

Religion, Language, and Ethnic Belonging in the 10th–13th Centuries Georgian Sources

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between religious and ethnic identity in medieval Georgia through an analysis of Georgian historical and hagiographical sources from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. Drawing on modern theories of ethnicity, particularly constructivist approaches, the study argues that ethnicity should be understood not as a biological or immutable category but as a cultural and historically contingent phenomenon shaped by perceptions, self-identification, and social interaction. The article explores how Georgian sources represented membership within the Georgian community and the extent to which religion, language, cultural affiliation, and political loyalty functioned as markers of identity.

The analysis demonstrates that in earlier medieval sources religious affiliation was the principal determinant of belonging. Conversion to Christianity and participation in Christian culture enabled individuals of non-Georgian origin to be incorporated into Georgian collective identity. From the tenth century onward, however, identity was articulated through a more complex combination of markers. The Georgian language acquired increasing ideological and sacral significance. The study further investigates Georgian perceptions of neighbouring unities, showing that Byzantine identity was primarily associated with language, education, and culture, whereas Armenian identity was understood chiefly through religious affiliation. The article concludes that medieval Georgian identity was neither fixed nor exclusively based on ancestry; rather, it was a flexible and dynamic construct shaped by changing religious, linguistic, cultural, and political contexts.

Keywords: *Ethnic Identity, Religious Identity, Georgian Unity, Medieval Georgian Sources, Perception of Ethnicity*

How should ethnicity be understood? What creates a sense of ethnicity? These questions belong to the field of identity studies and have been the subject of extensive research in Western historiography. Ethnicity, as a form of organising social groups, is an ancient phenomenon; however, its study as a social category began only relatively recently and is associated with the so-called “new history”. This approach differs from premodern historiography in that it places not only political history but also social perceptions at the centre of focus. This direction in historical research seeks to reconstruct the past by focusing on broad and diverse cultural elements, thereby making it possible to observe phenomena at the historical moment of their formation. Ethnicity is not a static phenomenon. It is the product of time and cultural context.

Although theories of ethnicity began to be developed in the previous century, historians made comparatively little practical use of them, since most understood ethnicity in a rather different way. Historians tended to regard ethnicity as a matter of blood relationship, requiring no particular attention. From this perspective, ethnic communities were conceived merely as objectively existing biological communities, not subject to fluctuation or change. Such an understanding makes it entirely impossible to view unity “from below” and obscures the community’s own perspective.

Such a view, whether unintentionally or deliberately, has attracted criticism. As a counterargument, researchers have asked whether the results truly express the shared vision of individuals within a community, and they have often regarded such information as less reliable. Yet the subjectivist knowledge obtained through research does not exclude objective reality; on the contrary, it enriches and gives greater vitality to our imagination of the past. An ethnic community, like any identity-based organism, undergoes development, and its study is possible precisely through observation of the markers of ethnicity, such as language, religion, a shared past and common ancestor, a sense of belonging, and other. The study of perceptions of ethnicity is highly complex and requires long-term observation. It also demands attention to issues such as religious confession, origin, sense of belonging, perceptions from the observer's perspective, and related matters. Accordingly, ethnicity should be considered not as a biological but as a cultural phenomenon dependent on subjective factors, namely, perceptions. “Ethnic Identity is a matter of self-ascription and ascription by others in interaction”.¹

A sense of ethnicity is created not by genetic origin, but by self-perception and a sense of belonging to a particular community. When we reconstruct images of the past, we often try to link ethnicity to the origin of a historical individual, which frequently leads us into error. For this reason, when interpreting a source, particular attention must be paid to context, which contains valuable information about perceptions of identity. From this point of view, Georgian sources preserve highly interesting material – not only traditional historiographical works (texts of Kartlis Tskhovreba), but also hagiographical sources, which provide invaluable information for the study of ethnic identity. The purpose of the present article, however, is not to observe and study Georgian medieval identity as a whole, a subject already reflected to some extent in my monograph.² I shall therefore not dwell at length on the theoretical framework, but instead focus on one issue of religious identity perception in medieval Georgia: namely, how religious identity is reflected in relation to ethnic belonging in 10th to 13th century Georgian historical sources, in the texts of Kartlis Tskhovreba, and in hagiographical sources. Why have I chosen above mentioned centuries as the object of observation? This period coincides with Georgia's unification and its era of power, often referred to as the Golden Age. It was to be expected that certain changes in perceptions of identity would be reflected in contemporary historical sources, as I shall discuss below. The historical works created in this period are rich in depictions of ethnic terms and in the foregrounding and recording of ethnic markers. Within a unified political

¹ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 6.

² See Kadagishvili, *Georgian Ethnic Identity in the Middle Ages*.

and cultural space, ideologised texts were produced in which national values and ideals became more clearly articulated. It may be said that this period was not only a political Golden Age, but also a Golden Age for Georgian literature. Of course, texts composed or edited in the Middle Ages have been thoroughly studied by historians and others; nevertheless, they have been studied less often in the context of identity issues.

In general, as it seems from medieval sources, religion was the determinant of identity. The Christian religion was a prerequisite for membership of the Georgian unity. Religious acceptance meant cultural acceptance as well. Religion created a boundary for membership of the Georgian unity.

Common understandings of religious and ethnic identity are not infrequently revealed in early medieval hagiographic writings and other historical sources. Ethnically non-Georgians who sacrificed themselves in Georgian territory are perceived as members of Georgian unity. Ethnicity creates a collective identity that is principally closed but can be open in practice. An example may be adduced from a hagiographical work composed in the eighth century. The story is about Arab Abo, who converted from Islam to Christianity, and that's why he was tortured and killed by Arabs. In the text, he is often referred to as an Arab in the past. After adopting Christianity, he was separated from his mates. In the text, we find repeated emphasis on Abo's Arabic origins.³ In the Middle Ages, ethnicity was not defined solely by nature or origin; the most important marker of identity was religion, which significantly determined membership in an ethnic group. For this reason, those who were non-Georgian by origin but gave their lives for the Christian faith were perceived as Georgian saints by Georgian unity. This view is especially striking in hagiographical texts, one of whose principal functions was to strengthen believers' faith. In the sources composed before the 10th century, religious identity was the primary determinant of ethnic identity. During the aforementioned period or earlier, Georgian unity was primarily perceived as religious unity. In Georgian sources written after the 10th century, however, Georgian cultural unity becomes more clearly visible. These texts are not concentrated solely on the saint and his or her martyrdom; rather, they express the ideals of the Georgian unity of the period. It may confidently be said that from this time onwards, the markers of Georgian identity are represented in Georgian sources in a more complex manner. Compared with the previous period, 10th-11th century texts actively address the question of the Georgian language. Language, as a determinant of community, is an important aspect of ethnic identity. From this period onwards, emphasis on the Georgian language increases, and, according to the *Vitas* of the Athonite Fathers, the language acquires a sacral function. The prominence of the Georgian language among other ethnic markers has its own explanation in modern Georgian historiography. From the end of the 10th century Georgian kingdoms were gradually unified under a single political centre. For a united Georgia, Byzantium posed a major challenge, against which Georgian kings constantly had to assert their political sovereignty. Alongside political demarcation, cultural demarcation from Byzantium was also important. As M.

³ For a broader discussion of this issue, see Kadagishvili, 'The Perception of Ethnicity in the Georgian Hagiography'.

Chkhartishvili has observed, in the 11th century, under the shared religious circumstances of Georgia and Byzantium, it would have been difficult for Georgians to draw an imagined religious boundary with the Greeks. “Despite the fact that Georgian identity was well separated by Chalcedonian creed from the neighboring Armenian one, with Byzantium being stronghold of Orthodoxy this marker could not work. Meanwhile absence of ideological partition in face of such political partner (actually rival) possessing great political and cultural potential, was very dangerous for Georgian identity. By this time Georgian language had achieved very high position in standardization”⁴ The special status of language is attested by Ioane-Zosime’s (10th c.) *Praise and Glory of the Georgian Language*, in which the Georgian language is regarded as the language of the Last Judgement. Georgian authors also sought to identify a sacral function for the Georgian language in hagiographical texts of this period. In the *Lives of St Ioane and St Euthymius the Athonites*, it is emphasised that the Mother of God spoke in Georgian to the ailing Euthymius. The text also stresses that only after the Mother of God appeared did St Euthymius begin to speak Georgian freely. An observation by Z. Gamsakhurdia, made in an essayistic rather than strictly academic work, is nevertheless worth noting: in his view, the term language in Ioane-Zosime’s famous hymn denotes the Georgian community itself. “The word “language” is understood only and exclusively in its modern sense. In fact, it is enough to consider the meaning of the sentence closely, and the one-sidedness of such an interpretation becomes clear, since “language” in Old Georgian, as in other ancient languages, meant not only language, but also people, nation, and lineage”.⁵ Georgian unity expressed through the Georgian language is evident in other texts as well. The Georgian language also serves to delimit the community in the *Vita of St Ilarion the Georgian*, a monk who lived in the 9th century. In a vision, the Mother of God tells the superior: “Do you not know that many speakers of their language are to dwell on this mountain?”⁶ The Georgian language is not merely a means of communication. Language expresses the community itself, and Knowledge of the Georgian language creates a boundary between us and others. The marking of the Georgian unity through the Georgian language is evident in two hagiographical texts composed in the eleventh century, namely in the *Vitas of St Ioane and St Euthymius the Athonites* and *Vita of St George the Hagiorite*. The author, Giorgi Mtsire (the Minor), evaluates the translation activity of St Euthymius the Athonite as follows: “No translator of this kind has appeared in our language apart from our holy father Euthymius, and I believe that none will appear”.⁷

The emphasis on the Georgian language is especially evident in the work of Leonti Mroveli (11th c.), who, in a historical context, outlines the stages of the development of the Georgian language and script. According to the historian, as a result of Pharnavaz’s linguistic reform, “He propagated the Georgian language. And the peoples of Kartli did not talk other languages besides Georgian anymore. He also created

⁴ Chkhartishvili, ‘On Georgian Identity Religious Marker’, 224.

⁵ Gamsakhurdia, ‘Praise and Glory of the Georgian Language’, 42.

⁶ Abuladze, *Monuments of Old Georgian Hagiographic Literature*, 20.

⁷ Abuladze, *Monuments of Old Georgian Hagiographic Literature*, 145.

Georgian writing.”⁸ after his accession to the throne of Kartli, the first Christian king of Persian origin, Mirian, “liked the Georgians and, forgetting the Persian language, he learned Georgian”.⁹ It may be said that 11th-century Georgian sources construct a model of the history of the development of the Georgian language, from the emergence of Georgian writing, connected with the creation of the Kingdom of Kartli, to the development of literary writing. In the 11th century, Georgian fathers on Mount Athos enriched Georgian literature with translations, bringing Georgian writing to a new stage. As we read in the Vita of St George the Hagiorite, St Euthymius filled the deficiency of our language through sacred books translated in a divinely inspired manner. Whereas earlier we had been called barbarians by the Greeks, St Euthymius, “through the wisdom given to him by God, reckoned us together with them (with the Greeks S.K.)”.¹⁰ Among other markers of ethnicity, language acquired a special status, creating a boundary to the entry of outsiders into the Georgian community; however, overcoming this barrier set a precedent for integration into that community.¹¹

In addition to the recording of Georgian unity in Georgian sources, neighboring communities frequently appear as well, especially Armenians and Greeks. This was conditioned by the political, economic and social relations that had linked these two unities to one another for centuries.

Religion undoubtedly played an important role in Byzantine identity; however, Byzantine identity was associated first and foremost with the Greek language, culture, and high education. Clear examples of this are found in the Vitas of the Athonite Fathers, where it is repeatedly emphasised that Georgian monks, despite their Georgian ethnic origin, were fully integrated into the Greek educational and cultural sphere. In particular, possession of the Greek language and education was regarded as one of the principal prerequisites for full membership of the Byzantine world. This view is clearly expressed in the address of the Patriarch of Antioch to George the Hagiorite: “although you are Georgian by origin, in learning and knowledge you are equal to us”,¹² and elsewhere: “although you are Georgian by origin, you are completely Greek in your knowledge”.¹³ Similar assessments are also encountered more than once in the Vita of Ioane the Athonite and Euthymius the Athonite.

These examples show that the ethnic origin of Georgian fathers did not impede their integration into Byzantine society. On the contrary, hagiographical texts demonstrate that they participated fully in the religious, intellectual and cultural life of the Byzantine world. Although religion was an important marker of Georgian ethnic identity throughout the Middle Ages, and although the religious factor is strongly represented in the sources, religious identity was not the decisive factor for Georgians, nor for Greek identity as seen through Georgian eyes. Georgian medieval sources have,

⁸ *Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History of Georgia*, 25.

⁹ *Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History of Georgia*, 42.

¹⁰ Abuladze, *Monuments of Old Georgian Hagiographic Literature*, 108.

¹¹ The reader should not be misled into assuming that language was the only barrier, although it may be said that command of the Georgian language became a decisive factor for membership of Georgian identity.

¹² Abuladze, *Monuments of Old Georgian Hagiographic Literature*, 153.

¹³ Abuladze, *Monuments of Old Georgian Hagiographic Literature*, 151.

however, preserved, through a different conceptual framework, the memory of how Armenian identity is represented. Armenian identity in Georgian sources is presented above all as a religious community; from the Georgian point of view, Armenian ethnic and religious identity are practically equivalent. One interesting example appears in the *Vitas* of St Ioane and St Euthymius the Athonite, where we read: “Again came Gvirpeli, chief treasurer of Jojik, and he was baptised, because he was Armenian, and he was called Arsen”.¹⁴ This example suggests that, in relation to Armenians, participation in Miaphysitism signified Armenian ethnicity and identity. From the Georgian perspective, Armenianness was regarded as a religious unity. This equivalence, however, characterises the perception recorded in Georgian sources rather than Armenian identity as such: within the Armenian milieu itself, language, script and a highly developed historiographical tradition served as powerful markers of belonging in their own right. The picture was further complicated by the existence of Chalcedonian Armenians, numerous in the Armenian–Georgian and Armenian–Byzantine contact zones, for whom confession and ethnic origin did not coincide (Arutjunova-Fidanjan 1988–1989). In the political sphere, the Armenian faith was the distinctive cultural marker of Armenian identity. Georgian sources also reflect the attempts of Georgian kings to bring about a Georgian–Armenian church union. From the perspective of the Georgian crown this was above all an instrument of political consolidation, since a shared confession would have removed the principal boundary between the two communities; the Armenian side, however, as the councils of the Armenian Church and the position of Mkhitar Gosh demonstrate, perceived such initiatives as a threat to the preservation of its own identity.

What determines an individual’s membership of a collective identity in medieval texts? Is it a common origin, a sense of belonging, or the author’s attribution of the protagonist to a particular community? Any of these may serve as a defining factor. The sense of ethnic identity is subjective, while ethnic identity itself is fluid and often transcendent. Identity may reflect political loyalty, confessional affiliation, or inclusion within systems of patronage.

Regarding perceptions of religious and ethnic identity among Armenians, even more interesting examples are found in the Georgian sources that concern representatives of the Mkhargrdzeli family. The Mkhargrdzeli family is well documented in both Georgian and Armenian historical sources. The Mkhargrdzelis are the same Zakaryans, or Zakarids, as the family is known in the Armenian milieu and historiography.

Armenian identity, as seen by Georgians, was associated with the Armenian faith, a point also evident in a 13th century Georgian source. In *Histories and Eulogies of the Sovereigns* we read: “These Zakaria and Ivane, sons of Mkhargrdzeli, although they were loyal to the kings and greatly experienced in campaigns, famous men, were nevertheless Armenians by faith. This Ivane was exceedingly knowledgeable in the Scriptures; therefore, he recognised the error of his own faith, received baptism, and became a true Christian, as the following words will make clear”.¹⁵ The same text also notes that Zakaria the amirspasalar “was Armenian by faith”. It should be borne in mind that

¹⁴ Abuladze, *Monuments of Old Georgian Hagiographic Literature*, 80.

¹⁵ *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, vol. 2, 33.

such wording — “the error of his own faith”, “a true Christian”, “hope in Orthodoxy” — reflects the confessional optics of the Chalcedonian chronicler rather than a neutral description: the Armenian Apostolic Church, for its part, regarded its own doctrine as orthodox, and “Orthodoxy” in these passages should therefore be read as Chalcedonian Orthodoxy.¹⁶ Through Georgian eyes, Armenianness is perceived, first and foremost, as a religious unity.

The question is whether the brothers’ faith, and subsequently Zakaria’s adherence to the Armenian faith, created a barrier to membership of Georgian identity. The answer must again be sought in the texts. Although the origin of the Mkhargrdzelis is an interesting issue in historiography, I shall not address it here. For me, as a researcher interested in identity issues, perceptions are particularly interesting, and the stories related to this family have been examined precisely from this perspective. Relevant information is preserved in Georgian and Armenian sources. Zakaria Mkhargrdzeli’s Armenian faith is also a significant issue in Kirakos Gandzakets’i’s *History of the Armenians*. In one passage, Zakaria Mkhargrdzeli becomes interested in religious questions. Mkhitar Gosh perceived this as a danger and addressed the council as follows: “Concern yourselves with the nation, so that the people do not mix with the Georgians by any custom and I shall worry about the commander, so that he (Zakaria S.k.) not be Georgian [in religion] like his brother who serves the Georgians”¹⁷ For Zakaria, the Armenian faith was a necessary condition of association with Armenian culture; however, it was not an impediment to coexistence within the Georgian cultural sphere. The Mkhargrdzeli brothers were fully integrated into the Georgian cultural space and, moreover, held important positions at the royal court. The historian of King Tamar notes that, “although they were Armenian by faith, nevertheless in every respect they placed their hope in Orthodoxy”.¹⁸ Clearly, being Armenian by confession brought an individual closer to Armenian culture and made him a participant in it; however, this did not create an obstacle to membership of Georgian society. Zakaria and Ivane Mkhargrdzeli are recorded several times in Georgian historical works as nobles of Georgia. At the same time, in the Armenian tradition the same brothers appear as liberators and rulers of the north-eastern Armenian lands, including Ani and Lori, so that the Zakarid principality functioned simultaneously as part of the Georgian political system and as a centre of Armenian political and cultural revival. In the work of King Tamar’s historian, we read that after the Georgian campaign the Iranians promised the Georgians gold and silver: “therefore all the nobles of the Georgians were amazed, Zakaria and Ivane Mkhargrdzeli as well”.¹⁹ The Mkhargrdzelis are also represented as nobles of Georgia in the *Hundred Years’ Chronicle*: “Those who knew this, the nobles of Georgia, were deeply grieved, especially Ivane atabeg and Varam Gageli, son of Zakaria, and they withdrew from attendance at the royal court”.²⁰ The sources testify that medieval Georgian unity was not a wholly closed system.

¹⁶ *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, vol. 2, 82.

¹⁷ Bedrosian, *Kirakos Gandzakets’i’s History of the Armenians*.

¹⁸ *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, vol. 2, 123.

¹⁹ *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, vol. 2, 106.

²⁰ *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, vol. 2, 155.

Individuals of ethnically different origin and/or representatives of another confession, if they shared important elements of Georgian culture, possessed the Georgian language, participated in common political and cultural life, or displayed loyalty to the Georgian state, could be perceived as full members of Georgian society. It appears that perceptions of ethnicity comprise various elements and differ across communities. Such perceptions were shaped by the cultural, social, and political environment, which played an active role in defining the boundaries of a given unity. In Georgian sources, Georgian ethnic identity is most clearly defined in relation to Armenians and Byzantines, since neighboring unities constantly act as “irritants” in the process of acquiring one’s own cultural niche. Comparable mechanisms of defining the ‘other’ have been traced in the neighbouring medieval Armenian historiographical tradition as well, where the perception of newcomers was likewise filtered through biblical genealogies and confessional categories (Margaryan 2026).

The Georgian historical and hagiographical sources of the 10th to 13th centuries offer a varied and dynamic picture of the relationship between ethnic and religious identities. Analysis of the sources demonstrates that, in medieval Georgian society, ethnic belonging was not defined solely by origin or by *blood* ties. On the contrary, religion, language, cultural practices, and the perception of a particular individual by the community itself played an important role in determining the community's membership.

The difference between perceptions lies precisely in the fact that the boundaries of ethnic communities were defined by different markers in different societies. Ethnicity is not an objectively given and unchanging category, but rather a social and cultural construct formed within a specific historical environment. One and the same unity may be perceived by different communities through different markers. The analysis of Georgian sources shows that, in Georgian self-perception, ethnic identity was understood as a complex phenomenon in which religion, language held an important place. These characteristics are continuous for an ethnic community, although not immutable. What differs is the level and intensity of their manifestation in texts. How a community perceives itself is one matter; at the same time, however, it is also interesting to consider Byzantine identity as seen by Georgians, which was constructed primarily on cultural markers, namely the Greek language, education and learning, whereas Armenian identity was perceived above all through a religious marker. Observation of this relatively short historical period from a comparatively narrow perspective has shown that ethnicity may be understood as a joint process of self-ascription and ascription by others. This circumstance once again confirms that ethnicity is a historically changing and context-dependent phenomenon, the study of which cannot be based solely on origin or biological ties.

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