

Marjory Wardrop and Guria

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Abstract: This article summarizes the travels of Marjory Wardrop in Guria during her first visit to Georgia in 1894-1895, with reference to material in the Wardrop collection in the Bodleian Library.

Key words: *Marjory Wardrop, Nino Gurieli, Ozurgeti*

One of the most famous English women in the Republic of Georgia is Marjory Wardrop (1869-1909), who translated the Georgian national epic poem, “The man in the panther’s skin” into English. Although her statue – together with that of her brother, Sir Oliver Wardrop – stands in the area of the Georgian Parliament in Tbilisi, she is hardly known in England. This article describes her visit to the region of Guria, in the West of Georgia, in 1895.

Marjory Wardrop visited Georgia only twice in her life. Her first visit was in 1894-5. She travelled with her mother from England, by train and boat, arriving at Batumi in December 1894 [1; 2]. Her brother Oliver was already in Georgia. This is how Marjory described her arrival: “One morning, about the middle of December 1894, after a voyage of thirteen days from Marseilles, I awoke to find our steamer lying outside the port of Batum. The day had just dawned, and the town was veiled in a chilling mist, but from time to time a glimpse might be caught of the high mountains beyond. It was my first glimpse of the land which I had so often pictured to myself, in visions of night as well as in my waking dreams. Since first my interest had been aroused in the Ancient Kingdom of Georgia, in its beautiful scenery, in its brave and handsome inhabitants, in its rich literature and, above all, in its sad yet glorious history, I had longed for the day when I should myself visit those places of which I had read and thought, when I should perhaps meet those poets in whose works I had found so much delight” [3].

After a night in Batumi, Marjory and her mother took the rather slow train to Tbilisi, where she did indeed meet some of those poets – notably Prince Ilia Chavchavadze. En route to Tbilisi, the train passed through the town of Chakvi (which Marjory calls “Chakva”) in Guria, and Marjory had her first sight of both Guria and Gurians: “Skirting the Black Sea for some miles, we reached Chakva, where tea plantations have been lately formed; at the station I was surprised to see about a dozen pig-tailed Chinamen, in their native costumes, mingling in the crowd of picturesque Gurians, who had come to see the train pass through” [2].

The Wardrops spent some time in Tbilisi and then Kutaisi, where they were treated to traditional Georgian hospitality: “The Georgians love guests, and hospitality is one of the first virtues in their estimation. Besides their natural love of strangers, they took a special interest in us, for we had learnt their language and had come from England to see them; the friendly and enthusiastic welcome we everywhere received more than compensated for the trying hours spent over the difficulties of their language, and the eccentricities of the Georgian verb” [3].

From Kutaisi, Marjory and Oliver went on to Guria in January 1895, staying in the village of Nigoiti: “[We] went with our kind host to pay a visit to Princess Machutadze at Nigoiti. This lady is English, and, in all the country, she is greatly admired for her goodness of heart. She looks after the peasants on her estate with the utmost consideration, and in sickness or trouble all go to her for advice and comfort. Her children speak English quite fluently, as well as Georgian. Here we were hospitably entertained by Princess Machutadze and her husband” [3].

The Princess referred to by Marjory was the wife of Prince Dmitry Machutadze, who had married an English woman called Hannah Tarsey. Hannah was the daughter of the gardener at Windsor Castle and in 1866, aged 19, she had gone to Russia to be the governess to the children of Count Leo Tolstoy¹ [4]. Whilst there, Hannah had introduced the Tolstoy family to both Christmas pudding and Yorkshire pudding. In 1872, Hannah had left to become governess for Sonya Tolstoy’s sister, who was living in the Caucasus. Hannah then married Prince Dmitry Machutadze [5, pp. 203-4], with whom she successfully managed the Machutadzes’ sheep-cheese business [6, Chapter 24]. After visiting her, the Wardrops continued their travels in Guria: “From Nigoiti we made an excursion on horseback to Jumati, a monastery up in the mountains, the burial place of some of the rulers of Guria. It was the beginning of January, but everywhere was spread a rich carpet of Christmas roses, snowdrops, violets, primulas and other flowers. The Christmas roses were especially beautiful, being very large and of a pale

¹ Hannah’s sister Jenny was governess of a friend of Lev Tolstoy’s, Evgenij L’vov, a landowner in Tula.

primrose colour tinged with pink. After riding about five miles in level country, the road, or rather path, began to rise, and for about two hours we travelled among mountains, the panorama becoming more and more extensive until we reached the monastery" [3].

Although Marjory does not mention the difficulties of travel, her brother Oliver wrote in a letter at the time: "The journey was only possible on horseback and I am afraid Madge had quite enough of riding, for we were altogether five hours in the saddle, but she was none the worse, and is in her usual robust health" [1; 2]. Marjory did however describe what she saw when she arrived: "The view from Jumati cannot be surpassed. To the Northward stretches the main chain of the Caucasus, every frosty peak of which can be seen clearly outlined on the azure sky; between lie the rich valleys of the Inguri, Khop, Rion and Tsqal Tseteli. To the Eastward is the Kartli-Imereti chain, while to the South rise the snow clad summits of the Adjara-Akhaltzikhe range, forming a wall to the undulating meadows of Guria" [3].

They were entertained at Jumati by a Father Arsen, "a kind, simple-hearted monk". They then went by train from Lanchkhuti to Supsa, where they stayed with the Guriels: "We spent two days at the winter residence of the Princes of Guria, who ruled the whole province until about the middle of the nineteenth century. It is a family remarkable in many ways. The personal appearance of its members is highly distinguished; among other characteristics they have magnificent heads of hair, dark and wavy. A Gurieli seldom wears a hat, as his locks are sufficient protection from the heat of summer or cold of winter. Their features are exceedingly fine and regular, lighted by an expression at the same time intelligent and wild. One can see that the race has been warlike, and one can readily believe the many tales told of its valour" [3].

Although it was the start of the year, the weather was "very fine and mild". Oliver wrote that "the people say it is because Madge is here" [1; 2]. Following this visit, Marjory kept in touch with the Gurielis; the Wardrop collection at the Bodleian Library in Oxford contains three letters to Marjory from Princess Nino Gurieli [7]. One letter from Princess Nino is dated 19 August 1896 and was sent from the village of Khidistavi, which implies both that Khidistavi was the summer residence of the Gurielis and that Marjory had recently been there, during her second and final visit to Georgia in 1896.

To return to the first visit in 1895, Marjory and Oliver went on from Supsa to the regional capital of Guria, the town of Ozurgeti: "The town is small, indeed it is scarcely more than a large village, but the inhabitants display great literary activity. There is a printing press and many interesting books are published. Here we were the guests of the descendant of the ancient Athabags, or rulers of Akhaltzikhe, who treated us with the greatest hospitality" [3].

Whilst staying in Ozurgeti, the Wardrops were invited by Abbot Ambrose – “a tall fair Kartlian” – to dine with him at the monastery of Shemokmedi. They went there by carriage along the river Bzuji: “We have good reason to remember this river, for our carriage was many times nearly overturned in rattling over its rocky bed, while the water was within about an inch of our feet” [3].

Marjory was apparently was so taken with Shemokmedi’s beauty that she stated in her will that she wished to be buried there [8, p. 423]. When the time came for Marjory and Oliver to leave Ozurgeti, the town gave them a farewell banquet: “I shall never forget the enthusiasm and goodwill of these kind Gurians. Time after time they entreated us to come back soon, and we had countless invitations to country houses. The banquet lasted about two hours, and only came to an end because we were obliged to leave by the evening train for Batum. Among the eighty guests were some very tall men – three of them being about seven feet high. Before departing one of these drank a bottle of native champagne, without taking breath, to our happy journey. At last we drove off amid the cheers of all the assembled guests, who came out on the balcony to bid us good-bye” [3].

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