

## Donald Rayfield's "A History of Georgia"

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It is my great honour and pleasure to introduce to our readers another extremely interesting book dedicated to the history of Georgia (Donald Rayfield's "Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia". Reaktion Books, London 2012). The author of the book is Donald Rayfield, an eminent English scholar, who knows Georgia very well and, at the same time, is a very good friend of our country. Professor Rayfield in Georgian academic fields first of all is associated with a Comprehensive Georgian-English Dictionary [1], as one of the authors and inspirer of it. Donald Rayfield's "History of Georgia" is generally intended for English speakers, which means that it is for readers from all over the world. As expected, the history of Georgia is discussed in the book in the context of the history of the World's Empires, which is apparent from its title – "Edge of Empires". However, in spite of this, the book is not intended to please just the superficial interests of a wide range of readers but the author presents a book which is significant for scholars as well.

Professor Rayfield demonstrates a profound knowledge of varied written sources on which his work is based and, at the same time, the book reads easily and with interest. While re-telling about the history of Georgia the author, who is an excellent philologist and literary critic, emphasises the episodes that are vividly narrated from the source material.

Donald Rayfield knows the modern history of Georgia quite well as he has been a witness of many events and developments taking part in our country. He reveals a very profound knowledge of the information spread in Georgian society, where it is not always easy to distinguish truth from untruths. That is why the last chapters of the book rather belong to the genre of journalism than to

the “dry” history. One can argue a lot in these chapters, however, the controversial spirit of our era is perfectly visible in it with many apparent contradictions.

On the contrary, the author initially presents a serious, scholarly review, which is frequently followed by the results of Rayfield’s research and witty observations about the periods of Georgian history with lots of solid data from written sources. This is true, first of all, for the detailed review of the “Russian Period” of Georgian history. While discussing the medieval history of the country, Professor Rayfield’s research is mainly based on the “Georgian Chronicles”, although he uses many other sources as well, and that makes the book exemplary for Georgian historians.

It should be noted that Donald Rayfield is familiar with the scholarly literature on the issues discussed in the book. However, I noticed that in the bibliography an important work by Heinz Fähnrich “History of Georgia” [4], is not mentioned which probably had not yet been published when the book was being written.

It should also be pointed out that unlike the written sources, the author minimizes the citation of the scholarly literature and tries not to get involved in the discussion on different issues. While discussing the issues on which scholars have been arguing for decades, Professor Rayfield relies on the opinion he trusts most, and presents it as an already proven fact. For an English-speaking reader it may not make much difference whether the Georgian alphabet was created in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC or only after adoption of Christianity as a state religion, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD; or whether the pagan Georgian idol Armazi symbolised the Hittite Arma or Iranian Ahura Mazda. However, it would have been advisable if the author had discussed or mentioned main opinions regarding the problematic issues.

The book is made more attractive by different additional illustrated or reference material such as maps and lists of the country’s rulers. Special attention should be paid to the fact that besides the information about the Parnavazid and Bagrationi Royal dynasties (available in most of the books about the history of Georgia), the author gives us a list of Abkhaz Kings as well as the

lists of the rulers of Abkhazia, Samegrelo, Guria and Samtskhe and the Emirs of Tbilisi. According to the author, the Kings of Abkhazia belong to the Anchba dynasty (p. 61; p. 440). Although the Achba-Anchabadze family is thought to be related to this dynasty, even in Wikipedia sources [6] this kind of identification is presented as hypothetical. I would also have preferred this attitude to have been presented as hypothetical in the book. This desire emerged several times while reading the book. Specifically, I would like to present several examples: the author argues that *Hayasa* from Hittite texts is related to Armenians, likewise, the term *Kashka* from Hittite or Assyrian texts is connected with *Kashags*, *Cherkess* people, and *Abeshlas* – with the *Apsils/ Abkhaz* (p. 16). Most of the scholars, including Professor Diakonov who cannot be accused of Armenophobia, do not support the idea which identifies *Hayasa* with *Hayastan* [3]. Whilst expressing doubts regarding the identification of the following terms: *Kashka-kashag/Cherkess* and *Abeshla-Apsil/Abkhaz* we would like to mention the work of Giorgadze, G. [5], let alone a hot dispute regarding the connections between the terms *Apsil* and *Abkhaz*.

In the chapter dedicated to the ancient history of Georgia (The Emergence of Georgia), I have, unfortunately come across several inaccuracies: the term “*tsukhme*” (comp. the Georgian term for ‘somekhi’ (Armenian)) is testified in Assyrian texts and not in Hittite (p. 16). Kings of *Daiaeni Asia* and *Sieni* are also known from Assyrian texts and not from *Urtian* texts (p. 17). Although most of the scholars support the idea which identifies the Assyrian term *Daiaeni* with the Urtian term *Diauehi* (Georgian *Tao*), however, *King Sieni* mentioned in the Assyrian text should not be referred to as *King of Diauehi* (p. 17). It would be difficult to agree with the opinion of the author that nowadays Meskhetians are entirely Turkish-speaking people (p. 12). Supposedly, the author means “Meskhetian Turks”, whose deportation and return to Georgia was quite an urgent issue in the immediate past.

Reading the same chapter of the book I was convinced that the terms used in ancient sources (Cuneiform or Greco-Roman) that we traditionally class as terms denoting tribal or political units,

should be studied specifically with the view of creating a methodology which would facilitate their interpretation in a correct way.

Finally, I would like to touch upon the issue with which the book starts. "A History of Georgia" shows Georgia first as a country in the borders recognized by the international community, secondly, as part of Southern Caucasus, and finally as historical Georgia, which used to be much bigger than it is now (p. 7). The author does not separate the history of Georgia from the history of the Georgian nation since the period when it becomes possible to speak about ethnicity. However, the author specifies that, on the one hand, ethnic Georgians have always been considered Georgians by birth, and also Georgian-speakers and anyone living in Georgia despite their ethnic background to be Georgian (Ibid). This, though somewhat debatable statement may leave a correct impression on the English-speaking readers about Georgians with their ethnic or religious tolerance that makes Georgia different from many other countries, and that makes it much more attractive to the civilized world. Besides Georgians, or the people speaking in other Kartvelian languages (like Georgians, Megrelians, Laz, Svans) the author also names the nations, which have played an important role in the formation of Georgia as a state, e.g. Abkhazians, Ossetians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, other Turkish tribes, Jewish etc. I would like to quote one paragraph, which, in my opinion, needs to be clarified: "For long periods in Georgian history, Abkhazia (whose indigenous language is a northwest Caucasian language unrelated to Georgian) has been part of the Georgian state. For most of Georgian history, those Ossetians (formerly Alanians, an Iranian people, remnant of Scythians) who live in Transcaucasia have also been subjects of the Georgian state. Therefore a history of Georgia is therefore, at times, a history of Abkhazia and Ossetia" (p. 8). It seems that any benevolent foreigner would resume his knowledge about Georgia the same way as it is in the above quoted paragraph, but there are some nuances here which, if read more carefully, make this passage more problematic:

A. I do not think that to ignore the possibility of Ibero-Caucasian unity totally would be a good idea, whether we agree with it or not. The latest research [2; 7; 8] reveals that the arguments of those scholars who do not agree with the theory of Ibero-Caucasian unity, sometimes are politically motivated;

B. Northwest Caucasian language e.g. Abkhazian, is a language of Abkhaz people and not the language of Abkhazia (even if according to its contemporary meaning, and not according to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when Abkhazia enclosed whole territory of West Georgia). The population of Abkhazia has always been ethnically diverse with a strongly represented Kartvelian component which determined very tight connections of Abkhaz people with Georgians for thousands of years;

C. Ossetians, whose identification with Alans, and even more with Scythians still raises some doubts, have played an important role in the history of Georgia. However, Ossetia, the country in the northern Caucasus has never been a part of Georgia. Ossetians have been living in Georgia for centuries like Armenians, Jews and other nationalities, and only in this context were they the subjects of the Georgian state.

It would have been very welcome if the author had emphasized the controversial issues for us right from the very beginning especially when he is an expert on the issues, and whilst discussing specific issues, he presented the material accurately.

Overall, I would like to express my satisfaction of the fact that readers interested in the history of Georgia have been presented with one more good book to read.

#### REFERENCES:

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