

# Understanding Nikoloz Baratashvili's National and Political Vision ("The Tomb of King Erekle")

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## ABSTRACT

*Tomb of King Irakli* is not an expression of Nikoloz Baratashvili's political and national beliefs; it is the point of view of the man to whom the poet dedicated this poem and entered it into the album upon his request. In dedicated poems, the poet always conveyed the words of the person or object to whom they were dedicated. This was his literary method. Therefore, this poem cannot be used as a definition of Baratashvili's national-political beliefs; moreover, during the period of writing this poem, the poet had a completely different point of view in his poetry and personal letters.

*Keywords:* Nikoloz Baratashvili; "Tomb of King Irakli"; Dedicated poems; National-political beliefs

## **INTRODUCTION**

Nikoloz Baratashvili is not only one of the greatest poets but also a distinguished figure of 19th-century Georgia, whose national and political vision has long been studied and appreciated by both Georgian and foreign scholars.

Nikoloz Baratashvili's ideas of national liberation are connected to the national liberation movement of 1832 and to the progressive thinkers led by Solomon Dodashvili. The influence of Solomon Dodashvili – Nikoloz Baratashvili's teacher and spiritual friend – on the poet's life was described in the works of his contemporaries as well as in the works of later figures (Tchitchinadze, n.d., p. 15).

Solomon Dodashvili was courageous enough to share his bold ideas with his students. For example, on June 6, 1828, he delivered a speech at the Gymnasium for Nobles during a public exam, in which he criticized the monarchy and expressed his preference for a republican order (Gatsserelia, 1965, p. 115).

The fact that Solomon Dodashvili, brutally punished by the Empire, died in exile at the age of 31 must have influenced the poet.

## **METHODS**

In addition to the poems and letters of Nikoloz Baratashvili, this work references the letters of Zakaria Chichinadze, Pavle Ingorokva, Ion Meunargia, Guram Asatiani, Akaki Gatsserelia, Giorgi Leonidze, Mikheil Chikovani, Akaki Bakradze, Nestan Sulava, Merab Ghaganidze, and other authors concerning the creative works of Nikoloz Baratashvili. The research also utilizes Shalva Gozalishvili's monograph on the 19th-century Georgian numismatist Mikheil Baratashvili, to whom Nikoloz Baratashvili dedicated his poem.

## **RESULTS**

The article employs historical-comparative, scientific analysis and synthesis, and a pragmatic methodology to determine the relationship between events and facts within a specific historical period. We studied the artistic method of Nikoloz Baratashvili, according to which, in poems dedicated to people or inanimate objects, the poet speaks on behalf of the person or thing to whom the poem is dedicated. During the period of writing the mentioned poem, the poet created texts imbued with the spirit of freedom. He consistently condemns the oppression and conquest of one nation by another, directly opposing the Russian Empire. Great thinkers like Baratashvili do not change their opinions in a short time. This analytical and methodical ap-

proach, along with familiarity with the life views of the poem's addressee, enabled us to reveal the erroneous perception of his poem *Tomb of Tsar Irakli* by Georgian literary scholars.

## **DISCUSSION**

Many scholars (Ingorokva, Gatsrelia, Asatiani, Sulava, etc.) focus on the metaphor and allusion to the evil King who appears in Nikoloz Baratashvili's poem "Meditations by the River Mtkvari" and identify the King with an emperor of Russia (Sulava, 2006, p. 61).

According to studies in the history of Georgian literature, Nikoloz Baratashvili's political orientation is believed to lean towards Russia because of his poem "The Tomb of King Erekle." The poem was written in 1842, the same year that Nikoloz Baratashvili composed two of his poetic masterpieces: "Merani" and "Hyacinth and a Bit," both imbued with the idea of freedom. In that same year, he finished working on his historical poem "The Fate of Kartli," in which he appears to be a strong advocate of freedom and state independence. The fact that the poems "Merani" and "Hyacinth and a Bit," as well as the ideologically contradictory poem "The Tomb of King Erekle," were all created in 1842 was interpreted as the creative technique of a bifurcated Romanticist. However, this interpretation was mistaken from the outset.

A proper national ideology, commitment to the ideas of freedom and independence, and disapproval of Russian influence and, in general, of slavery and colonialism are distinct characteristics of Nikoloz Baratashvili's poetry. These qualities gave rise to a significant notion in 19th-century Georgian literature. One of the most distinguished Georgian scholars, Pavle Ingorokva, expressed a similar view (Ingorokva, 2003, p. 178). According to Akaki Gatsrelia, Nikoloz Baratashvili's epic poem "The Fate of Kartli," as well as his poems "Merani" and "Hyacinth and a Bit," demonstrate that freedom was the supreme form of existence for the poet (Gatsrelia, 1965, p. 142).

Gatsrelia argued that the poems "The Tomb of King Erekle" and "The War of Georgian Noblemen and Peasants" do not fit into the sequence of ideas promoting national freedom. The former seems to preach reconciliation with captivity, and the latter appears to justify militaristic monarchy. However, Gatsrelia was aware of the Caucasian War and the nationalist fervor that motivated Georgians to participate in it. Despite this, he viewed Baratashvili's poem as a call for militarism, which I believe was a mistaken conclusion.

Guram Asatiani noted that the poet's oeuvre did not develop in a linear manner; it showed evolutionary advancement and ultimately appeared to justify King Erekle's

decision and support Russian orientation. According to Guram Asatiani, this is how real historical developments should be described (Asatiani, 1998, p. 209).

We believe that Nikoloz Baratashvili was unwavering in his commitment to the idea of liberty. His poetry does not reflect the dual nature often associated with Romanticism. After all, geniuses do not fit into the narrow confines of literature or era. Nikoloz Baratashvili was sincerely committed to the idea of liberty. However, how can we explain the presence of the poem “The Tomb of King Erekle” – which seems to be a complete anachronism – and the political stance and pathos expressed in it? Why is the poem unanimously considered by almost all analysts, including the most attentive ones (Asatiani, 1998, pp. 200–209), to demonstrate the poet’s Russian orientation and support for King Erekle’s “will”?

Nikoloz Baratashvili dedicated his poem “The Tomb of King Erekle” to a Russified Georgian – Mikhail Barataev – who was born and raised in Russia. In poems dedicated to different people, the lyrical character is not the poet himself but the person (or thing) to whom the poem is dedicated. Mikhail Barataev had asked the poet to write a poem in his notebook along with another poem, “Knyaz Barataev’s Azarphesha.” In the latter poem, the poet expresses the feelings of Azarphesha: “If you fill me up with wine, I’ll fill you with joy; if you have drunk it, may it do you good!” This principle is also evident in the poem “Merani,” where Ilia Orbeliani – Shamil’s hostage – is the poem’s narrator. (Nikoloz Baratashvili explained this in his letter enclosed with the poem and sent to Grigol Orbeliani, noting that women cried while reading it because it was not him speaking in the poem but Ilia Orbeliani).

The expressive style used by the poet in his poems dedicated to different persons or objects suggests that in “The Tomb of King Erekle,” the poet expresses Mikhail Barataev’s ideological and political views. The lyrical character of the poem – “The Tomb of King Erekle” – is Mikhail Barataev.

Who was Mikhail Barataev?

Mikhail Barataev was a Russian bureaucrat of Georgian origin, a descendant of Georgian prince Melkisedek Baratashvili, who had served in King Vakhtang VI’s army and later migrated to Russia. Mikhail Barataev was a Russified scholar who, like other descendants of Georgian emigrants, was a fervent advocate of Russian policy in Georgia.

A Russian statesman, historian, and numismatist, Mikhail Barataev was born on January 25, 1784, in Simbirsk. His father was the Simbirsk governor, and his mother was Aleksandra Choglokova, the daughter of Nikolai Choglovski. Mikhail Barataev’s mother came from a Russified Georgian family who considered themselves heirs of

the Russian Empress Elizabeth (matrilineally). Moreover, during the period of Totleben, one of Mikhail Barataev's relatives participated in a plot against King Erekle with the intention of overthrowing him and conquering the kingdom (Tskhiviloeli, 1891. #11). Almost all of Mikhail Barataev's ancestors held high positions in Russia at various times.

Mikhail Barataev was an acting State Councillor in Russia and a leader of the Simbirsk nobility. He held several military ranks and was an amateur numismatist, the first to study Georgian coinage. On February 17, 1826, he was arrested in Simbirsk for his alleged ties with the Decembrists. However, he was promptly acquitted and released. The same year, he became a State Councillor. In 1835, he started working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in 1838, he became an acting State Councillor. The following year, he was transferred to the Ministry of Finance and later to the Caucasus Customs District, whose head office was situated in Tbilisi. While in Tbilisi, Mikhail Barataev began studying Georgian numismatic artifacts, compiled a unique collection of Georgian coins, and wrote a paper on "Georgian Royal Numismatic Artefacts" in Russian and French.

During his stay in Tbilisi, Mikhail Barataev established close relations with Meliton Baratashvili, who was ten years younger than him, and his family. He noticed that Nikoloz Baratashvili was a gifted young man; he liked him very much and often consulted him while working on his research. Mikhail Barataev often attended literary gatherings with Nikoloz Baratashvili at various homes in Tbilisi. Nikoloz Baratashvili was the heart and soul of these gatherings.

The only thing they might have had in common was their passion for science and the exploration of historical past and antiquities. Nikoloz Baratashvili's perception of his motherland came from the core, from the center of Georgia, unlike that of Mikhail Barataev – a citizen and an acting State Councillor of Russia – who perceived the reality from outside Georgia, from the center of the Empire. This reality was shaped by Georgia's incorporation into Russia and, in fact, by its conquest. Nikoloz Baratashvili was an advocate of the modern state system, republican and liberal ideas, whereas the elderly Russian statesman (a Russian citizen of Georgian origin) was an advocate of imperialistic ideas, assessing the situation in Georgia as a "state of peace" – a heavenly state. Their views were in diametric contradiction to one another.

Nevertheless, Mikhail Barataev should be considered an educated and progressive-minded person of that time; it is likely why he was suspected of having links with the Decembrists (he is considered to be the first Georgian Mason). Due to their shared interest in ancient history, the distant relatives might have built a friendship despite their age gap.

Nikoloz Baratashvili writes about him in a letter sent to Grigol Orbeliani: “He left for St. Petersburg equipped with a vast database about the history of Georgia” (Baratashvili, N. 2012. Letter VIII).

After arriving in St. Petersburg, Mikhail Barataev, equipped with information about Georgian history, got in touch with certain circles in the Academy of Sciences and suggested compiling a catalog of Georgian manuscripts and entrusted Nikoloz Baratashvili with organizing the copies of these manuscripts. In 1842, before leaving for St. Petersburg, Mikhail Barataev arranged a meeting where Nikoloz Baratashvili was introduced to Julie Freiche, a representative of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, during a visit to Tbilisi. On January 13, 1843, Julie Freiche, after arriving in St. Petersburg, wrote in a report to the academy: “I am proud to inform the Academy of Sciences that one of the Georgian poets I had the pleasure to meet during my visit to Georgia, expressed his readiness and desire to prepare the first list of Georgian manuscripts, in case of consent from the Academy, and make copies of the manuscripts selected by the Academy” (Chikovani, 1947, p. 147).

The fact that a then-unknown young poet was entrusted with such a responsible task is considered a merit of Mikhail Barataev (Gozalishvili, 1987, p. 63).

Such attention and appreciation expressed towards the young poet, who felt abandoned by those around him, by an elderly high-ranking official and distant relative, might have invoked respect and reverence in Nikoloz Baratashvili towards Mikhail Barataev. His attitude might have encouraged the hopeless young poet who had lost all hope of succeeding in his personal and social life. Additionally, it should be noted that Mikhail Barataev sometimes wrote poems, albeit in Russian. We know of two of his poems dedicated to Alexander Chavchavadze and his daughter Nino, Alexander Griboyedov’s wife. Their shared passion for poetry might have influenced their relationship. Nikoloz Baratashvili and Mikhail Barataev most likely discussed the topical issue of their time, which was of great concern to contemporary society – the issue of Russian orientation. When Nikoloz Baratashvili wrote his poem in Mikhail Barataev’s notebook, he was expressing the views of the person who asked him to write the poem rather than his own.

It should be noted that Mikhail Barataev had been so busy with developments in his life since July 1842 that he could not visit Tbilisi or fulfill what he had promised to do for Nikoloz Baratashvili (namely, to act as a mediator and ask the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences to offer Nikoloz Baratashvili a job, which might have helped the impoverished poet meet his financial needs). Mikhail Barataev had not inquired about Meliton Baratashvili’s family either, who had been through difficult times. The

brilliant poet and thinker was in such a poor condition that he was obliged to accept any job to make ends meet, and eventually, he died of malaria while working in a disease-ridden territory.

The lyrical character of the poem, which is an example of ode poetry and employs artistic and expressive means unfamiliar to Nikoloz Baratashvili's poetry, and which, unlike his other works, uses a relatively simple and trivial style, praises the advantages brought to Georgia and the Georgians by Russia. This lyrical character of the poem sees a "reality" that the poet himself cannot see and that cannot be found in any other poems by Nikoloz Baratashvili. Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain how the same great poet could simultaneously be the author of "The Fate of Kartli" (Nikoloz Baratashvili had been working on this historical poem until 1844), "Merani," and "Hyacinth and a Bit," and the ideologically contradictory poem "The Tomb of King Erekle." In his letter to his uncle, General Grigol Orbeliani, the poet expressed such bold political opinions that Petre Ushikashvili did not dare to copy them in the 1870s. If Russia had brought Georgia such peace and heavenly conditions that made the poet rejoice in the freedom of his motherland and write a poem like "The Tomb of King Erekle," why would he have been so worried at the same time? Whose captivity did he describe in the poem "Hyacinth and a Bit"? What did he want to express in his poem "Merani"? Why would this undoubtedly greatest thinker of early 19th-century Georgia have changed his national and political views in just a few months or even weeks? Who could have influenced him so profoundly? Could we speak of the poet's volatile or unstable personality? This is something that researchers of his poetry entirely reject!

"The Tomb of Iberia" was the original title of the poem, which the publishers later changed. Russia did prove to be the tomb of Iberia, and who knows, the poet might have meant to express his emotional disposition towards the issue raised in the poem through this single phrase in its title!

It should be noted that the poem "The Caucasus, Beware!" about the Chechen-Dagestan war, written by Nikoloz Baratashvili in 1844, which is usually considered alongside "The Tomb of King Erekle" to highlight the poet's alleged Russian orientation, describes a completely different situation. The reason for Georgia's diligent involvement in the Caucasian War was the country's historical past. The enthusiasm displayed by Georgian noblemen and peasants was comparable to that seen in a patriotic war. By participating in that war, the Georgians – natives of a country oppressed and ruined by Dagestanis for centuries – sought to take revenge for what had been done to their ancestors. The poem has nothing to do with Russia, and the "King" mentioned in the poem (originally "King" was used, but it was later replaced by "Emperor," and

now “King” can be found in all publications) is not a Russian Emperor but King Erekle, who speaks from the sky encouraging Georgian fighters.

“Russia has brought happiness and peace to the Georgian nation”– these words cannot belong to Nikoloz Baratashvili because (a) he must have known that King Erekle did not desire what Russia did: abolishing Georgian statehood and turning it into a part of the Russian Empire; (b) turning Georgia into a part of the Russian Empire did not bring civil peace to Georgia; instead, anti-Russian uprisings followed, and many Georgians died in wars fought by Russia. However, Russified Georgians like Mikhail Barataev, serving the Russian Empire and its interests, had the sentiments expressed in the poem. (c) This attitude and viewpoint are not expressed in any other poem written by Nikoloz Baratashvili; his poetry is imbued with the spirit of national freedom and state independence.

The poem is an example of ode poetry, which is not characteristic of the poet. We believe that Nikoloz Baratashvili used this style to express the sentiments of a committed servant of the Russian Empire – a “Statski Sovetnik” (State Councillor) who came from Russia and became friends with the poet’s family. Mikhail Barataev’s biography and the details associated with his stay in Tbilisi substantiate the argument that the ideas expressed in the poem must have belonged to Mikhail Barataev and not to Nikoloz Baratashvili. According to Akaki Bakradze, the poem is an example of ironic poetry, and if we fail to identify it as such, “we risk being misled in our judgment of one of the greatest Georgian poets and thinkers, falsely accusing him of supporting Georgia’s loss of independence. Otherwise, we not only risk being misled in our judgment but also deliberately harm and ruin Nikoloz Baratashvili’s reputation.” Bakradze asserted that irony is not characteristic of the style of ode poetry. However, the idea expressed in the poem, whether ironically or seriously, cannot be considered to belong to Nikoloz Baratashvili. Considering Nikoloz Baratashvili’s personality, the poet’s bitter irony toward the viewpoint expressed in the poem is entirely natural.

## **CONCLUSION**

Nikoloz Baratashvili is the poet and thinker with the most national consciousness in Georgian literature of the first half of the 19th century. He preached and established the ideal of an independent state and freedom in Georgian literature. In this regard, he is the predecessor of the Georgian public figures of the 1860s, particularly Iliia Chavchavadze. “The Tomb of King Irakli” is not an expression of Nikoloz Baratashvili’s national and political beliefs. He held an entirely different point of view in the poems and letters written during the same period.



The great poet did not conform to the contemporary political situation, and he was aware that Georgia's conquest by Russia was not King Erekle's ideal. He did not see the happiness in modern Georgia that appears in the poem. The poem "Tomb of King Irakli" was, and remains, the perspective of the person to whom the poet dedicated it and inscribed it in an album with his own hand. Mikheil Baratashvili, a Georgian born and raised in Russia, held this view. Poet Nikoloz Baratashvili employed his well-established artistic method to express Mikheil Baratashvili's opinion in a poem dedicated to him. When evaluating Baratashvili's poetic legacy, this poem should not be used as evidence to argue the poet's alleged Russian orientation.

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