

On Similarity of Perception of Celts and Peoples of Caucasus

კელტებისა და კავკასიელების წარმოდგენების მსგავსებისათვის

Ketevan SIKHARULIDZE *

ქეთევან სიხარულიძე*

Abstract

The article covers the brief history of migration of Celts to the European Continent. It is mentioned that the Irish are their direct descendants and thus, Celtic mythology and religious perceptions have been maintained in Irish sagas best of all. The tradition according to which Celts used to cut off and keep the enemy's head is emphasized. Similar custom of the Caucasus population is described and an assumption is made that similarity of these beliefs may be the result of contacts of Celts and Caucasian peoples in ancient times.

Keywords: Celts, mythology, language and culture

რეზიუმე

სტატიაში გადმოცემულია ევროპის კონტინენტზე კელტების მიგრაციის მოკლე ისტორია. აღნიშნულია, რომ ირლანდიელები მათი პირდაპირი შთამომავლები არიან და ამიტომაც კელტური მითოლოგია და რელიგიური წარმოდგენები ყველაზე უკეთ ირლანდიურ საგებშია შემონახული. ყურადღება გამახვილებულია ტრადიციაზე, რომლის მიხედვით კელტები მტერს თავს აჭრიდნენ და ინახავდნენ. მითითებულია მსგავსი ჩვეულება კავკასიის მოსახლეობაში და გამოთქმულია ვარაუდი, რომ ამ რწმენათა მსგავსება შეიძლება კელტებისა და კავკასიის ხალხების კონტაქტების შედეგი იყოს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: კელტები, მითოლოგია, ენა და კულტურა

The name of the Celts and issues related to them attract more and more attention nowadays. This is not surprising as it is thought they have played a great role in establishment of the European civilization. Sufficient literature is available about the Celts but a lot of things need to be established yet. Their name first appears in Greek sources, where they are referred to as "Keltói". Data about the Celts have reached us in writings of the Greek and Roman historians, especially, in the story by Julius Caesar who represents the Celts to us under the name of Gauls. Archaeological findings and monuments of material culture are important as well.

The issue of origin of the Celts – where this Indo-European people who had a common culture and language came from - is mysterious. In 1500-1000 B.C. they occupied the central part of the West Europe and over time they spread over the West European regions: in the East of France, Switzerland, Belgium, North of Spain, the British Isles, etc. Here they assimilated with the local residents. The cultural environment of these regions was also drastically changed. In particular, processing of metal deposits and development of metallurgy begins. Under the influence of the Celts, a social structure was established where the

particular role of chiefs was outlined in whose hands material wealth was accumulated. They encompassed nearly all Europe up to Etruscans and Greeks (Celts, 2008: 11).

The Celts occupied the Iberian Peninsula and mixed with the local population – Iberians, whose language does not belong to the Indo-European group. Some scientists, such as Sh. Dzidziguri, M. Zitsar, Gr. Chantladze consider that Iberians come from the Caucasus and they provide certain supporting arguments on the basis of linguistics and ethnography. It is unknown when the Celts entered the Iberian Peninsula, because the archaeological material of the ancient era is not consistent. The picture becomes comparatively clearer from the 6th century B.C. when the Celt-Iberian culture was established.

The Celts immigrated to, possibly, even intruded the Peninsula before Romans heard the name of Britain. Here they found relatively developed agriculture, metallurgy and trade relations. The Celts improved the agriculture technology. This is proved by archaeological findings.

Some scientists consider that the purest descendants of the Celts are the Irish and the Britons. As we have mentioned, the westward expansion of the Celts reached the British Isles. These were Britons and Goidels. Britons set-

* Ketevan SIKHARULIDZE is Assoc. Prof., Dr. at IBSU

tled in England and Wales, while Goidels – in Ireland in the 4th century B.C. where they became the ruling caste in the short run. The locals were referred to as the “Picts” who were relatives to the Old Iberians. The Irish people later originated from these two ethnic units. The Gallic War and their suppression by the Roman Empire in the 1st century A.D. should be the beginning of fall of the Celts everywhere except Ireland which had never seen a Roman soldier.

The Celtic language spoken in Ireland was referred to as “Gaelic” or “Goidelic” from ancient times, which meant “Irish”. Briton languages represented kin languages to this one (4-5th century inscriptions on tombs are the ancient samples of the alphabet). One peculiarity should be mentioned here. The Celts had their writing system, but they gave advantage to oral speech. Possibly, it was done to take care of the sacral knowledge possessed by Druids to avoid its falling into hands of others and having a deplorable outcome. It is known that the Celts possessed knowledge of nature and its mystic forces. At the same time, folk tradition (myths, epic compositions, sagas) was the best means to maintain them. Indeed, all we know about the Celtic mythology and sagas, is mainly saved in the creations of bards. The religion and perceptions of the Celts were saved by the Irish best of all. The early Irish epics are the echo of the ancient Celtic sagas and mythology. These sources as well as the data of old historians and archaeological material allow us to talk about the beliefs, perceptions and mythology of the Celts. Diverse perception of natural forces was reflected in their poetry but at the same time their beliefs bore elements of violence and wildness. According to sources, Celts used to sacrifice humans, mainly children in order to receive gratitude of the forces of nature and receive a crop yield from them.

Based on the history of these tribes, it is not surprising that relations of the Celts with other old peoples were especially reflected in their beliefs and perceptions, as generally there are many universal images and motives in mythology. I think, that research in this direction promises a lot of interesting things. In this article we will cover two issues in which similarity between religious notions of the Celts and peoples of Caucasus origin is seen.

Celts were brave warriors, they often entered the battlefield naked, attacked and stupefied the enemy with outcries. They hunted for heads of the enemy and thus won a name for themselves (Celts, 2008: 77). Diodor the Sicilian in his composition “Historical Library” provides us with such data: “The Celts have long swords, they cut heads of their enemies off and hang them over the horse neck and put them at the entrance when bringing home. They raise the bloody plunder high, so that everybody can see it and afterwards they sing “pean”, i.e. the victory song. They keep the cut off heads of the most famous of the defeated enemies in cedar oil, in order to proudly show them to oth-

ers later” (Diodoros Sicillus, book V, 64-65).

This custom is based on the belief of the Celts in the afterworld. According to their perception, the head was the place of soul. If the enemy’s head was cut off, it meant that the soul and the body would be divided and the enemy would never become alive. From here we should conclude, that the Celtic religion recognized continuing of life in the afterworld and the revenge of the worldly enemies in the afterworld.

The custom based on the similar perception has been maintained in the Caucasus until recently. The enemy murdered in Khevsureti, the mountainous area of the Eastern Georgia was cut off the right arm which was hung above the door of the house to be seen by everybody. The more right arms were hung on the door of the man’s house, the more his bravery was appreciated, but another thing was more important. According to the perception of the Khevsurians, the enemies used to meet each other in afterworld and continue to fight until the final victory. The warrior with a cut arm could not fight with his opponent and remained defeated forever. One custom of the Kists is an echo of similar perceptions. If the murderer of a close person was caught, the Kists used to sacrifice him to the murdered – murder him on the grave of the murdered. They used to slowly stab a knife in his throat and actually cut his head off. If the victim would show fear, it was believed that he would become a permanent slave of the person murdered by him in the afterworld (a similar story is depicted by Vazha Pshavela in his poem “Guest and Host”).

The Scythians also had the custom of cutting off parts of enemy’s body. According to Herodotus, the Scythians used to cut off the arm to every tenth murdered and throw them high with outcries of victory. It is unknown whether they kept the cut off right arm (Herodotus, I- Clio, 216).

Perceptions of the afterworld are encountered in mythology of many peoples but cutting off parts of enemy’s body for the purpose of alteration of the afterworld is met only with the Celts and peoples of the Caucasus.

The Celts and peoples of the Caucasus have one more peculiarity of religious life. According to old sources, the Celts are animists and can see the Lord in everything which exists in the nature, but they do not construct churches, do not make idols, do not worship any religious icons. They revere Gods in the open air, in such natural places as woods, swamps, and rivers.

There is a similar situation in the religious life of peoples of the Caucasus. The 19th century researchers emphasized that the mountain residents of the Caucasus did not have chapels and the hieratic service was carried out predominantly in the open air. The situation did not significantly change even later. The deities of the ancient mytho-religious systems in the Caucasus personified the earth and nature. There were no hieratic structures and hieratic service was carried out in the open air – in small

woods, near the mountain or on the mountain slope, on the top of the mountain, because any place was deemed sacred. They worshipped stone images which stood in the open air where the space was not encircled. It is noteworthy that this ancient ritual practice was so intimate to the Caucasians that even in case of more developed religions, where deities had chapels and hieratic service performers, the majority of rituals were performed in the nature, in the open air again (Sikharulidze, 2006: 244).

The above-mentioned customs are connected with such important issues as religious views, realization of the world, interrelation of this world and the afterworld, and the form of deity worship. As we have seen, the Celts and peoples of the Caucasus used to have homogenous perceptions regarding these issues, which as a rule is the result of contacts of peoples and is not explained only by typology. In this regard, we should assume that the Celts and the peoples of the Caucasus met each other in a certain period of history.

Here I will quote a vast citation from Zviad Gamsakhurdia's article *The Old-Irish Saga and Mythos*: "After the Celts occupied the West European territories, they moved to the Balkan Peninsula, crossed Hellespont and conquered Thrace. Afterwards, they passed through Asia Minor, turned to the north, passed through Colchis, the entire Black Sea coast, moved to the Scythians and mixed with them. Certainly, the march of the Celts required a lot of time, especially as they were interested in trade with local population. Therefore, some of them used to stop on this or that invaded place. It may happen that the same happened in Georgia and the Celts mixed with the Georgian population, similar to other places" (Gamsakhurdia, 2010).

It is difficult to say today, how much this assumption corresponds to the truth, and it demands a deeper study than a modest article, but it may happen that the above similarities may be the result of certain cultural contacts of Celts and Caucasians.

References:

- Diodoros: Diodoros Sicillus, *Historical Library*, book V.
- Gamsakhurdia, Z., (2010). *The Old-Irish Saga and Mythos*, President Zviad Gamsakhurdia's facebook notes
- Herodotus, *Histories*, book I-Clio.
- Celts, first Europeans, (2008). Moscow.
- Sikharulidze, K. (2006). *Caucasian Mythology*, Tbilisi.