

## Georgian - Icelandic Literary Relations

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**Abstract:** What are the literary relations between two small countries, like Georgia and Iceland, which are very far one from each other, with very different languages, cultures and histories? Despite the great distance and the differences between those two cultures, some literary contacts between Georgia and Iceland exist. Although my research shows that the literary contacts started first in the 20th century, numerous works have been translated. This article is focused on the literary relations between Georgia and Iceland in the fields of translation of literary fiction and the reception of those translations in both countries.

**Keywords:** *Literary contacts; Georgia; Iceland; Icelandic sagas; Halldór Laxness*

The first literary contacts between Georgia and Iceland started, as far as it is known, when Icelandic writer and Nobel Prize laureate Halldór Laxness travelled to Georgia during his trip to the Soviet Union in 1937. Laxness was invited to take part in a congress dedicated to Shota Rustaveli in December 1937, and he held a speech there on 27th December 1937. His speech in Georgian translation was published and commented upon in the Georgian newspaper *Komunisti* in the article "Skandinaviis mtseral Saldor [sic] Laksnesis sitqvidan"[1]. In his speech Laxness

mentioned that it is very important for small nations like Georgia or Iceland to have their own language, and he also noted that one of the things that Georgia and Iceland have common is that their "golden age"- in Georgia the time when *The Man in the Panther Skin* was written and in Iceland when the sagas were written down- was approximately at the same time. Laxness described his travel experience in Georgia in his books about the Soviet Union, *On Eastern Roads (Gerska ævintýrið)*[2], published in 1938 and *Poets' Time (Skáldatími)*, published in 1963. He was well informed about Georgian culture; he praised Georgian culture and mentioned, that he had read *The Man in the Panther Skin* in French translation. In his book *On Eastern Roads* Laxness expressed his desire to visit Georgia: "Georgia is one of the countries in the Soviet Union that I wanted to become acquainted with the most, not only because of its unique location between the East and the West, but also because Georgia is the one Soviet republic that has had a high culture in ancient times" [3, p. 109].

Laxness was welcomed in Georgia in a very cordial manner, as the reviews of translations of his writings shows. For example Akaki Gelovani called Laxness in his review of the translation of *Independent People* "the great friend of our country"[4]. Halldór Laxness was one of the first Icelandic authors whose works were translated into Georgian, and at the same time he was the most translated Icelandic author in Georgia.

The first works of Icelandic literature translated into Georgian were Halldór Laxness' short stories *Lilja* and *Napoleon Bonaparte (Napóleon Bónapartí)* and *The Padlock (Hengilásinn)* and *Covert Business (Dulið erindi)* by Ólafur Jóhann Sigurðsson, which were published in the anthology *Scandinavian Short Stories (Skandinaviuri motkhrobbi)* in 1961[5]. This anthology was translated by Tinatin Koplataдзе and printed in 30000 copies. "Napoleon Bonaparte" was also published separately in 1968 in 20000 copies [6].

After this followed translations of three novels written by Laxness: *The Atom Station (Atómstöðin)*[7] translated by Jemal

Karchkhadze and Davit Tserediani, 1965, (10000 copies); *Iceland's Bell* (*Íslandsklukkan*)[8] translated by Akaki Gelovani, 1966 (25000 copies). In 1968 there followed the translation of *Independent People* (*Sjálfstætt fólk*)[9] translated by Nino Samukashvili (40000 copies). That Georgian translations of Laxness' literary works are relatively large in number can be seen by the fact that in the neighbouring republic Armenia only two novels were translated - *Iceland's Bell* (1989) and *Independent People* (1967) and in Azerbaijan only the short story *A bird on the fence post* (*Fugl á garðstaurunum*) in 1973 [see: 10, p. 35]

But not only modern Icelandic literature was translated; there were also translations of Old Icelandic literature, such as the *Poetic Edda* (1977)[11] translated by poet Giorgi Kalandadze (4000 exemplars). At least two poems from the *Poetic Edda* were also published in journals: *Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane* (*Helgakviða hundingsbana II*)[12] was published 1967 in the journal „Mnatobi“, and *The Spell of Gróa* (*Gróagaldur*) [13] in the journal „Sakartvelos kali“ in 1969.

In 1977 Giorgi Jabashvili's translation of *The Story of Burnt Njáll* (*Brennu Njáls saga*)[14] was published with a print run of 20,000. This book was, according to my research, the first direct translation from Icelandic (In this case Old Icelandic) into Georgian. This was an exception: most of the translations were not translated directly from Icelandic, but rather from Russian or German. The first person to translate directly from modern Icelandic into Georgian was Grigol Machavariani.

After 1977 there was, as my findings indicate, a break in translations until 1992. In 1992 Grigol Matchavariani, a Georgian admirer of Iceland who had taught himself Icelandic, published, according to an interview with Ágústína Jónsdóttir [15, p. 4], translations of the short stories *Julius* (*Júlíus*) and *Snoring* (*Hrotur*) by Halldór Stefánsson, and *Shankbone and Seashell* (*Leggur og skel*) written by Jónas Hallgrímsson, but it was not possible to find in which journal they were published. In the same year Grigol Matchavariani wrote a letter to the largest Icelandic newspaper,

*Morgunblaðið*, in which he described his struggle to learn Icelandic without any teacher or contact to Icelanders, using only a Russian-Icelandic dictionary. This letter was published on 24 October 1992 [16] and it caused a small sensation in Iceland. Grigol Matchavariani was invited to Iceland by Prime Minister Davíð Oddsson and started working on some translations during his stay there. Unfortunately Grigol Matchavariani died in 1996 at the age 33. Only after his death, in 1997, were his translations *Six Icelandic Sagas (Sex íslenskar sögur)*[17] published, which is an anthology of six shorter Icelandic sagas: *Book of Icelanders (Íslendingabók Ara fróða)*, *The Tale of the Story-Wise Icelander (Íslendinga þáttur sögufróða)*, *The Saga of Helgi Hallvarðsson (Helga saga Hallvarðssonar)*, *The Tale of Sigurður from Borgarfjord (Sigurðar þáttur borgfirski)*, *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue (Gunnlaugs saga ormstunga)* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders (Grænlandinga saga)*. In the same year his translation of Þórhallur Guttormsson's biography of Jón Arason *The Last Catholic Bishop (Jón biskup Arason)*[18] was also published, although the number of copies is unknown.

An interesting aspect is the image of Iceland described in texts about Icelandic literature and in translations from Icelandic. There were probably not many sources of information about Iceland in Georgia, especially during the Soviet period. The few sources of information about Iceland were limited to statements made by Halldór Laxness during his stay in Georgia, some few foreign books, and most importantly the publications of Russian scholar Mikhail I. Steblin-Kamenskij, who is often cited in Georgian texts about Icelandic literature. Because of this situation, the image of Iceland in Georgian texts was quite unrealistic and very romantic and exotic. Icelanders are described as passionate readers and poets; in almost every text about Icelandic literature there is at least some mention of Icelandic sagas, even when the text under discussion is a work of modern literature.

Most Georgian texts about Iceland appear to express admiration for Iceland, especially with regards to Icelanders'

struggle for their independence from Denmark and their will to preserve their own language and literature, which could be seen as a parallel to Georgian struggles for independence and the preservation of the Georgian language in the Soviet Union. This tendency can also be found in the reception of the works of Halldór Laxness in Georgia. Laxness was for some period a great admirer of the Soviet Union and of communist politics. Some of Laxness' works were very popular in the Soviet Union and were interpreted according to the principles of social realism. Icelandic specialist of Russian literature and translator from Russian Árni Bergmann points out that in the Soviet Union Iceland received exemption from the negative clichés about capitalist western countries [see: 19, p. 77] and this tendency could be seen also in the reception of the translation of Icelandic literature in Georgia. For example, in texts treating translations of Halldór Laxness' works the reviewers and translators focused not so much on the interpretation of his work in the spirit of social realism, but instead on the fight for independence and struggle of individuals. This image of Iceland is also for the most part preserved in the few contemporary Georgian texts about Icelandic literature.

Georgian-Icelandic literary relations have been small in number: the only Icelander to have translated from Georgian was the university professor in Oslo, Friðrik Þórðarson. Þórðarson was mainly a linguist, and published a number of articles about the Ossetian and Georgian languages. But he also translated into Icelandic a chapter from the *History of Georgia (Kartlis tskhovreba)* [20] about nordic men - *væringjar (varangebi)* - and also the short story *Devil's Stone (Steinn Satans)* by Mikheil Javakhisjvili, published 2001 in the translators' journal *Jón á Bægisá* [21].

Grigol Matchavariani translated, with the help of Icelandic poet Pjetur Hafsteinn Lárusson, the book *Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik (Píslarvætti hinnar heilögu Sjúsaníkar drottningar)*[22], which was published in 1996, as well as a few short stories, which were published together with translations by his wife Irma Matchavariani in the journal *Jón á Bægisá* in 2001.

Those short stories comprised Ilia Chavchavadze's *On the gallows* (*Í gálganum*), Giorgi Leonidze's *Wishing Tree* (*Óskatréd*) translated by Grigol Matchavariani, and Revaz Mishveladze's *Applaus* (*Klapp*) and *Riddle* (*Þraut*) [23] translated by Irma Matchavariani. In the same number of *Jón á Bægisá* a short article was also published about the history and periodization of Georgian literature, along with short information about the Georgian authors and the translators.

Those short stories along with a few others were also published on the homepage of Pjetur Hafstein Lárusson *Ljóðheimar og sagna* under the title *Smásögur frá Georgíu* (*Short Stories from Georgia*): in addition to short stories published in *Jón á Bægisá* were published here Chola Lomtadze's *Gramophone* (*Grammófóinninn*), Akaki Tsereteli's *Two Dreams* (*Tveir draumar*) and Vaja Pshavela's *Sentenced Smoking Pipe* (*Dæmd reykjarpípa*) [24] – all translated by Grigol Machavariani. *Sentenced Smoking Pipe* was also published in the newspaper *Morgunblaðið* on 4 December 1999 [25].

The foremost text in Icelandic about Georgia and Georgian literature is Laxness' description of his stay in Georgia in the books *On Eastern Roads* and *Poets' Time*. Here he also describes and praises the Georgian medieval epic poem *The Knight in the Panther Skin*:

„The Georgian work of high culture, The man in the Panthers skin is [...] an absolute resurgence phenomenon in the western understanding, it is at the same time inspired and permeated by Hellenic influences, Greek schools of thought in poetry and philosophy“ [26, p. 114].

In 1956 a delegation of Icelandic writers traveled to the Soviet Union, their itinerary including a visit to Georgia. One of the members of this delegation, writer Agnar Þórðarson published a book *Called in the walls of Kremlin* (*Kallað í Kremlarmúr*) in which he describes their journey around Georgia, including a supra in Vaja Pshavela's house [see: 27, p. 56].

Detailed descriptions of Georgia, although not completely free of pro-Soviet propaganda, appeared in 1981 in *Fréttir frá Sovétríkjunum* (journal of the society of cultural relationships between Iceland and the Soviet Union). The same society organized, in September 1981, Georgian Days (Grúsíudagar), during which Georgian art was exhibited in Iceland. A delegation of artists was invited from Georgia led by minister of education Otar Kiknadze. This journey to Iceland was also documented in a Georgian newspaper in an interview with Kinkknadze, where he described his impressions of Iceland [28]. Last but not least, Grigol Matchavariani's translations helped to introduce Icelanders to some of the highlights of Georgian literature and attracted the attention of Icelanders to this far away and very different country.

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