

# Long Journey of Silk

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The State Silk Museum<sup>1</sup> is one of the oldest museums in the country, and its establishment is linked to the colonial policy of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus. If the National Museum of Georgia is the successor of the Caucasus Museum, the Silk Museum was established as part of the Caucasian Sericulture Station. The empire's objective was to investigate the newly annexed territories' resources for further exploitation. An indirect result of this process is the establishment of museums or research centers in Tbilisi.

The colonization of the Caucasus triggered a series of consequent processes at all levels of cultural practices, domestic industry, customs, and daily life. How did the imperialist interest relate to the local potential of sericulture? What was the role of silk weaving in women's lives? How was the history of the field written by Georgian researchers? Only after answering these questions, can we initiate a new discussion about the rich historical heritage on the one hand, and the processes of colonialism and industrialization on the other hand.

To understand Russia's imperialist interests within the context of silk export, it is essential to delve into the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, which constitute only a later segment of the two-thousand-year history of the Silk Road.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France tried to get Persian silk to Marseilles by the shortest route, via the Black Sea. Missionary Pietro Della Valle<sup>2</sup> would report in detail to the Shah of Persia how fast and convenient it could be to export silk across the Black Sea compared to other alternatives available at the time. Pietro Della Valle advised the Shah to export silk to Europe via Georgia, from the Black Sea via the Dnieper and Lithuania-Poland<sup>3</sup>, thus the goods transit route bypassed Russia, which by the 1620s was "buying silk from the English and Flemish" at a high price.

Another missionary, Peyssonnel<sup>4</sup>, who met<sup>5</sup> Heraclius II of Georgia (Erekle II) in Tbilisi in the 1750s, reported to the king that Tbilisi's location made it "the key to all the cities of Persia" for the export of silk to Europe. The activity of the missionaries in Georgia is also related to the silk trade in another way, Catholic merchants in Kutaisi had separate

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<sup>1</sup> It was established in 1887 as a part of the scientific-research and educational center, the Caucasus Sericulture Station.

<sup>2</sup> Della Valle is known to Georgian readers for his published work on Shah-Abbas and his letter to Pope Urban VIII about Georgia and Georgians. *Valle Pietro. Informazione della Georgia data alla Papa Urbano VIII l'anno 1627*

<sup>3</sup> Yase Tsintsadze. From the history of relations between Ukraine and Georgia, 1954, 41-42

<sup>4</sup> French Charles de Peyssonnel

<sup>5</sup> French Trade Capital to Georgia in 18th century

quarters where they sold<sup>6</sup> goods imported, including silk from the Ottoman Empire and Persia. In addition to this, we have an interesting example of the export of locally (in the region of Guria) produced silk cocoons to Marseille by the Georgian Catholic merchant Stefane Tumanishvili.<sup>7</sup> We also find information about the local production of silk in Charden's records.<sup>8</sup>

The export of Persian Silk to the Russian Empire from the 60s of the sixteenth century has been studied<sup>9</sup> by Yase Tsintsadze. His work illustrates how this trading interest was determined by the colonial conquest of the Caucasus by the Russian Empire.

The Russian-Persian export statistics<sup>10</sup> before the conclusion of the Georgievsky Treaty, in 1760-75, show how important the control of silk export routes was for the empire. On the other hand, the possession of provinces rich in silk was an important economic factor<sup>11</sup> in the internal political situation of Iran. In 1763, the ruler of Iran at that time, Karim Khan, allowed the British East India Company to use the port of Bushehr for trade with the Persian Gulf.<sup>12</sup> The Zand dynasty, represented by Karim Khan, was replaced by the Qajars after fierce battles. In such a political situation, the fate of commerce remained undecided, that's why one of the motives for "offering help" to the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti was to create a buffer zone<sup>13</sup> on the Iran-India trade route. The result of the Empire's interest in the export of silk was the establishment of the Caucasus Sericulture Station in Tbilisi in 1887.

However, before the creation of a centralized research center, we have interesting local examples of silk production and export. In particular, Tbilisi newspapers between 1830 and 1831 years reported about the export of large quantities of locally produced silkworms to the Russian Empire by Tbilisi merchants - Tamamshev and Shadinov.<sup>14</sup> Later, we encounter Shadinov among the donors of The Society for the Spreading of

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<sup>6</sup> Z. Chichinadze, trade of Georgian Catholics, 1905, p. 37

<sup>7</sup> Cited work, p. 90

<sup>8</sup> "A lot of silk is produced in Georgia... Silk is taken to Ottoman Empire, Arzrum and other foreign countries, where it is sold at a good price" Chardin J., Jean Chardin's travels in Persia and other countries of the East, translation from French, critical apparatus and comments by M. Mgaloblishvili, Tbilisi. 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Yase Tsintsadze, Agha Mohammad Khan Attacking Georgia, publishing house "Soviet Georgia", 1969. p. 1-64.

<sup>10</sup> Cited work p.42

<sup>11</sup> Funds received from the export of silk were used to strengthen political influence, and this became the reason for the fight between Agha-Mohammed-Khan and Murtaz-Kuli Khan.

<sup>12</sup> See. Jones Brydges, East India Company, XVI, p. 781; Perry, 1979, pp. 259 ff.

Also: East India Company, *Persia and the Persian Records XV-XVII: Factory Records*, India Office (letters from the company's agents at Basra and Bušehr, 1763-79).

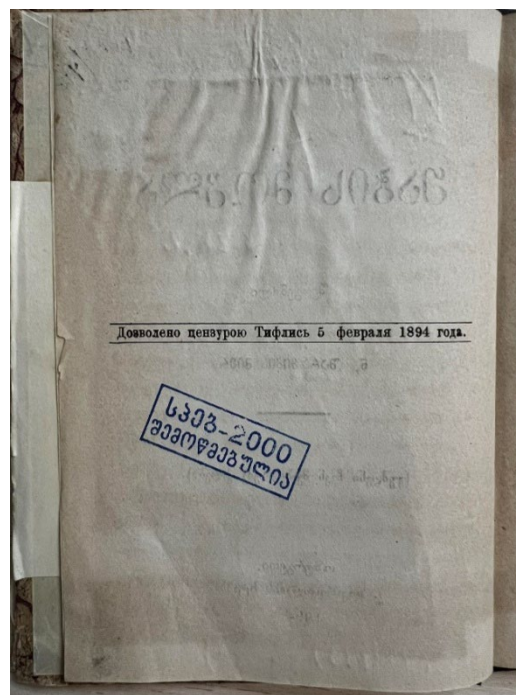
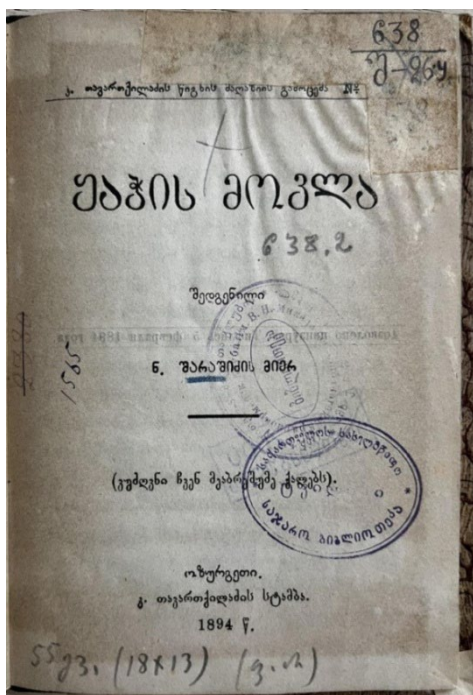
<sup>13</sup> Yase Tsintsadze, Patronage Treaty of 1783, 1969

<sup>14</sup> On January 3, 1831, Shadinov, a citizen of Tbilisi, went from Georgia to Russia for trade and took 70 feet of silk with him. Prosopographic database of Georgia (Tbilisi, 2017). Linguistic Research Institute of Iliia State University. fact 35477; Available at: <https://prosopography.iliauni.edu.ge/factoids/35477-1831-tslis-3-ianvars-saqartvelodan-rusetshi-savachrod>. Access date: 08/26/2023.

Literacy among Georgians namely (SSLAG), in "Iveria" of May 1888, the society thanks Shadinov for the donation.<sup>15</sup>

We cannot continue talking here about the shaping role of The Society for the Spreading of Literacy among Georgians for the country. The fact that the development of sericulture, in order to strengthen the local economy, was one of the tasks of the society is clearly seen from the fact that the schools founded by it often became centers for the study of the field<sup>16</sup>. More importantly, the society funded the translation and compilation of sericulture manuals in Georgian. Let's focus on one of the many such examples (documents on accounting are available in the database of the community of SSLAG).

In 1894, in Ozurgeti, (from where Georgian Catholics first took the raw material of Georgian silk to Marseille a century earlier for sale), [Kotsia Tavartkiladze's](#) printing house published a small manual by Nino Sharashidze's "Caring for Silkworm" (Geo. „ყაჭის მოვლა“) with the funding<sup>17</sup> of the Society for Spreading Literacy among Georgians.



[Nino Sharashidze](#) "Caring for Silkworm", 1894

<sup>15</sup> Prosopographic database of Georgia (Tbilisi, 2017). Linguistic Research Institute of Ilia State University. fact 48579; Available at: <https://prosopography.iliauni.edu.ge/factoids/48579-1888-tslis-maishhi-qartvelta-shor>. Access date: 08/26/2023.

<sup>16</sup> From the "Tsnobis Furtseli" of October 15, 1897, we learn that [Iliko Kiknadze](#) intended to build a silk house for the Kharagauli Parish School and import silk seeds for the students.

<sup>17</sup> See the facts in the Prosopographic database of the Society: <https://society.iliauni.edu.ge/persons/7215-konstantine-kotsia-chitanis-dze-tavartqiladze>



The work is dedicated to silk breeder women, information about them is found in the press of the same period. Some of them donate their own silks to SSLAG, while Others present silk produced by themselves at exhibitions.<sup>18</sup> Ethnographic material<sup>19</sup> recorded in the late 1930s also speaks of the special role of silk breeding in women's lives.

The main part of the manual is devoted to the care of the silkworm and the silking material. The text reflects the changes that occurred in the local silk production during the nineteenth century, The author introduces the reader to the new trends in sericulture and uses traditional terms for clarification.

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<sup>18</sup> From the "Tsnobis Furtsetli" of November 5, 1897, we learn that Mariam Gogolashvili received a certificate of commendation for her silk weaving at the horticultural exhibition. Prosopographic database of Georgia (Tbilisi, 2017). Linguistic Research Institute of Ilia State University. fact 52390; Available at: <https://prosopography.iliauni.edu.ge/factoids/52390-1897-tslis-5-noembris-tsnobis-furtsetli-dan-vigebt-ro>. Access date: 08/26/2023.

<sup>19</sup> Materials for the history of domestic industry and handicrafts of Georgia:  
Feikrishvili Sofio, 120 years old, Tokhliauri village

"Merdins (Thin woven silk headscarf, veil, scarf) were woven here in the olden days; The weaving mill was in Manavi. Two women used to weave, and since those two women died, no one has ever woven again. There was a lot of silk produced here, but I have never done it. That was someone else's business. I knew how to knit plain and simple socks.

I was a serf of the Cherkezishvili family. A lady wanted to teach me to read and write together with her daughters. She taught me how to read and embroider various patterns, and handicrafts. Then, I was married off by my parents, my lady took fifteen manats in my training from my fiancé. Tuman returned to me and took five Manats for herself. I don't remember the names of the patterns, it was called a bow for lining an underwear.

Eva Mzareulashvili 67 years old, Dighomi

"I used to weave colorful socks near the hearth;/ კერის პირზე... on those colorful socks, I would embroider patterns of cherries with a silk thread... I had six apprentices in the winter, and twelve in the summer. If I were to marry them off, the groom should have given me 15 manats. Then I would give the groom a Bagdad (in this case large size Men's silk handkerchief), a green one. Before they paid me a master's fee, I stood in front and didn't let them move. I used to make them wave the Arshias (laces) and make them work with Basma on veils (Basma - a white sticky paint that is used to paint on fabric). I also used to make them knit colorful socks, with all kinds of threads and they bloomed in various colors".

"Upon reading this little book Many of our old silk breeder women may have remarked that In the old days, they didn't take care of and clean the silkworm meticulously, yet the results were flawless. This is indeed a valid observation. However, it's important to remember that the silkworms during that era were of a local breed and thrived harmoniously in the local environment.

In the textbook, Nino Sharashidze examines the impact of silkworm diseases, which contributed to the decline of silk production in Europe. Nino Sharashidze reviews the the situation of 1850-1890, during which an increase in local production becomes evident (Tbilisi newspapers of that period also testify about this process<sup>20</sup>):

"More commendable silk was grown in those educated countries, which are commonly called Europe. But forty years ago, a terrible pestilence of silkworm appeared in Europe, it spread to the silk production areas of all Europe and finally reached us, then the silkworm began to slowly rot in our country, and finally, the Contagion got so strong here that it almost completely wiped out this useful practice. As we said above, Europe is a highly educated, knowledgeable country. Whatever learning and science there is in our country in our time, everything is invented by Europeans, and all the great learned and scientific men of our time are from Europeans. So, whatever world plagues and misfortunes arise in the country, European scientists are studying and investigating the cause and cure for them, so it was in the case of silkworm".

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<sup>20</sup> From the "Кавказский календарь на 1870 год" published in 1869, we learn that the secretary of the society, Nikolay Prokofivich Sitovsky, presented a plan for the cultivation of silkworms in Transcaucasia by means of the microscopic method developed by Pasteur. The community has selected an area in the garden of the Tbilisi Acclimatization Station for conducting trials.

"Кавказский календарь на 1870 год" published in 1869, informs us that Governor General of Caucasia, Mikhail Nikolozovich Romanov, allocated 1200 manats for experiments aimed at breeding new types of silkworms.

In 1896, Nestor Tsereteli, the head of the first cooperative of Kukhi village Sericulturists, tried to export silk produced by them with the help of Ioseb Kakabadze.

On January 17, 1897, an announcement was published in the "Tsnobis Furtseli", in which it is written that those who want to can buy silkworm seeds produced by the Pasteur system from Sardion Lukas son Lomidze, who also sold worm seeds imported from Ottoman Empire.

According to the "Tsnobis Furtseli" of March 22, 1897, the teacher of the women's school of Signaghi, Kazakhov, intended to grow a large number of silkworms in Signaghi.

As stated in "Tsnobis Furtseli" of July 30, 1898, Bishop Alexander Okropiridze wanted to start beekeeping and silk production in all monasteries of the Guria and Samegrelo regions.

In 1901, more than 8,000 boxes of silk Grena (worm seeds) of Araskhanyants, S. Tadevosiants, Sh. Pashayants, Ter-Zacharyants, Galustiants, and Eduard Block were submitted for inspection at the Caucasus Silk Station.

The text is interesting from another aspect too, Nino Sharashidze emphasizes that Georgian women have been practicing sericulture since time immemorial. According to the unspoken agreement, when there is a verbal or written discussion about history in Georgia, they start from afar - from antiquity, from ancient written sources.<sup>21</sup> This is the case when sericulture is discussed until this day. Fortunately, the information preserved in written sources about silk, which Nino Sharashidze talks about, was later confirmed by rich archaeological material. Almost 2000 years old are the remnants of cotton fabric mixed with silk, which was discovered during the excavation of the ruins of the palace of the ancient Georgian kings in the ancient textile workshop on Dedoflis Gora.<sup>22</sup>

The fact that spinning and weaving have been practiced on the territory of Georgia since ancient times is confirmed by the findings<sup>23</sup> of working tools on the monuments of the Eneolithic and Neolithic periods - Spindles, spindle whorls (weights), loom weight<sup>24</sup>, pins, sack-sewing needles and pins, as well as the remains of weaving looms of the later period.

The rich photo collection of the Silk Museum contains photo documentation of looms and other equipment both of local and European origin, imported for the sericulture station.

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<sup>21</sup> Ancient Georgian embroidery in written sources in archaeological materials and art monuments, Kutaisi, 2017

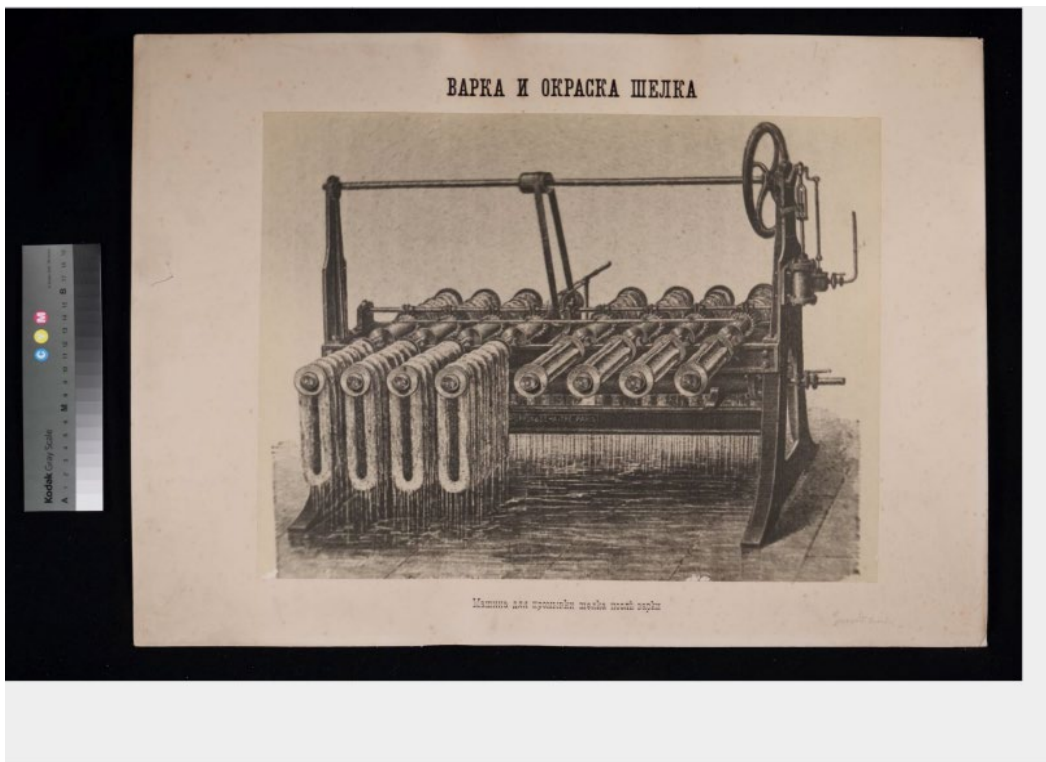
<sup>22</sup> Gagoshidze I., Ancient silk in Georgia, e-journal Online Archeology 2012, N2,

<sup>23</sup> In this regard, it is particularly noteworthy Fragments of a vertical loom and *Sabechuri* (sleeve of a Shirt or dress, Short mantle) found during archaeological excavations at the Ilto settlement dating back to the 3rd millennium BC. Prehistoric textiles from Georgia, 2022, p. 49

<sup>24</sup> *Satsapi* (Geo. საბაპი) - weights for tightening threads on a vertical knitting loom - weights for knitting looms.



Reeling a thread from the cocoons of Bagdad White species on a local loom  
Source: [Silk Museum Photo Collection](#), [IIIF Manifesto](#)



106 of 180 • ხარშვის შემდეგ აბრეშუმის გასარეცხი დანადგარი/A machine for washing silk after boiling

A machine for washing silk after boiling





Photo by Dimitri Ermakov,  
Source: [Prehistoric Fabric from Georgia, 2022](#)

The involvement of The Society for the Spreading of Literacy among Georgians in the creation and translation of sericulture manuals highlights the significance of this industry during the 19th century in Georgia. Furthermore, the state's attempt to establish a monopoly<sup>25</sup> on silk production during the First Republic underscores the economic value of silk.

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<sup>25</sup>According to the newspaper "Sakartvelos Respublika" of December 4, 1919, by the decree of Minister of Agriculture Noe Khomeriki, the building, and the land of Tbilisi Horticultural Schools were transferred to the administration of Tbilisi Cultural and Technological School.

On January 21, 1920, the "Sakartvelo" newspaper published Konstantine Martvileli's letter "About the impending introduction of silk monopoly".

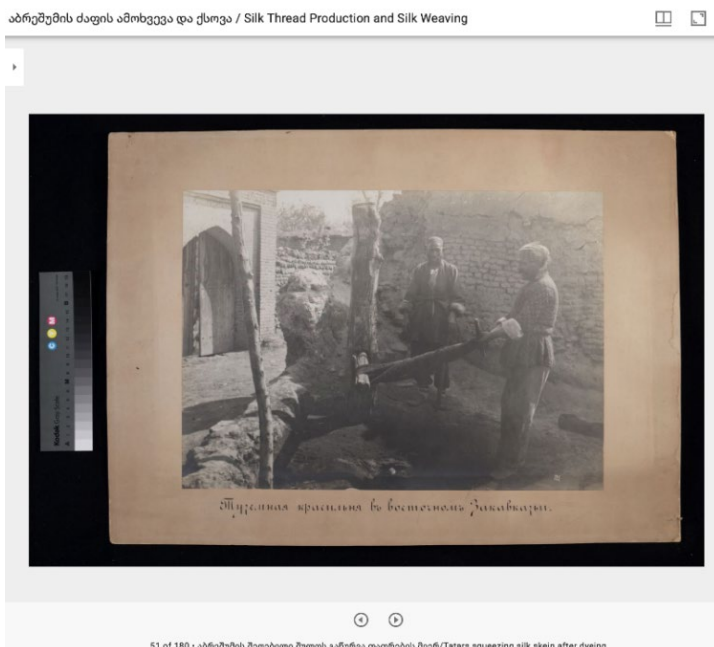
As stated in the "Sakartvelo" newspaper of January 25, 1920, Iason Lortkipanidze, the government representative, bought about 10 million feet of silk seeds and flour abroad.

"Ertoba" of July 6, 1920 reports that the silk cocoon season has begun. The Ministry of Supply undertook to settle the case. Ioseb Kutateladze, a senior specialist in sericulture, was entrusted with practical leadership. He hired the shed of old merchants P and M Gokielis on Kutaisi - Khoni road. where they keep the cocoon. The Eroba (Zemtsvo - was an institution of local government set up during the great emancipation reform of 1861 carried out in Imperial Russia by Emperor [Alexander II of Russia](#)) is buying it.

Following the Soviet occupation, sericulture emerged as a major source of employment for the Georgian population and a significant source of income.<sup>26</sup> However, in the 1960s a widespread outbreak of mulberry disease devastated up to 15 million plants, leading to a catastrophic decline in silk production.

Sericulture, as a branch of the handicraft industry, was a historically important cultural process for the region. Later, during the colonial era, this experience was formalized, and during the era of industrialization, sericulture became a field of mass employment. In 2002, silkworm production in Georgia was stopped. Today, this field is actually a museum exhibit. Based on the stories told above, the Silk Museum can become a space for reflection on the colonial heritage and the results of industrialization.

## Appendix



### Appendix 1

According to August 7, 1920, "Ertoba" the first yarn winding factory established by Sulukhia in Ozurgeti a few years ago had not been working for two years in Guria. It's been a month since the Eroba community started reeling a thread from the local silk cocoons and about 80 people have been employed.

On August 10, 1920, "Ertoba" reports that Kutateladze, the chief representative of the Ministry of Supply, informed the ministry that the buyers were taking the locally produced silk from Sukhumi, Ochamchir, Poti, and Batumi to Constantinople and demanded that it be forbidden to transport the silk by railway without proper permission.

<sup>26</sup> In the 60s of the 20th century, 4.0-4.4 thousand tons of cocoons were produced in Georgia and the cash income amounted to 15.5-16.5 million manats. 100-120 thousand families were employed in silk production, and 5-6 thousand people were employed in the silk industry.



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