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Contents

Introduction	1461
Folk Traditions Relating to Astronomy	1462
Stone Constructions as Cult Places and Time-Measuring Instruments	1463
Astronomical Characteristics of Cultural Heritage	1467
Cross-References	1467
References	1467

Abstract

In this chapter, we describe ancient cult and observational sites in Georgia together with cultural traditions that have astronomical significance from various parts of the country. In particular, we present the results of an archaeo-astronomical investigation of the Shaori complex, and consider its possible role as an ancient “solar station” with cult significance.

Introduction

Ethnographic data available within Georgia includes notes from investigations carried out by ethnographers in the 20th century and dictionaries published at various times. Inevitably, the material is not of uniform quality, but it contains

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interesting facts that reflect aspects of ancient Georgians' knowledge about the sky, celestial bodies, and impressive heavenly phenomena.

Such knowledge always has the potential for practical use in everyday life, both in agriculture and in orientation with respect to the terrain during local or long-distance journeys. It was gathered and optimized across the ages, being continually transformed and modernized. In the process, some ancient knowledge would be lost and new knowledge would be accumulated. However, some fundamental elements of ancient people's ideas about the universe may have been preserved up to the present.

The principal motivations for accumulating knowledge about the sky are likely to have been the following:

1. The necessity to keep track of time in order to maintain a continuous agricultural cycle
2. The necessity to keep tabs on local and global orientation in space in order to bring the land into cultivation, to build roads, to construct settlements, etc., as well as for military purposes
3. The necessity to "interact" with bright heavenly bodies for cultic, religious purposes. These are the main factors that stimulated the accumulation and adaptation of knowledge about heavenly phenomena, knowledge used by ancient people in different fields of activity throughout daily life.

We can suppose that the accumulation of such knowledge and its optimization led ultimately to the formation of a rather harmonious ethnocosmological system of ideas among ancient Georgians. However, the ethnographic data on surviving knowledge and practices does not provide direct support for this; we only have separate fragments of data scattered in the ethnographic material.

Folk Traditions Relating to Astronomy

A number of Georgian sources contain information of ethnocosmological importance. For example, Makalatia (1972, p. 50) describes some ancient traditions relating to seasonal practices of driving cattle and pasturing sheep: "The people living in the villages of Khizabavra and Zveli still remember the ancient traditions for determining when to drive the cattle. After the week of Khomli they could drive the cattle over a high mountain, as snow was not expected any more. The week Khomli comes in the month of Tibatve (July), when a group of stars known as Khomli (the Pleiades) appears. Khomli rises on the 6th day of Tibatve, but is not seen by eye until the 12th of Tibatve. During this week great care is taken about the sheep being in the open air. The peasant thinks that Khomli possesses the force to cause the hair of sheep to fall out and their faces to ulcerate. The inhabitants believe that Khomli is dangerous in the morning, when the sheep are still lying down in a sheep-pen. 'If Khomli rises above the lying sheep, it strikes them and causes the their hair to fall out and their heads and faces to ulcerate' (Khizabavra). 'It rises with a noise, causing the hair of sheep to fall out, and ulceration. In the morning they arouse the sheep and drive them' (Zveli). In the village of Zveli, during the

week of Khomli, sheep are driven to the nearby fields at the edge of the forest, where there is a protected place called Cholaka”.

The ethnographic sources provide various, even sometimes contradictory, information about the knowledge of the heavenly bodies possessed by ancient peasants in different regions of Georgia. Bochoridze (1993) gives the following names of heavenly bodies: Khariparia, Tsiskari, Gutneuli, Jaraebi, Mravalai, and Tsultokhebi. He mentions the fact that, in spring, some stars follow Mravalai at a fixed distance but then the distance between them increases. This is interesting, and provides evidence that some of the stars mentioned are “wandering” stars, namely planets. Among them is Tsiskari (Venus) and Mejoge, which rises after midnight. Given this and its brightness, it can be assumed that Mejoge is Jupiter.

The following is a list of several traditional names of stars and constellations used in the northern part of Georgia: “Tsiskris varskvlavi” (Tsiskris star); “Shuqur varskvlavi” (Bright star); “Qaravnis varskvlavi” (Caravan star); “Sabedo varskvlavi” (Fate star); “Shvidmoqcevis varskvlavi” (Seven cycles star); “Samshvilde varskvlavi” (Quiver star); “Dzagli varskvlavi” (Dog star); “Morbedi varskvlavi” (Quick star); “Maskvlavkuredi” (Tails star); “Tagdiri varskvlavi” (Red star); “Ikvliivi varskvlavi” (Grass star); “Kondio varskvlavi” (Poisonous star); “Mokhura varskvlavi” (Closing star); “Sakaloe maskvlavi” (Threshing-floor star); “Mosvlis varskvlavi” (Coming star); “Meshvelni” (Helping stars); “Mesakhleni” (Inhabitable stars); “Tserilani” (Letter stars); and “Bevrani” (Numerous stars) (Orbeliani 1991; Chincharauli 2005). The risings and settings of these and other luminaries played an important role in the religious, agricultural, and practical traditions of ancient Georgian peasants. Not all ancient Georgian stars and constellations are confidently identified.

On the basis of ethnographic evidence Bedukadze (1968) describes old instruments used by people for the determination of time. “In Khevsureti [a region of Georgia] the seasons were determined by means of groups of stone columns, called ‘sun nests’, erected on peaks to the east of villages. According to the movement of the rising sun from one nest to another, people determined the month, the season, the beginning and end of a year, and important dates of an agricultural character”.

Stone Constructions as Cult Places and Time-Measuring Instruments

The northern part of Georgia is rich with stone constructions of various sizes and forms. These standing stones, circular walls, and rows of boulders are usually located on the summits or slopes of high mountains (Figs. 128.1, 128.2). The main elements (openings) of several such monuments are aligned to the southeast. During pre-Christian times, monuments of this character probably served cultic purposes and were used also as time-measuring instruments through observations of the rising of the sun, moon, and bright stars. Later, these constructions were transformed into Christian monuments.

Fig. 128.1 Menhir and remnants of a surrounding construction on a high mountain in the Stepantsminda region, northern Georgia
(Photograph: G. Gigauri)

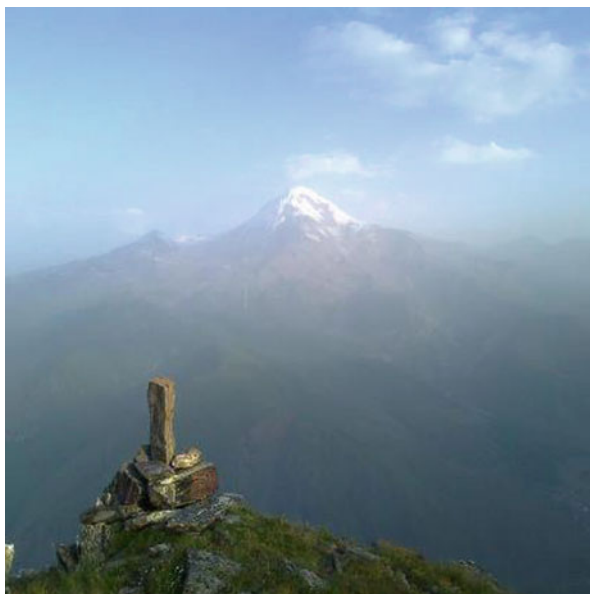


Fig. 128.2 Remnants of a circular stone construction in northern Georgia
(Photograph: G. Gigauri)



On the surfaces of large and small stones, boulders, and blocks located in Khevsureti are carved pictograms with various geometrical designs and other peculiarities. Some pictograms have a clear cosmographical character (Fig. 128.3). They include elements such as an eight-petalled flower-like symbol possibly representing stars, palms, and animals and may well reflect the relationship of ancient humans to the celestial order and recurrent astronomical phenomena. Taking into account the northerly location of the Khevsureti Mountains, it is possible that the eight-petalled star could represent Polaris, which played an important role for ancient Georgians. Determining more precisely the astronomical

Fig. 128.3 Pictogram with possible cosmographical significance from the Khevsureti region of Georgia (Photograph: G. Gigauri)



significance of stone monuments and the meaning of the cosmographical pictograms in Khevsureti requires comprehensive investigations taking into account their geographical location and cultural context.

In southern Georgia, near Paravani Lake in the Shaori Mountains, can be found a large megalithic complex constructed from basalt slabs (Kaukhchishvili 1973; Berdzenishvili 2002; Narimanishvili 2009). The Shaori complex consists of two parts – the large Shaori on the highest summit and the small one on the other mountain. The large Shaori building is located at N 41° 29' 2", E 43° 44' 57", elevation 2739 m, and the small Shaori building is at N 41° 29' 7", E 43° 44' 45", elevation 2735 m.

The architectural space of the large Shaori comprises an envelope-like shape with the remains of a small column at its center. The inner side of the complex wall contain numerous dolmens. The large Shaori building has a central opening with a door facing southeast (Figs. 128.4, 128.5). The small Shaori building is irregular in shape. The large Shaori building is connected to the bottom of the mountain by a ceremonial road several meters wide and stepped with recumbent menhirs.

These Bronze Age constructions probably had a dual significance both as a cult center and an observational place. Religious ceremonies held in Shaori buildings could have included the observations of heavenly bodies.

The central opening or door of the large Shaori building faces a true azimuth of 121° 40' as determined by a survey carried out by Ilia State University in 2011. The azimuth of the rising sun at the winter solstice is 121°, so that observers standing near the central column would have seen the rising winter solstice sun through the door. The significance of the surrounding mountains and the existence of the small Shaori building have still to be fully investigated.

In view of what we know of ancient Georgians' religious beliefs it is possible that the Shaori complex was not only a ceremonial center with buildings in



Fig. 128.4 Large Shaori building, 2011 (Photograph: G. Houston)



Fig. 128.5 Large Shaori building – inner view
(Photograph: G. Houston)

which diverse rituals were performed, but that it also served as an observational site – a type of ancient “solar station” – in which people worshiped their Gods and watched the rising of diverse heavenly bodies – the sun, moon, and stars – in order to maintain their orientation in time. On the morning of the winter solstice, the ancient Georgians could have observed sunrise from the large Shaori building, marking the onset of the cold season.

Other peculiarities, such as the fact that the door of the large Shaori building was observable from the opening of the small Shaori building, may indicate further links

of cosmological and religious significance. The Shaori complex as an ancient solar station awaits further, more detailed archaeoastronomical investigation.

Astronomical Characteristics of Cultural Heritage

Several examples of ancient Georgian cultural heritage, while known for many years to historians and archaeologists, have only recently been analyzed from the viewpoint of their possible astronomical significance. Georgian legends and folk stories, art, architecture, observational sites, and cult objects contain direct and indirect evidence of astronomical cognition and fragments of cosmological views (Simonia 2001). Astronomical characteristics of cultural heritage in the form of astro-terminology, ornaments, pictures, aligned constructions, and buildings with spatial peculiarities have not yet been studied in detail (Simonia et al. 2009). Much remains to be done to study early astronomical traditions and practices in Georgia, taking into account the ethnocosmological notions and beliefs of ancient Georgians.

Cross-References

► [Astronomy in the Ancient Caucasus](#)

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