

History

Persian Master Builders in the Cities of the Nineteenth Century Georgia

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ABSTRACT. Persians formed an important group among the builders working in the nineteenth-century Georgia. They were known as consummate brick masons who mastered the art of constructing complex vaulted structures. They participated in the construction of a number of administrative buildings, barracks, hospitals, caravansaries, and residential houses. Interior decoration work was another field of activity of Persian masters in Georgia. They used rich repertoire of Safavid and Qajar decorative art including stucco ornament, painting, and mirror work. Among the clients of Persian decorators there were high officials, rich merchants, noblemen, and even the members of the Russian royal family. Artisans invited from Persia played a leading role in embellishing “Persian style” interiors in Georgia; however, there were local Persian masters as well. Persians were also engaged in the construction of hydraulic structures such as channels, wells, and dams. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the area of the activity of Persian masons was limited to Eastern Georgia. The majority of them worked in Tbilisi. From the mid-nineteenth century, following the great wave of emigration from Persia, they appeared in the Black Sea littoral cities of Batumi and Poti as well. © 2019 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Key words: persian masons, brickwork, mirror work, muqarnas, Tbilisi, Borjomi

Persians formed an important group among the master builders working in nineteenth-century Georgia. Information on their activity can be found in the writings of European and Persian travellers. As a rule, they did not make difference between the Persians proper and Azerbaijanis, Shia Turkic people of Iranian Azerbaijan and the Caucasus; therefore it is difficult to say who were these builders ethnically. Judging from the places of their origin (Baku, Tabriz), at least some of them

should have been Azerbaijanis. It must be also taken into consideration that censuses of the population of Tbilisi conducted by Russian authorities in 1803 and 1817 did not mention Persians at all; however, they counted “Tatars” (235 and 300 respectively), the term that was applied to Azerbaijanis in Russia in the nineteenth century. From the architectural point of view, the question of their ethnic origin is irrelevant as all of them were rooted in late Persian building tradition.

Brick Masons

Persians were known as consummate brick masons. In the early Qajar period, they mastered the art of constructing complex vaulted structures. The English traveller George Fowler, who observed them building the dome of a bazaar in Tabriz noted that bricklayers turned arches with a dexterity which would astonish an English artisan. The earliest information on the activity of Persian brick masons in Georgia was provided by Chevalier Jean François Gamba, French consul general in Tbilisi from 1820 to 1823. He was deeply impressed by their skills: “[in Tbilisi] principal master builders are Persians. It is impossible to find more active and intelligent craftsmen... I speak of those who calculate so well the work of their vaults and arches, which they build in brick without falsework and scaffoldings, that accidents never happen on the site.” [1:156].

What did Persians construct in early nineteenth-century Georgia? Obviously, they did not participate in church building. The main field of their activity was secular architecture – administrative buildings, barracks, hospitals, shops, and residential houses. Apparently, Persian masons contributed to the construction of the well-known caravansaries of Tbilisi. Their skills in covering large spaces with brick vaults would be particularly applicable in these structures.

Persian building technique continued to attract the attention of visitors to Tbilisi in the following decades as well. It is mentioned in the writing of the German explorer Baron August von Haxthausen, again with a special emphasis on the high quality of work: “The masonry of the modern houses in Tiflis is remarkably good, better than is usually seen in Russian buildings. I was informed that Persian masons, who are said to be the best in Asia, are employed; they may perhaps have inherited the manual skill and the secret of manufacturing mortar, which are evinced in the indestructible edifices of antiquity” [2:95-96]. Even in the late nineteenth century, Persian masons had a significant role in the city. According to the British

officer Sir Thomas Gordon, in 1895 most of the new houses in Tiflis were built by Persians [3:17]. Though this statement seems to be an exaggeration, still it serves as a testament to a strong Persian presence among Tbilisi builders.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the area of the activity of Persian masons was limited to East Georgia. From the mid-nineteenth century, following the great wave of emigration from Persia, they appeared in the Black Sea littoral cities as well. In 1882, the Persian pilgrim Mirza ‘Abd al-Hoseyn Khan Afshar Orumi saw in Poti four or five Persian subjects all of whom were masons [4:56]. After Russian capture of Ajara Province in 1877, a small Persian community of about 20 people emerged in Batumi. According to the other pilgrim Mirza Mohammad-Hosayn Farahani, in 1885 the community consisted of proprietors of coffee houses, brokers, and bricklayers [5:94].

The great majority of Persian builders who worked in Georgia remained anonymous, though there are exceptions. The Persian poet Ya‘qub Mirza Tabrizi who visited Tbilisi in 1868, relates the story of the master known as Bana-ye Tabrizi, which in Persian means “the builder from Tabriz.” He came to Tbilisi as an ordinary mason and soon won reputation of a skilful master builder. Later on he decided to go back to his native Tabriz, but the governor of Tbilisi asked him to stay and offered him a generous salary. Since then Bana-ye Tabrizi lived in Tbilisi and subsequently became a rich man [6:144-145]. The story smacks of Oriental fantasy, but Bana-ye Tabrizi is most probably a real person. The governor of Tbilisi mentioned here should have been Grigol Orbeliani, an eminent Georgian poet who headed the Tbilisi Governorate between 1860 and 1868.

Persian masters were building exclusively with brick, there were no stonemasons among them. They used flat square brick known as “Asian” in the Russian Empire and sometimes called “Georgian” by modern authors. Until 1880s, it was a principal building material in Tbilisi and other cities of East

Georgia. Persians were involved in its production as well.

Interior Decorators

Interior decoration work was another important field of the activity of Persian masters in Georgia [7:255]. They used the rich repertoire of Safavid and Qajar decorative art including stucco ornament, painting, and mirror work. Inserting small pieces of mirror into plaster ornament under different angles, they created flickering effects of light and shade. Mirror work combined with painting was often used to embellish stucco muqarnas, an ornamental design resembling stalactites.

Among the clients of Persian decorators were high officials, rich merchants, noblemen, and even the members of the Russian royal family. From 1864 to 1866, they worked in the palace of Grand Duke Michael Nikolaevich, brother of Emperor Alexander II, who then served as the Viceroy of the Caucasus. This wooden palace was built in the spa town of Borjomi and burnt down in Soviet times. Between 1865 and 1869, Persian masters adorned one hall in the Viceroy's Palace in Tbilisi (present National Palace). In the Arshakuni Palace (present Tbilisi State Academy of Fine Arts), constructed in 1860s, flamboyant ornaments and painted images cover the whole walls and ceilings of several rooms. Arches, vaults, cornices, and corbels are adorned with muqarnas. According to the Russian architect Vasily Kuroedov [8:122], interior decoration works in all three above-mentioned buildings were carried out by a Persian master who earlier had embellished "a palace in Tehran", which should mean the well-known Golestan Palace reconstructed in 1860s.

A later example of the Persian decorative design is the Palace Firuze built by the Persian consul-general Mirza Reza Khan Danesh Arfa' ad-Dowle in Borjomi in 1892. For painting he invited an anonymous artist from Baku, and for stucco

ornaments and mirror work a master from Kazvin named Mirza Mohammad Qazvini. After completing the Firouze Palace, Mirza Reza Khan bought a house in Tbilisi, on Gudovich (present Chonkadze) Street and reconstructed it. The work was carried out by Italian masons and Persian decorators, one of whom, again, was Mirza Mohammad Qazvini. The house was called the "Diamond Palace" since mirror work in its interior looked like diamonds [9:15-29].

As one can see, artisans invited from Persia played a leading role in embellishing "Persian style" interiors in Georgia; however, there were local Persian masters as well. V. Kuroedov describes his visit in 1878 to the house of Abdullah, an old mason who lived in Seidabad (Kharpukehi) district of Tbilisi, traditionally settled by Persians. The ceiling and walls of the front room had splendid muqarnas with mirror work made by Abdullah himself [8:123].

Other Activities

Persians were also engaged in the construction of hydraulic structures. As early as 1828, the emigrant Persian religious leader (*mojtahed*) Mir Fattah called in workers from Persia to excavate a channel from the Kura River for the irrigation of his illustrious garden near Tbilisi [2:60; 10:765]. Persians were considered the most skilful diggers of wells until the early twentieth century. In 1905, when excavating the foundation pit for the new Kvashveti church in Tbilisi, the builders faced the problem of groundwater and resorted for help to a Persian worker who made a ten-meter-depth drainage well [11:40].

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ისტორია

სპარსელი მშენებელი ოსტატები XIX საუკუნის საქართველოს ქალაქებში

დ. ხოშტარია

საქართველოს განათლების, მეცნიერების, კულტურისა და სპორტის სამინისტრო, გ. ჩუბინაშვილის სახ. ქართული ხელოვნების ისტორიისა და ძეგლთა დაცვის ეროვნული კვლევითი ცენტრი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. მეტრეველის მიერ)

XIX საუკუნის საქართველოში მომუშავე მშენებელთა შორის სპარსელები მნიშვნელოვან ჯგუფს შეადგენდნენ. ისინი ცნობილი იყვნენ, როგორც აგურით შენების აღიარებული ოსტატები. მათ არსებითი წვლილი შეიტანეს ადმინისტრაციული შენობების, ყაზარმების, საავადმყოფოების, ქარვასლებისა და საცხოვრებელი სახლების მშენებლობაში. სპარსელ ოსტატთა საქმიანობის მეორე სფერო ინტერიერების გაფორმება იყო. ისინი იყენებდნენ სეფიანთა და ყაჯართა დროის დეკორატიული ხელოვნების მდიდარ რეპერტუარს – ნაძერწ ორნამენტს, მხატვრობას, სარკეებს. მათ დამკვეთთა შორის იყვნენ მაღალი რანგის მოხელეები, მდიდარი ვაჭრები, წარჩინებულები და რუსეთის სამეფო ოჯახის წევრებიც კი. „სპარსული სტილის“ ინტერიერების შემკობაში წამყვან როლს სპარსეთიდან მოწვეული ოსტატები ასრულებდნენ, თუმცა იყვნენ ადგილობრივი ხელოსნებიც. სპარსელები ასევე ჩართულნი იყვნენ ჰიდროტექნიკური ნაგებობების – არხების, ჭების, კაშხლების მშენებლობაში. XIX საუკუნის I ნახევარში სპარსელი მშენებელი ოსტატების საქმიანობის არეალი აღმოსავლეთ საქართველოთი იფარგლებოდა. მათი უმეტესობა თბილისში მუშაობდა. მომდევნო ათწლეულებში, სპარსეთიდან მასობრივი ემიგრაციის კვალდაკვალ, მათი ჯგუფები შავიზღვისპირა ქალაქებშიც – ბათუმსა და ფოთშიც გაჩნდა.

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