

Georgia, country of ancient medical traditions

R. Shengelia

Summary

Georgian medicine as well as the whole culture of Georgia, is one of the oldest in the world. In more than the 500 medical manuscripts preserved and since described, there are traces of Sumerian medicine. Examples of Chinese, Indian and especially Arabic medicine are also clearly seen. At the same time close relationships with Graeco-Roman medical traditions are beyond doubt. Nursing homes established by Georgian healers, many of whom were canonized by the Orthodox Church are to be found in many churches and monasteries all over the world. They gave fruitful scientific research and practical help.

Résumé

La médecine géorgienne, tout comme l'ensemble de la culture dans ce pays, a une très longue histoire. Des traces de médecine sumérienne sont retrouvées dans plus de 500 manuscrits médicaux anciens. Des éléments de médecine chinoise, indienne et particulièrement arabe sont également présents. En même temps, les textes montrent qu'il existait des relations étroites avec les traditions médicales gréco-romaines. Des maisons de soins fondées par des guérisseurs géorgiens, dont beaucoup ont été canonisés par l'Eglise Orthodoxe, sont retrouvées dans plusieurs églises et monastères. Ces guérisseurs nous ont légué les fruits de leur recherche scientifique et de leur compétence pratique.

The Georgian nation is one of the oldest in the world and Georgian medicine was well developed in each historical era. Unfortunately, we have no primary written historical sources for the ancient period, but on the basis of later Christian accounts, we can judge the culture and medicine of ancient Georgia.

In the 18th century K.J. Sprengel's classic of the history of medicine begins with *Cum Medians* (Treatment by Medea) and thus recognizes the antiquity of Kolkh-Iberian medicine. There exists a well founded version linking medicine with the name of the Kolkhetian ruler's daughter Medea, famed for her knowledge of various remedies.

Graeco-Roman medicine, the source of modern medicine had this background.

In the first century (as in the case of all Hellenic culture) Graeco-Roman medicine was closely bound to the ancient Pelazgian, pre-Iberian world. The Georgians and the Caucasians were always close to the Hellenic world. It resulted from genetic, anthropological, intellectual and cultural links between them.

It is noteworthy that the majority of ancient Greek physicians (at least those who wrote in Greek) were from Asia Minor. They were often referred to as 'Minor Asians', which does not indicate any specific nationality. At that period only three nations inhabited Asia Minor: Georgians, Armenians and Greeks. Iberians regarded the Greek language as the language

1. Medea's face (E. Berdzenishvili) became the symbol of Georgian medicine



In the work of Sabatsmindeli, *Sinanulisatvis Simdablisa*, medical knowledge necessary for monks and nuns, together with many interesting comments, is given. Here is noted as well, emergency situations in which to call a doctor. It denotes that the medical profession existed independently in the 6th century in Georgia. Monastic medicine was especially emphasised in religious literary sources. It is evident, that monastic medicine played a significant part in medical practice.

All saints are healers, and there are no exceptions. Petre Iberi, Shushaniki (5th century AD), Thirteen Assyrian Fathers (6th century AD) and Grigol Khandzteli (8th-9th centuries AD) were the famous healers of their times. Ilarion Kartveli (9th century AD) must be especially mentioned. He was known worldwide, treating patients without fee.

of scientific and international communication. The question of the nationality of the so-called Greek physicians is very complicated, requiring further investigation.

The Devil was considered as a cause for all diseases in pre-Christian Georgia. In the period of Christianity some basic changes took place. Baptized man supplicated the Holy Spirit for his health and recovery. The level of Georgian medicine is given in the literary record of the 5th century *Martyrdom of Shushanik*, in which the author gives not only the methods of treatment and care of the patient, but also describes the direct and indirect causes of disease.

The first medical book, *Ustoro Karabadini* still extant, is dated 10th century. Last year we celebrated its 1000th anniversary. It is written by a doctor with encyclopaedic knowledge, who calls himself Kananeli. It should be noted that these works include not only the advanced medical knowledge of that period, but also some methods originating from Sumerian medicine, which makes this book especially important.

Many scientific works are devoted to the Georgian renaissance and its pioneers Ioane Petritsi and Arsen Ikaltoeli. Arsen Ikaltoeli was recognized as the greatest anatomist of this period.

2. Mythridate the Pontian preparing drugs (T. Mirzashvili)

In the 13th century Khojakopili wrote a medical book *Tsigni Saakimoi* which corresponds with the "golden period" of Georgian history. In the 10th-13th centuries many Georgian institutions were created in Georgia and abroad. One of the leading roles was devoted to the building of hospitals.

The ruins of these hospitals are still to be seen in Georgian cloisters in the western and eastern Georgia, south-western part (now in Turkey) Tao-Klarjeti, and at Georgian cultural centres abroad : Jerusalem, Khalkedon, Petritsoni, Sinai and Black Mountains. In some of them e.g. at Atone monastery there are some hospitals for different infectious diseases and mental and general care. These hospitals had very rich libraries. Thus, Georgian medicine, practical and scientific, existed and developed side-by-side.

The greatest Georgian doctor and philosopher, Zara Panaskerteli-Tsitsishvili (15th century AD) is the first lay person, holding an especial place in the history of Georgian medicine. His book *Samkumalo Tsigni* (The Book of Treatment) is a real masterpiece in this field. The last big work in medicine of old Georgia was *Iadigar Daudi* written by David Batonishvili (Bagrationi) (16th century AD). There are more than 500 medical manuscripts in Georgian and foreign libraries.

We may say, that Georgian medicine is a phenomenon of a composite nature, created on the basis of two great traditions of East and West, and includes equal contributions from both worlds with evidence characteristic of both philosophies. It has depth and variety from the one side and the fixed and systematized disci-



pline from the other. It makes Georgian medicine interesting and original.

The documents of the period of the King Erekle 11 show that "Ekimbashi" -chief of doctors, trained his pupils for 20-25 years and only after attending his course, had they a right to conduct independent practice and to have their own trainees.

The 17th-18th centuries are significant because of the expansion of European culture and knowledge in Georgian medicine. In the second half of the 18th century the King of Georgia,

3. Zaza Phanaskerteli the Georgian philosopher, medical author and physician of 15th century (Mural at Kintsvisi Monastery).



Vakhtang VI took some young people to Moscow and St Petersburg, where they received good university medical education. Among them, especially must be mentioned Iliia Gruzinov (Namchevadze) as a talented person who knew many European languages and was sent at state expense to Europe. Soon, he became well known in the scientific circles of Germany, France and England. He is considered as a pioneer neurophysiologist. Duchenne, the famous French scientist deservedly emphasized the great contribution Iliia Gruzinov made. Iliia Gruzinov died when he was 32 years old in the burning of Moscow in 1813. Muscovites called him the "Hero Professor".

In 1801, after annexation, Russia tried to reconstruct the basic structures of the country

convenient for its own policy. It also affected medicine as well. It is true that Georgian medicine was always composite by nature, combining European and Oriental medical traditions, but as the result of Russian occupation, Georgian medicine acquired an European orientation. Dozens of brilliant Georgian physicians received their education in Russian and European medical schools. In Tbilisi, the Caucasian Medical Society was founded, which had a worldwide response and whose honorary members included Virkhov, Pirogov, Pasteur, Hirstli and Mechnikov. In the short standing period of Independence of Georgia in 1918-21, a medical faculty was founded at the Georgian University in Tbilisi. It became the centre, where many renowned Georgian medical scientists were educated.

At present more than 30 000 physicians work in Georgia. The Georgian Medical Society is duly proud of its wide intellectual potential and professionalism.

Biography

Professor Ramaz Shengalia MD PhD ScD is currently Professor of the History of Medicine at Tblisi State Medical University, Head of the Department of Traditional Medicine and Deputy Head of the Institute of Experimental and Clinical Medicine there.

He has published some 102 scientific works and a Collection of Stories. He has been a member of the Georgian Alpine Team and was awarded a medal of honour for his skill in performing a surgical operation at an altitude of 4000m.

Professor Shengalia is the ISHM National Delegate for Georgia.