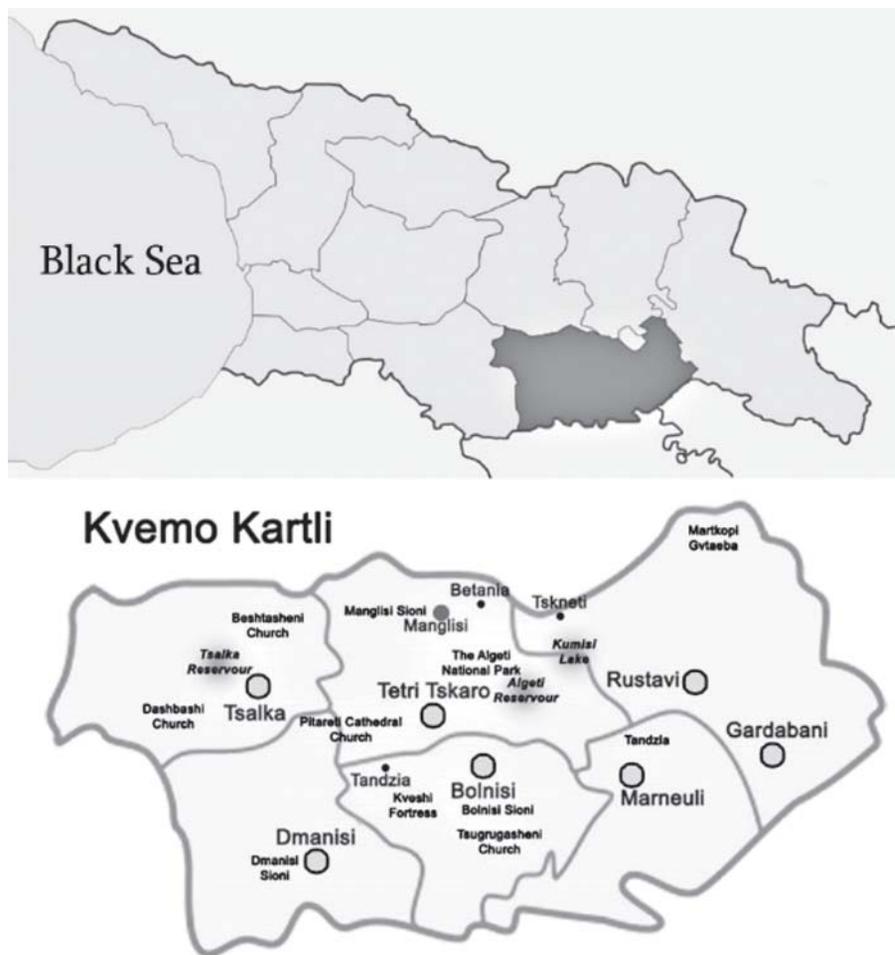


Fig. 1 Gokhnari megalithic complex near Manglisi in the South part of Georgia (KvemoKartli).

of celestial bodies. An illustrative example of this fact is the materials from the archive of S. Bedukadze<sup>1</sup>, in which a ploughman yokes oxen after the appearance of the specific star - “Sapara’s Chuti”. Ploughman’s songs during the cultivation of the soil (i.e. during ploughing), in which the Sun and Moon are mentioned, is also noteworthy.

“A good singer did not have to do anything (plough), he used to cheer us up, even a ploughman sang if he knew a song, sometimes I had drovers, they started singing out loudly such a song as “Orovela”, or some other one about oxen or other things; some of them sang like this:

“The bright moon said  
I am much better than the sun.  
Sat and wrote the book.  
The wind was carrying away ...”

(Dmanisi, Gantiadi, IosebDatuashvili, patronymic Vasil, 84 years old, a ploughman, recorded by: S. Bedukadze, October 19, 1964.)

As the records above show, the ploughman’s song is about the Moon, the Sun and the wind; before yoking the oxen he looks at the Beacon Star and only then he starts yoking them. These materials reveal that the people used to manage their agriculture through observations on celestial bodies. This shows that they possessed certain astronomical knowledge about celestial bodies and their motion, and that the land farming culture and rules were passed from generation to generation with their accumulated knowledge. In our opinion, ancient cultic megaliths were created for the purpose of the seasonal breakdown of year for the ancient people to know when they could plough and sow, when the cold and hot weather periods started, when rainy and dry seasons commenced. In essence, the megaliths encode information necessary for survival.

### **Cultural – Religious Correlations in the Georgian Folklore**

John Rogers in his article “Origins of the ancient constellations”<sup>4</sup> describes the mythology relating to the Bootes constellation. “It follows Ursa Major in the sky, and has always been associated with it, as a hunter of the bear, a guardian of the bears, a herdsman of the oxen, a driver of the wagon, or a ploughman with a plough. Bootes probably means Ox-driver.”;

“In Mesopotamia this area, or especially Arcturus, was somehow identified with the god Enlil; but there was an alternative name Shudun, meaning Yoke, which perhaps suggests that association with oxen did reach Mesopotamia”;

In the Almagest of Ptolemy, the Alpha star (e.i. Arcturus) in Bootes is mentioned as “Subrufa”, it means - slightly red<sup>5</sup>. On the celestial sphere, between the constellations of Bootes and Ursa Major is located the CanumVenaticorum (hunting dogs). According to Ptolemy’s Almagest, CanumVenaticorum translates into the “Dogs” constellation. It includes two stars: Corcaroli – Alpha 2 (Visual magnitude 2.84) and Chara (Visual magnitude 4.24).

The Constellation of Bootes is also mentioned in Homer's epic poem the "Odyssey". Odysseus navigates away from Calypso by the Stars.

"...nor did sleep ever descend on his eyelids

As he kept his eye on the Pleiades and late-setting Boötes

And the Bear, to whom men also give the name of the Wagon,

Who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion..."<sup>6</sup>.

According to the Greek mythology, the Bootes constellation is associated with a ploughman with 7 yoked oxen (the stars of Ursa Major).

The above-mentioned historical data indicate that luminaries had a significant place and role in ancient epochs. They contained not only mythological and religious aspects, but were of vital importance for maritime and agriculture.

The ethnographical data collected by S. Bedukadze, in which yoking of the oxen is described, are similar to the Sumerian, Egyptian and Greek mythologies.<sup>4</sup>

Going back to this ethnographic data:

Presumably, the source of the explanation of "Sapara's Chuti" comes from Ptolemy's definition of Arcturus ("Subrufa"), "Chuti" may be from Sumerian "Shup.pa". In ancient folklore these two definitions transformed into "Sapara's Chuti" and reached us as "Sapara's Chuti" star.

Supposedly in the ethnographic data obtained from the above-mentioned Georgian ploughman, the star of "Sapara's Chuti" implies the star Arcturus, whose visual magnitude equals 0.05. It can be seen with the naked eye and presumably was the marker of the beginning of agricultural works. Based on the ethnographic data, when "Sapara's Chuti" was observed on the celestial sphere, the ploughman began yoking his oxen. According to the Sumerian and Greek mythology, "yoked oxen" were associated with the seven stars of the Ursa Majoris constellation, and a ploughman was the symbol of the constellation of Bootes."A frisky dog (small) followed him, a wolf ran after them (S. Bedukadze 1964)" - these are the stars in the Canum Venaticorum (Hunting dogs) constellation, Beta - Chara (visual magnitude 4.24) is the symbol of "a frisky dog - small", the brighter Alpha star - Corcaroli (visual magnitude 2.84) is the symbol of a wolf, mentioned in the ethnographic data.

As seen from the data given by the said ploughman, it ("to yoke oxen") happened at night, when the "Beacon Star" was seen at the horizon. The modeling with the use of the Sky Map Pro<sup>7</sup> shows that in antiquity Arcturus - the brightest star in the Bootes ("ploughman") constellation - was a circumpolar star.

Based on the results of the Sky Map Pro modeling, in 4000 BC the Arcturus star "culminated below pole"<sup>8</sup>, skimming near the horizon before the rising of the sun. This astronomical phenomenon could be observed from the northern dolmen. After the lower culmination, the star started moving to the zenith of the celestial sphere increasing in altitude (in a horizontal coordinate system). Hypothetically, ancient people noticed such kind of motion and the bright light from the star (low visual magnitude) during the ploughing time of the year. They discovered that the appearance of Arcturus at that time of year was very soon followed by the dawn. Owing to these three factors the ancient people began to deify the star along with putting their knowledge to good use. The dolmen, built in the north part of the megalithic complex, is oriented to the Arcturus star.

Equating of "Sapara's Chuti" with the Arcturus star gives us an assumption that in different ethnographical data the worshipped "Beacon Star" is the Arcturus star in the Bootes constellation. The culmination of the star near the horizon meant that the dawn would break soon and the ploughmen began to yoke the oxen.

The ethnographic data collected by S. Bedukadze from a Georgian ploughman in 1964 contains description of a part of the ancient celestial sphere. However, the plowman was unconscious of the knowledge he had about the "sapaschuti" star, he did not realize he was describing the celestial bodies and constellations when talking about ploughing. Based on the results of sky map pro modeling, it was only in 4000 BC that the Arcturus star became a circumpolar star and appeared in the sky, skimming near the horizon before the helical rise of the planet Venus and the Sun rise in the summer solstice period. Such astronomical phenomena are correlated with the ethnographic data collected in the modern period (ethnographic data about the Beacon Star and plowman). In spite of the fact that these ethnographic data were collected in the modern period, presumably such folklore comes from the prehistoric period as many stories and legends of Georgia do, such as the legend about Elia, Christ and Saint Giorgi, the story about Amirani and others. This folklore was preserved and passed from generation to generation until the present. The above-mentioned folklore describes a part of the ancient celestial sphere, more

precisely, the Bootes (ploughman), Ursa Majoris (Yoked oxen) and Canum Venaticorum (dogs, which in prehistoric Caucasian epistemology were dog and wolf) constellations and their location in the celestial sphere.

“Dawn was dragging and dragging together with his skin,

he (dawn star) rises at the daybreak, was kicked and driven out,

“Beacon star” came, he was made drunk,

dressing gown was changed, and chokha (Georgian national suit) put on”<sup>9</sup>

As seen from the ethnographic data by V. Koketishvili the Beacon-star and the Dawn-star are different stars. This fact is a compelling argument in support of our assertion of the identity of the Arcturus star as the Beacon-star (as is mentioned in many Georgian ethnographic data).

In the Gokhnari Megalithic complex in 4000 BC on the summer solstice there was a heliacal rising of the planet Venus, which rose after the culmination of the Arcturus star near the horizon. In the ancient ethnographic data the planet Venus is mentioned as “Aspirozi – Greek name”, “Mtiebi”, “Khariparia - oxen stealer”, “Tciskrismaskvlavi - dawn star”, “Mtsukhrismaskvlavi-twilight star”<sup>10</sup>. The folklore passed through the generations is the evidence that the planet Venus influenced the religious and cultural aspects of the life of prehistoric people of Georgia.

“ქიმიჩონე გუმათანე - bring “carrier light” (star)

ბჟაში ეკმაჩუნჯე - following the Sun”<sup>11</sup>

“ჟინი ჰაკას ნოთეთ რდგრქრ - upon sky (air) standing as beacon,

თუდონ ჰავაშ მასრნთებელო - illuminating the world,

გრმათანე მერეხი რექრ - illuminator you are the star,

გოთანაში მახარებელო - daybreak herald”<sup>12</sup>

In the Lexicon of Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani<sup>13</sup> Aphrodite is explained as “dawn star”, in the Greek mythology Aphrodite was the face of the planet Venus.

In 4000 BC in the Gokhari megalithic complex heliacal rising of the planet Venus was a religious and ritual

ceremony for the people of this region. In his book “Georgian Megalithic Culture” L. Meliksed Beg describes the Gokhnari megalithic complex and mentions that in one of the pitsthe expedition found an ancient stone woman that supposedly represented the religious cult worshipped by the local people<sup>14</sup>. S. Makalatia in his book “Cult of phallus in Georgia” indicates that contemporary Georgian celebrations of “Harikela”, “Adrikela”, “Saqmisi”, “Keenoba”, and “Berikaoba” are connected to the cult of phallus and kteis, worshipping the goddess of fertility<sup>15</sup>. The stone woman was the materialized symbol of the planet Venus, the Goddess of fertility. She was perceived as the source of life and light, the herald of daybreak and therefore people worshipped Venus which is also reflected in the Gokhari megalithic complex.

### Conclusion

Combining ethnographic data that shows the importance of Venus and Arcturus along with the measurements of possible celestial alignments and computer modeling we conclude that the megalithic complex of Gokhnari was designed to observe the heliacal positions of planets and stars along the horizon and worship the Gods. Focusing on the ethnographic data, we established that the “Dawn Star” refers to Venus which is not uncommon in other cultures and that the “Beacon Star” is Arcturus. The strength of this conclusion is based on the heliacal position of Arcturus to the extreme north and Venus to the east on the summer solstice. □

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