

STUDIES: RUSTVELOLOGY

The Meaning of *Vepx-i* in Shota Rustaveli's *The Man in the Panther's Skin*

Luigi Magarotto

Professor, Venice University Ca' Foscari

*Foreign Member of Georgian National Academy of
Sciences, Honorable Doctor, TSU*

Abstract: The present work refers to the interpretation of the animal – tiger given in the MPS. According to the author, the name is not related with the modern Georgian tiger.

Key Words: *Vepxist'q'aosani*, “*The Man in the Panther Skin*”, *Rustaveli*, *tiger*, *leopard*, *panther*, *vepxi*.

The literal translation of the title of the famous poem *Vepxist'q'aosani*, written by Shota Rustaveli (or Rustveli as he himself specifies) around 1190s, is “The One clad in the Skin of a Vepxi” and has been translated into all the principal European languages and into Russian as *The Man (Lord, Knight) in the Panther's (Tiger's) Skin*. The difference in the translation between *Man*, *Lord* or *Knight* depends on the aesthetics of the translator, but the meaning remains the same. On the other hand, the translation of *vepx-i* as *panther/leopard* or as *tiger* is of far greater significance. It is true that we are speaking about two animals both belonging to the family of felines, but the panther has a spotted coat, while the tiger has a striped coat. The various translators of *Vepxist'q'aosani* were certainly in contact with informants, but how could it happen that some informants have suggested translating *vepx-i* as *panther* and others as *tiger*? Rustaveli employs the ancient word *vepx-i* (in modern Georgian *vepxv-i*, with the meaning of leopard/panther,

scientifically the same animal, i.e. *Felis pardus*, today *Panthera pardus*)¹. Beginning at least in the second half of the 19th Century, the term *vepxv-i* was reconceptualised in Georgian as tiger, so that many Georgians – as well as some quite harsh critics – think today that the animal to which Rustaveli refers is a tiger.

One of the best renditions of the title in the Russian language was proposed by the famous poet Konstantin Bal'mont (1867-1942), translating *Nosiashchii barsovu shkuru* (The One who wears a leopard/panther skin). Russian has the terms *leopard* and *pantera*, but also *bars* (leopard/panther), from which derives the adjective *barsovyj* employed by Bal'mont. This latter term in all probability entered into the Russian language no earlier than the 16th century from ancient Turkish *bārs*, where the meaning was leopard/panther. The Turkish word *bārs* probably originated from the Hittite root *parš-*, via an Iranian mediation *pārs/fārs*. It referred specifically to leopard/panther because in Turkish tradition the worship of a large feline with a spotted skin was dominant, if not exclusive, as we can see from reliefs and drawings in the village of Çatalhöyük (VIII-VI millennium BC) in southern Anatolia. In the course of time, the lexeme *bārs* began to assume in ancient Turkish the meaning of tiger too, but it entered the Russian language with the sole meaning of leopard/panther [5, pp. 500-507], so there is no ambiguity in Russian about this word.

The opposite happened in the Georgian language with the lexeme *vepx-i /vepxv-i*, which almost certainly changed its meaning as early as the 19th Century. In the ancient and medieval Georgian language, this term did not indicate tiger, but leopard (*Panthera pardus*) or panther, which is – as we said above – the same animal. We can find an irrefutable proof of this assertion in the translation of the Bible, in which the Hebrew word *namer* (leopard/panther), usually rendered into the European languages as leopard/panther, into Georgian was always translated as *vepx-i/vepxv-i*. For example: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the

¹ Even in the presence of local melanisms, as it happens in Java, where the panther is black, the animal is always the same.

leopard shall lie down with the kid”²(Is 11: 6) [8]. In Georgian we have: “Mašin dzovdes mgeli k’ravta tana, da vepxi tik’anta tana ganisuenebdes”³ [11]; or “Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities”(Jer 5: 6), in Georgian we find: “Amistws daesxa mat lomi maynarit, da mgelman vidre saxltamde mosc’qwdna igini, da vepxman iywdza kalakta matta zeda”. Still in Jeremiah (13: 23) we have: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?” and in Georgian we find “Uk’uetu cvalos etiop’elman t’qavi twisi da vepxman sič’releli misni”. A final example: in the *Song of Solomon* (4: 8) there is: “Come with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon: look from the top of Amana, from the top of Shenir and Hermon, from the lions’ dens, from the mountains of the leopards” and in Georgian we find: “Moved, sdzalo, Libanit, moved Libanit. Moxwde da c’armohvlo dasabamit sarc’munoebisat txemsa zeda Sanarisa da Ermonisasa saqopeltagan lomtasa da mtatagan vepxtasa”⁴.

In support of what we are saying we can find encouraging examples in translations in Rustaveli’s time of literary works from Persian into Georgian, for example *Visramiani* (*Visramiani. The Story of the Loves of Vis and Ramin*). Translated in the mid-12th Century, about one century after the creation of the original Persian poem *Vis o Rāmin* (Vis and Rāmin) by Gorgani, we notice that the Persian word *palang* (leopard/panther) is always translated with the term *vepx-i*. For example: “Dzalad da gulad – vita lomi, sapicxed – vepxisaganca upicxesi” [15, p. 11](“In

²All quotations are from the *King James Bible. Authorised Version* -

<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Deuteronomy&chapter=14&verse=4> - retrieved 2.01.2015.

³We do not quote in Georgian the Bible from the last translation, *Biblia*, “Sakartvelos Sap’at’riarko”, Tbilisi 1989, but from *Mcxeturi xelnac’eri* (Ek’lesiast’e, Sibrdze Solomonisa, Keba Kebata Solomonisa, C’inasc’armet’qvelta C’ignebi – Esaia, Ieremia, Baruki, Ezek’ieli), “Mecniereba”, Tbilisi 1985.

⁴In this case the English translation differs from the Georgian with regard to the expression “from the top of Amana”, which we do not find in Georgian. The Georgian version of the Bible closely follows on the *Septuagint*, where we do not find “from the top of Amana”.

strength and courage like a lion, in fierceness fiercer than the panther”) [16] or “Guloanni mindorta šigan lomtaebr iqvnes da mtata šigan picxelisa vepxisaebr iqvnes” [17, p. 24] (The heroes in the plain were like lions, and in the mountains like fierce panthers). We restrict ourselves to just two examples because the Persian term *palang* is always rendered by *vepx-i*.

Even in the Georgian of the 17th-18th Century, for example in *Kilila da Damana* (*Kilila and Damana*), a work translated from the Persian into Georgian in the 17th Century, the Persian word *palang* (leopard/panther) was translated with *vepx-i*.

We shall point out one more argument in support of our thesis. In the ancient Georgian, to indicate the *giraffe* (*Giraffa camelopardalis*), the term *aklem-vepx-i* was employed; the term was in use probably until the 18th Century since this lexeme is still attested in the famous dictionary by Sulxan-Saba Orbeliani, compiled between 1685 and 1716 [12]. The word was composed of the lexeme *aklem-i*, camel, and the lexeme *vepx-i*, leopard/panther (in modern Georgian giraffe is *žirapī*). It is the literal translation of the Greek word *kamēlopardalis*, composed in turn of the lexeme *kamēlo*, camel and *pardalis*, leopard/panther. In Deuteronomy (14: 4-5), where all the animals we are allowed to eat are listed, those mentioned are: “The ox, the sheep, and the goat, the hart, and the roebuck, and the fallow deer, and the wild goat, and the pygarg, and the wild ox, and the chamois” [8] or “Ox, sheep, goat, deer, gazelle, roebuck, ibex, antelope, oryx, mountain sheep” [14]. The Hebrew *zemer* (in ancient Hebrew a *hapax legomenon*) is usually identified as the ibex, but it has also been identified as oryx or mouflon and it was translated into Greek as giraffe or *kamēlopardalis*. In the Gelati Bible (*Gelatis Biblia*), clearly translated into Georgian from Greek, the same mistake was made and the term *kamēlopardalis* has become *aklem-vepx-i*. In the last version of the Bible into Georgian we can see that the mistake was corrected and the Hebrew *zemer* was translated as *šveli*, roe-deer (xari, cxvari da txa, iremi, kurcik’i, k’ameči, ğixvi, garetxa, arčvi da šveli) [2].

Georgians defined therefore the giraffe with a common name modelled on the Greek word because its body looked like a camel and its skin or fur was spotted or patched as a leopard/panther [3, p. 270-276; 10, p. 354-360]. At this point, it is quite clear that, following

the tradition of Alexandrus in *The Iliad* (“When they were close up with one another, Alexandrus came forward as champion on the Trojan side. On his shoulders he bore the skin of a panther”) [6, Book III, 17] and Menelaus (“Neither could Menelaus sleep, for he, too, boded ill for the Argives who for his sake had sailed from far over the seas to fight the Trojans. He covered his broad back with the skin of a spotted panther”) [7]⁵ in *The Iliad*, the skin borne on the shoulders of the Rustavelian hero is that of an animal called *vepx-i*, but spotted as a leopard/panther and not striped as a tiger [9, pp. 59-61].

Finally it should be remembered that no medieval reader would have had doubts about which animal Rustaveli meant by the term *vepx-i* since in the miniatures that we see in the manuscripts of *The Man in the Panther's Skin* (albeit dating back only to the centuries 16th-17th), the hero Tariel is always depicted bearing on his shoulders the skin of an animal spotted and not striped. Even in the illustrations by the different painters that accompany the poem in various printed editions, we find the unknown knight, who bears on his shoulders a skin of a spotted animal and this tradition continues at least until the pictures of the Hungarian painter Mihály Zichy (1827-1906). In any case, in the 20th Century the Georgian painter Sergo Kobuladze (1909-1978), illustrating Rustaveli's poem, paints a knight having his back covered with a skin of a cat striped and not spotted. Why this radical change in the interpretation of the cat? The fact is that at least from the beginning of the 20th Century the lexeme *vepxv-i* no longer maintains its ambiguous meaning of leopard and tiger, but assumes only the meaning of tiger and today for every Georgian *vepxv-i* just means tiger. The Georgian painter Sergo Kobuladze interprets the animal whose skin the knight wears on his shoulders, with the linguistic perception of a Georgian man of the 20th Century.

In his work *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius the Areopagite, the theologian so beloved by Rustaveli, after listing the properties according to which the angels are sometimes represented by a lion, an ox, an eagle or a horse, concludes “the sacred explanation of the Divine representations of the Heavenly Minds through wild

⁵ *Ibidem*, X, 29. In both quotations the lexeme employed by Homer is *pardaleē* (skin of leopard/panther).

beasts” [4, Book XV, 7] asserting that it would be possible to “adapt the particular characteristics of the aforesaid living creatures, and all their bodily representations to the Heavenly Powers, upon the principle of dissimilar similitudes [...] referring all the sensible perceptions, and many parts of irrational beings, to the immaterial conceptions and unified Powers of the Heavenly Beings” [7]. He explains that the representation of angels by the figures of beasts is not dangerous for the human being as it avoids the risk that he will be mistaken about the true nature of what is concealed behind the symbol.

In the symbolism of the panther described in the *Physiologus*, it is a close friend of all animals and is the only enemy of the dragon and the snake, symbols of the devil:

The panther is a quiet and most exceedingly mild animal. If, however he has eaten and is satisfied, he falls asleep immediately in his lair and arises from his sleep on the third day (like our Saviour). If the panther awakens from his sleep on the third day, he roars out in a loud voice and many a pleasant fragrance issues from his voice. Those who are far away and those who are near, hearing his voice, follow its pleasant fragrance. Our Lord and Saviour rising up from the dead became a pleasant fragrance for us [cf. II Cor 2: 15], peace for those who are far away and those who are near [cf. Eph 2: 17] [13, p. 42].

Even Aristotle knew about the special scent of the panther that attracted animals, for he writes:

They say that the panther has found out that wild animals are fond of the scent it emits; that, when it goes a-hunting, it hides itself; that the other animals come nearer and nearer, and that by this stratagem it can catch even animals as swift of foot as stags [1, Book 9, 6].

Bibliography:

1. Aristotle, *The History of Animals* (translated by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson), Book 9, 6. http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/history_anim.mb.txt (retrieved 3.01.2015)
2. *Biblia*. “Sakartvelos Sap'at'riarko“, Tbilisi 1989/ბიბლია. „საქართველოს საპატრიარქო“, თბილისი 1989.
3. Caišvili, S., “Vepxi' da 'giki' Vepxist'qaosanši“, Šota Rustaveli – Davit Guramišvili“. *Nark'vevebi dzveli*

- kartuli lit'erat'uris ist'oriidan*. "Mecniereba", Tbilisi 1974/ცაიშვილი, ს., „ვეფხი“ და „ჯიქი“ „ვეფხისტყაოსანში“, შოთა რუსთაველი – დავით გურამიშვილი. *ნარკვევები ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორიიდან*. „მეცნიერება“, თბილისი 1974, გვ. 270-276.
4. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, Book XV, 7. http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_13_heavenly_hierarchy.htm#c15 (retrieved 3.01.2015)
5. Gamkrelidze, T., Ivanov, V., „Indoevropskij jazyk i Indoevropcejcy“. *Rekonstrukcija i istoriko-tipologičeskij analiz prajazyka i protokul'tury*, II. "Izdatel'stvo Tbilisskogo Universiteta", Tbilisi 1984.
6. Homer, *The Iliad* (translated by Samuel Butler), Book III, 17. <http://classics.mit.edu/Homer/iliad.mb.txt> (retrieved 3.01.2015)
7. Ibidem, Book XV, 8.
8. King James Bible. Authorised Version. <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/book.php?book=Deuteronomy&chapter=14&verse=4> (retrieved 2.01.2015)
9. Khintibidze, E., *Rustaveli's „The Man in The Panther Skin“ and European Literature*. "Bennet & Bloom", London 2011.
10. K'obidze, D., "Vepxis" sak'itxi, in Visramianis sak'itxebi". *Kartul-sp'arsuli lit'erat'uruli urtiertobani*, I. Tbilisi 1983./კობიძე, დ., „ვეფხის“ საკითხი, „ვისრამიანის“ საკითხები, *ქართულ-სპარსული ლიტერატურული ურთიერთობანი*, # 1. თბილისი 1983. გვ. 354–360
11. *Mcxeturi xelnac'eri* (Ek'lesiast'e, Sibrdzne Solomonisa, Keba Kebata Solomonisa, C'inasc'armet'qvelta C'ignebi – Esaia, Ieremia, Baruki, Ezek'ieli). "Mecniereba", Tbilisi 1985./*მცხეთური ხელნაწერი* (ეკლესიასტე, იერემია, ბარუქი, ეზეკიელი). „მეცნიერება“, თბილისი 1985
12. Orbeliani, S.-S., *Leksikoni kartuli*, I-II. "Merani", Tbilisi 1991, ad vocem/ორბელიანი, ს.ს., *ლექსიკონი ქართული*, I-II. „მერანი“, თბილისი 1991, ad vocem.
13. *Physiologus* (translated by Michael J. Curley). "University of Texas Press", Austin 1979.
14. *The Jerusalem Bible* (Popular Edition). "Darton, Longman & Todd", London 1974.

15. "Visramiani", *Kartuli mc'erloba ocdaat t'omad*, 3, "Nak'aduli", Tb., 1988. /„ვისრამიანი“, ქართული მწერლობა ოცდაათ ტომად, # 3, თბილისი 1988, გვ. 11.
16. *Visramiani* (English translation by Oliver Wardrop). *The Story of the Loves of Vis and Ramin*. "The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland", London 1966.
17. *Visramiani*, in Ibidem.