

Principal Stages of Ethnical Development of the Georgian Nation from Ancient Times to the Phase of Nation Formation

Prominent Georgian historian, Academician N. Berdzenishvili wrote in his time: “Our historians (moreover, non-historians) believe that “Georgia”, in fact, has always been situated on the place where the Georgian race has lived. There is no necessity of discussing that this is a wrong opinion. There have existed several different productive-cultural organizations, i.e. several different “peoples” on the placement territory of the Georgian nation. A country is exactly each of these organizations and not the territory and the people dwelling on it. Territory and race (ethnic) may remain unchanged for a long time, while the country may be experiencing repeated changes: a pre-class country, a slavery country, a feudal country, etc.”

These words of the scientist are absolutely adequate to the ethnic development of the Georgian people. “Different ‘peoples’”, as mentioned by N. Berdzenishvili, means Georgian ethnos in different historic epochs, since every phase of social-economic development corresponds to an ethnic type characteristic to it. Usually there are three types of historically formed ethnos:

1. tribe (for pre-class and early-class society / family and territorial tribes/);
2. nationality (for early-class, slavery and feudal societies);
3. nation (for capitalist society).

All three types of ethnos are based on social-economic basis of a definite formation and are distinguished from the previous one by higher forms of consolidation and stability.

In the given article, alongside with nationality and nation, we use another term “people”-the word of a wide meaning, but with its ethnic sense, i.e. to denote ethnic unity with its specific language (or languages), with the historically formed area of placement and ethnographic peculiarities.

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Georgians are one of the most ancient people. Georgian (*kartvel*) tribes - Meskhs, Colkhs, Saspers, Ibers, Chans, Svans and others are mentioned as early as in Ancient Eastern and Classical sources. Their placement zone covered modern Georgia and some neighboring regions, especially in the north-east part of Anatolia. Furthermore, on the territory of present Georgia there

have also lived Abkhaz-Adighe and Nakh-Daghestani tribes since ancient times, who had cultural and ethnic relation with ancestors of the Georgians.

Ancient Georgian (*kartvel*) tribes were divided into three closely related groups - Karts, Zans (Megrel-Chans) and Svans.¹ It is believed, that dividing the proto Georgian (*kartvel*) language into Georgian, Zanian and Svanian branches occurs at the end of the III millennium and the beginning of the II millennium BC (according to another opinion, in the II - the beginning of the I millennium BC). Naturally, in Pre-historic epoch, as well as at the early stages of written history, there did not exist Georgian people and there was no sense of ethnic unity not only among Georgian tribal groups, but, presumably, among separate tribes involved in these groups either. Understanding of unity arrives as a result of ethno-political development, when there appear first early state unions, since, first of all, it is the state organization that conditions political and ethno-cultural consolidation of related and non- related ethnic groups around one centre.

The origin of the Georgian statehood is sometimes related to the political formations of *Diaukh* and *Culkha*, which are mentioned in ancient Eastern sources (here we do not consider the topic of how well-documented the subject of *Diaukh's* relation to the Georgian world is), although these formations did not manage to provide appreciable scale of ethnic development. For example, in the 5th century BC the descendants of the *Diaukh* are mentioned under the name of the *Taokhs* as one of the tribes of the Chorokh valley.

Neither Colkhida - *Culkha's* heir - revealed vivid signs of ethnic consolidation. Greek and Roman sources name numerous different tribes here, among which are the Colkhs too, who prevailed other local ethnic groups by ethno-social development. This is why their name disseminated throughout the region.

The main reason of why not a single important ethnic union originated on the basis of *Diaukh* and *Culkha-Colkhida*, must be their immaturity as political unions. Academician N. Berdzenishvili states: "If Colkhida had been a state, just like Egrisi was later, it would not have vanished so easily and the tribes which appeared so self-protected after the disintegration of Colkhida, would have mixed up within the state of the Colkhs".

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The Georgian political unit that managed to reach the highest form of the state organization as early as the old era was kingdom of Kartli, or Iberia, the formation of which is dated back to the end of the 4th c or the beginning of the 3rd c BC (we presume that Parnavaz, who, according to national tradition, is considered to be the first Georgian king, reigned between 312 and 301 BC).

Kingdom of Kartli did not generate from an empty space. Much earlier before Parnavaz there existed several early-state unions that fought among each other for leadership. One of such ethno-political formations was situated at the confluence of the Mtkvari and the Aragvi, a very favorable location in terms of strategy and economy, which was intersected with main roads running across South Caucasia. Presumably, this was the very place where the tribe of Kartvels² resided. It was one of the local ethno-territorial units among Georgian and non-Georgian tribes of central Transcaucasia.

According to N. Berdzenishvili the ancient centre of the mentioned formation was situated on *Kartli* Mountain, where later the citadel of Mtskheta - Armazi Castle was constructed. Its territory embraced both banks of the Mtkvari from the river Ksani to the modern border of Tbilisi. Apparently, it was this union that was originally called *Kartli*.

In the course of time the political centre of Kartli moved to Mtskheta and it turned into (yet before Parnavaz) the most important economic and religious centre of east Georgian tribes, "since, - as the 11th century Georgian historian Leonti Mroveli comments, - the city of Mtskheta was privileged most of all, and was called the capital".

In this situation, apparently, the geographical term Kartli - denoting the placement of a Georgian tribe, obtained general meaning and spread across the vast country which was formed with the leadership of the city of Mtskheta at the end of the 4th century BC and which is called *Iberia* in foreign written sources.

Since that time for several centuries *Kartli-Iberia* represents the most organized power throughout the Georgian ethno-cultural area. It is not accidental that the national tradition links the birth of Georgian statehood right with the kingdom of Kartli. Creation of this state is a significant phase in the history of ethnic consolidation of Georgian tribes.

On the territory which integrated within the kingdom of Kartli or Iberia groups of other ethnic origin lived alongside with Georgian population. According to Leonti Mroveli, in Kartli six different languages were spoken originally, although since Parnavaz's times only Georgian language predominated and "no other language was spoken in Kartli any more but Georgian". Here we give a simplified explanation of complicated ethnic processes as a result of which an early-class type proto-Georgian Iberian nation is formed within the borders of the kingdom of Kartli.

Foreign authors perceive the population of Kartli, unlike the one of Colkhida, not as a conglomerate made up of different tribes, but call them "*Ibers*" on the whole. Furthermore, they were aware of the fact that among the *Ibers* there were groups distinguished by the lifestyle and, probably, also

by ethnic origin. In particular, Strabo writes: “The plains are occupied by the *Ibers* who are mostly farmers; they are inclined to peace, are organized *like* the Armenians and Medians. A larger part, which is of more militant nature, occupies highlands and leads the lifestyle like Scythians and Sarmats, whose neighbors and relatives they actually are”.³ Despite this, as mentioned above, for Strabo, as well as for other Greek and Roman authors, they were all *Ibers*. Thus, they considered the name “*Iber*” not only as an ethnic but also as a state and political concept.

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On the territory of modern west Georgia an analogous process takes place in the first centuries AD and is connected with reinforcement of the kingdom of Egrisi (Lazika), which reached its apogee in the 4th and the first half of the 5th century.

Political influence of the kings of Egrisi was spread throughout the historic Colkhida, although local ethno- territorial groups had different statuses in their state:

1. the population of the plains of present western Georgia, mainly those using the *Zan* language, directly depended on the royal administration. Here the process of ethnic consolidation was the fastest. Written sources of the first centuries AD mention *Lazes*, *Egrs*, *Sedoxezes*, *Zidrits* and other tribes living on this territory, while by the 5th century here actually only one group of people is represented, which is called *Lazes* in Byzantine sources and *Megrs* in Georgian ones. It is presumable, that apart from the *Zan* tribes the *Svans* and a part of *Apsils* were mixed too;
2. mountain tribes populated to the north of Colkhida plains (*Apsils*, *Misimians*, *Skvims*, *Svans*) had certain autonomy in the kingdom of Egrisi. Written sources mention local princes and nobles who controlled their tribal territories by fortresses situated on the area, which was approved of by the kings of Egrisi. Integration of these autonomous tribes within the Megrel-Laz ethnos did not occur here, if we do not consider separate bordering groups mentioned above. The reason for this was not the language difference between the *Zans* and the mountain tribes of Colkhida (although this factor also has to be considered), but weakness of ethno-cultural and economic links;
3. finally, the highest level of internal independence in the political system of Egrisi was owned by *Abazgs* living in

the western part of present Abkhazia. They even retained the institution of their own kings who recognized the sovereignty of the Laz king until the 6th century, but later they became direct vassals of Byzantine emperors.

Thus, in the first half of the I millennium AD the process of ethnic consolidation on the territory of present western Georgia too becomes more intensive, although, as mentioned above, first of all, it concerned the population that was under direct administrative subordination of royal power, and less intensely - the autonomous ethno-political units. On the basis of Zan tribes formation of the *Egrs* is going on in the plains of Colkhida. Academician N. Berdzenishvili writes about the *Egrs* of the 4th century: "These were already the people, among who the *Egrs* were privileged and carried out assimilation of neighboring tribes, the *Megrs* were being formed, who remembered wealth and political strength of Colkhida and considered themselves its heirs." However, unlike Kartli, in the kingdom of Egrisi this process took place only among one part of its population and did not develop through the historic outlook. The reason was, firstly, the collapse of the kingdom of Egrisi and, secondly, the process of formation of the united Georgian feudal nation, which commenced on the basis of early Iberian nation and later disseminated over the territory of west Georgia.

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Spread of the Karts on the territory of historic Colkhida and assimilation of west-Georgian population by them, presumably, began as early as the Classical period. Eastern province of Colkhida - *Argveti* (*Margvi, Margveti*), as it seems from its name, was originally inhabited by the tribe of *Margs* (*Margal, Megrel*), although politically it found itself within the kingdom of Kartli and soon "*Kartvelized*", which was promoted by proximity of Georgian and Zan languages.

At the height of development of Egrisi kingdom (4th -5th cc), when there occurs intensive ethnic consolidation of Zanian tribes, the process of *Kartization* in Egrisi reduced, but the situation changes from the 6th -8th centuries. Egrisi kingdom began to decay in the 6th century. Continuous fight between Iran and Byzantine, whose one of the main arenas was present western Georgia, had bad effect upon it. The Byzantines took advantage of the situation: they abolished the local royal power and appointed their administrator with reduced autonomous rights at the head of the country (7th c).

At the time in the regions west to the Likh mountain range⁴ the number of Georgian-speaking population grows again. One of the reasons for the

migration of the Kartli population to the west was foreign invasions. As I. Javakhishvili says, “yet in the times of the Sassanid rule the exiles or the refugees moved from Kartli and Kakheti to west Georgia, Lazika, Egrisi or found shelter in the mountains of Abkhazia. Migration of the population became more frequent during the Arab rule, especially when religious oppression became an ordinary phenomenon and taxes were doubled and even tripled. At these times too Georgians usually found shelter and hearth in western Georgia... It is doubtless that not everybody returned to their homes; as their country was not favored with peace for a long time, they had to stay there and settle down”.

However, migration of the population from east to west cannot be explained only by refuge and exile. In the first half of the 8th century there occurred feudal expansion from Kartli and Samtskhe. For example, Prince of Kartli Stepanoz is mentioned as “suzerain of Kartli and Megrel eristavs⁵”, which points to establishing Kartli authorities in Egrisi. The rule of Kartli princes in Egrisi continued for a good long time. After Stepanoz here reigned his sons Mihri and Archil, and then Archil’s son - Ioane.

At some period during the 8th century it seems that the Odzrkhe⁶ eristavs also disseminate their authority over the old tribal territory of the Lazes between the Chorokh estuary and the lower part of the Rioni. As a result of mixing Meskh and Zan population a new ethnic Georgian sub-ethnic group-Gurul- is formed, who were originally subordinated to the Odzrkhe eristavs, but after forming the Abkhaz kingdom they joined it and, therefore, became part of western Georgia politically too.

Thus, in the 8th century, on the territory of present west Georgia there occurs the parallel process of drawing the Georgian ethnic groups together and partial *Kartization* (Georgianization) of the west-Georgian tribes.

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In the history of Georgia the period of the end of the 8th century and the beginning of the 9th century is marked by forming new feudal states. In east Georgia Kakhet principedom appeared the first. In Kakhet, which was the part of ancient Iberia, there had already started the process of assimilation of different local tribes with the main local Georgian tribe -the Kakhs. By this time names of old ethnic units in the plains of Kakhet survived, in fact, only in toponymy. . This is why it is natural that the outstanding religious figure of the middle of the 9th century- Ilarion is called “Kartvel”.

Rather different situation was observed in Heret - the neighboring principedom of Kakhet. This ancient Albanian region joined the kingdom of Kartli relatively late, in the 5th century. This is why in the 8th -9th centuries, and,

partly, later too, this area preserved its specific local linguistic-ethnographic character. Despite this, Heret had already become a part of the Georgian world from social and political points of view, which was eventually legalized in the 10th -11th centuries by spreading of Georgian Orthodoxy throughout Heret and by unifying it within the united Kakhét-Heret kingdom.

In the second half of the 8th century great changes take place in the region beyond the Likh Mountain, which was still considered to be the country under Byzantine protection. At this time the principedom of Abkhaz (Abazg) dominated here, which also embraced Apsilia and the territories of other tribes of the north-east coast of the Black Sea. Within the limits of this political union there occurs intensive process of ethnic consolidation in the 7th -8th cc. According to Academician S. Janashia, “by the 8th century on the territory of present Abkhazia the Abazgs had gained obvious privilege. This ethnic name soon obtains wider and more general meaning. Its Georgian form “Aphkazi”, which is derived from “abazg”, “abazkb” by the internal re-grouping of the consonants according to the phonetic rules of Georgian language..., gradually becomes common throughout the area”. Actually, from the 6th -8th cc written sources do not mention relatively small tribal formations residing on the present Abkhazian territory (*Apsils, Sanigs, Misimians, Bruks*) any more and instead of them chronicles name only the Abazgs or Abkhazs. Thus, in the 8th century the process of forming the Abkhaz feudal nation comes to an end. In this process Abazgs and Apsils played the main part, whose merging creates a core of united nation and which was gradually joined by other ethnic components living on the territory of historical Abkhazia.

In the first half of the 8th century Abkhaz princes come into contact with political forces of eastern Georgia. In connection to this fact the 730s must be particularly mentioned, as it was then that during the invasion of the Arab commander Marwan princes of Kartli Mihr and Archil found shelter in Abkhazia. In 736 the joint Abkhaz-Georgian forces repelled the Arabs’ attack near Anakopia, which made Marwan retreat and soon he left the territory of Egris too. “After that, - says P. Ingoroqva, the name of the Abkhaz had to become particularly popular in Georgian circles and it did”.

In the 80s of the 8th century the Abkhaz prince Leon II spread his authority throughout present western Georgia and close to 797, taking advantage of the disorder which broke out in Byzantine, declared independence and received the title of the “King of the Abkhazs”. The state created by Leon entered the history under *Abkhazia kingdom*. Since then the term “Abkhazia” expands in written sources and covers the whole western Georgia.

Among new Georgian feudal states Tao-Klarjet was last to be formed (the 20s of the 9th century). This country was a part of Kartli (Iberia) from the

beginning and ethnic consolidation of Georgian tribes had started far before. As N. Berdzenishvili wrote, “in Meskheti the process of merging the Georgian tribes had gone much further than anywhere else and Shavsh-Klarj-Javakh-Meskhs had long ago become genuine Georgians in terms of language, culture, religion”. This is why it is not accidental that the head of the Bagrationi royal house, who were the owners of Tao-Klarjet, received the title of “King of Georgians” in 888. In this case the term *Georgian* (*kartveli*) must be understood as “Kart” and not with its modern meaning, just like the title - “King of Abkhazs” meant the sovereign of all western Georgia and not just the ruler of properly the Abkhazs.

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Social-economic and political pre-conditions necessary for creating united Georgian feudal nation had formed by the 10th century, when the process of integration of Georgian princedoms as one state was coming to an end. In this process the role of Georgian church and writing cannot be ignored. The policy of decreasing Byzantine influence in their princedoms, carried out by the Abkhaz kings, proved favorable to developing Georgian language and writing in present western Georgia, the language, which was the only alternative to Greek culture in the area. Naturally, spreading of Georgian language in Egris-Abkhazia, was also promoted by the existence of Georgian-speaking population in the region. In particular, in the 8th century the capital city of Abkhazia kingdom - Kutaisi- must have already been a Georgian-language city, where Georgian national culture, which was mainly religious in those times and generated from Kartli, developed earlier than in any other city of western Georgia. Thus, it is not surprising that “the Abkhaz dynasty led the building of the Georgian feudal society and culture”, as N. Berdzenishvili comments. For the contemporaries, apparently, expanding the area of liturgy, which was based on Georgian language (alongside with Georgian writing), was perceived as expanding the country of “Kartli” (with cultural-religious sense of the word). This is why it is natural that the well-known formula of the 10th century Georgian writer Giorgi Merchule - “ ‘Kartli’ is the name of the country throughout which service is conducted in Georgian language” - covers not only historic and ethnographic Kartli, but the whole territory of Georgia being in the process of forming.

But, at the same time, the term *Kartli* retains its old, specific meaning. This is why in the course of time there originated a new term for the country - “Sakartvelo”, which coincides with Giorgi Merchule’s term *Kartli* with its widest sense. Georgian historiography remarks that origination of this term is

connected to the moment of political unification of the state. "This fact (the appearance of the new term - G. A.), - N. Berdzenishvili says, - is a vivid evidence that the feudal productive organization demanded a new name for this organization, that the old term *Kartli* did not manage to embrace the new organization <...> This new organization went beyond the limits of the old ethnic term".

Formation of the "new organization", or the united Georgia, is connected to the name of King Bagrat III, who was the representative of the family owning Tao-Klarjet on the father's side, while on the mother's side he was the descendent of the Abkhaz kings. Bagrat occupied the throne in 978 and during his long reign (died in 1014) unified almost all the Georgian territories. The Abkhazs, who lived in the north-west part of the kingdom, were actively involved in carrying out the state policy of Bagrat III and his successors. The Abkhazs never showed any resistance in connection with changing the royal dynasty. It can be said, that growing the Abkhaz kingdom into the united Georgian state becomes unnoticed by the contemporaries, since the Abkhazian kingdom (in its essence) was the same as the Georgian state, while the royal title - "King of Abkhazs"- remained at the top of list of titles of Georgian kings. Therefore, many foreign authors of the 11th -13th centuries refer to the united Georgian kingdom as "Abkhazia", and use the term "Abkhaz" as a synonym of "Georgian". Academician N. Berdzenishvili remarks: "Such a unity of the Abkhazs and the Georgians (Kartvels) was not the result of conquering each other, but the result of the Abkhazs' gradual peaceful integration within the cultural world of the Georgians".

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In parallel with forming united Georgia, the meaning of the term "Georgian" expands too, although in the way that it did not lose its original narrow meaning - "Kartlian"("Georgian"), or the inhabitant of one of the east-Georgian provinces. In written monuments the term "Georgian" (*Kartvel*) was in use until the end of the 18th century in the sense of "Kartlel".

In the 11th -13th cc Georgian written sources the term "Kartvel" (Georgian) has another wider meaning, which denoted a *Kart*, or a representative of Georgian-speaking tribal-territorial groups (Kartlels, Kakhs, Meskhs, Klarjs, Margvels, etc.). Such an understanding of the term "Kartvel" (Georgian) can be seen, for example, in investigations dealing with peoples' kinship and chronicles, which were based on the Biblical tradition about originating of post-Flood mankind from Noah's family. Conducting such investigations was an accepted experience in Byzantine and the countries within its cultural area.

In Medieval Georgia too there was the interest of “how many people lived in the world”. In particular, there has been preserved a work of Eqvtime Atoneli (955-1028) based on Greek literature, where the peoples familiar to the author are listed. Here, among Shem’s descendants we see Kartvels (Georgians), Herets, Abkhazs, Megrels alongside with Jews, Hindus, Armenians, Germans and others. There has been preserved another analogous Georgian monument which cannot have been written earlier than the 13th century, as the Tatars are already mentioned there. Here too “Georgians”, “Abkhazs”, “Svans”, “Megrels”, “Dvals”⁸ are mentioned separately. As we see, in this case the peoples’ classification is firmly based on the language factor: one language equals to one nation, one “kindred”. The term “Georgian” (Kartvel) in this sense of the word referred to, as mentioned above, only the Karts without west-Georgian groups.

The same approach is observed in the 11th century original Georgian work - Leonti Mroveli’s “Kings’ History”, which is, presumably, based on the earlier Georgian sources. In the introduction of the work, which is half mythical, the Caucasian peoples are represented as the descendants of one ancestor - “Torgom”, who was the grandson of Japheth, Noah’s third son. The story has it that after destroying the Tower of Babylon Japheth settled near Mount Ararat together with his family and distributed the territory of Caucasia among his sons. Leonti believes, that according to the sons’ names - Haos, Kartlos, Bardos, Movakan, Lekos, Heros, Kavkas and Egros - derived the names of their descendants, Caucasian neighboring peoples (respectively Armenians, Georgians, Rans, Movakans, Lezgins, Herets, Caucasians and Megrels).

As we see, the 11th century Georgian writer believes that Georgians (Karts) and Megrels were related in the same degree as the Lezgins, Armenians, Albanians (Rans) and other neighboring peoples. It means that here, too, the defining moment of the ethnicity is language - Georgian-speaking tribes are called Kartvels (Georgians). We learn about which tribes were meant by *Kartlosians* (Kartlos’ descendants) from the names of the children and grandchildren of Georgians’ mythical eponym - Mtskhetos, Kakhos, Kukhos, Odzrkhos, Javakhos and so on).

Finally, formation of the united Georgian kingdom brought the third and the widest understanding of the term “Georgian” (*Kartvel*). If this term had only ethnic (“Kartlosian”) and political (a representative of Kartli kingdom or principality) meanings before, now it already obtained cultural-social-state-political connotation. In this wide sense a “Georgian” (Kartvel) does not mean an inhabitant of Kartli, but a person bearing certain signs, having certain cultural look, despite their place of origin; i.e. a “Georgian” was the common name for everyone who, despite their ethnic origin, recognized Georgian Christianity (Diophysite), shared Georgian feudal relations and was active in

Georgian cultural or political arenas. At the same time, the arena did not have to be only Kartli (even in its political meaning), but it included Egrisi, Abkhazia, Heret, Caucasian highlands and bordering Armenian lands too. Thus, from approximately the 11th century the term “Georgian” with its wide meaning covers not only the terms “Kartlel” and “Kart”, but it includes west-Georgian groups (Megrels, Svans) as well as Abkhazs, Hers, Dvals, and, to some extent, North Caucasian highlanders (Alans, Chechen-Ingush and Daghestan tribes, etc.) and Chalcedonite Armenians too.

Thus, in the 11th -13th centuries in Georgian written sources the term “Kartvel” is used with three meanings:

1. Kartlel (inhabitant of Province of Kartli)
2. Kart;
3. representative of Georgian kingdom and adept of Georgian Church (Georgian with social-political and cultural-religious sense)

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After forming the united Georgia neighboring peoples understand *Georgianship* mainly with its wide sense and consider Georgians the collection of separate tribal units. In particular, the 12th century Byzantine author Ioane Tsetses regards Georgians as such a super-ethnic union and writes:

*Ibers and Abazgs are of the same tribe,
Ibers dominate, Abazgs come next,
While Alans occupy the last, third place.*

The same view is expressed about the components of Georgian people by the 15th century historian Tovma Mecopeci. He reports that Georgian “race” consists of “eight” languages: “Dvals, Oset, Imerel, Megrel, Abkhaz, Svan, Kartvel (Kartlel. - G. A.), Meskh”.

Thus, according to the Armenian author Karts (Kartlels, Imers, Meskhs are named) as well as west-Georgian tribes (Megrels, Svans) are unified in Georgians, and together with them Dvals, Osetians and Abkhazs. The fact that Dvals, Osetians and Abkhazs did not belong to Georgian language group, was not a disturbing factor for medieval authors, as “Georgian” for them was, first of all, political and social-cultural concept.

Being a Georgian, with the wide sense of the word, of course, did not mean erasing the elements of super-ethnos and assimilating with the Georgians (although there are such examples too - Herra). As N. Berdzenishvili comments, “each tribe or people had their own culture, had their own tribal language too, but Christianity was a great new phenomenon, adapted to new

relation, strong weapon of feudalism and its language was Georgian too. It is quite natural, if all these tribal languages and cultures became “home” ones. Their existence and development was not a problem and not a single Megrel, Dval, Herr or Abkhaz ever tried to introduce literacy in their own language and they accept Georgian, which has become their common language.”

Unfortunately, because of scanty sources, it is difficult to define how deep the sense of “cultural-political” *Georgianship* was among the population of the Georgian kingdom. However, it is obvious, that the feudal class and the scholars identified this fact rather perfectly. “This is why feudal Georgia did not experience any fights for tribal independence; feudals personified “Georgia” and were equal creators of Georgian feudal society.”

The term “Kartvel”, with its wide sense, is used in Georgian writing until the 18th century. After traveling across Europe, Georgian diplomat, scientist and writer Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani met his natives on the island of Malta in 1715: “I saw Georgians too: some were Abkhazs, some Imerels, Guruls, Megrels, who had been taken away from Tatars. They still spoke the language quite well. I wondered why the Abkhaz spoke Georgian!” - he writes. As we see, Saba includes the Abkhaz within the term “Georgian”, although he knows that the Abkhazs spoke a different language and knowing Georgian was rather a rarity among them.

The word “Georgian”(Kartveli) was used with the same wide meaning by the 18th century Catholicos-Patriarch Anton I, who, in the verse dedicated to his contemporary historian and geographer Vakhushti Bagrationi, means ethnic Georgians and Abkhazs as well as Caucasian highlanders under this concept:

*“I praise Vekhushti’s knowledge of geography,
How he conveys history-extensively and wisely,
He described the Georgian history,-
Of Kakhs, Meskhs, Abkhazs, Megrels, Svans, Caucasians...”*

“Such an understanding of the term...was reachable for those well aware of their native history”, reports S. Janashia. It was the echo of the epoch, when feudal Georgia played the role of the political unifier of the peoples in Caucasus. But in the 18th century, when Sulkhan-Saba and Anton I lived and worked, such an understanding of the term “Georgian” already did not correspond to the real situation, especially with reference to North Caucasus. Besides, there did not exist the state-political ground - united Georgian kingdom - any more, on the basis of which such an understanding of the term “Georgian” originated. The notion of the term “Georgia” itself changes too. During the time of being a united state “Georgia” was the name of the territory which comprised the Bagrationi monarchy despite specific ethno-cultural nature of separate regions.

(An Armenian calligrapher Terter Erevants, living in the 30s of the 14th century, writes about himself: “I, Terter, an unworthy writer, who wrote this book - Vardan... came from Georgia, from a beautiful city near Echmiadzin”).

After the disintegration of the unified kingdom the term “Georgia” lost its political connotation and it actually became an ethno-geographical concept. However, the five-century long unity did not pass without trace. In order to indicate princedoms that originated on the ruins of the united Georgia there appears the term “Georgias”(in plural), which points to all-national consciousness. By that time Georgians are already a historically formed and relatively firm ethno-social unity. This is why the conception of Georgia, as a whole native country, did not disappear during feudal fragmentation and continuous civil wars either. It is remarkable, for example, that in diplomatic correspondence with Russian King the prince of Megrelia Levan II Dadiani calls himself “Levan Dadiani, the inhabitant of the Megrel part of the country of Iveria”. In the same way the population living in separate Georgian political units were called Georgians and despite local differences maintained consciousness of national-cultural wholeness.

A little different was the situation only in Abkhazia, as ethno-cultural integration of the Abkhazs within the Georgian world did not appear firm enough. Besides, the Abkhazs themselves (at least their feudal class, which is proved in the 18th -19th cc sources) had a good memory of the fact that during the times of united Georgia their country was a part of that state.

Some kind of removal of Abkhazia from all-Georgia becomes noticeable after the 15th -16th centuries, one of the first signs of which was weakening of Christian faith here. Christianity in Abkhazia was, apparently, spread relatively superficially. N. Berdzenishvili explains particular reasons for this phenomenon: “Christianity in Abkhazia was spread in a foreign language and it remained so, because these Christian languages (Greek, Georgian) were strange for the Abkhazs and remained the same way”. In Abkhazia Georgian language was available for the dominant class only, while the wide population did not speak it. Probably, it was mainly caused by the fact that Abkhaz ethnos was detached from Georgian-speaking population by the barrier of west-Georgian languages. Therefore, Christianity did not manage to root out traditional cults and beliefs in Abkhazia and when political and cultural decadence started in Georgia, Christianity in Abkhazia almost completely collapsed and old religious beliefs revived which was added by partial, also superficial Islamization from the 18th century. This is why Vakhushti Bagrationi comments: “The Abkhazs do not obey [Christian] confession and faith”. In the 17th-18th cc the Georgian-Abkhazian cultural links decrease dramatically, although these links have never cut off completely.

Because of the above mentioned, the 17th -18th cc foreign observers, unlike earlier times, do not consider Abkhazia as a part of Georgia. For example, Patriarch Makar of Antioch, who traveled in Georgia in the 60s of the 17th century, mentions only Imereti, Kakheti, Kartli, Megrelia and Guria while listing Georgian states. "And all the Georgian lands are [stretched] from the river Alazani and Kakheti and Qizilbashes' border to Abkhazia".

The analogous situation is depicted in the work of a German traveler Guldenschedt, where, describing the geographical location of Georgia, the list of neighboring countries is given and alongside Daghestan, Kisteti, Osetia, Balqaria, Turkey and Persian provinces he mentions Abchasia too.

In Turkish documents of the 17th -18th cc too Abkhazia (أبازا 'Abaza') is not considered a part of Georgia (گورجستان 'Gurjistan'). In particular, in Turkish reports of the beginning of the 18th century, which were sent to Istanbul from the Black Sea Coast, the Anaklia and Rukh castles, situated on the left bank of the river Enguri, are mentioned as border points between Georgia and Abkhazia. As we see, Turkish clerks consider Megrelian principedom as a part of a bigger country Georgia despite its political autonomy, while Abkhazia is regarded as a separate territorial unit.

Thus, the Abkhaz ethnos, which took part in building united Georgia from the very beginning and was perceived as a part of its population in social-political terms, actually leaves these frames at the end of Middle Ages despite numerous "threads" connecting feudal Abkhazia with central regions of Georgia as before. This is why, apparently, unlike Megrelia, consciousness of belonging to united Georgian people did not succeed.

The separation of Abkhazia principedom from Georgian political system is also proved by the fact that the Abkhazs did not participate in political acts conducted by west-Georgian princes in the second half of the 18th century (banning buying a captive, attempts of arranging church affairs, the 1790 Alliance Treaty, etc.).

The 1790 "treaty of Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti, Megrelia and Guria confirmed by Iverian kings and princes", which was formed with the contribution of Solomon Lionidze, the Vice-Chancellor of Kartli-Kakheti kingdom, is an important source for our investigation. The text of the treaty is particularly interesting because here the innovative explanation of the term "Georgian" is confirmed, which is based strictly on ethno-cultural and linguistic factors. In particular, the preamble of the Treaty says: "As all the Iverians inhabiting within kingdom of Kartli, Kakheti, Megrelia and Guria have the same faith, are born from one Catholic Church and speak the same language, experience love towards each other like blood relatives and are related to each other".

This definition, which was given at the end of the Georgian medieval epoch and which is based on the factors of faith, language and ethnic origin, is very close to the famous statement of Ilia Chavchavadze: “Homeland, Language, Faith”, which was made while forming Georgian Bourgeois nation.

Thus, the 18th century Georgian written sources show two meanings of the term “Georgian” with its wide sense: 1. traditional, based on cultural and historic factors (Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, Catholicos Anton) and 2. new, based only on ethno-confession realities (Solomon Lionidze). In the first case the term “Georgian” denotes Abkhaz too, while the second understanding covers only Georgian-speaking groups.

This difference between the opinions of the outstanding representatives of Georgian intellectual elite, must be explained, first of all, by the social-economic changes that occurred in eastern Georgia (where all three public figures came from), which caused transformation of historic and social outlooks. Solomon Lionidze, who was born about 100 years later than Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani and was a younger contemporary of Catholicos Anton, was already the son of a different epoch. The period of his life and work coincides with the beginning of the collapse of serfdom and feudal formation and the origin of capitalist production relations. Apparently, new social-political background generated a new criterion of defining ethnicity. Thus, at the end of the 18th century we see the composition of the Georgian people, which was formed as a Georgian nation after the winning of capitalist relations in Georgia.

Notes:

- 1 The first two terms were created with this meaning through literacy.
- 2 Kartvel - Georgians' self-designation.
- 3 In this case Scythes and Sarmats mean North Caucasian mountain tribes.
- 4 Likh mountain - mountain range in the middle part of Georgia dividing east and west parts of the country.
- 5 eristav - ruler of the province in ancient Georgia
- 6 Odzrkhe - an ancient town in Meskheta, south Georgia.
- 7 Sakartvelo - this is the Georgian name of Georgia.
- 8 Dvals - a mountain tribe of Caucasia, which was politically included in Georgia from the 6th century.