

Travellers' Tales of Mingrelia and of the Ancient Fortress of Nokalakevi

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Abstract

The last decade has seen a flourishing of the tourist industry in Georgia, as increasing numbers of Western travellers discover its beauty, history and culture. However, it is still not well known, perhaps in part due to 70 years of Soviet occupation, and the destabilising effect of its expansionist neighbours to the north and the south over many years prior to that. Despite this, a number of travellers have left evocative accounts of the region since the 14th century, and this paper considers what these historical sources can tell modern scholars about life in Mingrelia, western Georgia, and particularly in Nokalakevi.

Introduction

Frédéric Dubois de Montpéroux is most often credited with the first realisation that the remains at Nokalakevi represented those of Archaeopolis as described by Procopius in the sixth century AD. His publication of 1839 is undoubtedly an important step in recognising the importance of the site, however, as is often the way, there has been an increasing tendency to briefly acknowledge his contribution to the study of Nokalakevi without any re-interrogation of his original text. The idea that there might be more revealing information, in terms of both the site itself and of Mingrelian culture of the early 19th century, led to his original text being translated from French and, in turn, to the search for other travellers' accounts. While foreign travellers might often provide inaccurate reports – through their own biases, or by being given and then repeating incorrect information – they often also describe aspects that would be unremarkable to native Georgian or Mingrelian chroniclers. This paper summarises, in some cases for the first time, external perceptions of Mingrelia, a principality in western Georgia (Fig. 1), and particularly of the site of Nokalakevi where the author has worked as part of a collaborative Anglo-Georgian team since 2002.

In the early 14th-century versions of a Middle English epic poem, *Sir Bevis of Hampton*, the heir of the Earl of Hampton (modern Southampton) is sold into slavery by his mother and her lover, the emperor of Germany, after the murder of his father. Arriving in the land of the Saracens, the poem describes how he is delivered by the merchants to 'the king highte Ermin of that londe' – the king of Armenia – and when asked who he is, the boy introduces himself

thus: "For Gode," a seide, "ich hatte Bef; Iborne ich was in Ingelonde, At Hamtoun, be the se stronde".¹

Bevis goes on to marry the king's daughter and become a fearsome warrior, recovering his birthright, but for an English audience the distant land of Armenia must have seemed like the ends of the earth. Although it was perhaps referring to Cilician Armenia on the Mediterranean, more familiar to Crusaders and therefore to storytellers,² it is an indication of how remote the eastern Christian world was to most in the west at the time, despite the fact that Georgia was in the midst of its golden age when this version of the story had first been written down.

Mingrelia in the Early 15th Century

A century later, in the first of the Western travellers' accounts of the Caucasus to survive, Johannes de Galonifontibus described the countries through which he passed in his Libellus de notitia orbis, completed in 1404. Galonifontibus had been made bishop of Armenian Nakhichevan in 1377 by Pope Gregory XI, and archbishop of Sultanieh in 1398 by Boniface IX.³ With these territories then ruled by Timur, Galonifontibus assumed an important diplomatic role, working as an envoy between Timur and the Christian world and subsequently working to build a coalition to defend against the rise of the Ottoman Turks. In 1403 he arrived at the court of the English king, Henry IV, who provided introduction to a number of Christian rulers, including George VII of Georgia.⁴ The travels of Galifontibus in this important role left him uniquely qualified to describe the countries he visited.

Hewitt⁵ provides a brief summary of this account which emphasises, for reasons that suit a modern political agenda, the identity of the Abkhaz as separate from the Mingrelian and the Georgian, and the fragmentary nature of Georgia. However, the original text is rather more complex if one consults Tardy's⁶ complete transcript, not least because Georgia in his text does not mean Georgia in the modern sense, but simply the Iberia of earlier historians – effectively eastern Georgia today. By this time the Mongol invasions had brought about the collapse of a flourishing and expansive Georgian kingdom by capturing the east of the country in the 13th

¹ Herzman et al. 1997.

² Burge 2016, 51.

³ Tardy 1978, 84.

⁴ Tardy 1978, 85.

⁵ Hewitt 2009, 184.

⁶ Tardy 1978.

century; and efforts to rebuild the country were halted by the even more devastating Timurid invasions between 1386 and 1403. While Galonifontibus, in a brief description of the ‘small, hilly country’⁷ of Abkhazia, describes their subjugation by the Romans in less than flattering terms, he also writes that ‘they do not care for the matters of the soul, in religion they follow the Georgians. They have their own language. They are experts in working up cloth, linen and, silk.’⁸ His description of Mingrelia, written in 1404 and thus the first surviving account by a western visitor since antiquity, is worth quoting in full:

To the east of them, in the direction of Georgia, lies the country called Mingrelia. A rather big province. The people have their own language, and their writing and religion is identical to that of the Georgians in every respect. They have many plains. Their mountains are high and, border on the mountains of Abkhazia, the Caucasus and, the Caspian mountains; their belief and that of their surroundings are the worst of heresies, (because they believe, that) the seat and home of the Queen of Heavens or Diana is in these very high mountains, there she lives with her nymphs, girl mates and satyrs feasting day and night, and if you apply to her for anything it will be granted.

Various nations speaking various languages live among these mountains such as the Mingrels, Suans, and Franks who used to speak their own language at that time. They follow the religion of the Georgians. Those living in Mingrelia and along the Black Sea are great wine-bibbers because they have an excess of wine. They do not care for wheaten bread, they sell it to strangers even if they have it, they cannot even eat it, they eat millet instead, cooked in earthen vessels and dried hard with meat and fish. They fast much like the Greeks, perhaps even more, but they eat during the fasts as many times as they feel like it, they even get drunk and it is not considered a sin.

They get involved in numerous love affairs, but they never think afterwards that they had done the wrong thing earlier. Georgia, one of the fourteen provinces of Asia, is to the east of this country.⁹

Mingrelia also featured briefly in the account left by Johann Schiltberger of Bavaria. Schiltberger’s tale is an extraordinary one, beginning when he left home in 1394 in the service of his master, Leonard Richartinger at the age of about 14.¹⁰ Fighting for Sigismund of Hungary, Schiltberger was captured by Ottoman forces at the battle of Nicopolis in 1396. Spared the general massacre of prisoners, most likely because of his youth, he became page to Sultan Bayezid I. In 1402, with Constantinople firmly in the sights of the growing Ottoman power, Timur’s forces attacked them and captured Bayezid at the battle of Ankara, delaying the fall of Constantinople for half a century. Captured along with his master, Schiltberger soon entered the service of Timur, with whom he remained until the latter’s death in 1405, after

⁷ Tardy 1978, 93.

⁸ Tardy 1978, 94.

⁹ Tardy 1978, 94–95.

¹⁰ Telfer 1879.

which he served a succession of Timurid princes and travelled across the empire, from Egypt to Siberia.¹¹ Schiltberger ultimately arrived in Mingrelia from the Crimea, and from there he finally escaped across the Black Sea back to his native land, arriving in Bavaria in 1427. Presumably being illiterate, Schiltberger appears to have dictated his account from memory after he returned home, and consequently there are some inconsistencies and errors in terms of place names and dates, but it remains a fascinating account. Providing a list of the countries through which he travelled, he describes ‘a small country called Megral, the capital is Kathon, and in which country they hold to the Greek faith’.¹² The use of the name Megral here is interesting, as the Georgian name for Mingrelia is Samegrelo. The Georgian prefix-suffix combination (sa – o) gives it a literal meaning of ‘place of the Megreli’, and in their own language Mingrelians call themselves Margali. It is harder, however, to explain the description of Kathon as its capital, and this might simply be Schiltberger’s misremembering of the name of Kutaisi – the capital, in fact, of neighbouring Imereti. Later in Schiltberger’s account he relates the final period of his servitude:

When Zegra was defeated, as is already related, I came over to a lord named Manstzusch; he had been a councillor of Zegra. He was obliged to fly, and he went to a city called Kaffa [modern Feodosia] [...] There he remained five months, and then crossed an arm of the Black Sea, and came to a country called Zerckchas [Circassia]; there he remained half a year [...] Mantzuch went into another country called Magrill; and, as we now came into the country of Magrill, we, five Christians, agreed, that we should go to our native country from the land of the Infidels, as we were not more than three day’s journey from the Black Sea; and when it appeared to us opportune and right to get away, all five of us escaped from the said lord, and came to the chief town of the country, which was called Bothan [Poti or, perhaps more likely, Batumi – known as Bathus to ancient Greek colonists], on the Black Sea shore.¹³

Josaphat Barbaro, the Venetian ambassador to Genoese Tana (Azof) from 1436, and subsequently to Persia, provides a further account of Mingrelia in the 15th century:

This Mingrelia (Mengleria) borders on the Kaitacchi who live about the Caspian Mountains, partly also near Giorgia, and on the shores of the Black Sea, and on the range of mountains which extends into Circassia. On one side it is encompassed also by the river Phasus, which empties itself into the Black Sea. The sovereign of this province is called Bendian (Dadian), and is in possession of two fortifications near the sea, the one of which is called Vathi and the other Savastopoli; and besides these, he has several other castles and fortified rocks.¹⁴

Mingrelia in the 17th Century

¹¹ Telfer 1879.

¹² Telfer 1879, 43.

¹³ Telfer 1879, 99.

¹⁴ Forster 1786, 168.

With the fall of Constantinople and collapse of the Byzantine empire in 1453, and the subsequent rise of the Ottoman empire, Georgia was once again plunged into chaos. It was not until after the Peace of Amasya in 1555 divided the territory of Georgia between the Turks in the west and the Persians in the east that some sense of stability, though not necessarily prosperity, returned. After Barbaro, the next descriptions of western Georgia to have been found are from the 17th century, and can largely be characterised as representing catholic missionary accounts of religious practice, merchants accounts of business opportunities, or those describing Turkish military action. However, the Roman traveller Pietro della Valle (1586–1652) described western Georgia in an account to Pope Urban VIII, having returned from the Holy Land via the country and marrying a Georgian woman. He wrote that

This province, the ancient Colchis, is called Mingrelia by the Turks. The Prince who reigns over it at present is young, his name, to the best of my recollection, is Levan. In 1615, a Jesuit from the establishment at Constantinople, who visited the Christians of this country to inform himself of their disposition, returned while I was still at Constantinople. I was with him, without any other company, for three or four days after he was taken ill on his return of a contagious disorder which reigned in that city. The good father related to me that he had seen this young Prince, at that time, but twelve years of age old; that the mother, who lived in a coarse, rustic manner, governed during his minority; that he had seen the Prince visit the church one day to offer up the head of a wild boar which he had killed; that the Prince had loaded him with kindness and showed great attachment to him, but that for want of knowing the language of the country, and of any who could interpret for them, they were at a loss to understand each other and incapable of treating on any matters.¹⁵

An interesting insight into the Ottoman view of western Georgia is provided by the accounts of Evliya Çelebi (1611–1682) of Constantinople, who accompanied the Turkish military on several engagements in the region at the turn of the 1640s. Of the province of Jilder, or Akhichkeh, he writes ‘During the reign of Sultán Mohammed Khán, the castle of Kotátis was captured by Kara Mortezá, and was added to this province.’¹⁶ Describing the province of Gúrjistán, or Georgia, in this case meaning west Georgia and thus indicating an abiding sense of Georgian sovereign territory 300 years after it ceased to be unified, he adds

The sanjaks are: 1. Achikbásh. 2. Shúshád. 3. Dádián. 4. Gúríl. The Begs of Megrelistán [Mingrelia] are all infidels; but Murad IV reduced them, and having placed Sefer Pasha as their governor, made the castle of Akhickha the seat of government. To this day they send the annual presents.¹⁷

¹⁵ Della Valle 1745, 382.

¹⁶ Çelebi 1834a, 95.

¹⁷ Çelebi 1834a, 95.

In AH 1050 (AD 1640/41), Çelebi described his journey along the Black Sea coastline to Azov. He describes the border between Abkhazia and Mingrelia as being at the Phasis river, the modern Rioni. It is not clear whether this was the Turkish view of the territories under its possession, or whether he was simply mistaken – the latter perhaps explaining his description of Mingrelians living on both sides of the Phasis. The actual border in this period is noted elsewhere¹⁸ as being at the River Kodor (in central modern Abkhazia), and as Mingrelian influence in the region gradually weakened the border moved further south to its present location. Çelebi's account is also one of the first references to the slave trade for which Mingrelia became so associated – a long-established trade encouraged by the Turks:

I left Konia with a good wind, passed the river Júrúgh and arrived at the harbour Sofári on the frontier of Mingrelia. The landing-place Súri has an old ruined port. The landing-place Yarissa is a ruined castle where goats are now kept. The landing-place Raijeh is without a port, but has an old ruined castle. These five landing-places are all on the frontiers of Mingrelia, they are only visited in the summer time by the merchants who carry on the slave trade. The mountains are inhabited by forty of fifty thousand warlike Mingrelians. We passed the said five landing places, and came next day, at a hundred miles distance from Konia, to the great river Fáshechai [Phasus]. It rises between Mingrelia, Georgia, Thágistán, Kabartaí, and Circassia, from Mount Caucasus (Kúhal-burz), Ubúr, and Sadasha, and passes between Mingrelia and Abáza into the Black Sea. On the east side are the Mingrelian villages, on the west the Abáza; and both shores being covered with thick forests, the two people mutually steal their children of both sexes and sell them as slaves. We passed the Phasus, marching to the west, and for a whole day went along the shore of the Black Sea.¹⁹

Describing the Land of the Abáza (Abkhazia), Çelebi writes that:

It forms the northern shore of the Black Sea, begins at the mouth of the Phasus, and ends at the castle of Anapa near the island of Tamán. The principal tribe in Abáza are the Chách, who speak Mingrelian, which is spoken on the opposite shore of the Phasus; they are warlike men, in number about ten thousand, who follow more than one religion, and are an unruly set of people. Their mountains are very fruitful, particularly in nuts, hazel-nuts and apricots; they bear the same arms as the Arabs, arrows, bows and lances, have few horsemen, but valorous footmen.²⁰

In 1647, a force of Cossacks seized the castle at Gonia (Gonio), supported by Christian Mingrelians, but were defeated by the army of Ghází Sídí Ahmed, Páshá of Tortúm, which included Muslim Georgian and Mingrelian troops. The Mingrelian rebellion led to the looting of the region, as the Ottoman army sought to 'gain some booty as compensation for its journey' from Tortúm.²¹ Çelebi describes the pillage of hundreds of castles and villages in Mingrelia,

¹⁸ For example, Lamberti 1653.

¹⁹ Çelebi 1834b, 53.

²⁰ Çelebi 1834b, 53–54.

²¹ Çelebi 1834b, 195.

presumably referring to the territory south of the Rioni, and the capture of thousands of prisoners for the slave trade, including ‘such beautiful boys and girls, that each of them was worth a treasure in Egypt’.²²

The impact of this punitive raid must have been felt severely in western Georgia, and Ottoman rule was not seriously challenged again in Mingrelia for many years. When Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605–1689) travelled through Turkish territory into Persia in the 1660s he found an even more fragmented situation in western Georgia. Tavernier, a Frenchman engaged in the trade of gems, published accounts of his travels at the request of Louis XIV in 1676, with an English translation following two years later. Of the Georgians in the east, he observes that ‘The Georgians are very great Drinkers, and Nature has fitted them a Country that produces good store of Wine. They love the strongest Drinks best; for which reason, at their Feasts, both men and women drink more Aqua vita than Wine.’²³

Mingrelia, which 20 years previously had been described as a single province occupying all of western Georgia between the Rioni and the Sanjak of Batum, and much of Abkhazia, is described by Tavernier as extending

from a chain of mountains, that separates it from Georgia to the Black Sea, and is now divided into three provinces, every one of which has their king. The first is called the province of Imarete, or Bassa-Shiouk, the king whereof pretends to a superiority over both the other, which is the reason they are often at war...

The second province is that of Mengrelia, and the ruler of this province is called the King of Dadian. The third is the province of Guriel. The province of Mengrelia was formerly subject to the King of Bassa-Shiouk, who sent thither a governor, which is called in their language Dadian. One of these governors, being a person of wit and courage, gained so far upon the affection of the people, that they chose him for their king.²⁴

One of the most famous, if not the most flattering, travellers’ accounts of Georgia from this period is that of Sir John Chardin a few years after Tavernier. Chardin was born in Paris in 1643, the son of a Huguenot jeweller, and went on to amass a personal fortune through the jewel trade, largely on behalf of the same patron as Tavernier, Louis XIV of France. However, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 forced him to move to England where his wealth and character led to him being knighted by Charles II. Chardin travelled extensively in and

²² Çelebi 1834b, 195.

²³ Tavernier 1678, 124.

²⁴ Tavernier 1678, 124.

around Persia, and published his accounts in 1686. They were reprinted in Mavor's collected accounts of celebrated voyages and travels in 1797.

Leaving Paris in 1671, Chardin travelled to Persia in search of jewels, and arrived at Caffa (modern Feodosia) on the Crimean Black Sea coast on the 3rd August 1672. From there he travelled along the Cirassian coastline, arriving at the small Mingrelian trading port of Isgaour (Sokhumi?) on the 10th September. Prior to this period Mingrelia's increasing power had seen it acquire the southern half of Abkhazia, but by 1680 the border would be fixed further south at its modern location along the Ingur river. Chardin is notable for his critical description of Mingrelia, which is largely at odds with the others that survive. It is possible that the anxieties he expresses over the safety of his jewels, at a time when Mingrelia was under attack from a combined Turkish and Gurian army and the Abkhaz opportunistically raided Isgaour, gave him a negative disposition:

The ancient Colchis was much superior in extent to the present Mingrelia. Its capital, of the same name, was seated at the efflux of the Phasis. The country is uneven, full of hills and mountains, valleys and plains. It is chiefly covered with woods, which are constantly usurping the few cultivated spots that present themselves.

The air is temperate with regard to heat or cold; but its humidity, from almost perpetual rains, often give rise to the pestilence and other fatal disorders. Numerous rivers descend into the Black Sea from Mount Caucasus.

The soil is unpropitious to corn and pulse, and the fruits are insipid and unwholesome, excepting the vines, which produce an excellent liquor. Did the inhabitants possess the art of preparing their wine properly, it would be inferior to none in the universe.

In seed time the ground is so very moist, that they sow wheat and barley without ploughing. The common grain, however, is gomm, which resembles millet, and is about the size of coriander seed. Of this they make a paste, which is used instead of bread, and is esteemed preferable to wheat; being agreeable to the taste, conducive to health, and of a cooling and laxative nature.

Beef and pork are very plentiful, and constitute the ordinary food. Goat's flesh is also used, but, it is lean and ill-flavoured. Venison is common, and the country abounds in boars and several sorts of game, and wild fowl of great delicacy and flavour.²⁵

Fleeing Isgaour, Chardin continued down the coast to Anarghia (now known as Anaklia in the modern region of Mingrelia, on the Abkhaz border) at the mouth of the Astolphus river (Enguri). Finding himself in increasing danger, and with the prince of Mingrelia unable to offer security because of the war, Chardin sailed from Anarghia to the mouth of the Phasis (Rhioni),

²⁵ Mavor 1797, 120–21.

and then on again to Gonia 65 km away. He arrived in Acalzika (Akhaltzikhe) on the 9th December, where he stayed a few days before travelling to Surham (Surami), on towards Gory (Gori), and then back west to Cotatis (Kutaisi).

Mingrelia in the 19th Century

The 18th century appears largely devoid of surviving travellers accounts of western Georgia. This is perhaps because of the turmoil of the preceding century, but perhaps because it saw increasing tensions between the Ottoman empire and the Persian-dominated east and the rise of a new power in the region – the Christian Russian empire. By the 1820s Russia had annexed eastern Georgia and Imereti in the west, and was taking a keen interest in the, still, autonomous principality of Mingrelia. Jean-François Gamba, the French consul in Tbilisi, travelled widely in the region in the early 1820s and leaves a more positive account of the Mingrelians than Chardin had been able to muster:

The noble Mingrelian [called Georgighia according to Gamba], who held the functions of chief of the village [Khobi], received us with great hospitality; he was remarkable for his size and his strength; he wore a beard and a short moustache. His features were regular, but amidst an expression of kindness, which he expressed to us, he had rather the air of a feudal lord than of a peaceful cultivator.²⁶

Having offered them some tea, we were about to make use of our own provisions, when our interpreter informed us that supper was preparing for us. Accordingly, in a short time, they placed before us a long bench, on which the domestics, in great numbers, arranged the provisions. These consisted of three large vessels, containing a paste of ground millet, which they call gomi, and which was taken with a wooden trowel out of the iron cauldrons; then was brought in, two roast fowls, and a great wooden bowl, coarsely wrought, containing pieces of meat, accompanied with cold water; and, finally, white cheese, made with the milk of goats. Large cakes of corn flour served us for plates and for bread.²⁷

Gamba was also far fonder of the wine of Mingrelia than Chardin had been, perhaps because the latter had not been properly entertained as Gamba clearly was: ‘The red wine which our host gave us was of a good quality, and did not at all resemble that which we had been accustomed to buy in the market of Redoute-kale.’²⁸

After leaving Khobi, Gamba travelled to Sakharbet (probably Sakharbedio), and described a difficult crossing of the River Siva (Tsivi) which had been swollen by recent summer storms.²⁹ He estimated the distance between the Siva (Tsivi) and the Techaur (Tekhuri) at about six

²⁶ Gamba 1826, 143.

²⁷ Gamba 1826, 144–45.

²⁸ Gamba 1826, 145.

²⁹ Gamba 1826, 153.

versts (6.4 km), and described travelling through ‘a fine forest, in which the elms, walnut trees and oaks are quite numerous; But the alder is everywhere the most common tree, and forms almost all the thickets. This tree seems to have taken possession of the whole Mingrelia.’³⁰ After crossing the Techaur (Tekhuri), Gamba continued to travel through forest punctuated, he noted, by clearings on which cattle were grazed; or maize, millet, barley and tobacco were cultivated.³¹ On their left (i.e. to the north) they saw the snow-capped summits of the Caucasus Mountains in the distance, and a chain of smaller mountains close by:

On one of these isolated mountains, and at a distance of about four versts [4.26 km] from our road, stands an old castle or monastery [probably Shkhepi Castle]; For in these countries, when they were exposed to the incursions of the barbarians, the construction of the convents and that of the fortresses were the same. This building is well preserved, of a square form, and with four bell-towers, in the middle of which stands a fairly high tower. The building is built of large-sized stones, placed in layers.³²

The bulk of the other travel accounts from the 19th century are, as in the 17th century, by missionaries and soldiers. These first hand descriptions differ significantly from the countless geographical encyclopaedia, which largely recycle very similar text on Mingrelia. The new wave of missionaries came not from catholic Europe but from protestant America and took a rather different view of alcohol consumption in the region. Eli Smith³³ wrote, disapprovingly, that ‘drunkenness prevails to an incredible extent’, and he goes on to describe the lawlessness of the region. However, he also noted the great strides made by the Russians in reducing the slave trade now that they held Poti and Akhaltsikhe – former Turkish slave-trading posts. Of the Russian domination of the region, acknowledged by the Ottomans in the 1829 Treaty of Adrianople, Smith wrote:

The power of Russia, when once extended across the Caucasus, was felt no less in the valley of the Rion, than in that of the Koor, and supplanted the power of Turkey in the one, as it did that of Persia in the other. The king of Imireti rebelled against his new sovereign, was expelled, and his territories were united to the crown. The princes of Mingreli and Gooriel still hold their places, acknowledging allegiance to Russia; but their countries are filled with Cossack police stations.³⁴

By the mid-19th century, Mingrelia was once again a battleground as the Russo-Turkish wars were rekindled and fuelled, on this occasion, by the additional involvement of Britain and France. Although most commonly referred to as the Crimean War, the conflict that lasted from

³⁰ Gamba 1826, 154.

³¹ Gamba 1826, 155.

³² Gamba 1826, 155–56.

³³ Smith 1833, 249.

³⁴ Smith 1833, 247.

1853 to 1856 was fought on a number of fronts, including western Georgia. Dodd³⁵ quotes a report prepared at the outbreak of war by Sir Hamilton Seymour, the British Ambassador at St Petersburg, which noted that the Russian Corps of the Caucasus included 25,000 troops in Mingrelia, under the command of General Beboutof. With Ottoman power on the decline at this time, the independence of the Caucasus region from Russia was an aspiration for the British and French, not least because it would serve to contain her expansion. However, this would require military victories in the region to strengthen their hand in peace negotiations. Ultimately, only a small Turkish force was transported, on British steamers, from the Crimea to the port of Redout Kalé in September 1855, yet the ‘inconvenience’ of this harbour led Omar Pasha to choose the more northerly port of Soucoum-Kalé for his base of operations.³⁶ From there the Turkish force (which counted among its senior ranks British officers who had formerly served in the Indian army, Poles and others) marched south-east to the Ingour river, near Zugdidi, where they had to force passage into Mingrelia against strong Russian positions on the 6th November. Understandably, for the locals, the perceived crimes of the Russian occupiers may have paled into insignificance when compared with the centuries of Turkish domination:

On the 15th, after this sojourn in a beautiful region, with the magnificent Mount Elbruz (nearly 15,000 feet high) full in view, the Turks resumed their march towards Kutais – still in the midst of the Mingrelians [...] who, whatever were their feelings towards their co-religionists the Russians, had unquestionably little sympathy with the Turks.³⁷

The most useful first-hand account of this campaign in English is, undoubtedly, that of Laurence Oliphant. He was a journalist, embedded with the Turkish rifle brigade, who wrote a very colourful description of the Mingrelian campaign. Having experienced the dramatic crossing of the Ingour under intense Russian fire, followed by encampment at Zugdidi, he describes the march from the 15th November down a ‘very fair’ road, alongside which stockades had been constructed. Oliphant observes in his account, that this ‘style of harassing warfare’ would have been far better for the Russians than risking general action in the crossing of the Ingour.³⁸ The following day, the army marched a further three hours before reaching Chopi (presumably meaning Khobi).

We ascended the steep hill and pitching our tents upon its summit revelled in a glorious prospect. To the left a richly wooded plain extended without an undulation to the Black Sea too

³⁵ Dodd 1856, 22.

³⁶ Dodd 1856, 466–67.

³⁷ Dodd 1856, 467.

³⁸ Oliphant 1856, 130.

distant to be visible. On the right we saw the broad fertile valley of the Chopi winding away to the base of the Caucasian range where fields of yellow stubble bore testimony to its abundant cultivation. Villages clustered among the woods which clothed the hill sides.³⁹

Leaving Chopi (Khobi) on the 17th November the army moved south, and soon met the ‘macadamised’⁴⁰ road which connected Redoute Kale (Kulevi) with Tbilisi. From there they continued marching east towards Kutaisi. According to Oliphant, the good weather and the beauty of the landscape ‘rendered campaigning in Mingrelia a most agreeable occupation’.⁴¹ Oliphant, echoing Gamba’s observations of 30 years previously, describes the road to Kutaisi winding along the bases of the spurs that emerged from the Caucasus Mountains and extend onto the plain. He also noted that the wooded hills to the north were ‘almost invariably crowned by the wooden walls of some old monastery or the massive battlements of a ruined fortress’.⁴² As the Turkish army made good progress through Mingrelia, there seemed a very real chance that they could reach the main Russian base in Kutaisi – the taking of which would break their hold on west Georgia – but the weather was about to change to favour the Russians. In the meantime, Oliphant took advantage of having picked up a local guide and translator and ventured a little way beyond the route of the main force, exploring the countryside and meeting the locals:

Then we smoked pipes of Mingrelian tobacco which I found excellent. Over these we discussed politics and the men assured me that though they hated the Turks as much as the Russians, if an English or French army came they would be delighted to see them and give them every assistance in the shape of supplies &c. Whether this was genuine or only for my benefit I was unable to judge.⁴³

The bulk of the Turkish army remained camped on the banks of the Ziewie (Tsivi), while Skender (a Polish officer in Ottoman service, for whom Oliphant has nothing but praise) took his troops 8 km further ahead, to the river Techoua (Tekhuri) about 3 km from Sinakia (Senaki). From that camp, Ferhad Pasha ‘had pushed a reconnaissance as far as the Skeniscal where he had a slight skirmish with the outposts of the Russians who had gradually retired until they had placed this river between themselves and their enemy’.⁴⁴ With the Skeniscal (Tskhenitskali) now the last physical obstacle between the Turks and Kutaisi, and the Russians fortifying positions on the opposite bank, the army began building bridges across the Ziewie

³⁹ Oliphant 1856, 132.

⁴⁰ Oliphant 1856, 134.

⁴¹ Oliphant 1856, 136.

⁴² Oliphant 1856, 137.

⁴³ Oliphant 1856, 142.

⁴⁴ Oliphant 1856, 152.

and the Techoua. Oliphant used the days spent waiting for the bridges to be completed to explore the locality further, including accompanying Colonel Caddell to Sinakia (Senaki) where English stout was sold by enterprising shopkeepers for seven shillings a bottle.⁴⁵

Sinakia was however the most popular resort with us as being a comparatively near approach to civilisation. It was composed of two streets of wooden houses and had been deserted upon our approach, the inhabitants taking refuge in the woods bearing with them thither all their stock in trade. When, however, our harmless character and readiness to pay fabulous prices was discovered, five or six storekeepers returned and opened their shops in which a few of the luxuries of civilisation could be procured, though the wine was undrinkable.

[...] The town was situated at the base of a range of hills about two thousand feet high, upon a spur of which had been perched the picturesque old castle of Schehekheppe [Shkhepi] with its unpronounceable name and heavy tower rising in the form of a truncated cone above its massive walls covered with ivy. It was the residence formerly of one of the Dadians and still belongs to one of them.⁴⁶

Just as the bridges were being completed, and the march on Kutaisi could resume, the weather changed and heavy rain turned the rivers that had previously been placid into torrents. Skender's bridge over the Techoua was the first to be swept away, followed by the one across the Ziewie, effectively cutting the army in half. Once the bridges were replaced the main force was able to cross the Ziewie and, after a fortnight encampment there, marched to Sinakia. The following day the crossing of the Techoua was accomplished, with some difficulty, but by now the heavy rain had transformed the character of the landscape:

The next morning saw us again en route. The road was literally knee deep in mud so that we preferred scrambling through the woods and over the corn fields to following it. Every mile or even less there was a deep stream to cross which always created a good deal of delay. One of these, the Abasha, was almost as formidable as the Techoua and I looked forward with some apprehension to the Skeniscal, which was reported to be a great deal larger than either.

[...] We camped at a distance of about two miles from the Skeniscal and, being now again in the presence of the enemy, care was required in placing the outposts. I rode round them with the Sirdar Ekrem Omer Pasha in the afternoon and he cheered the hearts of the men as he passed by telling them that on the following day they should fight the Russians. They answered with loud shouts of Inshallah. Intelligence had indeed arrived that although not prepared to dispute the passage of the river the enemy had taken up a position near Mehranie about two miles from it where they intended to risk another general action.⁴⁷

With the Skeniscal apparently a torrent some 200 m wide, carrying tree trunks on its 'boiling surface', Oliphant rode with Skender up the bank, looking for a place to cross.

⁴⁵ Oliphant 1856, 154.

⁴⁶ Oliphant 1856, 158–59.

⁴⁷ Oliphant 1856, 165–66.

Now and then we could see the figures of the Russian soldiers posted upon the opposite side but they did not fire at us. The country people showed us a number of places where the river was fordable in fair weather, but they laughed at the idea of attempting to cross it in its present state so we turned reluctantly back after being so near Kutais that had we been on the other side of the stream in two hours smart riding we should have reached it.⁴⁸

The decision to retreat was announced to the troops on the 8th December 1855, after the Skeniscal had been determined to be unpassable. Had they been able to cross the river, the Turks were ready to resupply their army upon reaching Kutaisi – with their support vessels loaded and ready to move up the Rhion from Redoute Kaleh – and consequently this was a disappointing end to a daring campaign. Oliphant's accounts provide a fascinating insight into the Turkish troop movements during this period, but most interesting are the glimpses into Mingrelian culture he affords. Despite not mentioning Nokalakevi by name, Oliphant was clearly no more than 15 km from it at some stage, and may well have visited it on one of his travels in the vicinity of Senaki – the castle of Shkhepi he mentions is on the road between Senaki and Nokalakevi.

After this campaign, the nature of travellers' accounts of Georgia changed and, as the territory of Georgia was once again reunited under the Russian crown, inevitably the focus was less on the rural west and increasingly on urban Tbilisi, in the east. Notable scholarly contributions in this period include the work of Sir (John) Oliver Wardrop (1864–1948), the founder of Kartvelian studies at Oxford University who became Britain's first Chief Commissioner of the Transcaucasus after the First World War. After travelling to Georgia in 1887 he began work on The Kingdom of Georgia, published in 1888, before embarking on a number of books relating to the language and culture of the country.

Independent Georgia

Towards the end of the First World War, journalists and military alike took a keen interest in the likely fate of Georgia – unified and independent for the first time in centuries – as it became pivotal to events in the region. Some accounts from soldiers of the British 27th Division, stationed in the Southern Caucasus as peacekeepers in this period, have been discussed by the author elsewhere⁴⁹ so will not be duplicated here, instead the focus will be on the American view of the region. Maynard Owen Williams (1888–1963) was the first foreign correspondent

⁴⁸ Oliphant 1856, 169.

⁴⁹ Everill 2012.

for the National Geographic, and travelled across the southern regions of the Russian empire in late 1917 in order to document its collapse. Bearing witness to the first investiture of a Georgian Katholikos for a century, a statement of Georgia's newly (but briefly) regained independence, he noted that the Turks had retaken the district of Batumi and wrote: 'Whether Georgia can hold out against the Turks and Germans remains to be seen, but of one thing we may be sure, Georgia will never tamely submit to oppression.'⁵⁰ Another correspondent for National Geographic, Melville Chater, wrote about the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Armenia the following year. He described his arrival in Batumi:

Everyone was on deck for the night – British Tommies and their officers, the little Mongol-faced Ghurkas, the tall and dignified Sikhs, the gray-clad nursing sisters – and even the Punjabi cooks in our fore hatchway ceased work on the flour-and-water cakes, which they had been baking incessantly for four days, and shaded their eyes toward the wide, squat port of Batum, with its foreground of British warcraft and its sky-line where the pear-shaped church domes of Russian civilization spired upward.⁵¹

Batum was the gateway to the western Caucasus in this period, and it was essential to the western allies to keep it open. It was described by the American Major General James Guthrie Harbord, following his appointment by President Wilson as Head of the American Mission to Turkey and the Near East, thus:

Batumi was in actual possession by the British with a brigade of troops and a military governor. At the period of our visit, it was coveted by the Turks, the Georgians, and Denikin's Army. It appeared likely that the withdrawal of the British troops, which some expected at that time, would be the signal for a rush of all three of those interested parties for possession of this important well-equipped port. The Georgians claim it because its people are of their blood, and it is geographically a part of their country. Denikin wanted it because it is necessary to Russia; the Turks because they once held it and the majority of its people though of Georgian origin are Moslems.⁵²

Chater, in his article, describes a conversation with a British officer on the train from Batumi to Tbilisi through Mingrelia, over 'bully beef and tea'.⁵³ 'At the Bolshevist revolution the Russian army of the Transcaucasus had flung down its arms and gone home, so there wasn't any one left to stop the Boche and Turk from having their way', Chater reports the British officer as saying, 'Since then we've been doing a kind of police job here, while the Peace Table – heaven help it! – decides.'⁵⁴ Chater also describes the esteem with which British soldiers, the

⁵⁰ Williams 1918, 251.

⁵¹ Chater 1919, 393.

⁵² Harbord 1920, 279.

⁵³ Chater 1919, 397.

⁵⁴ Chater 1919, 399.

Tommies or the ‘Great British Thomas’,⁵⁵ were held in the region, when he relates the officer’s account of an incident during which Georgian and Armenia forces were engaged in a border dispute, with the Armenians apparently faring the better:

Well, one day an officer of ours, with a dozen or so Tommies, comes along to where the two armies lay on either side of the railroad, about to go at it again. The officer chap jumps in between the opposing forces and makes a bit of a speech from the railroad ties.

‘Commanders of the Georgian and Armenian Armies in being’, he says, ‘since you can’t carry on without killing some of His Majesty’s forces, I propose an armistice.’

So the British army of twelve sat down to its tea, in between the firing lines, while terms were concluded. And now we are occupying the disputed region, in trust, as it were, and the two republics have called off the dogs of war. Peace reigns in Georgia.⁵⁶

Travellers’ Accounts of Nokalakevi

The first known reference to Nokalakevi in any of the travellers’ accounts that survive, appears in the Relatione della Colchide hoggi detta Mengrellia published by Arcangelo Lamberti in 1653. However, Lamberti’s descriptions are primarily of religious and medical practices in Mingrelia,⁵⁷ with some discussion of the flora and fauna; and of the major rivers. Nokalakevi, which he calls Nacalachèns, is mentioned briefly as one of the places where Laurel is found.⁵⁸ Of the Tekhuri river, which Lamberti calls the Tachùr, he suggests that it was the Sigames described by Arrian in the 2nd century from which the name Sinàghi (Senaki) might be derived⁵⁹ – though modern scholars⁶⁰ suggest that the Enguri is a more likely candidate for the Sigame.

Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux (1798–1850) travelled widely in the Caucasus region from 1831 to 1834. A classically-educated Swiss polymath, he is acknowledged as the first to identify the ruins of Nokalakevi with the city of Archaeopolis described by the Byzantine historian, Procopius. His account, published in 1839, is the one most commonly cited, but he had previously contributed a letter to the Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences in 1835:

I then visited, in Mingrelia, the ruins of Nacolachewi, where the three fortified castles occupy a large tract along the banks the Tachauri. They were erected at different periods, and the

⁵⁵ Chater 1919, 399.

⁵⁶ Chater 1919, 399.

⁵⁷ See Pkhakadze and Chagunava 2011 for discussion of the latter.

⁵⁸ Lamberti 1653, 234.

⁵⁹ Lamberti 1653, 208-09.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Braund and Sinclair 2000, 1227.

lower castle, to judge by its style of architecture, must be of great antiquity. It contains the ruins of an extremely ancient palace of the czars, and a church. Martvili, the seat of the Bishop of Mingrelia, deserves to be visited, as well on account of its magnificent situation as for its very beautiful church.⁶¹

His book contains a far more detailed description of his visit,⁶² along with discussion of the site's association with Archaeopolis:

My guide alerted me to the fact that Prince Dadian, was camped upon the plain where he was hunting, so I left the monastery [at Martvili] where I was staying in order to find him.

[...] 6 Versts [~~about 7 km~~] from Martvili, we forded the Abacha River; another 6 Versts led us to the banks of the Tekhouri where we left behind the last traces of mountainous country to enter the great plane of Phase. Who would recognise, in these walls and ruins, covered with ivy and fig trees, in this silence and in this desolate place, the ancient capital of the Lazes, the Archeopolis of Procopius, the Aea of Circe and the Argonauts? We find, in order to enter through the venerable precinct, supported by old towers, an arched doorway where the stone and brick emerges beneath the vines of the wall pellitory (*Parietaria judaica*). Huge plane trees, Persimmons (*Diospyros* sp.), walnut tress garlanded with vines, the tall undergrowth masking the ruins sought by my avid eyes.⁶³

Dubois de Montpéroux goes on to describe the humble abode of Bejan Dadiani, nephew of the prince of Mingrelia, at Nokalakevi, with wooden benches and a plank for a table standing on an earthen floor. The wine he served, which was apparently of high quality, was served in cups made of horn and a sheep was slaughtered in order to feed his guests. Despite the basic nature of the household, Dubois de Montpéroux notes that 'every thing that he offered us, he gave with such good heart'.⁶⁴ In describing the ruins, he wrote that:

The area of Nokalakevi where we were comprised a fairly large wall, cornered in by the Tekkouri, laden with the ruins of a bridge, and a high hill dominating the area. It was enclosed in all parts by a high wall built of brick with occasional stone, of which the major part is fairly well preserved, although demonstrating visible traces of age. Some square towers placed here and there truncated the perimeter of the wall. It is what Procopius called the castle, the doors below.

In the interior of the fortress, where nature competes with heaps of rubble, of old building foundations that she has covered with a vigorous vegetation, an old building can still be made out beneath the ivy, which climbs all over: the walls are of big grey ashlar stones. On all the ground floor, in other words underground, it is also vaulted with the same stone. This storey has a large door with a portico leading into a large room: all around is a stone podium similar to the winter apartment of King Tamar at Vardzie; low and narrow windows provide light. The upper storey has disappeared. These are the remains of the palace which was that of the Lazes.

The portico and the great door face a very old church, very simple, with an extremely low cupola that I have made a plan of. The Church is built of stone and brick, like Pitzounda. The

⁶¹ Dubois de Montpéroux 1835, 620.

⁶² Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 50–61.

⁶³ Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 50–52.

⁶⁴ Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 53.

Bema is simple, the apse on the left was added later. The pictures are coarse and very worn. The church demonstrates all the characteristics of the most pure primitive Byzantine style. There are neither sculptures nor inscriptions. Nothing but ivory and figs veil the bareness.⁶⁵

Dubois de Montpéroux speculated that the church (Fig. 2) was contemporary with the emperor Justinian and Zathus. The latter he describes as being the ‘evangeliser of the Lazés’⁶⁶ and having established a church in their capital, while he credits Justinian with having that church, threatened with ruin, repaired. The bell tower, still used as such to this day, he describes as being ‘built of large stones like the Palace, [and] is 100 yards from the church. It possesses an external stone staircase and is more modern than the church.’⁶⁷ He also describes the castle that sits on the ridge overlooking the lower town:

This masonry was cut in a hurry, and appears to be much more modern than the church and the palace, the materials, as well as those of the surrounding buildings would have served in this construction. One is able to see from place to place some blocks of stone that could only have come from there. This castle is not remarkable with neither an inscription, nor relief nor trace of internal division. On the side of the Tekhourî, the rock forms a chasm; that which is accessible is surrounded by a very deep ditch, lined with box tree. The view is superb. The great precinct, the interior castle and the hillock upon which it is set are dominated by a craggy hill by the side of the river. We climbed it with great difficulty, my guide and myself, during which he explained to me the marvels of Nokalakevi. Its summit is crowned by a third fortress which is 460 yards long and which is shaped as a parallelogram on the crest of the hill; the entrance, the only accessible point, is towards the north-east and is furnished with towers and openings; this what Procopius refers to as the gate on high. The other extremity of the fort, which is higher, contains a great construction of stone and large narrow bricks, which I suspect to be another of the palaces of the Kings of Lazés or a residence of the commander of the fort.⁶⁸

The following day, the kindly Bejan Dadian advised Dubois de Montpéroux to accept the invitation of his far wealthier cousin Alexandre, whom Bejan admitted would be able to ‘treat [him] far better than [he had] been able to do’⁶⁹

Despite being nephew to the prince, Bejan was only in receipt of a modest income compared with his cousin:

We took his advice and accepted the invitation of Prince Alexandre who himself came to find us, and who led us to a strongly built house of wood where he lived with his mother, by the Tekhourî, opposite the ruins. He prepared us a great feast and there was no lack of abundance or gaiety. I was not able to hand myself over to this as the wonderful people wished; I spent upwards of two hours wandering round, examining the ruins of the fort above, and when I returned I found them still at the table and feasting.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 55–57.

⁶⁶ Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 57.

⁶⁷ Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 57.

⁶⁸ Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 58–59.

⁶⁹ Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 61.

⁷⁰ Dubois de Montpéroux 1839, 61.

Only four or five years after Dubois de Montpéroux visited the region, the noted British diarist and traveller Anne Lister travelled through Nokalakevi. Lister was a wealthy Yorkshirewoman, having inherited the estate of Shibden Hall, near Halifax, from her aunt. Lister's diaries represent an enormous body of primary source material, but they are perhaps most noteworthy for the fact that she lived unapologetically as a lesbian. In fact, many consider her to be the first 'modern' lesbian and her (often coded and incredibly intimate) diary entries contain significant detail on her lifestyle. Eschewing even a pretence at conventionality, Lister married Ann Walker in 1834 and, even though it was not legally recognised at the time, Walker did ultimately inherit Shibden Hall on Lister's death. Travelling with Walker, Lister embarked on her final journey, to Russia and into the Caucasus, from 1839. As David Lang⁷¹ has noted, Lister's accounts of the Caucasus represent a great untapped resource for those studying the history of the region. However, it appears that, after staying a time in Koutais (Kutaisi) and Choni (Khoni), Lister and Walker passed through Nokalakevi (which she spells Nakolakevi) on the 7th August 1840, en route to Zugdidi, without describing it. It was around this time that she received the tick bite that brought on the illness that killed her, in Kutaisi, on the 22nd September 1840. Arriving in Zugdidi, she was received by David Dadiani, the regent of Mingrelia, who presented her with a letter of safe passage for the remainder of her journey in that region. This letter, which survives in the archives in Halifax (Fig. 3), along with a huge quantity of her other papers brought back to England by Ann Walker, offers a glimpse into the enlightened court of David Dadiani, de facto ruler of Mingrelia following his father's retirement earlier in 1840. In his 'open letter', dated 30th July (12th August in the Gregorian Calendar), he wrote:

Two respectable persons from the foreign country Anglia by their wish travelling to this place, all populated countries and villages, to see mountains, fields and unknown sights. Wherever these two would wish to travel in places in our domain, they are permitted and because of it we annunciate all of our Lieges, high and low, to respect them during their travel in all their demands, to present food and drink, bringing horse and all other demands immediately and to guide these respectable scholars wherever they would like to see the places of mountains and surroundings. By the grace of God by our right I write to all nobles, managers and officials not to show any deficiency to those strangers travelling to our domain. CHKM [1840] year, day of July L [30th]. Heir of Mengrelia [LS].⁷²

The work of John Mason Neal is worth briefly touching on here, though he wrote purely from secondary sources in publishing his History of the Holy Eastern Church in 1850, and as

⁷¹ Lang 1990.

⁷² West Yorkshire Archive Service, Calderdale SH:7/ML/1115.

a result his work does not qualify as a traveller's account. However, his description of the Forty Martyrs' church at Nokalakevi (Fig. 4), though based largely on Dubois de Montpéroux's observations, also includes some additional detail from other sources. It is interesting to note that the prothesis he describes no longer survives, and that a small chapel to St George has been added on the northern side subsequently:

The church of the Forty Martyrs [footnote in original: 'Mouravieff, Georgia, iii 260 The plan is from Dubois de Montpéroux'], at Nakolakevi, the ancient Archaeopolis, and the Christian capital of the Lazi, and close to the city of the Argonauts, was rebuilt by Justinian from the ruins of an earlier church. It is undoubtedly that to which Procopius refers. It stands alone towards the top of a hill, and in the midst of ruins, now overgrown with trees and underwood. It is remarkable for the projection of the prothesis to the north, and for its immense size; for the double instead of the triple apse; for the smallness of the diaconicon, and for the chapel of the Forty Martyrs, attached to the south side of the choir. Justinian gave some relics of the Martyrs of Sebaste to this church: and to commemorate them, forty stones are placed in the pavement of the chapel. The narthex has an entrance from the south, as well as from the west. Here we have the influence of the new fashion, the apses being polygonal.⁷³

A generation after Dubois de Montpéroux, Lister and Walker travelled in the region, after the upheaval of the Crimean War and before poor Russo-Turkish relations erupted once again into open conflict in the region, John Buchan Telfer toured the Crimea and Transcaucasia with his Russian wife Ekaterina. Telfer was a Commander in the Royal Navy and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and provides a wonderfully vivid account of his travels between 1872 and 1875. He started the sixty-sixth day of his tour in Senaki, and 'when morning came I started for Nakalakev with a Russian official, in a troika and post-horses, and we drove along the valley of the river Tehour, through the straggling villages of Sh'hepy, Staroy-Senaky, Sorta, and Kortamety'.⁷⁴ Telfer's description of Nokalakevi itself is particularly evocative:

At the hamlet of Nakalakev we crossed to the left bank of the Tehour, where the ground at the foot of an eminence anciently named Mount Ounaghyra, but now more commonly called Dedamoukha, is covered with piles of venerable ruins.

One edifice only, a church of the sixth century, has survived the wreck of time; it is in part of brick and stone, in the purest style of early Byzantine architecture, like the church at Pytzounda, but otherwise of little interest, except for the forty small circular slabs let into the floor, at the south entrance, over the heads of the Forty martyrs, and among the numerous names inscribed in Georgian on the north wall is that of St. Sylvester, Pope. There are no ornamentations, frescoes, or other inscriptions.

To the west of the ruins is a vaulted passage, through which, by means of a flight of steps, communication was had with the river for the supply of water, as was the case at Gori, Ouplytzykhe, Ksanka, &c. The priest informed us that after the Forty martyrs were beheaded, their bodies and heads were flung into the river from the opposite cliff; the bodies were carried

⁷³ Neal 1850, 255–56.

⁷⁴ Telfer 1876, 122.

away by the stream, but the heads floated to the steps, where they were recovered, and afterwards buried in the church, of which the Forty martyrs are the protectors.

To reach the fortress above the church we had to scramble uphill through dense vegetation which extends over the very walls, some of the trees about the parapets having attained their full growth. The walls, which in some parts are 7 feet in thickness, appear to be of more modern construction and in better preservation than the church. There is a second fortress in a still higher position, but we did not care to ascend to it in the noonday heat of a broiling sun.

Nakalakev is probably the site of the Archaeopolis of the Byzantines, with the description of which it greatly accords. A fortress was built here as early as the reign of Pharnawaz, king of Karthly, by his relative Koudj, erystav of Souaneth, after whom it was named Tzykhe-Koudj.

Archaeopolis subsequently became the most strongly fortified city of the Lazi, who about the year 470 defeated the Onougours or Tetraxite Goths, in a battle near the city, and in commemoration of their victory they constructed a fortress and called it Ounagoury. A century later, when the Persians invaded these provinces, Mesmeroes returned by way of Archaeopolis and laid siege to it, after burning the Roman camp on the Phasis. Archaeopolis existed as a fortress to the eighth century, when it was destroyed by Mourwan, and became in later times a residence of the Dadian.⁷⁵

The same year that saw Telfer's volumes published also bore witness to another Western traveller touring Mingrelia. Mme Carla Serena's accounts were translated from the original French and published in a single volume by Peter Skinner in 2015. They provide yet another invaluable source for those seeking to understand the historical character and development of the Caucasus region and, like Telfer's, include some vivid descriptions of Nokalakevi and its environs. Serena herself was born in Belgium in 1820, raised in France, and settled in London with her wealthy Venetian husband in the 1850s. Serena was certainly a remarkable woman, leaving London in 1874 for five years of extensive travel at the age of 54 and after giving birth to five children. Equally remarkable, given her social standing, was her willingness to travel relatively unsupported, aside from a guide and a porter. Serena appears to have been equally comfortable in the company of the Viceroy of the Caucasus as she was relying on traditional Georgian hospitality, or sleeping outside when required.⁷⁶

Serena had been staying in Kutaisi, and from there she was escorted on her rail journey to Senaki (Novo-Senaki in her account). Upon her arrival she was met by the head of the district and led, across the thick mud and snow, to the house of a Russian officer and his Mingrelian wife who 'gave me a most friendly welcome and appointed themselves my guides'.⁷⁷ She

⁷⁵ Telfer 1876, 123–24.

⁷⁶ Skinner 2015, ii.

⁷⁷ Serena 2015, 19.

describes Nono-Senaki, apparently founded in 1876, as a ‘city in miniature’,⁷⁸ with a population under 300 and surrounded by vast swamps. The bazaar, she writes, ‘is the center of local life, the meeting place for strollers and the unemployed, and at the same time the field of study where strangers can come to observe at their ease the mores of the inhabitants of the Caucasus’⁷⁹ – a description that holds true to this day. Novo-Senaki had, according to Serena, been built to replace Staro-Senaki (Old Senaki) as the administrative capital of the district, after the latter had been devastated by floods in May 1869. ‘These floods’, she writes, ‘the last of which [...] was terrible, are attributed to the imprudence of excessive deforestation’.⁸⁰ Her descriptions of Nokalakevi itself are, like Telfer’s, worth quoting at length because they are so evocative and useful to modern studies of the site.

At fifteen versts from Senaki, beside a highway that was opened a couple of years ago, flows the River Tekhura [footnote in original: ‘So called from the precipitous violence of its waters, which break off and carry away everything they encounter; Tekha, in the local language, means “break off”’]. There, on a high rocky mound that dominates the watercourse, may be seen the vestiges of ancient buildings. They are alleged to be those of the former city. Gold and silver coins have been exhumed there, showing on one side the head of a ram, and, on the other, that of a man, which people think they can identify as that of Jason. Without discussing the problem of numismatics, I will say that, in all probability, the architectural reliefs discovered in this place come from the Laz city of Archaeopolis, which was built on the ruins of Aea.

The place is known today as Nokalakevi, a Georgian word which means former city. The remains of the acropolis of the ancient city are located on a hill about a thousand feet high; they consist of two encircling walls, formed a roadway that extends for about two versts.

[...] As for other quite numerous ruins to be seen inside the present city, they are, it would seem, the remains of houses and churches. At the central point of the hill arises a spacious gateway, the only one that affords entry to the city, the dressed stones of which it is constructed are so massive that you ask yourself how, without the aid of machinery, these gigantic blocks could be transported. The city was fortified on one side; on the other was a rampart of rocks

[...] A tunnel dug in the rock that overhangs the river was formerly used as a secret passage and also as a channel for drinking water when the city was besieged.

The thickly wooded mountain, teeming with game, which dominates these ruins is known as Mount Unagira.

An excellent lunch, washed down with champagne, was offered to me at the foot of these venerable ruins, the philosophic visions of the past were thus agreeably combined with the legitimate enjoyment of the present moment.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Serena 2015, 20.

⁷⁹ Serena 2015, 20.

⁸⁰ Serena 2015, 20.

⁸¹ Serena 2015, 20–22.

Serena goes on to describe the significant infrastructural improvements to the communication network allowing the local population to move more freely across territory previously punctuated by extensive marshes. The construction of a road from Senaki to Nokalakevi, shortly before her visit, was only part of this investment. Equally important was the route over the two rivers it crossed – the Abasha and the Tekhuri. The former was easily forded, however the Tekhuri, especially at Nokalakevi where it has carved a steep gorge through the limestone, was impossible to cross at times of torrent. Serena describes a situation, in the years shortly before her visit, when

hundreds of peasants from the plains and the inhabitants of the neighboring mountains were held up for weeks on one bank or the other, without being able to cross. This occurred mainly in the month of August, in other words at the time of the fairs, which coincides with the rainy season, when communications are most active between the river-dwellers on opposite sides of the Tekhura, one group coming to sell the products of their labor, the other to lay in their provisions for the winter.⁸²

Serena notes that, at the time of her visit to Nokalakevi, work was ongoing on the construction of a bridge ‘between two rocks at the foot of Mount Unagira (104 feet long)’.⁸³ The project, conceived by the head of the district, was being undertaken “with no help from engineers or machinery, as everything is done in these regions, where man is virtually the sole instrument of work.”⁸⁴ Local sources indicate that, in 1895, this bridge across the Tekhuri was replaced with an iron one, which was itself replaced during rehabilitation work at Nokalakevi by the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation of Georgia in 2018. Seeing the river reminded Serena of the story of the Forty Martyrs who, she writes, were captured by the invading Muslims, beheaded, and thrown in the river. Although the Forty Martyrs’ church at Nokalakevi predates the Muslim faith by some considerable time, Serena claims it to have been built in memory of this event with a Chapel of the Forty Saints attached to it. Within this chapel was, she writes, a ‘tombstone surmounted by raised reliefs in the form of skulls’,⁸⁵ with their martyrdom celebrated on the 9th March each year. In concluding her description of this part of her travels, she wrote:

At Novo-Senaki, Europe and civilization are represented by only a few families, a charming and united little group. Their houses, located on the main highway, open their hospitable doors to any traveller who may knock on them, and immediately, in honor of the passerby,

⁸² Serena 2015, 23.

⁸³ Serena 2015, 23.

⁸⁴ Serena 2015, 23.

⁸⁵ Serena 2015, 24.

pleasure parties are organized, which enhance still more the attractions of the site. Nokalakevi, in particular, takes the prize for picnics.⁸⁶

Conclusion

While it must be recognised that historical accounts by travellers may well include inaccuracies, the sources presented here represent fascinating glimpses into the province of Mingrelia over the course of its often difficult recent history. Mingrelia (Samegrelo in Georgian) is an integral part of the modern country of Georgia today, and yet it retains many distinctive characteristics, including its own language – a branch of the Kartvelian (i.e. Georgian) group, itself one of the primary language families unrelated to any other. However, the pressures of the modern world are seeing a decline in native Mingrelian speakers as greater numbers travel to the growing cities of Kutaisi (in neighbouring Imereti) and Tbilisi (in Kartli) in search of work.

Through the collection of foreign accounts presented here, the reader can observe everyday life in Mingrelia experienced at a local level as priests, merchants, soldiers, journalists and tourists from beyond Georgia describe their personal observations and interactions. Amongst these accounts the most useful to archaeologists are perhaps those few that describe Nokalakevi itself, presenting a picture of the place that predates the first archaeological work at the site in 1930. The work of Dubois de Montpéreau, in particular, served to inspire these early investigations and it is he that is rightly considered the first to discuss the ancient history of the site with the benefit of a classical education. However, the social history contained within many of the accounts is perhaps just as important, serving to preserve the unexcavatable past of the Mingrelian people.

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⁸⁶ Serena 2015, 24.

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Figures

Fig. 1: Topographic map of western Georgia, showing key locations referred to in the text.

Fig. 2: Ruins of Nokalakevi around the Forty Martyrs' Church (drawing by P. Sellier, after Dubois de Montpéroux: Serena 2015, 23).

Fig. 3: The 'Open Letter' from David Dadiani, heir to the principality of Mingrelia, requesting safe passage for Anne Lister and Ann Walker (Document Ref: SH:7/ML/1115, reproduced with the permission of the West Yorkshire Archive Service, Calderdale).

Fig. 4: Plan of Forty Martyrs' Church, derived from Dubois de de Montpéroux (after Neal 1850, 255).