

# Snapshot from...



The NSR Forum is delighted to announce a new feature for our website –we'll be regularly posting a brief selection of facts, figures and places about a specific NSR country which we hope will inspire you to learn more about the lands along the New Silk Road. Our first destination is the Republic of Georgia in the south Caucasus.



Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Georgia is heir to a unique and ancient culture whose roots go back to the bronze age and beyond. Perhaps best known as the fabled land of Colchis where Jason and his Argonauts sought the Golden Fleece in Greek myth, Georgia – Sakartvelo to its people – has numerous famous historical, artistic and literary figures, beautiful architecture and scenery, not to mention a superb national cuisine and viticulture.

## Queen Tamar the Great



A scion of Georgia's ancient Bagration royal dynasty – who claim descent from the biblical King David – Tamar presided as queen regnant at the height of the nation's glorious golden age from 1184 to 1213.

Overcoming aristocratic resistance to a reigning female sovereign, Tamar's shrewd and energetic foreign policy saw Georgia reach its greatest territorial extent, reaching from the Black Sea in the West to the Caspian in the east, and from the northern slopes of the Caucasus and south into what is now eastern Turkey. This spread Georgian rule well beyond its traditional boundaries, leading to Tamar being hailed as ""By the will of God, King of Kings and Queen of Queens of the Abkhazians, Kartvelians, Arranians, Kakhetians and Armenians; Shirvanshah and Shahanshah; Autocrat of all the East and the West, Glory of the World and Faith; Champion of the Messiah."

Nor was her reign simply one of military success and political stability – it also saw a outburst of astonishing cultural activity ranging from the flowering of a distinct Georgian style of architecture inspired by Byzantine and Armenian models that had been maturing since the early 12thc, to a boom in secular literature culminating in Shota Rustaveli's epic poem *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* - universally acknowledged as the greatest classic of Georgian literature ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Knight\\_in\\_the\\_Panther's\\_Skin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Knight_in_the_Panther's_Skin)).

With such an impressive regnal record it is unsurprising that Tamar remains an iconic and much loved figure across Georgia today. Indeed she is now an official saint of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Holy Righteous King Tamar!

## Ilia Chavchavadze



If Queen Tamar represents Georgia's medieval golden age, then writer, poet, journalist, lawyer and patriot Prince Ilia Chavchavadze surely stands for its modern renaissance. Born in 1837 into a Georgia that had become apt of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the century, Chavchavadze championed Georgian language and culture during a period of growing russification. Among his best know and regarded literary works are *Happy Nation*, *Is a man a human?!*, *Kako the Robber*, *Letters of a Traveller*, *Oturaant Widow*, *The Ghost* and *The Hermit*.

Heir to an educated and patriotic aristocratic family, Chavchavadze was not simply an advocate of a cultural and linguistic revival, but also, ultimately, of a revived Georgian state and autocephalous church. Unfortunately, this put him at odds with the growing social democratic movement who opposed Georgian nationalism in favour of a socialist commonwealth of nation, including a former pupil of his at the Tbilisi Orthodox seminary he called the 'young man with the burning eyes' - better know today as Josef Stalin.

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Tragically these divisions over Georgia's future would lead to his assassination along with his wife in August 1907 by a gang of six unknown assassins determined to silence such an eloquent and hugely popular advocate of an alternative future for the Georgian nation.

Needless to say his death was viewed as a national tragedy by the Georgian people. Ironically, the Mensheviks, who came to dominate Georgian politics after Chavchavadze's death, would also come to bitterly regret his passing as, after 1918, they swung to supporting national independence in the face of the Bolshevik seizure of power, leading to the short-lived Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921). As with Queen Tamar, he was canonised as Saint Ilia the Righteous by the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1987, clear recognition of his vital role in helping forge the independent Georgia of today.

## Gelati Monastery and Academy



Recognised by UNESCO in 1994 as a world cultural heritage site, the Gelati monastic complex near Kutaisi in western Georgia was begun in 1106 by King David the Builder with the founding of the Church of the Virgin Mary to celebrate a great military victory, to be followed in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries by the churches of St George and St Nicholas.

The central church was burnt down during a later war in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, but restoration work soon began as it became the seat of the Katholikos of Western Georgia and continued until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the country was absorbed by Russia.

The attached Gelati Academy was for centuries a powerhouse of Georgian cultural and intellectual activity, hailed in its prime in the late Middle Ages as a "new Hellas" and "second Athos" and recognised as one of Europe's leading academic institutions. Though the Academy closed down at the end of the Middle Ages and was converted into a refectory, the complex's proud cultural heritage survives in its impressive 12<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>c wall paintings, murals and manuscript collection. It is without question a "must see" for any visitor to Georgia today.

## The Bridge of Peace (Tbilisi)



Georgia's architectural virtuosity is not simply confined to medieval ecclesiastical treasures such as Gelati, the nearby Bagrati Cathedral or the historic sites of the ancient patriarchal capital of Mtskheta. Modern visitors to Tbilisi will be especially impressed by the daring modern design of the 2010 Bridge of Peace spanning the Kura river connecting the old and new districts of the capital. Designed in steel and glass by Italian architect Michele de Lucchi, the bridge is best known for its spectacular light displays that take place every day for an hour and a half at both dawn and sunset. These include waves, sparkling stars and a message in Morse code that spells out the elements of the periodic table! Their designer Philippe

Martinaud sees as a form of communication celebrating "life and peace between people". Most apt for a bridge dedicated to the spirit of peace and cooperation.

## Georgian Wine



It might come as a surprise to many that Georgia is home to one of the oldest viticultures in the world, stretching back at least as far as 6000BC. Indeed some archeologists believe the south Caucasus is where the wild vine was first domesticated in neolithic times. It is then hardly surprising that wine forms an inextricable part of Georgian culture.

With over 500 varieties of grape now in cultivation (though only around 40 are used commercially), Georgia has a greater diversity than anywhere else in the world – which goes along way towards explaining the 150 million litres of wine produced last year in the country and the circa 45-000 hectares of vineyards under cultivation.

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Georgian wine has long had an excellent reputation across the countries of the former USSR that dates back to imperial times. Wine exports totalled US\$74.1 million for the period January-September 2013, representing 3.7% of total national exports. Key markets include Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, with exports to China and Western Europe also expanding.

Georgian wines span the whole spectrum of red, rose, white and sparkling and are divided into 18 Specific Viticulture areas – the local equivalent of Controlled Appellations of Origin. As in Burgundy and Bordeaux, most Georgian wines are a mix of more than one grape – and are classified as sweet, semi-sweet, semi-dry, dry, fortified and sparkling.

The Georgian Wine Society of the UK recommends in particular the following semi-sweet wines; the white Pirosmeni, and the reds Kindzmarauli, Ojaleshi and Khvanchkara, the latter the favourite tippie of Josef Stalin. It goes without saying that Georgian wines have won numerous international awards (Decanter, IWC, etc...) over the years.

To learn more about Georgian wine, the NSR Forum recommends the following sites:

<http://georgianwinesociety.co.uk/>

<http://news.hvino.com/>

<http://www.decanter.com/>