An interdisciplinary approach to the foodways of Georgia

Introduction

According to a Georgian legend, God took a supper break while he was creating the world. He became so involved in his meal that he by accident tripped over the high peaks of the Caucasus and as a result he spilled his own food onto the land below. The land below blessed with the scarps of Heavens table was Georgia. This article is about a newly started project that has as its working name “Foodways of Georgia”, as the working name indicates the research field is to in a scientific way map out the foodways of Georgia and its origins.

Method and theory

The project id carried out in a highly interdisciplinary manner were different kind of sources are used such as; artefacts, historical written sources (for example, receipts, cookery books, narratives stories, accounts, agricultural texts, lists), photographs (past and present) and oral sources (such as interviews with local housekeepers). As an archaeologist I have learned and been taught to interpret minutiae of humans relics as evidence of lives once lived and as an historian I am well accustomed to work with written sources and photographs as indices of culture. As I see it working interdisciplinary gives a broader, deeper and more complex picture and answer to the asked question/s in a study then just limited oneself to one type of source. Most of the times the different kind of sources does not tell the same story or history to the asked question/s and from my point of view that are what makes working interdisciplinary dynamic. This is especially true for the Caucasus region with its complex pre-history (Bukhrashvili 2003: 226-227).

Culinary art in the life of the Georgians in the past and present is fundamental in the research and by combining different kind of sources it serves the method very well to work interdisciplinary.

The theoretical framework for the research is based on a theory created called “homo gastronomicus”. A lot of factors are of vital importance for the reasons and choices the human being makes in her diet throughout her entire life. In short these factors are on a personal level; need, physique, nourishment, efficiency, edibility, tradition, ideology, technology, availability, distance, economy, regulations, influences (that are professional, commercial and social), geographical and mental borders, philosophy, the five senses, heritage from childhood, social structure, social class, gender, utensils (Söderlind 2005, p 21-47).
An interdisciplinary approach to the foodways of Georgia

A part from that a nation’s gastronomy also consists of factors such as diet, provisions, food stuffs (in different categories), culinary art, cookery and fare. The choices of diet are thus complex and never static. It gets even more complicated due to the fact that the factors mentioned above not necessary have the same meaning for all individuals in the same geographical area. All this factors and contexts constitute the “homo gastronomicus” and can be applied to any period in time (Söderlind 2005, p 21-47).

Survey of the field in short

The research of food and beverage is a field that has been minor in general amongst historians and archaeologist if one looks at it on a grand scale. However, that being said the field is not totally empty on scientific works regarding antiquity and the Middle age areas. Then most important works regarding the antique area has been written by Dalby, Andrew that writes about the antique period in Greece and Imperium Romanun (Dalby, 1996, 2000), he has also written about food in the Byzantine Empire (Dalby, 2003). Dalby is not the only scholar that has paid attention to the cuisine of antiquity, worth mentioning in the field is also Grottenelli & Milanos (2004) work on what role food played for the identity of humans in antiquity, Garnseys work (2002) on how food reflected the different social classes during the time, Wilkins & Hill (2006) large and general work on what was eaten in Greece and Rome and on the same theme Alcocks (2006) and Brothwells (1998) works on distribution of food stuff as an overview in the classical world. On the same topic but with a different angel are the works of Faas (2003) and Slater (1991) that deals with the actual eating and dining of the foodstuff. The cuisine of the classical and antique area had a major impact on the local cuisines all over Europe during the Middle Ages which has been proved by several researchers (Adamsson, 1995, 2002, 2004, van Winter, 2007, Scully, 2007, Redon, Odile, Sabban & Serventi, 1998, Bober, 1999, Elliot, 2004, Bhide, 2003). Very little has been done in Georgia in the field of food and beverage, worth mentioning here is the work by Bukhrasvili (2002, p. 33-36) that deals with food techniques of the central Transcaucasian populations of the mid- 3rd millennium B.C.

Why study Georgia from a culinary and gastronomic perspective?

Georgia (საქართველო, Sakartvelo) is a transcontinental country in the Caucasus region, situated at the dividing line between Europe and Asia. The country’s geographical location with borders to the Black Sea, the modern Russian Federation, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, has meant that through pre-history and history, it has been a crossroads between the West and the East.
Due to its location, the country has been invaded several times over the course of history, by, for example, the Greeks, Persians, and the Ottomans, to name but a few. The invasions mean that much of the antique and Islamic worldview still exists at the country’s borders—which is a unique cultural situation. The invasions have also left their footprints on Georgia’s food- and drinking traditions and habits. This has resulted in the existence of many different gastronomical and culinary branches in the foodways of Georgia today.

The research is still in its infancy and in this paper, the staple food that is most precious to Georgians today will stand as an example of what kind of information that can be reached if one works in an interdisciplinary way, namely wine.

Georgia was one of the earliest Christian countries in the world which has afforded wine a certain role in the transition from pre-history into the Christian era. Wine still holds a very special place in the hearts and minds of the Georgian people.

**Wine**

The beginning of human civilizations is closely connected to the development of agriculture and the history of cultivated plants, and Georgia played a crucial role in this process. One of the reasons for that is that wine culture in Georgia can be traced to early prehistoric times (Rusishvili 2007, p 5, 13). The research of linguists such as T. Gamkrelidze and V. Ivanon indicates that the root of the Indo-European term for ‘wine’ - \textit{u(e/o)} tano which means wine – might derive from the Georgian word \textit{Rvino} (Gamkrelidze, 1984, p 647, 649-651). These linguists are of the opinion that the word would have been transferred into the Proto-Indo-European language before this language started to separate into its various branches in the fourth millenium B.C. The separation transformed the word in different ways, leading to the English ‘wine’, Italian ‘wino’, and Russian ‘vino’, to give but a few examples (Gamkrelidze, 1984, p 649-651, Mcovern, 2003, p 33-34).

The archaeological discovery of cultivated vines in Georgia supports the linguistic theory of the origin of the word ‘wine’. Cultivated grape pips have been found on the archaeological site ‘Shulaveris Gora’ (situated in the trans-caucasus region of modern Georgia).

The site is dated to sixth – fourth millenium B.C. and belongs to the Shulaveri-Shomu Tepe chalcolithic culture (Kkushnareva, Chubinishvili, 1970, p 170). Even if there is a large time span for the culture itself \textbf{C14} (Radiocarbon dating is a radiometric dating method that uses (\textsuperscript{14}C) to
determine the age of *carbonaceous* materials up to about 60,000 years old) analyses of the cultural layer where the pips were found gives a dating of 6625±210 years millenium B.C (Kkushnareva and Chubinishvili, 1970, p 170). At other sites belonging to the Shulaveri-Shomu Tepe culture a ceramic vessel which had ornamentation in relief was found. The ornamentation appears to show grapes and could very well be the earliest ‘label’ for grapes and wine that it is known of today. In the vessel also sediment was found that after analysis showed too consisted of wine residue (Hansen, Mirtskhulava, Guram 2007, p 13-19, Chilashvili, 2004, p 47-9. Soltes, 1999, p 58-59).

After the initial evidence of cultivated grapes and of wine-making. cultivated grape pips were found in many other archaeological sites dating to the Bronze Age, Antiquity, and the Middle Ages. This indicates a situation of continuity in the cultivating grapes of Georgia (Rusishvili, 2007, p 13-35). It is not until the Bronze Age that table grapes for eating are found which indicates that humans in the earlier chalcolitic societies cultivated vines and grapes for wine-making and not for eating. Wine was, therefore, the primary reason why the vine was cultivated ( PhD, N. Rusishvili, personal communication, Center for Archaeological Studies of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2008-10-23).

It is not only grape pips that appear in the archaeological sites that can be linked to wine. At a site belonging to the Trialeti Culture (third – second millenium B.C.) a superb example of toreutic art, a silver wine cup richly decorated, was found. This cup has become known as the “Silver Cup Of Trialeti” (Kkushnareva, and Chubinishvili, 1970, p 16). There is ongoing debate about what the scene depicted on the cup means. Some researchers state that it is a depiction of the God Mithra surrounded by worshipers, and of the tree of life. Others, however, are of the opinion that the depiction is that of the God Mithra surrounded by hops and worshipers drinking haoma (Kuftin,1941, p 84, Jafaridze, 1981, p 15, , 2004, p 67-73.). Mithra means ‘contact’ or ‘pact’ and these terms are closely associated with a God known among the Persians around 1200 B.C. Mithra was understood as a personification of the sun and a God of justice. The God Mithra is often described as a forerunner of the God Mithras who became known as a very important God in Greece and Rome during Antiquity. The people of Georgia worked not only in silver during their middle Bronze Age period; they also mastered the art of working in gold as is evident from the discovery of a wine cup made of a gold sheet dating from that period. The cup, which has a double wall and hollow legs, is richly decorated with sardonic, lapis lazuli, red jasper, agate, and amber stones. The cup is a stunning example of glass- pasted filigree work (Japhardidze, 1981, p 52).
During an archaeological excavation in 2006 (Mtskheta, the old capital of Georgia) a small bronze figurine depicting a ‘Tamada’, holding a drinking horn in his right hand, was found. The figurine is dated to the beginning of first millennium B.C (Japaridze, 2006, p 23). To this day; the Tamada is the toastmaster at banquets or special dinners in Georgia. The occasions on which the Tamada is present are called ‘supra’ (table). The Tamada’s main task at the supra is to salute the toasts. The Tamada is elected at the beginning of the supra and it is considered a great honour to be so selected for this function (Goldstein, 1999). A supra goes on for hours and the Tamada gives the toasts in a special order. The first toast is for the host and his family; thereafter follows a toast for the mother country of Georgia, then toast to the memory of the deceased heroes of the country and families of Georgia, followed by a toast to parents (especially mothers), friends, relatives, and the future of Georgia, to name a few of the toasts performed at a supra. Usually the guests empty their wine glasses on each toast and the glasses are filled again for the following toasts. No wine is drunk between the toasts. When the Tamada has given the last toast and rises up from the table the banquet or dinner, this is a signal that the event is over.

A special kind of artifact known as a ‘kvevris’ has been found in the course of many excavations. A kvevri is a wine vessel which became known as an amphora during Antiquity in Greece and the Roman Empire; In Georgia, however, this kind of vessels has always been termed ‘kvevris’ and still is. It is known from sites that can be dated as far back as Antiquity, that the kvevris was placed up to its neck in the ground and then filled with grape juice. The kvevris was sealed with a lid and the juice was left to ferment. The wine-farmer looked after the fermentation process until the wine was ready. The wine was then transferred to bags made of animal skins. In Georgia, there is no tradition of carrying wine in kvevris; skin bags have been used for this purpose since antiquity – perhaps even at an earlier period also. There are many reasons for this, including the fact that it was easier to carry a skin bag full of wine on one’s back than to transport a hard kvevris. Furthermore, the skin bags did not break as easily as the kvevri did during transportation on ships or in chariots. The kvevris was mainly used for during the fermentation process of the wine. However, it is evident from several archaeological sites that, during Antiquity the kvevris were also used for non-cremation burials (Chilashvili, 2004, p 91-105).

Georgia was one of the world’s first Christian countries, and dates such as 337 A.D. and 319 A.D. have been put forward for the country’s adoption of Christianity (Tarchnisvili, 1953, p 572). Georgia’s conversion
An interdisciplinary approach to the foodways of Georgia

to Christianity is closely linked to St. Nino. According to one tradition, St. Nino was from Kolastra, Cappadocia (in today’s Turkey) and she was a relative of St. George (the patron saint of Georgia). She was said to have come to Georgia from Constantinople. Other sources claim that she came from Rome, Jerusalem or Gaul. According to legend, St. Nino saw the Virgin Mary in a dream and she told Nino that she should enter Georgia with a cross made of the wood of vine stocks. When Nino woke up from her dream she found herself holding two pieces of wood from vine stocks and she tied them together with her own hair. With this cross made of wine she fled Roman persecution in Cappadocia and made her way into Georgia and started to teach Christianity. The legend also tells that she performed miraculous healing and converted the Georgian queen, Nana, and eventually the pagan king, Mirian III, of Iberia. Mirian III declared Christianity an official religion in c. 327 A.D. and Nino continued her missionary activities among Georgians until her death in 338 or 340 A.D (Machitadze, Zakaria, 2006, p 48-52, Wardrop, M./Wardrop, O, 2006, p 12. Tarchnisvili, 1953:572, Lang, 1956, p 13-39).

St. Nino’s tomb is still shown at the Bodbe Monastery in Kakheti – which is also the main wine region– in eastern Georgia. She has become one of the most venerated saints of the Georgian Orthodox Church and her attribute, a Grapevine cross, is a unique cross in the Christian world. Since, according to the legend, it was the Virgin Mary, who told St. Nino to go to Georgia and teach Christianity, the Grapevine cross became a symbol for and of Georgian Christianity.

Wine also plays a very important role in the daily lives of the Georgians (not only in a religious worship) that can be classified as sacred. One example of this is when for example a family is moving from a homestead and there is land connected to it. The family or a member of the family makes sure that a jar of wine is left in the soil and family members come back to attend it (personal conversation, assistant professor Tskvitinidze, Zurab, Illia Chavchavadze State University, Tbilisi, Georgia).

As mentioned earlier in the text, Georgia as a nation has been invaded several times and other times been under occupation; for example under the Soviet era. The politics of the statesmen of the Soviet Union tried to forbid wine in Georgia during a period. This did not turn out very well since the Georgians always found a way to drink wine, both on a day to day basis and at festivas. One way was for example to serve the wine from teapots etc instead of from jars. (Personal conversation, Professor, Licheli, Vachtang, Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia). Even today the Russian government are using wine export as a mean of control.
since there is an embargo against Georgia to export wines to Russia and the Kreml.  

Closing discussion and the future

As mentioned above the research is still in its infancy and a lot of work still remains to be done until all of the foodways of Georgia is mapped out in a scientific way. Even if the research is in the beginning a lot of new questions arise and need to be answered.

An important question which arises and which it may be possible to answer as the research proceeds, is whether it really is hops that are depicted as surrounding the God Mithra on the silver wine cup that dates to the Bronze Age, and whether the God is drinking haoma. If this proves to be the case, it will indeed change what is known to date about the haoma cult – that is, that the cult was closely connected to Mithra in the Persian Empire before the God was transformed into Mithras during antiquity. Many researchers have devoted much effort in trying to find out what the main intoxicating ingredient of the haoma beverage was. Some say that mushrooms (Amanita Muscaria) were used, while others are of the opinion that the original plant would have been a small bush that secreted a strong smell and had bitter leaves. The haoma beverage was a very intoxicating one and was also hallucinogenic. The plant that is in use today among the worshippers and followers of Zoroaster is a different one – which belongs to the Efediner (Peganum Harmala) family. The intoxicating and hallucinogenic effects of this plant are not as strong as its forerunner. If, indeed, the main ingredient in haoma was hops, there must have been some other ingredient in the beverage that gave the consumer the strong hallucinations. What that ingredient was remains to be seen.

Even if the research is still in its early stages, I consider that it is safe to say that the cradle of wine-making is today’s Georgia. This is due to the early discovery of cultivated grapes in complex societies dated to the chalcolitic era in Georgia, and due also to the fact that the inhabitants of these early societies cultivated the vine in order to procure wine for drinking and not grapes for eating, something that took place later – actually in the Bronze Age. It is known from sources written in antiquity that Greece took a great interest in the Kingdom of Colchis – the territory of modern western Georgia (Lordkipanidze, 2000, p 11-12). As a result, Greece colonized the coast of Colchis and established trading posts in Phasis (modern-day Poti), Gyenos, and Dioskuria (modern-day Sokhumi). Phasis and Dioskuria became splendid Greek cities dominated by mercantile oligarchies.

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Role for the inhabitants to start agriculture with vine and grapes. To make that decision in order to have an alcoholic beverage as a result takes a lot of work and was most likely driven by strong needs which faith usually is. The reason for me saying so is that table grapes are not produced until later in the Bronze Age. There is no doubt that the factor economy has been an important part when it comes to wine and vine in the history of Georgia, it is going to be very interesting to see how far back that can be traced. An important factor over time is politics which usually goes hand in hand with economy. That can at least be traced back to the Greek colonies and then it goes like a red thread into modern politics.

The attempt with this article has been to give a contribution to the discussion of working interdisciplinary and I hope by choosing wine as an example I have given a glimpse of what the future holds. If the work carried out so far have not been done in an interdisciplinary way some information would have been lost, such as how the Georgians themselves still kept on drinking wine at times of prohibitions. It would not have been possible and will not be possible in the future to write the whole history of for example wine in Georgia using only one source, a lot of valuable information will be lost in that case. I am looking forward to continue the work and research in Georgia with good faith.

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An interdisciplinary approach to the foodways of Georgia

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An interdisciplinary approach to the foodways of Georgia

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It is known that at least since antiquity wine was left to ferment in *kvevris* that had been placed up to its neck in the ground. This photo is from a bishop’s palace dating to the Middle Ages. Some wine farmers still use this ancient fermentation technique (© Söderlind, Ulrica, 2008).
An interdisciplinary approach to the foodways of Georgia

full size replica of the artifact depicting a Tamada found in 2006. This replica stands as a statue in Tbilisi, Georgia (© Söderlind, Ulrica, 2008).
An interdisciplinary approach to the foodways of Georgia

Grapes waiting to be harvest in the main wineregion in Georgia, Kacheti.
(© Söderlind, Ulrica, 2008).
In Georgia grapes are not only growing on wine stocks, but also on trees. Here grapes from trees are harvest in Guria (© Söderlind, Ulrica, 2008).
An interdisciplinary approach to the foodways of Georgia

Saint Ninos cross made out of branches from winestocks
(© Söderlind, Ulrica, 2006).