Among the Chosen Cities: Tbilisi in the Shi‘i Tradition

Grigol Beradze
The G. Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies, Tbilisi

Following the setting up in the late 730s-early 770s A.D. of the Tbilisi emirate, its administrative center Tbilisi, the former capital of the Christian kingdom of Kartli (Eastern Georgia), now run by the Arabs, became involved in the political-religious and cultural life of the Caliphate, soon becoming one of the important strongholds of Islam in South Caucasus. Hence, it is not surprising that, beginning with the mid-8th century A.D., the written sources often refer to Muslim scholars and other persons whose biography and activities are to some extent connected with the city of Tbilisi (Teflis) and who accordingly bore the *nesba* “al-Teflisi.” The majority of such persons were Sunnis, which is quite natural if we recall that official Sunni Islam dominated in the Tbilisi emirate (as well as in other parts of the Caliphate), and that followers of orthodox Sunni denominations (*mazhab*) prevailed in the intellectual circles of the local Muslim community. At the same time, Shi‘ites are also

1 On the Tbilisi emirate, see Lordkipanidze, 1951, pp. 185-201; idem, 1973, pp. 489-506; idem, 1979, p. 611; idem, 1988, pp. 349-353; idem, 2002a, p. 519; Alasania, pp. 21-26; Djaparidze, 1999a, pp. 72-74; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emirate_of_Tbilisi>.
2 Tbilisi was liberated from Muslim political rule by King David IV the Builder (r.1089-1125) four century later, in 1122. King David made it the capital of the kingdom of Georgia, and treated the religion, culture, and customs of the local Muslim residents with great tact and respect. This is attested by Ebn al-Azraq al-Fāreqi, who visited Tbilisi in 548/1135: “He (i.e., King David) guaranteed to the Muslims everything they wished, according to the pact which is valid even to-day… He was extremely kind to the Muslims; he honoured the scholars and *ṣūfīs* by respecting their rank and [granting them] what they do not enjoy even among the Muslims. I witnessed all these privileges (*shurūt*) when I entered Tiflis in the year 548/1153. And I saw how the king of the Abkhaz, Dimitri (1125-1156), in whose service I was, arrived in Tiflis and sojourned there some days…. And I witnessed on his part such esteem towards the Muslims as they would not enjoy even if they were in Baghdad”; see Minorsky, pp. 33-34.
mentioned in the sources among the earliest Muslims bearing the above *nesba*. Although concrete evidence on the activity of the latter in Arab-occupied Tbilisi is very scanty, it still points to the rather early penetration of the oppositional Shi‘ism and Shi‘ite propaganda into the indicated region.

The activists of the Shi‘ite movement in Tbilisi emirate in the 8th-early 9th centuries A.D. will be referred to below. First, however, special attention should be paid to a little-known Shi‘ite tradition whose content seems to have a direct bearing on the aspect of the history of Tbilisi discussed here.

The tradition to be discussed below is found in a number of Arabic and Persian sources of which the earliest is *Tārikh-e Qom*, a medieval chronicle on the history of the city of Qom (Arab. Qumm), the famous Shi‘ite center in Iran. It was composed originally in Arabic apparently in 378/988-89 by Hasan b. Mohammad b. Hasan Qomi (d. 406/1015-16). The Arabic original has, regrettably, not survived. Only the Persian translation of its first five chapters, done in the early 15th century A.D. by Hasan b. ‘Ali b. Hasan b. ‘Abd al-Malek Qomi, has come down to us.4

Here I shall not go into a detailed description and assessment of this important historical source.5 I shall only touch upon the eighth section of the first chapter, which is devoted to extolling the excellent qualities and virtues of Qom and its inhabitants. In this section of the text the “exclusiveness” of Qom and its significance as a bastion of Shi‘ism is illustrated with numerous legends and Shi‘ite traditions containing sayings of great religious authorities.6 The majority of the sayings cited in this work are ascribed to the sixth Shi‘ite Imam Abu ‘abd Allah Ja‘far al-Sādeq (d. 148/765). It is in one such authoritative dictum that we find the mention of the name of Tbilisi (Teflis), in a very curious and somewhat unexpected context.

The translator of this historical work, proceeding from the text of the Arabic original, adduces in Persian translation a Shi‘ite tradition referring to Kufa, Qom, and Teflis as the three choice cities of God, then follows a report to the

---

4 *Tārikh-e Qom* (hereafter *TQ*) belongs to the category of Iranian local (or city) histories of the pre-Mongol period, about which C. E. Bosworth (p. 235) remarks: “It is noteworthy that many of the earlier of these histories were first composed in Arabic but then had Persian translations or epitomes—presumably aimed at a wider audience than the narrow circle of those scholars literate in Arabic—made from them, often with continuations; and not infrequently, it has been the latter versions, rather than the Arabic originals, which have survived till today”; cf. Cahen, p. 125.
