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Queen Tamara: An Analysis Of Tamaran Myths And Legends Through Eight Centuries Of Georgian History

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QUEEN TAMARA: AN ANALYSIS OF TAMARAN
MYTHS AND LEGENDS THROUGH EIGHT CENTURIES
OF GEORGIAN HISTORY

AN HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT
IN CANDIDACY FOR A BACHELORS DEGREE IN
HISTORY

BY

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This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the Department of History.

Director

Reader

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INTRODUCTION

Georgia, surrounded by modern day Turkey, Iran, and Russia, and flanked by the Black and Caspian Sea, has been the subject of frequent foreign invasions since the fifth millennium B.C.. Influenced by Greek and Persian thought in the pre-Christian era and then annexed by Rome in 66 B.C., Georgia eventually became one of the first kingdoms to adopt Christianity in A.D. 330. The Byzantine Empire held tremendous influence over Georgia until the Arabs invaded the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, in A.D. 645. Under David the Rebuilder, who ruled from 1099 to 1125, Georgia was united once again as he pushed Turkish forces out and expanded Georgian influence east to the Caspian Sea and south to Armenia. David the Rebuilder laid the foundation for the Golden Age of Georgia which reached its pinnacle under the leadership of Queen Tamara who ruled from 1184 to 1212. The Mongol invasion and Moslem hold over Georgia began in 1236 and lasted well into the 14th century. In 1386 Tamerlane, a Moslem conqueror, destroyed Tbilisi. Less than 100 years later the Ottoman and Persian empires established control over Georgia for three centuries. With the Russian annexation of Georgia in 1801, Georgia finally gained protection from foreign invasion. The Georgians experienced a brief encounter with independence from 1918 to 1921, only to be incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922. It was not until April 9, 1991, that Georgia again achieved the status of a fully independent country. In The Making of the Georgian
Nation, Ronald Suny explained the unique situation of the newly formed Republic of Georgia:

Whether Georgia can be successfully transformed from a society rent by conflict into a pluralistic democratic nation will depend on Georgians rethinking their history. The key to the future lies in what people selects from its past, how it imagines itself as a community and continues to remake itself as a nation.

With this in mind, I will present an historical analysis of Queen Tamara—a Georgian queen of the Middle Ages—whom the Georgian people have selected from their past as a cultural icon. The period being analyzed covers eight centuries; from Queen Tamara’s coronation in 1184 to the present. It is my intent to point out how her historical and legendary character have been used both in Russian and Georgian literature and politics. In Georgia’s Golden Age (12th and 13th centuries), Tamara represented everything that was considered good in Georgian society. With the passage of time, Tamara’s character was twisted into different molds in order to serve the separate interests of Georgian and Russian consolidation, patriotism, nationalism, and morality. This became especially evident in the process of Georgia’s incorporation into Russia. In the 20th century, Stalin used Tamara’s image to justify his violent and absolutist rule over Georgia. Taking advantage of Georgia’s love for Queen Tamara, Stalin used her legend to gain Georgian support for the Soviet fight against Adolf Hitler. Still today, Queen Tamara’s legend offers the Georgian people the inspiration needed to form a more perfect society.
CHAPTER 1
THE ENLIGHTENED QUEEN

Queen Tamara, an heroic, historic figure who ruled during Georgia's Golden Age (1099-1213), has come to symbolize various features in Georgian culture, including the emphasis on freedom, morality, friendship, and unity. Throughout history the legend of Queen Tamara has generated unabashed patriotism and nationalism. Statues and shrines dedicated to her have been venerated by young and old, and rich and poor. In return, her memory has given strength to Georgians in times of struggle. Queen Tamara represents the ideal of liberty for every Georgian who ever dreamed of freedom. The myths and historical legends surrounding her abound in Russian and Georgian literature. Her legendary ability to inspire led to Russian intervention in the 16th century, when Russia appropriated Tamara's memory for specific geopolitical reasons. This ultimately led to Russia's annexation of Georgia in 1801.¹

At the beginning of the 19th century, Russia used Tamara's name as a political tool to justify the annexation of the Caucasus, which had been united under the leadership of Queen Tamara. In the propaganda utilized by Joseph Stalin, Tamara's legend helped to generate widespread support among the Georgians to help defeat Germany in World War II. For hundreds of years, Queen Tamara has remained a powerful and awesome character in the minds of the Georgian people. Just as U.S. citizens have frequently hailed Abraham Lincoln as a symbol of what the American
character should embody, so have Georgians lauded Queen Tamara as a symbol of freedom, morality, and justice.

Tamara belonged to the royal household of Bagratids who ruled Georgia for about 1000 years. The Bagratids claimed they were direct descendants of David and Solomon of Israel. Tamara’s life reflected the Christian principles of faith, hope, and love. Her legend also provided great support in the Georgian search for peace and unconditional love. She was canonized by the Orthodox Church with her feast day celebrated annually on May 1. The first historian of Tamara explained how the queen was received by her country during her own reign and the centuries that followed. He wrote: “It is impossible to tell in what happiness and prosperity Tamar[a] ... abided—a knight like one descended from the seed of David/the Prophet/, you will gradually learn how felicitous and victorious she became.”

As a young woman, Tamara was recognized as being remarkably intelligent. Thus, Tamara’s father, King Giorgi III, crowned her (his only child) as co-ruler in 1178. At Tamara’s coronation ceremony, according to historian Antonia Fraser, Giorgi III “gave her the official title of ‘Mountain of God’ and placed on her head a crown richly encrusted with rubies and diamonds.” Tamara became the first woman to rule over the Georgians. She had broken the long-standing patriarchal structure of government. Historian Roin Metreveli explained how Tamara’s coronation affected the status of women for years to come: “Though this took place against the background of internal political struggle, at the same time the event highlighted the refined and humane attitude to[wards] women.” Giorgi III’s controversial decision to bring a woman to the throne clashed with the idea that “women should be seen and not heard.” Many of the
influential nobles probably believed that a woman ruler would make their nation weak and destroy the credibility of the Georgian kingdom. However, Queen Tamara was extremely popular among the majority of the Georgian people and those who knew her could vouch for her intellect and brilliance as a leader.³

With her father’s death in 1184, the nobles of Tamara’s court attempted to create a framework of government that would set her up to be merely a token queen, exercising only the executive power of initiating programs created by the nobility. Tamara was forced to concede. Feudal aristocrats forced her to dismiss her closest advisors—those who had fought for her rights as their queen. The chief treasurer, Qutlu-Arslan, then attempted to seize royal authority as he and other chief nobles demanded the powers of “bestowal and acceptance” and of “pardon and punishment.” Queen Tamara, however, decided to take action. With the help of loyal forces, Tamara seized Qutlu-Arslan, and did not release him until the rebels swore allegiance and submission to her authority. Tamara had regained her royal power from a power-hungry nobility. She had prevented an aristocratic coup. In gratitude for her success, though she was already popular with the Georgian population, she made enormous royal donations to the church, the clergy, and the poor.⁴

Immediately following the attempted takeover, Tamara initiated her domestic policy. It called for the cooperation of throne and altar to root out corruption, to provide moral instruction, and to evangelize. Reflecting on how she would act, Queen Tamara explained the theory behind her domestic policy to the priests:

Examine everything well, confirm and establish what is right and root out corruption. Start with myself, for this crown of mine is one of kinship, not opposition to God. Do not flatter princes for their riches, or disdain beggars for
their poverty. It is for you to speak, for me to act; for you to instruct, for me to practice; for you to educate, for me to administer correction; together we will keep Holy law unified, so that we shall not all be called to judgement: you as priests I as monarch, you as stewards and I as guardian.

Queen Tamara was humble. She insisted that her acts of charity should be credited not to her, but to God. She would not allow her people to believe that they had a monarch who did not practice what she preached. With her own two hands, Tamara made clothing and personally distributed it to the poor. She created a committee to distribute one-tenth of the kingdom’s revenue to the poor and hungry. Never in Georgia had there been a ruler like her.5

Increasingly worried about a successor, the church and aristocracy chose Iurii Bogoliubskii, a Russian prince, to marry Tamara. Soon after, however, as a result of his drunken and barbaric behavior, Tamara divorced Iurii. He was then exiled to Constantinople. Later, he led two unsuccessful military raids against Tamara’s court.

Tamara, who had made it a point to follow holy law, was devastated by the divorce but would not blame herself for her husband’s behavior. She attempted to explain this to those who had chosen the sinful prince as her husband:

When one spouse does not keep the marriage chamber undefiled it is not right for the other to remain with him, since he is abusing the temple of God. It is not in my power to straighten the shadow of a crooked tree, and I can without sin rid myself of the dross that you have cast upon me.

Still the nobles and clergy pressured Tamara to marry once again. Recognizing Tamara’s wish to choose her mate, and sad at seeing Tamara childless, the church and aristocracy allowed David Soslani, also a Bagratid, to wed with Tamara in 1189. David and Tamara’s marriage produced a son and daughter. The son, Giorgi, was to be king when Tamara died. Tamara’s actions taught the Georgian kingdom that in some circumstances
true love and marital harmony are more important than legal requirements. The themes of Orthodoxy and true love would prove to be important in Tamara’s influence throughout history.⁶

Together, Tamara and David Sosiani established peace in Georgia and began to look beyond their borders in an attempt to unify the Caucasus. After Tamara and David forced their Moslem neighbors, the Seljuk Turks, to cede to Georgia certain towns and pastureland in the western Caucasus, the Caliph of Baghdad organized a military raid against Tamara in an attempt to establish permanent Moslem influence in Georgia. It was a battle between Christianity and the Islamic faith. The Caliph of Baghdad considered himself the leader of the Moslems just as Queen Tamara believed herself to be an evangelist and “defender of the faith.” Praying for several days before the battle of Shamkor in June 1195, Tamara addressed her soldiers:

Brothers of mine, be not fearful at heart because they are many and you are few, for God is with us... Put your trust in God alone, keep an upright heart before Him and have faith in Christ’s Cross. Make good speed, march to their country aided by the most holy Virgin and the might of the... “Cross”.

Tamara’s troops, who were outnumbered, defeated the Moslems and spread Georgian influence southward.⁷

Fearing the Christian expansion, the sultan of Ruknadin and Rum attempted unsuccessfully to rid Tamara of the region at the battle of Basiani in 1204. Just as Tamara had called together an army to defeat the Moslems at the battle of Shamkor, so she collected the strongest men of her kingdom to fight at Basiani. No draft to gather the army was needed. The men of Georgia gathered together voluntarily, in a patriotic spirit elicited by Queen Tamara. With Tamara once again victorious, the Georgian sphere of
influence grew larger than ever before, reaching to the Black Sea and securing its borders. Tamara then established the Empire of Trebizond made up of the following lands: Lazia, Trebizond, Limon, Sinope, Samsun, Kerasund, Kitiora, Amastris, Heraclea, Paphlagonia, and Pontus.  

While in Tabakhmela in 1213, Queen Tamara died. Her body was placed with her ancestors at Gelati, and buried in a personalized vault. Her death marked the end of the Golden Age of Georgia. Her son, Giorgi, took over as king of Georgia. After his death and during the reign of Queen Tamara’s daughter, Rusudan (named after Tamara’s aunt), the Mongols conquered Georgia. As a result of Mongol domination, Georgia’s kings had little power and therefore Georgia’s royal princes and families became segmented. However, Queen Tamara would never be forgotten by her people, as Metreveli explained:

The Georgian people have always cherished and will eternally hold dear the memory of the great patriot queen who had served her country tirelessly. Her image is today [1990s] with the Georgian people, encouraging the Georgian national movement towards further successes. Georgia is capable of showing profound affection for her celebrated ancestor. To every patriot Tamara is “Queen of Queens, beauty of the century and the religion [Orthodoxy], and worshipper of the Messiah.”

The Georgian struggle to evangelize and maintain its religion against its neighbors would prove to be essential characteristics in the subsequent use of Tamara’s legend in Georgian and Russian politics and literature. The development of her legendary character began with the Georgian poets of the Golden Age. Their praises of Queen Tamara, as well as their vivid imagery of her reign, provide remarkable insights into the Golden Age of Georgia.
ENDNOTES


4. Ibid., 69, 71.

5. Ibid., 72, 92-93.

6. Ibid., 72, 74, 76, 78.

7. Ibid., 78, 80.

8. Ibid., 80-82.

9. Ibid., 95.
CHAPTER 2
QUEEN TAMARA AND THE
LITERATURE OF THE GOLDEN AGE

Georgian history and myth are dominated by images of the Golden Age. Georgia has thrived on folklore and legend throughout its history. Engrossed with the literature regarding freedom and unity, Georgians have looked to the history and legend of Tamara as a source of political might and cultural progress. Therefore, Queen Tamara's character began to evolve into a utopian image that would provide unyielding inspiration for the Georgians. Just as Tamara's myth has created images of freedom and unity, so has it initiated sexual images. This is evident in the last stanza of Mikhail Lermontov's poem Tamara:

But her words of farewell were as tender,
And the sound of her voice was as sweet,
As a promise of loving caresses,
Or of rapture, as when lovers meet.

Queen Tamara's people looked upon her not only as their commander, but also as their guardian. As she strategically planned war and constantly attempted to be present at battle to inspire her troops, Tamara's historical character, according to historian Antonia Fraser, provided two dynamic functions:

One was to inspire from on high as if in the guise of a goddess—or as a Holy (Armed) Figurehead. The other artifice—rather more physically testing—was to provide from time to time . . . the spectacle of a fragile female sharing the military rigours: such a display of courage in the notoriously timorous sex
being equally calculated to inspire.¹

In The Literature of Georgia: A History, Donald Rayfield asserted that Shota Rustaveli’s masterpiece epic poem, The Man in the Panther’s Skin, has been quoted by Georgians in “the same way that Shakespeare is quoted by speakers of English who have never read him.”² Rustaveli, who was the royal treasurer to Tamara, knew the queen on a personal basis. Therefore, Rustaveli gained tremendous insight into the life of Queen Tamara and the Golden Age. This knowledge and experience allowed Rustaveli to create an ideal kingdom in his epic poem. Rustaveli’s epic is filled with adventure, romantic love, heroes, and friendship. He explains that the poem was written at the request of Queen Tamara: “She bade me indite sweet verses in her praise, laud her eyebrows and lashes, her hair, her lips and teeth, cut crystal and ruby arranged in ranks. An anvil of soft lead breaks even hard stone.” Thus, not only did Tamara request the epic be written, but also requested she be a character in the story. The entire prologue to the epic was written as a eulogy to Queen Tamara’s reign. It praised her beauty, her intelligence, and her wisdom.³ Under the leadership of Tamara, a spirit of self-sacrifice and selflessness was instilled in the hearts of the Georgian people. Rustaveli’s epic reflected such a mind-set. Two main characters of the story, T’hinat’hin and Avt’handil, were directly related to the historical persons of Queen Tamara and Rustaveli, respectively. The two characters brought alive a romantic image of love. In writing the epic, Rustaveli revealed his love for Tamara:

By shedding tears of blood we praise King [Queen] T’hamara, whose praises I, not ill-chosen, have told forth. For ink I have used a lake of jet, and for pen a pliant crystal. Whoever hears, a jagged spear will pierce his heart!”⁴
Throughout the poem, the character of T'hinat'hin paralleled Tamara’s historical character. In the story, the royal council spoke to the king about his daughter’s great intellect and ability to lead: “Though indeed she be a woman . . . she knows how to rule. We say not this to flatter you; we ourselves, in your absence, often say so. Her deeds, like her radiance, are revealed bright as sunshine.” Thus, in the epic, the king appointed his only daughter as co-ruler, just as King Giorgi III had crowned his only daughter, Tamara, co-ruler in 1178. Through the character of T’hinat’hin, Rustaveli spelled out Queen Tamara’s own glory and legacy to come:

No other child had the king[,] save one only daughter, the shining light of the world, to be ranked with nought but the sunny group; whoever looked on her, she bereft him of heart, mind, and soul. It needs a wise man to praise her, and a very eloquent tongue.5

Throughout history, Tamara has always been looked upon, by the Georgians, as the most esteemed ruler ever. Whenever her name was mentioned or her legend reproduced, the Georgian citizen felt a connection, a kinship of heart, mind, and soul. To praise her was one of the most righteous acts a Georgian could do.

Also matching up historically in Rustaveli’s epic was the Georgian kingdom’s great eagerness to see that Queen Tamara’s lineage was carried on. She had not produced any children with her first husband whom she had divorced. Rustaveli’s verses about T’hinat’hin reflected the mood of the nation. At the time, it wanted to see Tamara married and pregnant:

Now we want a husband for our daughter. Where shall we find him to whom we may give our throne, whom we may form in our image, make him ruler of the kingdom, guardian of the realm, that we be not destroyed, that we may not let our enemies whet their swords for us.96
In addition, the historical Tamara would accompany her troops, barefoot, to a battle where she would give such dazzling speeches that her men would be stirred to a point of frenzy.

Through similar use of the oratorical skills that Tamara was known for, T'hinat'hin inspired Avt'handil to achieve various heroic actions of love, friendship, and selflessness. Cicil Maurice Bowra, author of *Inspiration and Poetry*, declared that “Though the poem says nothing directly about T'hamar, it reflects Rust'hevili’s feelings for her and presents them in a secondary or ‘allegorical’ form. It is in fact a dramatization of them into a heroic medium.” As Avt'handil performed heroic tasks for T'hinat'hin, she returned her love and devotion through her capacity to trust.

For eight centuries, this epic of love, trust, patriotism, and friendship has provided an ideal character model for the Georgians; it is a model followed religiously by the Georgian people. The only other moral guidebook in Georgia that matches the popularity of *The Man in the Panther’s Skin* is the Bible. However, the same principles that Queen Tamara had stressed more than eight-hundred years ago when she justified her divorce to Iurii Bogoliubskii—that the law of true love sometimes had greater importance than Orthodox law—are still held today, as many Georgians rely on Rustaveli’s verses as a “scripture of life.” One expert on Georgian culture explained, “whether approved by the Orthodox Church or no, Rustaveli’s ethical code, with its emphasis on courage, loyalty and patriotism, is well attuned to the Georgian national character.” When a Georgian took a journey through Rustaveli’s epic, he/she took a journey through Georgia’s glorious past. Throughout eight centuries, such great veneration has been paid towards the epic that it has become reflective of the Georgian
outlook on life. Georgians have been encouraged to memorize lines from the epic. For example, Georgian newlyweds may be instructed to model their love after Rustaveli’s description of a lover:

To a lover, beauty, glorious beauty, wisdom, wealth, generosity, youth and leisure are fitting; he must be eloquent, intelligent, patient, an overcomer of mighty adversaries; who has not these qualities lacks the character of a lover.8

Rustaveli spoke with a prophetic voice to peasants, merchants, the aristocracy, and royalty. He produced an epic “bible” that Georgians would recite word for word and line by line. Brides have been expected to memorize the epic in order to provide entertainment for their husbands. The poem has been translated into German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Armenian, French, Czech, Hungarian, Spanish, and English. The center of Tbilisi, Prospect Rustaveli, has been named after the author, as well as the Georgian State Theater, the Scientific Research Institute of Georgian Literature of the Academy of Sciences, and the Theatrical Institute.9

Rustaveli also took part in the writing of odes recited at court receptions held by Queen Tamara. The primary authors of odes, however, were Chakhrukhadze and Ioane Shavteli, both contemporaries of Rustaveli. One ode, Tamariani, provided a eulogy for Queen Tamara. In the eulogy, Chakhrukhadze referred to Queen Tamara’s character in Rustaveli’s epic, T’hinat’hin:

Her greatness, the bewildermint of the wise. I shall praise Tinatin [Tamara],
    a well-watered garden,
Oh, this Tinatin [Tamara], not the generous Tinatin in Arabia,
But a young woman, pure, a rose of paradise, sun-like to behold.

Chakhrukhadze praised Tamara’s beauty and thirst to evangelize. He also analyzed Tamara’s thoughts on predestination. Chakhrukhadze claimed that Tamara was hand
picked by God to serve as his servant of peace. In Tamariani, Chakhrukhadze’s verses contained lines that spoke of wise philosophers at a loss for words because they could not adequately explain just how magnificent Queen Tamara was. Chakhrukhadze’s magnificent style of verse often obscured historical events that were repeatedly supplemented into Tamariani.¹⁰

The Praise of Davit [sic] the Builder and of Tamar was an ode attributed to Shavteli. The ode was also titled Abdul-Mesia, “Slave of the Messiah,” and had such inspiring verses that Rustaveli tried to claim it as his own writing. However in 1833, Prince Teimuraz, who had studied Georgian oral tradition back to Queen Tamara’s time, verified that the author was Shavteli:

Shavteli wrote in verse a marvelously composed narrative about an Abdul-Mesia, and our chroniclers say that never had such fine verses been written in Georgian. We unfortunate Georgians have lost these amazing verses by Shavteli . . . my grandfather King Erekle had many searches carried out, he badly wanted this poem, but he was no longer able to find it.¹¹

Not only does the title Abdul-Mesia explain the historical Georgian view of Queen Tamara as a pious and holy ruler who served God by serving the poor and unfortunate, but it also confirmed that oral tradition carried the legend of Tamara through eight centuries. For King Erekle to carry out extensive searches for a poem about Queen Tamara, attested to her enormous popularity with all classes of the Georgian society.

Other verses from Shavteli have been recovered, such as his eulogy of Queen Tamara:

You are the eye of the blind, that tutor of the young, bread for the hungry, shelter for the homeless, Father to orphans, protector of widows, destined to clothe the naked, A staff of strength for the old, worn out by labour, to lean on! You spread wisdom among us; the teller of grace, you show us the
These few words truly sum up the historical character of Queen Tamara. For example, at Tamara's second wedding she slaughtered one hundred sheep and two hundred of her best oxen to feed a large population of those at the wedding party and those who were less fortunate. Tamara gave away large amounts of gold to the widows, orphans, and poor of Georgia not only on her wedding day, but throughout her life. The odes seemed to capture the best traits of Queen Tamara in beautiful verse. The odes have been passed down, both orally and inscribed, and have enhanced the image of Tamara for the generations that followed.12

Another major accomplishment that occurred during the reign of Queen Tamara was the change in content of the chronicles written during her reign. Prior to Queen Tamara's reign, the Georgian kings had authorized chronicles written about them that were not based on factual information and therefore included abstract concepts based on legend, story-telling, spirituality, holiness, and philosophy. However, when Queen Tamara came to power she ordered that proper history, based on facts, be recorded in the chronicles. Therefore, beginning with Queen Tamara, history has seen the chronicles of Georgia as reliable sources, especially in the areas concerning political judgements. Chronicles concerning Queen Tamara's reign were numerous: The Life of Georgia, The Life and Known Facts about the Bagratid Kings, The Histories and Praises of the Crowned Monarchs, and The Life of Queen Tamar. Tamara had allowed for the writing of history in Georgia to measure up with the more progressive historians of the age.13

The poets of the Golden Age of Georgia had created an image of Queen Tamara that would stand as a symbol of progress, love, morality, and unity. Her image was
deeply implanted in the minds of the Georgians. This loyalty to Queen Tamara’s image made it relatively easy for Russian diplomats to use and manipulate her character in order to further the interest of the tsar.
1. Fraser, *Warrior Queens*, 167, 177.


6. Ibid., 77; Fraser, *Warrior Queens*, 177.


12. Ibid., 86; Metreveli, *Queen Tamar*, 77.

In 1236 the Mongols invaded Georgia. From the time of invasion to 1386, Georgia was fragmented and suppressed by the Mongols. The legend of Tamara, however, survived through these years. Tamara's reign and historical character, absorbed in Rustaveli's epic and the various odes, served as a utopian vision for the shattered country of Georgia. Her legend also endured three centuries of Moslem supremacy beginning in 1453. Nineteenth-century Georgian romantic authors used her legend to incite patriotism and revolution. Their goal was to overthrow their oppressors and regain the lost glory of the Golden Age.¹

Russia, on the other hand, since the 16th century, had commercial and territorial interests in the area surrounding Georgia. The Historian Ronald Suny explained the changing relations between Russia and Georgia: "As for long-distance trade, the road to Russia through Astrakhan became more important, and the ties to Iran weakened. Russian money was [also] increasingly used in commercial transactions in eastern Georgia." Georgia, therefore, moved from a consumptive society to a productive society. This, in turn, caused close political and economic ties between Russia and Georgia. The two cultures began to mesh in a friendly atmosphere. It was in this setting that Queen Tamara's legend became potently effective. Recognizing the power of Tamara's name and legend, the Russians adapted her image to fit their policy of expansion. Russian
leaders and authors played upon the utopian vision of the Georgians in order to justify the incorporation of the Caucasus. It all started in the 16th century when Russian expansion conflicted with Ottoman and Persian dominance in the Caucasus.²

The Ottoman and Persian empires had dominated Georgia since 1453. In 1553 they divided Georgia into three spheres of influence: Kartli (central); Kakheti (eastern); and Imerti (western). Meanwhile, Russia expanded into the Tartar khanates of Kazan in 1552 and Astrakhan in 1554. The Ottoman Empire’s latitudinal expansion crossed Russia’s longitudinal effort just north of Georgia. Russia, being an Orthodox Christian nation, was immediately drawn to Georgia, the last remaining Orthodox country in an area that was surrounded by Moslems. Russia was also attracted to Georgia because it lay directly in Ivan IV’s expansion plans into the Caspian and Black Sea, as well as Iran. It was not until 1558—after the Russians took Astrakhan—that King Levan of Kakheti (eastern Georgia) took the initiative for the Georgians, and began correspondence with the Muscovite court.³

Georgia, surrounded by Turkish armies as well as Avars and Kumukhs, agreed to be taken under the protection of Russia. This was largely accepted by the Russian people, in part, because of the already existing mythical account of Queen Tamara in Russia, which began in the 1550s. According to one Georgian historian, The Tale of Queen Dinara “spread throughout Russia, and interest in the Christian kingdoms isolated in the Muslim world increased at the court of Ivan IV [the Terrible].” Tamara’s historical character and, specifically her policies of “throne and altar” and “defender of the faith,” were molded into a legendary character—Queen Dinara or Queen “Life Is Joy.” Dinara’s character embodied all that was good in the eyes of the Russians. She
pursued Christian morality and defended her small Orthodox nation against the
Moslems. There is little doubt that this story helped to incite Russian interest in Georgia
and therefore helped lead to Russo-Georgian diplomatic meetings. After all, during
Queen Tamara's expansion of the Georgian borders, friendly relations were created and
maintained in the northern region of the Caucasus Mountains bordering Appanage
Russia. Tamara had established close political, military, and cultural ties to Russia. Her
character in the myth, The Tale of Queen Dinara, retained a logical/psychological
connection to the Russian people and enabled Georgia's incorporation.4

Between 1564 and 1605, seventeen different formal conferences were held
between Russia and the Georgian kings of Kakheti. It is very likely that Ivan "the
Terrible" and the proceeding tsars of Russia heard the mythical tale of Tamara.
According to the Russian folklore expert, Y.M. Sokolov, "bakhary [storytellers] were an
inalienable adjunct of the everyday life of peasants, trades people, the merchant class, the
noblemen, and even of the princely and royal court." Therefore, the tale probably
touched each social class of the Russian society, including the royal family.5

In correspondence with local rulers, Alexander II, king of Kakheti from 1574 to
1604, explained:

God has now willed it that the Sovereign Tsar has accepted me under his royal
hand for the sake of the Christian faith and has raised me from the earth to
heaven by the mercy which he showed to me in his royal letter patent . . . I rely
on his grace not to deliver me to the infedels [Moslems]. For only my land
remains in the Christian faith; and near me all the lands are Moslem.

The tsar's promise did not last. Occupied with other pressing domestic and foreign
affairs, Moscow did not respond to Alexander II's repeated appeals for Russian support.
During the seventeenth-century, Russia was in an age of transition. Its culture began to
accept western influence. During this age, Russia made many promises to send troops in order to help Georgia defeat Persian dominance. In 1722 Peter the Great promised Russian support to Georgia, but three weeks later the Persians invaded Georgia’s capital and the Russian army was nowhere to be found. Catherine the Great of Russia provided protection to Georgia in 1783, but withdrew Russian forces in 1788. The Persians, once again, seized the Georgian capital.6

In another attempt to establish total control in the Caucasus, Persian Agha Muhammad Khan attacked Georgia in 1795. In response, Russia initiated the Persian campaign of 1796. In 1800 the Georgian king, George XII, sent a letter to Tsar Paul I in hopes of union with Russia. In December of that same year Paul I accepted George XII’s offer. Three months later Paul I was killed and his son, Alexander I, rose to power. Alexander I then signed the manifesto of 1801 that annexed Georgia and called for the end of the Bagratid dynasty. Now that the eastern part of Georgia was incorporated into Russia, it was Prince Tsitsianov’s job to successfully incorporate the western half. The Georgians had mixed feelings about the annexation. Some loved the idea of gaining protection against their Moslem neighbors, and yet others were reminded of the many times that Russia had betrayed Georgia’s trust. Prince Tsitsianov, of the Georgian royal family Tsitsitsvili, was appointed governor-general of Georgia in 1802 in an attempt to consolidate Russian control.7

Tsitsianov, who was both fully Russianized and a member of the Tsitsitsvili family, had great knowledge of both cultures. This allowed Tsitsianov to maintain a diplomatic balance between Russia and Georgia. His task was clear; he was to bring peace to Georgia by suppressing its hostile Moslem neighbors and by offering west
Georgian states protection under the tsar. Tsitsianov was to establish confidence and respect for Russian interests in the region.\textsuperscript{8}

Being of Georgian royalty, Tsitsianov remembered that Queen Tamara had accomplished these goals centuries earlier. He might have recalled that after the battle of Basiani in 1204, Tamara had defeated the Moslems and expanded the Georgian kingdom to a size unprecedented in Georgian history. Queen Tamara had united the Georgian people and lands and therefore created an atmosphere of unbridled progress and invincibility. Basil the Majordomo, a contemporary of Queen Tamara, recalled Queen Tamara’s welcome home parade after she had defeated the Moslems: “Now the citizens of Tbilisi covered the city with decorations, and Tamar and David entered it radiant as the aureole of the sun.” What Tamar had accomplished six centuries earlier seemed like an exact blueprint of what Tsitsianov was to achieve. In a region of mountainous terrain that divided the cultures who lived only miles away, Tamara served as the fist that held many fingers.\textsuperscript{9}

Arriving in Georgia in 1803, Tsitsianov believed that the only way Russian goals could be met and justified was to engage in a foreign policy that called for war against those nations who held land originally controlled by Tamara and other medieval rulers. Lezghis, an area that controlled access to Kakheti and Kartli, was Tsitsianov’s first target. Previously the area was of prime importance to Tamara’s first line of defense against the Moslem Daghestani tribes. He quickly took over the area and commanded the Daghestani chieftains to swear faithfulness and allegiance to Russia.\textsuperscript{10}

Tsitsianov then moved to attack the Khanate of Ganja that extended 2,000 miles beyond the Georgian borders. By 1804 he had taken over Ganja, causing the Russo-
Persian War (1804-1813). Tsitsianov justified the execution of the Khan of Ganja by condemning the leader’s domination over the territory that had once been unified under Queen Tamara. The victory at Ganja was tremendously important for Russia as it blocked the southeast entrance of Georgia from Persian invasion. Also incorporated under Tsitsianov’s foreign policy were Imerti, Mengreli, and Guria. By 1804 Russian influence had extended to the Black and Caspian Sea, reuniting all the Georgian lands.

As the Russians proved victorious in the Russo-Persian War, the Treaty of Gulistan forced Persia to formally recognize the entire annexation of Georgia into the Russian sphere of influence, as well as the incorporation of Daghestan and Shemakna. It almost seemed as though the Golden Age and kingdom of Georgia had never been dissolved. If Georgians had been tricked into thinking that their former glory, under Queen Tamara, could once again be a reality, they were sadly mistaken.

Even though the Russian annexation saved them from the terror of the Moslems—beheadings, castrations, massacres, slave-trading, and a lack of religious freedom—the Georgian nobles abandoned their people for prestigious positions in the Russian society. The Georgian Orthodox church lost its genuine and unique ways of ceremony and celebration, and the Georgian peasants once again experienced a harsh form of serfdom. According to one expert on Georgian history, “the rampant corruption and notorious insensitivity of lower-level tsarist officials made significant segments of the Georgian population long for a return to the imperfect independence that they had enjoyed before 1801. In light of the dismal present the past took on the features of golden age [specifically the Age of Tamara].” This was especially evident during Tsar Nicholas I’s oppressive reign, which some characterize as “thirty years of dead loss.”
ENDNOTES

1. Department of the Army, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, 158.

2. Ibid., 159; Suny, Georgian Nation, 57.


8. Rhinelander, The Incorporation, 84-86.

9. Metreveli, Queen Tamar, 81.

10. Ibid., 89-91.


CHAPTER 4

A CENTURY OF CONFLICT IN GEORGIA

With Alexander I’s death in 1825, Nicholas I took over as tsar and established his Doctrine of Official Nationality, based on Orthodox Christianity, autocracy, and nationality. The Third Section of Nicholas I’s government, the secret police, brutally enforced the tsar’s doctrine as liberals were arrested and killed for attempting to overthrow the conservative status quo. The tsar’s foreign policy of war with Persia and the Ottoman Empire, in the second half of the 1820s, allowed Russia to take control of Armenia (bordering Georgia), Wallachia and Moldavia (areas on the Black Sea), the Bosphorus and Dardanelles (connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean), and commercial/military rights in the Caspian. With interests both internal and external, Nicholas I expanded Russian control over Georgian society and the areas surrounding the Caucasus. Nicholas’ suppression served as a catalyst for liberalism and nationalism.

Nicholas I hated journalists, clubs, discussions, and especially liberal propaganda. Nicholas rejoiced at the death of Alexander Pushkin, who was the greatest Russian writer of the time. Soon after, a Guard’s officer named Mikhail Lermontov wrote a poem condemning the Russian elite for the death of Pushkin. The Poet’s Death became one of the most loved poems in Russian history. Nicholas I, stunned by the audacity of Lermontov, sarcastically remarked: “A nice poem indeed . . . I have told the Senior Doctor . . . to visit this gentleman and make sure whether he is not crazy; later we will act
according to the law. Lermontov was exiled to the Caucasus. Despite strict censorship and fear of government reaction, liberals found freedom and independence through literature. An authority on the history of Nicholas I’s Third Section, Sidney Monas explained how liberal groups and literature affected the Russian and Georgian society:

Even groups that had no philosophical, let alone political, interests might on occasion listen to a reading of some satirical poem or sing a scabious song about the government. Among the young it was an assertion of freedom and independence.

Georgian intellectuals, in an effort to gain political power and independence from Russia, engaged in an unsuccessful plot to overthrow the tsar in 1832. Modern literary historians have stated that at a time of hopelessness, when the future of Georgia was threatened, the authors of Georgian literature turned to the romantic images of the Golden Age and Queen Tamara for inspiration:

While continually fighting against foreign usurpers in their native country, they had already grieved over the fate of their land. And now . . . without a shade of hope for any improvement, they looked with despair on the surrounding world. The future of their country seemed to be devoid of all prospect. And only the glorious past of Georgia could soothe their anguish.

At this time the theme of patriotism was clearly evident. Alexander Chavchavadze, a romantic writer of the time, engaged in the conspiracy of 1832. He wrote about the terrible loss that Georgia suffered in its incorporation into Russia. In his literature, Chavchavadze looked to Georgia’s Golden Age, and thus Tamara, as a model of the cherished dream called freedom. To live in the age of Queen Tamara was to be totally free, whether as a serf, an aristocrat, or a wage earner. All classes of society were affected by the prosperity of Tamara’s kingdom. Everyone in Georgia and the Caucasus region seemed to be united by this prosperity. According to one historian, when Tamara
finally had produced an heir to the throne (Giorgi) there was nation-wide jubilation:

“alms were given away lavishly, prisoners of war were pardoned, and King David and Tamar’s sister gave presents and made donations.” The jubilation and unity of the Golden Age were seen in the poetry of Chavchavadze, who wrote in a period of obscurity. Liberation from Russian control was Chavchavadze’s ultimate goal. In his poetry, Georgia was seen as a prisoner and slave to Russian autocracy. This gloomy imagery was dramatically contrasted with vivid pictures of Georgia’s prosperity during the Golden Age.4

Grigol Orbeliani, who lived from 1800 to 1883, also took part in the 1832 conspiracy. Ironically, he was governor-general for Russia in his native land of Georgia. His poems also called for a restoration of the age of Tamara as he praised the glorious achievements of Kartli during the era. Orbeliani, a “fighter-poet,” was fascinated with Tamara’s legendary character. The content of the poet’s verses sang praise to Iberia—a region previously ruled by Queen Tamara—and its former glory. One authority on Orbeliani claimed that the poet, till his dying day, “worship[ed] old Georgia, dreaming of a hero [Queen Tamara] who could realize his dream.” The utopian image of Georgia, created by Tamara, had the power to soothe the sadness and depression of the Georgians created by the overbearing Russians. The legend provided a temporary, psychological moratorium for the day-dreamers of Georgian society, who wanted so badly for Georgia to regain its past glory. Like Chavchavadze, Orbeliani’s ultimate goal was freedom and independence.5

In The Standing Toast, according to one historian, Orbeliani “grieves over the loss of his country’s freedom [that] increases twofold when he recalls the honour and glory of
his native land and his people in the past.” Orbeliani also wrote a moving description of
the army that Queen Tamara had gathered together in order to fight the Moslems and the

Caliph of Baghdad at the Battle of Shamkor:

Tamar’s standard was unfurled . . .
An army mustered at Didube:
The Kakhi with the shield and spear, the Tushi with a sword,
The chain mail becomes the Pshavian and the Khevsuri,
The strong-armed Kartlian,
Like a fortress strong,
The fleet-footed Ossete, and the Mtiulian
Valiant in battle.
The Meskhian praised for his learning,
The courageous Imertian for his bleeding,
The Abkhazian for his archery,
The Gurian, Svan, and Megrelian
For their ability.6

Orbeliani could almost grasp the army of Queen Tamara and use them to accomplish his
goal of military superiority and Georgian independence. These valiant soldiers and their
lionhearted queen were only a “pen and ink” away for Orbeliani, yet over six hundred
years in the past.

Nikoloz Baratashvili (1817-1845), the nephew of Orbeliani and an outstanding
romantic poet, wrote patriotic verses about Georgia’s lost glory in his poem about the
Fate of Georgia. Where Orbeliani and Chavchavadze glorified the Golden Age in hopes
of its restoration, Baratashvili saw the Russian incorporation of Georgia as essential to its
lasting vitality. He looked to the present and past to define what might be expected in the
future. Literary historians have examined Baratashvili’s love of the Golden Age and
Queen Tamara, but have also pointed out his belief that one should not dwell on the past:

At the very outset N. Baratashvili displayed a correct understanding of the
historical necessity and regularity of the development of Georgian social life. The
heroic past of his people is dear to the poet, but he realizes the impossibility of
retreating into the past.7

These three romantic poets, who called upon the age of Tamara as a source of patriotism, strength, and cultural vitality, all dreamed of an independent Georgia. Nicholas I’s Third Section undoubtedly read the works of these men and labeled them as revolutionaries. However, suppressing and censoring Orbeliani, Chavchavadze, and Baratashvili would have probably caused serious indignation among the Georgians, who recognized the cause of these writers as just and honorable. After all, just as Lermontov’s readers established groups to recite his liberal poetry, so did youth of Georgia form groups to praise the efforts of these romantic Georgian poets. If the nationalistic poets would have been imprisoned, censured, or even killed, the youth of Georgia would have definitely revolted in their honor. Nicholas I, with commercial and strategic interests in the Caucasus, must have realized the delicate situation in Georgia and thus would not allow anything to disrupt this fragile relationship. Unfortunately, Lermontov’s poems, The Demon and Tamara, did just that.

Lermontov’s poetic work, The Demon, has often been recognized as Russia’s most famous romantic poem. Verses from the poem, as well as the name of the protagonist, Tamara, have become essential elements of Russian spirituality. Between 1829 and 1839 Lermontov wrote eight versions of the poem. During his first exile to the Caucasus in 1837, Lermontov changed the protagonist of his poem from a nameless nun to Queen Tamara.8 It is very likely that Lermontov heard several different myths and legends that folklore had orally passed down through six hundred years. Knowledge of the historical/mythical tales of Tamara was second nature to many Georgians. Therefore, Lermontov could have easily gained information about the queen by asking questions
while he was in exile. However, Lermontov took his knowledge of Tamara and created a whole new image. Tamara's character was no longer morally strong; Tamara's character had become almost evil.

*The Demon* became so popular that even Nicholas I's royal court and wife demanded a recital that would take place in February of 1839. One literary historian explained the great difficulty that Lermontov caused himself: "The Empress, indeed, seldom missed such an opportunity, and it is an established fact that she was interested in Lermontov, in his poetry, and in his friends (a circumstance that precipitated Lermontov's destruction)." It also is an established fact that Tsar Nicholas I hated Lermontov, and Lermontov hated him. Already making appropriate corrections from the sixth version to the seventh in an effort to pass censorship, Lermontov had to edit again the antireligious and lustful scenes of Queen Tamara.9

As a Guard's officer, Lermontov undoubtedly knew about Russia's delicate relationship with Georgia. He also would have realized that *The Demon* contained material that directly conflicted with Nicholas I's Doctrine of Official Nationality. One expert on Lermontov explained why *The Demon* conflicted with Nicholas I's policy of Orthodoxy: "The principle problem of *The Demon* is the character of the protagonist [Tamara]. It is immediately clear that the poem does not go back to any particular episode in the scriptures, though Tamara, as well as all her relatives, is Christian." The fact that Tamara was Orthodox Christian and that Lermontov was belittling her character was reason enough for the tsar to be angry. Tamara's traditional image and historical character clashed with the passionate and morally weak characteristics of Tamara in *The Demon*:
But, full of sinful meditation,
She stays away from contemplation,
She is to nature’s beauty blind.
When night descends or day approaches,
All objects send her their reproaches,
All set aflame her tortured mind.10

In an effort to make the poem acceptable to the court, the literary changes in The Demon saw Tamara’s character become less passionate and more innocent. Tamara’s character no longer died opposing God’s will as she had in the sixth version. However, Lermontov still played upon Tamara’s infatuation with the Demon in the eighth version:

She burns, she sees contorted faces,
She stifles under passions whips,
Her breast and shoulders seek embraces,
His kisses melting on her lips.

This allowed for her character to be reconciled with God. In addition, her seduction by the Demon was seen only as a test imposed by God. This matched perfectly with the history of Queen Tamara and her character. She would attribute all of life’s challenges as a test imposed by God and a feat conquered only by the pious servants of God. In the eighth version of The Demon, Tamara had conquered the temptation of evil, therefore making the Demon look loathsome and weak:

“Away, oh spirit of negation!”
The angel answered in disdain,
“You will not ever rule again.
Henceforward will the Lord ordain,
And you are sentenced to damnation
This maiden was severely tried,
But all is over, she has died,
And for her soul you will not rival.
We waited long for her arrival”11

The idea of Tamara’s suitor dying in the poem, and her being forced to find another husband, also matched up historically with the situation concerning Iurii
Bogoliubskii and David Soslani—the two husbands of Tamara. Another change in the last version had to do with Tamara’s confession to her father that an evil spirit had invaded her soul. This confession, as well as Lermontov’s decision to edit the eight lines in the previous version concerning God’s careless concern for humanity, allowed for Tamara’s character to be trustful of God.¹²

The Georgian folktale of Prometheus had circulated hundreds of years before Queen Tamara’s reign. In the tale, Prometheus was a rebel who was chained to a rock because he had attempted to bring knowledge to humankind. Prometheus’s character was now adapted under the pen of Lermontov. The image of Tamara as a Promethean character did not embody many editorial corrections by Lermontov. For instance, as a traveler was passing by the convent in Lermontov’s poem, he heard cries like that of a devil chained to a cell. The cries that Lermontov’s traveler heard were that of Queen Tamara as she wept in her cell, slowly becoming demonic:

And often, while the world was sleeping,  
When on the mountains darkness fell,  
She started passionately weeping  
Before the icon in her cell.  
And then a traveler benighted,  
Surprised, embarrassed, and affrighted,  
Would spur and urge his horse excited—  
And think he had his life to save  
From the malicious, groaning devil  
Who languished fettered in [Tamara’s] cave,  
A conquered and imprisoned rebel.

It was odd, almost as if Lermontov desired to push Nicholas’ patience to the limit at the court reading, and yet, at the same time, edited out what he believed would push the line too far. Many politically subversive lines remained in The Demon, both degrading Tamara’s legend and Russian Orthodoxy.¹³
The Demon was passed by a general censor in March 1839 but spiritual censorship prohibited its publication. The degrading nature of Tamara’s character in this poem would have definitely caused indignation and hatred in Georgia towards the Russians. The poem slandered their hero, Tamara, a saint of Orthodox Georgia.

Lermontov’s characterization of Tamara clashed with the Georgian romantic writers’ notions of a strong-spirited and morally perfect Tamara. If The Demon did not break the camel’s back, Lermontov’s Tamara surely did as it portrayed her as a sex-crazed killer:

While above Queen Tamara, reclining
On her bed in her finest array,
With two goblets of wine set beside her,
Awaited her guest—and her prey.

Then hot hands would entwine with each other,
As lips upon lips were glued fast;
And strange, savage cries would re-echo
Until long after midnight was past.\(^{14}\)

In Lermontov’s first exile to the Caucasus he visited numerous castles in Georgia that folklore had labeled as Tamara’s. In Tamara, Lermontov might have twisted several different tales, surrounding these castles, into one composition that would have surely insulted the Georgians. It also might be possible that Lermontov heard a typical folklore plot where an evil sister and a virtuous sister shared the same name. One such folktale has existed, in which Tamara’s evil sister was seen as a selfish and cruel sorceress who wanted nothing more than to seek pleasure. Whatever the case, Tamara’s name and legend had been slurred by a Russian. This was totally unacceptable to the Georgians. However, Nicholas I got to Lermontov first. The poet was exiled again to the Caucasus in 1841, shortly after Tamara was written. There, Lermontov was killed in a duel by a fellow officer whom some believed to be an agent of the tsar. Lermontov scholar,
Anatoly Liberman, explained that “even several decades later, the political scandal associated with his name sealed many mouths. His letters were destroyed, and his friends kept their recollections to themselves.” Whatever the truth, Nicholas, who certainly wanted to destroy Lermontov, would no longer have to deal with a poet who had disrupted his policy of Orthodoxy and the fragile situation in the Caucasus.¹⁵

In the 1830s, pressure from Russian officials to further Russify Georgia increased. The Georgians were subjected to the oppressive policies of Nicholas I’s Doctrine of Official Nationality. The Georgians, for one, were not allowed to speak in their native tongue. The Great Russian dialect was to be the only language spoken. Nicholas I believed that all Russians—including non-natives who had been incorporated into the Russian empire—should pursue a life devoted to the progress of the state. According to Russian historian Sidney Monas, Nicholas I’s “tastes were for the grandiose, the rhetorical, provided of course that the rhetoric served to celebrate the state and selfless devotion to the state. Self-sacrifice appealed to him; self-fulfillment seemed but a petty ideal.” The Georgians, therefore, had to obey the autocracy of the tsar if they wished to lay low and not be marked as a political subversive. Their religious freedom was also stripped away, as the Georgian church was forced into silence.¹⁶ All the pressure stemming from Nicholas I caused increasing hatred among the Georgians for Russian control over Georgia. Once again, literature expressed best the mood of the Georgian people during this period and the decades that followed. Numerous Georgian and Russian authors in the 19th and 20th centuries set the scenes of their stories during the age of Tamara.
Grigol Rcheulishvili, who lived from 1820 to 1877, wrote poems that focused on romance. In *Princess Tamar*, Tamara’s character represents the hopeless lover. In the poem the princess finds the love of her life. However, Tamara’s wicked mother forbids the romance to continue, as she also falls in love with the young man. This heart-wrenching story was indeed fiction, however, the Georgian people seemed to immediately identify with Tamara’s character because she was the “underdog”—a condition with which the Georgians were familiar. It is reported that the story brought tears to many Georgian eyes. It was as though they felt empathy for Tamara’s character. In an effort to “woo” his readers into a story, Rcheulishvili failed to supply an accurate history of Queen Tamara and therefore created a “formula” for Georgian novelists in the future. This, in turn, caused protest among the nobility who felt Rcheulishvili was giving Tamara a bad name. Before the 20th century, the poem *Princess Tamar* had been staged twice.¹⁷

The history of Queen Tamara’s marriage and divorce to Iurii Bogoliubskii, and her re-marriage to David Soslani, has always been popular history among the Georgians. Rcheulishvili played upon this history, adding different twists here and there to attract the interest of those longing to read a story about the romantic voyage of their beloved Tamara. The character of Queen Rusudan, who was Princess Tamar’s mother in Rcheulishvili’s poem, was also related historically to Queen Tamara. Queen Rusudan, to whom Tamara looked up to as a parent, was actually Queen Tamara’s aunt. As “mother” Rusudan denied Tamara her lover’s hand in Rcheulishvili’s poem, “aunt” Rusudan, in contrast, gave her approval to her niece to marry David Soslani:

[I] can see the manifestation of Divine Providence in your life: how

³⁷
many young men—sons of the sovereigns of the Greeks and the Romans, Sultans and Soythians, Persians and Ossetians, sought your hand, but then were all rightly rejected [except Soslani].

Just as Rusudan’s role changes, so too does Queen Tamara’s character. Even after her first try at marriage, historically, Tamara was forced to agree to a suitor. However, she let the nobles and Rusudan know how she felt about it: “God is witness that I never desired marriage—neither earlier nor now—so I entreat you to free me from this necessity.” In contrast, Rcheulishvili’s poem saw Tamara’s character as eager and desperate to be married. With the transformation of Tamara’s historical character, Rcheulishvili created a poetic masterpiece which caught popular Georgian attention.\(^1\)

A self-made poet, Iosif Davitashvili, who lived from 1850 to 1887, wrote democratic poetry that represented the working peasant. Even though feudalism was in full swing during the age of Tamara, the serfs enjoyed a good life. Tamara’s historian stated that “in her reign husbandmen turned into squires, squires into nobles, and nobles, into kings.” Davitashvili saw that the system had worked under Georgia’s great queen. Even the peasant had enough financial power to live comfortably. With a spectacular irrigation system, Georgia’s feudal and national economy exploded. Highly developed farming, craftsmanship, commerce, domestic and foreign trade, and artisanship all produced greater capital which led to the development of towns in twelfth-century Georgia. Davitashvili used these aspects of Tamara’s reign to provide examples for the Georgians who saw the working peasant in all his/her glory. Davitashvili’s poetry was, thus, a source of inspiration for those Georgian peasants of his era who were forced to accept the corrupt system of Russian slavery from 1801 to 1861. It was in 1861 that the “Tsar Liberator,” Alexander II, enacted the Edict of Emancipation, which freed some.
fifty-two million slaves. Tamara and the peasants of Davitashvili’s poetry were seen as models of prosperity, figures of hope, and dreams of a better life.19

Classroom songs were modeled after Davitashvili’s verses: “Queen of Georgia, Tamar I, Clad in beauty, peer of the rising sun.” After the great liberation of 1861, the peasantry became more involved. Now, as citizens, their voices could be heard. Davitashvili’s democratic poetry helped to initiate this change. Georgian writers respected and praised him in their literature. Davitashvili’s poetry brought strength to those Georgians who felt constricted by Russification.20

Akakii Tsereteli, who lived from 1840 to 1915, wrote Perfidious Tamara. He was very much involved in the Russian revolutionary democratic movement that called for an “iskra” or “spark” to ignite the hearts of the Russians so that destruction of the Romanov dynasty could be realized. This destruction would bring the opportunity for the freedom that the Georgians had sought. Georgian literary experts commented on Tsereteli’s writing as patriotic and nationalistic: “the poet cannot conceal his admiration for the heroic exploits of his ancestors while reproducing the glorious paragons of the people’s unity and selflessness.” Tsereteli reached into the historical chronicles of Georgia to find characters who depicted the struggle for freedom and independence. Thus, he used scenes of Tamara’s heroic exploits to inspire patriotism. Tsereteli also wrote an authoritative edition of Rustaveli’s epic (1881) in an attempt to capture the original words and thoughts concerning the plot and characters in the epic. This too, he hoped, would kindle the flames of revolution by providing a fresh look at the utopian society that Rustaveli had set forth. For his efforts in bringing back that version of Queen Tamara
and the Golden Age, Tsereteli was hailed as the “uncrowned king of Georgia” and “the Georgian nightengale.”

Vasili Bamovi, who lived from 1856 to 1934, wrote historical novels which contained characters from ideal surroundings. Once again, images of the Golden Age and Tamara were absorbed by the literature as Bamovi wrote The Younger Tamar. Bamovi believed that characters of this age could provide ideal models for the population. Queen Tamara was a prime example of such a model. For instance, after defeating her greatest enemies, the Moslems, at the Battle of Basiani, Tamara took the prisoners of war to her palace and, according to her historian, “welcomed them all with words of reassurance and gave them a sumptuous feast, with presents for each one according to his rank. [Then] she sent them away to fortresses in different places.” This helps explain why Tamara’s historical character was so appealing to Bamovi—she was polite, gracious, and forgiving, yet, firm in what she believed was justice. Tamara was also productive. During her reign, not only did Georgia’s economy and borders expand, but the use of specialized equipment also appeared. For example, increasingly more “high-tech” and large-scale irrigation canals and conduits were built throughout the Georgian kingdom. The quality of these highly advanced waterways added greatly to the development of hydraulic engineering. These canals and conduits were a symbol of progress and productivity. In addition, Queen Tamara ordered that outside cultures be studied. She understood the importance of cultural growth, and that the adaptation of certain “alien” influences would further Georgian progress. Therefore, architecture, metal carving, worldly literature, and fine arts from around the world made their way into Georgia. It was these sort of things
that Barnovi wanted to revive in Georgia, a nation whose society, he believed, was corrupt and without virtue.\textsuperscript{22}

In addition, the first Georgian opera, \textit{Crafty Tamara}, based on Tsereteli’s \textit{Perfidious Tamara} and written by Meliton Balanchivadze, was staged in St. Petersburg in 1897. This opera was later adapted into two versions, one in 1926 and the other in 1936.

When Balanchivadze was a child, he began writing down and singing sacred folksongs. This might have been the origin of Balanchivadze’s interest in Queen Tamara’s character. Dimitrii Arakishvili founded a society that collected and studied these folktales.

Interested in the author of \textit{The Man in the Panther’s Skin}, Arakishvili wrote an opera called \textit{The Legend of Shota Rustaveli} that played for the first time on the opening night of the earliest Georgian opera studio. Once again, Rustaveli’s imagery of Georgia’s Golden Age would inspire the people of the region. The legend of Tamara had power to incite nationalism and patriotism. This was particularly evident in Joseph Stalin’s use of her image.\textsuperscript{23}
ENDNOTES


3. Baramidze and Gamezardashvili, Georgian Literature, 48-49.

4. Ibid., 50; Metreveli, Queen Tamar, 78.

5. Ibid., 52; Suny, Georgian Nation, 124.

6. Baramidze and Gamezardashvili, Georgian Literature, 52; Metreveli, Queen Tamar, 80.

7. Suny, Georgian Nation, 124; Baramidze and Gamezardashvili, Georgian Literature, 53-54.


13. Ibid., 57-58; Lermontov, Major Poetical Works, lines 476-486, pp. 379, 381.


18. Metreveli, *Queen Tamar*, 76.


Stalin, a Georgian, became the Soviet leader of Russia from 1927 to 1953. In the 1890s, as a seminary student in Georgia, he read The Man in the Panther's Skin, one of his favorite books. As stated earlier, the epic was a model story of friendship, patriotism, and selflessness. Stalin absorbed these themes from the character T‘hinat’hin (Tamara). In addition, being a Georgian youth in the 1890s meant that one could be easily influenced by the revolutionary literature written by A. Chavchavadze, Orbelian, Baratashvili, Rcheulishvili, Davitashvili, Barnovi, Balanchivadze, and Arakishvili. Each of these authors praised Queen Tamara and the Golden Age as a model for the future. A fellow seminary student, Iremashvili, recalled how Rustaveli and the rebellious authors affected Stalin and the revolutionary mentality:

At that time the writings of Georgian national literature made the strongest impression on SoSo [Stalin] . . . [The literature spurred] the first explosions of the revolutionary temperament, in which an idealism still fresh combined with sudden awakening of ambition. “SoSo and I” . . . frequently talked about the tragic fate of Georgia. We were enraptured by the works of . . . Rustaveli.¹

The Utopian society of Queen Tamara, as described through the character of T‘hinat’hin in Rustaveli’s epic, incited a passion for freedom and happiness that remained the ideal for all Georgians, and specifically for Stalin. Combined with his ambition, the epic helped mold Stalin into a revolutionary. He would spend sleepless nights reading this work (and others) under candle-light and without food. When Stalin came to power, he
had illustrations from Rustaveli’s epic printed in the textbooks of Soviet Georgia. In this regard, the historian Marat Akchurin, describing his visit to a house while traveling in the newly independent Georgia of the 1990s, wrote:

The entry hall of Shlupkin’s apartment was decorated with a home-made copy of the painting *The Knight in the Tiger Skin* [Rustaveli’s] . . . Shlupkin grew up in the late Stalinist era, when illustrations of the poem . . . were printed in all textbooks, and copies of these pictures could be seen at all public places.

The specific section of a Soviet textbook that contains information unique to a certain area is called a *kraevedenie*. It is a section crammed with specific facts about the great people of the past. There is little doubt that Queen Tamara’s character was explained at length in the *kraevedenie* about Georgia. Stalin used the images of Georgia’s Golden Age to gain support from the Georgians for the Soviet battle against Adolf Hitler.²

When Hitler invaded Russia in June of 1941, Germany broke the Soviet-Nazi Non-Aggression Pact of 1939. Perhaps this alliance reached its apex of friendly relations when the German foreign minister, Ribbentrop, according to historian David Dallin,

had learned by heart a few verses of a poem by . . . Rustavelli [*The Man in the Panther’s Skin*]. At the triumphal breakfast that followed at the Kremlin with Stalin present . . . Ribbentrop, between bites . . . and gulps of Georgian wine, displayed his knowledge of Georgian poetry.

Though this impressed Stalin greatly at first, he realized even then that the alliance would not last. In a situation that required total warfare, Stalin had to gain the support of all Soviet states in order to achieve victory. As a native of Georgia, Stalin must have recalled the ritual of a Georgian soldier as he entered battle. The ritual involved paying tribute to one of the many shrines constructed for Tamara. One such shrine of Queen Tamara stands at Pshavia. It is the setting for the poem, *The Pshavs Make war on*
Mitkho. In the poem Queen Tamara is seen as “the protector” of the Georgians against the Chechens:

The woman that has come
They said is Queen Tamara,
She has veiled the sea,
So that no dew should fall.

In other poems concerning these shrines, Tamara is seen riding a blue and gray horse decorated lavishly with gold. In a brief literary commentary on her death, Tamara is depicted as both queen and goddess. In the commentary, according to literary historian Rayfield, “she is credited with setting limits on the sea, bringing dry land closer, making demons pay for apanage, exacting tribute from Isfahan, [and] attacking Istanbul and Derbent with the sword.” For the soldier, Tamara was seen as an ideal monarch and goddess who provided good luck, safety, strength, and bravery.3

Given the purges that took place under Stalin’s leadership, which killed thousands of Georgians in the 1930s, the German invasion of Russia seemed to bring salvation to the suffering people of Georgia. To counteract this situation, Stalin had to devise a plan that would mend the torn friendship with Georgia and gain widespread support for the war. He found the answer in the same demi-god character that Georgian soldiers always called upon; as seen above.4

Stalin had drawn up a list of historical characters that he hoped would spur the patriotism of all the Soviet states. M. Morozov and V. Slutskiaia, writing an editorial for the Propagandist in 1942, pointed out that minimal research had been done on the heroes of the Soviet republics:

It must be noted, as a shortcoming in the work of the local publishing houses, that there is an almost complete lack of books on local heroes, on the participation
and military cooperation of the various peoples of our country in popular, patriotic wars against foreign conquerors, on the love of the motherland and love of freedom these peoples. Meanwhile there exists, among all the peoples of our motherland, a burning desire to know more about the heroism of their ancestors, about the participation of their sons in patriotic liberation wars.

This statement (most likely carefully arranged according to Stalin's desire) was to prepare the Soviet republics and, therefore, Georgia, for the propaganda that was to burst on the scene in order to create a mood of Soviet nationalism among the republics. The list included Queen Tamara. Stalin theorized that the patriotism created by Tamara's character would generate a Georgian nationalism that would help defeat the Germans. Stalin ordered that his list be mailed to selected historians from the Soviet republics. These historians were then ordered to produce patriotic pamphlets on the characters that had been listed.

Georgian historians, now writing without constraints, quickly produced pamphlets on David the Rebuilder and Queen Tamara. Both of these monarchs, according to historian Lowell Tillet, "could be remembered for their importance in building a strong state and defending it against foreign incursions." The Tbilisi film studio also joined in the effort, producing historical dramas about Queen Tamara, David the Rebuilder, and others as well. With the great outpouring of literature about Queen Tamara, popular discontent towards Stalin diminished. The legend of Tamara had helped him to achieve his goal. Georgia sent 500,000 troops together with crucial munitions and textiles to help in the Russian defeat of Hitler. Stalin himself became a national Georgian hero. He is still largely popular among the Georgians. Fitzroy Maclean, a twentieth-century historian, toured Georgia in the 1970s and recalled: "A little way below the village we came to another shrine, dedicated this time to the late
Generalissimo Stalin, whose portrait, in full dress with decorations has been painted in vivid hues on an enormous rock by the roadside.” The Georgians would never forget Stalin’s desire to extend and spread the legend of Queen Tamara so that future generations could also come to know this great Georgian hero. Historian Ronald Suny summed up the effects of Stalin’s use of Tamara in World War II:

A new national unity was promoted by the very regime that for a decade had stimulated class antagonism. The war ironically worked both to end hostilities between traditional and revolutionizing elements in Georgian society and to legitimize the communist regime as a leader of the nation.6

Queen Tamara’s legend is hugely popular in modern Georgia. Restaurants, comic strips, and cigarettes all carry her name. It is second nature for the Georgian’s to think about Queen Tamara while sipping a hot cup of coffee, reading the newspaper, or having a smoke. Contemporary Georgia has made her legend accessible to all ages. Children in Georgia might experience their first cigarette with the name “Tamara” spread across the carton and wonder who this person was and why she was important (that is, if they had not learned about her already). The comic strips that hold her name can be seen posted on bulletin boards and refrigerators throughout Georgia. Her legend has expanded the imagination of the Georgian people. Cults have related Tamara’s character and legend to the Georgian goddesses of Ainina, Itrujani, and Danana, thus joining her legend to the ancient tradition of Greek mythology. Statues of Tamara attest to her image of a “Great Mother” who protected her siblings in times of great danger and trouble. Queen Tamara has been a “protector” and “moral guide” for both pagans and Christians who looked upon her as a goddess and saint. It is rare that any historical figure represent so many features of a particular society.7
Throughout eight centuries Tamara has inspired millions of Georgians. Each of the centuries has adapted her image to fit the specific need of the time. Thus, the image has fluctuated greatly. Georgian writing has portrayed Tamara as morally perfect and infallible while Lermontov depicted her as dangerously evil and morally impure. Queen Tamara’s name and character developed into a multifaceted symbol for freedom and unity, friendship and romance, patriotism and nationalism, as well as political strength and cultural progress. In a land surrounded by hostile neighbors, Georgians have been able to carry on despite frequent invasions. The legend of Tamara is largely responsible for its strength and endurance. When in need of inspiration, Georgians have never hesitated to call upon the character of Queen Tamara for guidance. She remains the guiding light for the newly independent Republic of Georgia, and as history has shown, her legend will continue to unite the Georgians in common cause.
ENDNOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


