

Characteristics of Georgian-Iranian Relations during the Achaemenid Period

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Abstract: The relationship between Georgia and Iran dates back to ancient times. From the early reign of the Achaemenid rulers, these relations became increasingly intensive. The Achaemenid Kingdom had connections with both Iberia (Kartli) and the Georgian Kingdom of Colchis. These interactions were distinguished by their diversity, encompassing political, military, cultural, religious, and trade-economic aspects.

The Achaemenid *shahs* extended their political influence over vast territories, including the South Caucasus and its inhabitants, particularly Armenian and some Georgian tribes. To consolidate their power, the Achaemenids implemented administrative reforms in the territories under their control, dividing them into satrapies. These satrapies included parts of Georgia as well. Each satrapy, depending on its status, had specific obligations toward the central authority (the Achaemenid *shahs*).

It is noteworthy that the obligations of the Kingdoms of Colchis and Iberia (which were part of the 18th and 19th satrapies) differed from those of other satrapies. Unlike others, they enjoyed certain privileges, which indicate some unique characteristics of Georgian-Iranian relations.

An important aspect of these relations was the religious factor. Zoroastrianism, which was widely practiced in Achaemenid Persia, was not unfamiliar to Georgia. The spread of Zoroastrianism in Georgia is confirmed by various archaeological findings. The traces of Zoroastrian influence in Georgia become more evident toward the later period of Achaemenid rule.

Keywords: Iran, Georgia, Relations, Religion, Zoroastrianism, Satrapy

Introduction

The relations between Georgia and Iran, which began during the Achaemenid period, contributed not only to political and military developments but also fostered spiritual and cultural ties between the two nations. This is evident in the social and ideological exchanges between Iran and Georgia, including religious influences and linguistic-literary elements. As a result, the relationship between Georgia and Iran during the Achaemenid period is characterized by its multidimensional nature.

Methods

This article is based on comparative analysis, retrospective analysis, and the structural-functional research method.

Results

Although parts of Georgian territory were included in the satrapies of the Achaemenid Kingdom, and the Georgian tribes within these satrapies had certain obligations to the Achaemenid rulers, the Achaemenids attached great importance to their relations with Georgia and the Georgian people. This positive attitude toward Georgians is evident throughout their rule. The interactions between the two peoples during this period were distinguished by their diversity and productivity.

Discussion

The Achaemenid rule (6th-4th centuries BCE) represents a crucial period in Iranian history. The Achaemenids established one of the most powerful ruling systems in the world, playing a significant role in contemporary political processes. Their strength was not only defined by their political and military power but also by their rich and distinctive culture, which continues to attract interest today. Therefore, the Achaemenid period is considered an era of Persian grandeur.

During the peak of their power, the Achaemenids dominated many peoples, including Armenian tribes and some Georgian tribes living in the south. Before Darius I divided the kingdom into satrapies, some southern neighbors of the Georgian Kingdom of Colchis allied with Colchis to avoid becoming an administrative unit of the Achaemenid Kingdom (Inadze 1994, 48).

According to the Greek historian Herodotus, the Achaemenid state was divided into 20 provinces, or satrapies (*Hist.* 3.89). In his famous inscription at the Naqš-e Rostam (DNa §3), Darius I mentions 30 provinces within the kingdom. The monarch appointed an

official as the governor of each province, whom the Greeks called a *satrap*, while the Iranians referred to as *xšaçaṣpāvan-* (Chipashvili 1989, 8; Schmitt 2014, 284-285). It should be noted that, in some cases, the borders of a satrapy coincided with ancient state boundaries (Melikishvili 1992, 175).

In addition to dividing the country into satrapies, around 518 BCE, Darius I established a new system of state taxation, after which each satrapy was assigned a tax according to its economic capabilities. Taxes were paid in kind and in money (for satrapal administration and taxation in the Achaemenid Kingdom see Hackl and Ruffing 2021; Jacobs 2021). The 18th satrapy included the Matieni, Saspies, and Alarodians, who paid 200 talents. The 19th satrapy, on the other hand, paid 300 talents. According to Herodotus, this satrapy included the following Georgian tribes: the Moskhii, Tibareni, Makrones, Mosynoi, and Marres (*Hist.* 3.94).

Herodotus notes that the Tibareni, Makrones, Moskhii, and Mosynoi had the same type of armament. Meanwhile, the Alarodians and Saspies were armed in a manner similar to the Colchians (*Hist.* 7.79). According to him, the administrative division of the Achaemenid Kingdom, along with tax obligations, also included military corvée labor. In addition to the tribute, peoples under their command were required to provide a specified number of soldiers when needed. If we take into account their obligations to the Achaemenids, the presence of Georgian warriors on the battlefield as part of the Persian command or satrapal armies is a logical and expected occurrence.

According to Herodotus, the Achaemenid Kingdom extended as far as the Caucasus Mountains. Parts of South Caucasia were included in the 18th and 19th satrapies. As mentioned earlier, each satrapy was assigned a specific tax. However, the Kingdom of Colchis was not formed into a satrapy under Darius I's administrative reforms. Nevertheless, it had certain obligations to the Achaemenids. In this regard, Herodotus writes that "the Colchians and other tribes living between Colchis and the Caucasian mountain range [...] were assigned to make a donation every fourth year, as they still do today, of a hundred boys and a hundred girls" (*Hist.* 3.97).

According to him, the Achaemenids determined the amount of tribute in the conquered lands themselves. Taxes were primarily paid in gold and silver. However, the tribute of the Colchians was different. Why was it so?

It is well known that, from mythology (the myth of the Argonauts), Colchis was considered a land rich in gold. How did it happen that a country rich in gold sent 200 young people (100 girls and 100 boys) to the Achaemenids? What kind of diplomacy does this represent, and who might be its author?

Herodotus also mentions that the Ethiopians, Colchians, and Arabs did not pay tribute but presented gifts to the Persian king. The Ethiopians would present, every three years, two hundred gold pieces, two hundred black (benoz) trees, five Ethiopian boys, and twenty large elephant tusks. The Arabs' annual gift was 1,000 talents of frankincense (Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.97).

It might be inferred that, compared to some other peoples such as the Arabs or Ethiopians, the Colchians had a more direct and significant relationship with the Achaemenid Kingdom, as demonstrated by the tribute of young people and virgins, which suggests a more intricate and possibly diplomatic arrangement between the two powers (Metreveli 1998, 16-17).

The actions of the Colchians are difficult to explain, as similar forms of *corvée* labor (such as sending young people as tribute) are rare among other peoples. One possible explanation for this could be that the Colchians collected the young people they sent as gifts from their captives.

In this context, it might be understood that the tribute of 200 youths (100 boys and 100 girls) might have been a form of tribute composed of war prisoners or slaves, a practice that was not uncommon in ancient kingdoms where subjects or neighboring tribes were expected to provide resources or people as a sign of submission or loyalty. This would reflect a more complex and potentially coercive relationship between Colchis and the Achaemenid Kingdom, wherein the tribute served both as an offering and as a means of maintaining control over the region (Songhulashvili 2005, 31). It should also be noted that the gifts sent by the Colchians to the Achaemenids were not voluntary in nature. The amount of these gifts was determined by the Achaemenids. Those who were subjected by the Achaemenids paid taxes, while gifts were received from the peoples living on the borders of the kingdom. These included the Colchians, Arabs, Ethiopians, and others.

This indicates that the Achaemenids imposed a system where people within the kingdom were taxed, while neighboring tribes or nations, often outside the direct control of the kingdom, were expected to offer gifts or tribute. This practice reinforced the hierarchical nature of the Achaemenid Kingdom, where subject peoples provided resources or gifts as a sign of submission or diplomacy, rather than as a formal tax obligation.

The tribute sent from Colchis to Persia can be considered a *fiscal atavism*. This type of taxation system existed in Iran only during the time of Cyrus the Great. Therefore, the recognition of Achaemenid hegemony by Colchis most likely occurred during the reign of Cyrus the Great.

This is an important observation because it highlights that the practice of sending gifts (rather than regular taxes) from neighboring peoples, like the Colchians, was a remnant of earlier, more symbolic forms of tribute, which were associated with earlier stages of kingdom-building, especially under Cyrus. His conquests and the establishment of the Achaemenid Kingdom marked a period where such tribute systems were in place before the full-fledged tax systems and formal satrapies of later Achaemenid rulers like Darius I (Dundua 1997, 269). By “voluntarily” recognizing Iran’s influence, Colchis managed, to some extent, to preserve its independence and avoid being incorporated into the Iranian administrative system.

This diplomatic strategy allowed Colchis to maintain a certain level of autonomy while acknowledging the supremacy of the Achaemenid Kingdom. By sending symbolic

gifts and paying tribute in the form of youths rather than regular taxes, Colchis could avoid full integration into the kingdom's administrative structure, thereby preserving its sovereignty and identity. This arrangement reflected a balance between submission to the overarching power of Persia and the desire to retain local control and political independence.

Persia pursued a protective policy toward the large satrapal unions of Asia Minor, and there were clear reasons behind this strategy. These reasons included supporting the consolidation of these satrapies' positions and their development into influential, self-governing theocracies. A similar situation is likely in pre-Hellenistic Iberia (Eastern Georgia) under Persian influence.

It is difficult to definitively determine the strength of Iran's political influence in Iberia, but it is clear that the relationship with Persia left a significant mark on the advancement of the cult centers of the Iberian (Kartli) kings and their transformation into major religious-political centers. It is not incidental that in Samadlo and Tsikhiya-Gora (Eastern Georgia), the influence of Achaemenid Persia is distinctly visible in religion, art, architecture, and other fields. Indeed, it was during the pre-Hellenistic era that large religious organizations began to form in Iberia, and monumental temple construction began. At that time, a tower-like temple was built in Samadlo, which closely resembles Achaemenid Persian temples (Songhulashvili 2005, 32-33).

Some Georgian scholars believe that the territory of Kartli (Iberia) was part of the Achaemenid Kingdom's 18th satrapy. However, others argue that the recognition of Persian political influence did not necessarily mean that Iberia was incorporated into one of the kingdom's satrapies.

This debate reflects the complexity of the relationship between Persia and Iberia. While it's clear that Persia exerted significant political and cultural influence over Iberia, the exact nature of Iberia's integration into the Persian system is still a matter of scholarly discussion. Some argue that Iberia maintained a degree of autonomy and was not fully absorbed into the satrapal system, instead maintaining a form of vassalage with diplomatic and tributary ties to Persia (Inadze 1994, 101). It seems entirely plausible that Persia extended its influence over Kartli (Iberia) through cult centers, thereby fostering their development into political-religious organizations. Furthermore, Persia likely helped strengthen the political power of the supreme priest who led these religious-political entities, as evidenced by written records.

By using religious centers as a conduit for influence, Persia could ensure the alignment of Iberian elites with Achaemenid ideals and governance structures. The supreme priest's enhanced political role reflects the merging of religious authority with political power, a key feature of the Achaemenid Kingdom's strategy in integrating its subjects. This influence is clearly visible in the ways religious and political authority were intertwined, especially in the development of local institutions that mirrored Persian governance practices (Songhulashvili 2005, 33-34). Based on this, it seems entirely

possible to hypothesize that during this period, Iran exerted its influence over Kartli (Iberia) by relying on local political-religious powers.

A similar approach would have been pursued by Persia in the Kingdom of Colchis (Western Georgia). In Colchis, by the 6th century BCE, large cult centers and the priests leading them had already emerged as one of the key organizing and guiding forces in public life. Persia's political influence in Colchis may have been tied to efforts to integrate these religious institutions into its broader imperial system.

The discovery of a large “square” dating back to the pre-Classical period in Vani (Western Georgia) could be evidence of Persia's attempts to spread its influence in Colchis. Researchers suggest that this was likely a ritual square where fire played a key role in the rituals performed, which may reflect Achaemenid religious practices and their influence on local customs and structures. This could be seen as an example of how Persian influence shaped the religious-political landscape of Colchis, just as it did in Iberia. The influence of Iranian cults is also evident in the religious-political center of Sairkhi (Western Georgia). Therefore, it can be said that after the establishment of the Kingdom of Colchis, Iran's influence over the theocratic centers and the priests leading them seems to have significantly increased.

The religion of the Achaemenids has been the subject of numerous scholarly debates for decades and yet with no definite conclusion. Thus, it has been suggested that the Achaemenids were Zoroastrian. It is known that in Zoroastrianism, the world is viewed as a battleground between the forces of good and evil. The good forces are embodied by the supreme god Ahura Mazda, symbolized by eternal fire and bright light that fights against the evil forces led by Angra Mainyu. The evil spirits or *daevas* from these evil forces are often featured in Georgian folklore and fairy tales. Zoroastrianism, therefore, seems to have entered Georgia from Persia, bringing with it these religious ideas and symbols, which likely influenced local belief systems and stories (Beridze and Sanadze 2003, 1:77; for Zoroastrianism in Georgia see de Jong 2015; for the term “Zoroastrianism” see Rose 2011, xvii-xx).

It should be noted that the first Achaemenid kings showed tolerance toward other religions. As a result, followers of various religions felt peaceful and secure across the vast territory of the Achaemenid Kingdom. In the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, Ahura Mazda emerges as the supreme god. For instance, for both Darius the Great (DNa) and Xerxes (XPa; 486-463 BCE) “Ahura Mazda is the great god, who created this earth, who created that sky, who created mankind ...”. However, we have evidence that there was a shift in this policy. Whether Zoroastrianism, a Gāthic form of it, or any other religion, it appears that the growing centralization and imposition of the Achaemenid religion, particularly during Xerxes's rule, would have had a significant impact on the religious landscape of the kingdom, as it may have affected the tolerance previously shown toward local beliefs and

practices.¹ It seems that after this shift, Zoroastrianism became an officially codified religion, with its institutionalization becoming particularly prominent during the Sassanid period (Chilashvili 2004, 31). The relationship between Georgians and ancient Persians played a significant role in shaping the historical thought of the people who lived in what is now Georgia (Beridze and Sanadze 2003, 1:79).

The influence of the Persian world in Georgia is reflected in the widespread use of Persian names, forms of social relations, the hierarchy of the administrative apparatus, religion, and culture. The traces of such influence can also be seen in Georgian fairy tales and mythology (Malazonia 2001, 185; Songhulashvili 2005, 35-36).

It is known that Zoroastrianism prohibits burying the dead in the ground, as both the earth and fire are considered sacred in this religion. Therefore, as early as the Median period, rock tombs were created. Since rocks were not considered soil, they were used to avoid the defilement of the earth with a corpse. The same burial practices continued during the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanid periods (Bakhtadze 2003, 31).

The general structure of the necropolis found in the Caspian region of Georgia, its integration with the landscape, and the spatial-planning arrangement of individual tombs are quite similar to ancient Iranian analogs. This complex includes separated platform-beds, which are characteristic only of Zoroastrianism (Bakhtadze 2003, 32).

Intensive Georgian-Iranian relations are also indicated by numerous factual materials. According to one Georgian historical source, the mother of Pharnavaz, the last ruler of Kartli and the nephew of Samara, was Iranian (or Persian; *The Life of Kartli* 1959, 74). When discussing the life of Kartli, it is mentioned that Pharnavaz erected the idol of Armaz in Kartli, stating: "Pharnavaz created a great idol in his name. This is Armaz, as Pharnavaz is called Armaz in Persian" (*The Life of Kartli* 1959, 75). Armaz is the same as Armazdi, Urmazdi, Ahuramazda. By doing this, Pharnavaz emphasized his divine origin and that of his dynasty. In the Eastern world, and specifically in the Persian world, there was a long tradition of deifying kings and royal family members. The Kingdom of Kartli, formed in the 30s of the 4th century BCE, was an inseparable part of this world (Melikishvili 1970, 665).

Life of Kartli informs us about Pharnajom, the fourth king of the Pharnavazian dynasty, stating that he embraced the Persian religion, brought priests from Persia, and assigned them a place in Mtskheta, the capital of Kartli (*The Life of Kartli* 1959, 172). This is the first information about the attempt to officially introduce Zoroastrianism in Georgia (Kurdiani 2001, 73-74). This was the 2nd century BCE.

¹ In the so-called Daiva inscription (XPh), Xerxes recounts that false gods were worshipped in a land under his command. He destroyed the demons' sanctuary there and established the worship of Ahura Mazda (see Schmitt 2009, 164-169).

In the 2nd century BCE, during the reign of King Pharnajom, Zoroastrian temples and chapels existed not only in Mtskheta but also in Uplistsikhe, Nekresi, and other places (in the Kingdom of Kartli). It is important to note that the construction of the city of Nekresi is connected with King Pharnajom.

To conclude the discussion, one should highlight that from the beginning of the Achaemenid period, the formation of Georgian-Iranian relations began, which soon became of an influential nature. These relations continued throughout the entire period of Achaemenid rule. In addition to political ties, there were also cultural, religious, and other forms of close connections between the ancient Georgians and ancient Iranians.

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