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Article



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THE EVOLUTION OF THE LEATHERWORKING TRADITION IN GEORGIA ACCORDING TO HISTORICAL EPOCHS

Abstract: Historical chronicles and written sources from various eras confirm that leather was a significant part of agricultural and household practices. Information about leather production technologies, craftsmanship traditions, and craft centers is often found. Although archaeological material generally plays a vital role in studying the field of material culture, written monuments are more informative, as they provide insights not only regarding technical processes but also on the means of production and the socio-economic context, which clearly indicates the level of development of society in the corresponding era. The article discusses how Georgian written sources from various eras reflect the knowledge of leather processing, its specialization, and cultural significance. The research

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is based on archaeological findings, written sources, ethnographic materials, and an analysis of past technological development in the light of modern technologies. The article discusses data that reflect both ancient production methods and the role of leather in the economy, military affairs, and the formation of Georgian material culture.

Key words: leather processing, leather goods, material culture.

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Introduction

Livestock breeding has been highly developed in Georgia since antiquity, as evidenced by ancient scenes on bas-reliefs and various written sources. On this basis, it is reasonable to assume that leather was widely used in Georgia for the manufacture of personal and household items. Because leather is an organic material and cannot be used in its raw state without conservation and processing, there must have existed specific rules and techniques for leather processing in Georgia.

Historical chronicles and written sources from different periods confirm that leather has long been an important component of agricultural and domestic life. These sources frequently contain information on leather production technologies, craft traditions, and craft centres. While archaeological material is crucial for the study of material culture, written monuments are often more informative, because they describe not only technical processes but also the means of production and the broader socio-economic context, thereby indicating the level of social development in each era. The following discussion examines Georgian written sources from various periods with regard to knowledge of leather processing, its specialization, and its cultural significance.

Archives of Georgian handicrafts, museum records, family documents, and travellers' accounts describe the technologies by which Georgian craftsmen produced durable items such as shoes, bags, belts, saddles, household utensils, military equipment, musical instruments, and many other everyday objects. These written sources make it possible to trace the evolution of leatherworking skills over the centuries and to understand the role of leather in the daily life of Georgian society. They also provide material for analysing a highly specialized and distinctive technical vocabulary.

Authors of the last century offer particularly rich information on the rules and practices of leather processing in Georgia, including Iv. Javakhishvili, K. Khutsishvili, Iv. Tsitsishvili, R. Topchishvili, I. Nanobashvili, N. Abesadze and others [1–7]. Over the course of Georgia's centuries-long history, leather production has been:

an important component of the national economy;

an indicator of the level of social development;
a key element of military infrastructure and equipment;

a major branch of urban crafts;

an object of both local and international trade.

The tradition of leather processing in Georgia dates back to prehistoric times, when people needed to protect their feet during hunting and agricultural activities. Mesolithic and Neolithic archaeological materials include bone awls and needles, as well as various types of knives associated with leather processing and the manufacture of leather goods, which indicate the earliest technological stages of leather working and sewing. At this initial stage, leather processing was probably based on natural conservation methods such as drying, treatment with fat and salt, and simple vegetable tanning with plant extracts. During this period, leather likely became one of the first materials that mediated and shaped the relationship between humans and their natural environment.

In the Bronze and Iron Ages, early forms of plant tanning using pine bark, walnut shells, and other tannin-rich materials are already attested, with traces identified in clay vessels and stone container deposits. Finds from this era include leather clothing, belts, bags, and fragments of military equipment such as belts, leather-covered shields, fastening elements, scabbards, and horse harnesses. This period marks not only the beginnings of more advanced leather processing, but also the emergence of specialized crafts in many areas. Ancient written sources describe active trade in leather and leather accessories in Georgia. Georgia functioned as an exporter of raw hides and finished leather goods, was renowned for its craftsmanship in leatherworking (including shoes, belts, and packs), and supplied military leather equipment to peoples in the North and the Near East. Archaeological research has confirmed the use of vegetable tannins such as oak, beech, and walnut in leather processing.

In the ancient period, during the existence of the kingdoms of Colchis and Iberia, Georgia participated in both Eastern and Greco-Roman trade and cultural networks. Written and archaeological evidence indicates a highly developed level of leather production: ancient authors refer to Colchian leather as a durable, high-quality material used in

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shipbuilding, vehicles such as wagons, and the manufacture of agricultural tools such as scythes. Leather also played an important role in military equipment, including armour, protective jackets, and saddles, demonstrating that leather was essential not only in the household sphere but also in military infrastructure. Materials from this period confirm that leather processing and leather goods were closely linked to international trade, the exchange of technological knowledge, and the development of local crafts.

The Middle Ages (10th–13th centuries), often referred to as the Georgian “Golden Age”, were marked by a high level of political, military, and cultural development, including the strengthening of state power, the flourishing of architecture and church art, and the creation of the first secular literary works. This period is especially important for Georgia because the country’s influence reached its zenith. Close ties with the Byzantine and broader Mediterranean world shaped both the arts and the development of crafts and trade. As a result, the range and geographical spread of leather use expanded significantly. Written sources show that, in addition to Tbilisi, craft activities, including leatherworking, were also concentrated in cities such as Mtskheta, Gori, and Kutaisi. It is likely that leather processing was differentiated according to animal species (for example, separate processing of horse, ox, goat, and sheep skins). This is consistent with the fact that strength, hardness, thickness, flexibility, and other properties of leather vary by animal type and thus determine its appropriate uses. Hides from large-hoofed animals were more often used for military purposes, whereas those from small-hoofed animals were chiefly used for footwear, bags, accessories, and household goods. This distribution is supported by museum collections of historic leather artefacts, although none of the preserved items in Georgia itself can be dated securely to the Middle Ages.

The surviving leather artefacts from Georgia are relatively recent, probably no more than three to four centuries old, and their exact dating remains uncertain. This limited survival is likely due to the quality of tanning, which, despite established processing rules, may not have been sufficient to ensure long-term durability. As an organic, biodegradable material, leather is highly susceptible to deterioration, which explains the scarcity and relatively late date of preserved items.

In the 15th–18th centuries, leather production in Georgia appears to have reached a significantly higher level. Georgian leather was actively exported to Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and the North Caucasus. Fat and semi-fat tanning methods spread alongside vegetable tanning, enabling the production of softer and more flexible leathers. Information about Georgian leather

products from this period is preserved in the accounts of foreign travellers.

The 19th–20th centuries are commonly described as the industrial era. During this time, tanneries were established in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Zestafoni, and Batumi. The development of chemistry transformed all branches of industrial production, including leatherworking. The range of active tanning agents expanded, and tanning with chromium and aluminium salts, aldehydes, and other chemical reagents became established in production. These innovations greatly improved the quality of tanned leather, enhancing its flexibility, durability, resistance to ageing, and other consumer properties. Leather goods production became fully industrialized, and the exchange of experience and goods with foreign countries intensified. Artificial and synthetic leathers were developed which, although still inferior to natural leather in hygienic and performance characteristics, have been steadily improved through advances in material science and biomaterials, bringing them closer to natural leather in terms of texture and consumer qualities. Specialists, however, generally agree that they cannot completely replace natural leather.

Over this period, regional differences in the reflection of local traditions in leather products gradually diminished. Handicrafts from mountainous areas had long been distinguished by their originality and the abundance of traditional decorative elements, whereas rural products showed greater uniformity. Industrialization and standardization contributed to the partial erosion of these regional distinctions.

In the modern period, large-scale leather production in Georgia has largely been replaced by small and medium-sized enterprises. At the same time, traditional handicrafts that had declined during industrialization have been revived, and there has been renewed interest in leather goods that embody traditional and national aesthetics. The turn towards traditional elements has been accompanied by a stronger emphasis on local cultural motifs, which are now more evident in contemporary products than they were in the last century. Public awareness of environmentally friendly materials and hygienic products has increased, leading to growing demand for ecological and non-toxic materials and goods. This situation has highlighted the need to intensify scientific research on leather, focusing on qualitative analysis of products made with existing methods and technologies and on the development of new, environmentally sustainable processing technologies [9–15]. The historical development of leather processing and use in Georgia can be schematically represented as shown in Scheme 1.

The footwear of prehistoric humans likely consisted of a single piece of leather wrapped around the foot to protect the ankle from contact with rough

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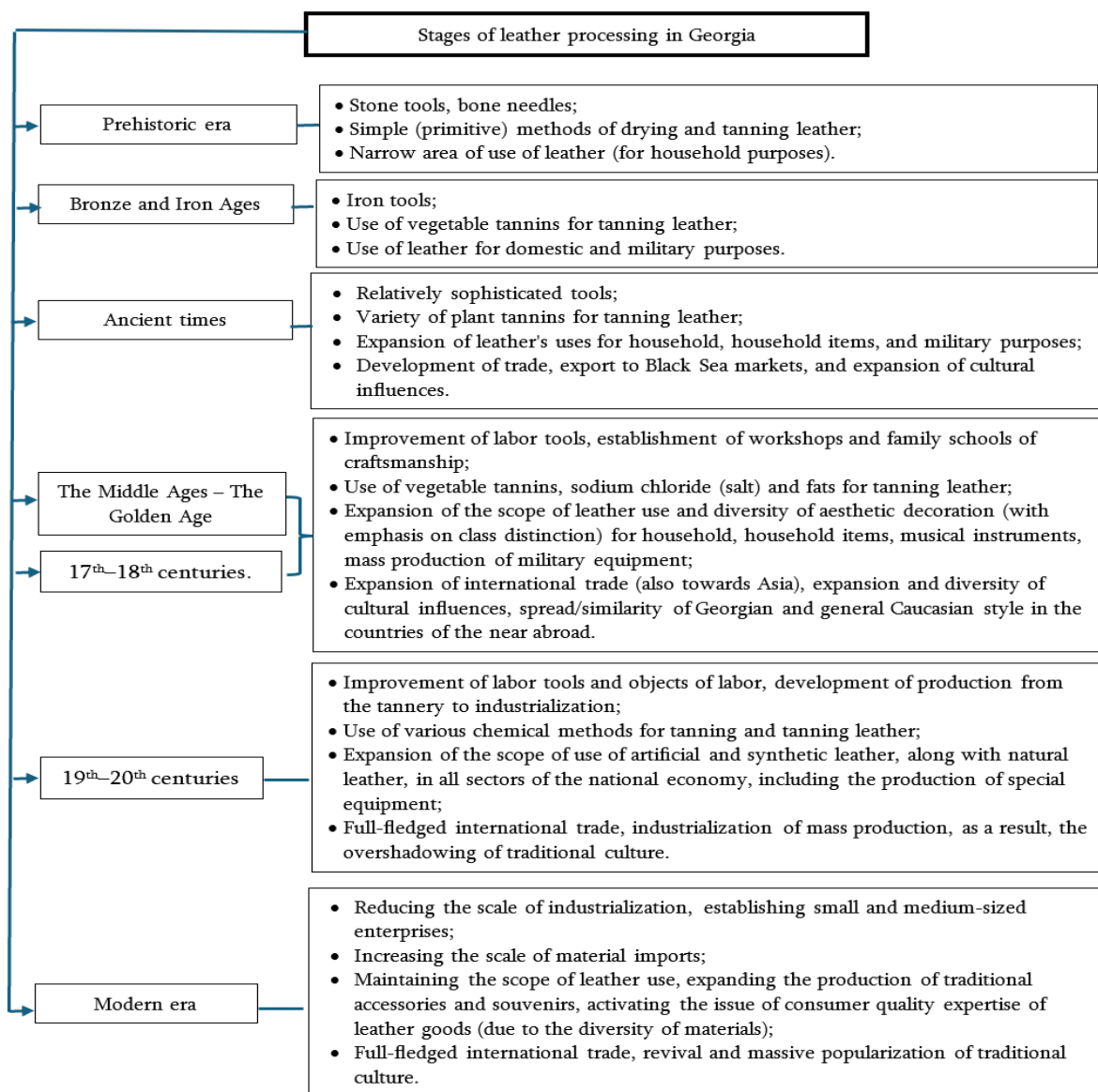
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ground. It would be difficult to describe such coverings as comfortable. Given that early humans probably relied mainly on drying to prevent hides from rotting, the resulting leather would have become stiff and rough, with potentially harmful effects on the feet.

Recognition that leather could be treated to prevent decay represents an important stage in social and technological development and a transition to a new level of technical thinking. Precisely because effective preservation methods were rare, only a few examples of ancient footwear and leather goods have

survived globally. One such example is the “Areni-1” shoe, a 5,500-year-old leather shoe discovered in 2008 in excellent condition in the Areni-1 cave in Armenia’s Vayots Dzor province, which is considered the oldest known piece of leather footwear in the world (Fig. 1).¹ The published description of this find emphasizes that the shoe was preserved thanks to the cool, dry cave conditions and a thick layer of sheep dung that acted as a seal; grass inside the shoe may have served either as insulation or as stuffing to maintain its shape, and the preserved laces further attest to the sophistication of early leatherworking.



Scheme 1. The historical development of leather processing and use in Georgia.

¹<https://historyofinformation.com/detail.php?entryid=3199>.

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Fig. 1. World's Oldest Leather Shoe - from excavations in Armenia.

The rarity of ancient leather artefacts is largely explained by the relatively low level of tanning in early periods. Time, moisture, and other environmental factors gradually destroy the structure of leather, so leather products have survived in far smaller quantities than artefacts made of more durable materials and are typically much younger than other household or personal items. As noted above, the regular practice of tanning probably began in the Bronze Age (around the 4th century BC), while explicit discussions of leather processing in Georgian written sources appear only from the 18th century, even though tools associated with leatherworking are dated archaeologically to the 8th–13th centuries.

The traditional rules of leather processing in Georgia have been thoroughly and vividly described by the historian Ioseb Nanobashvili in his book *Folk Rules of Leather Processing in Georgia* (Tbilisi: Science, 1973). In this work, the processing sequence is presented systematically according to the intended use of the leather. The classification is based on the final application of the material: soles and uppers for footwear, military equipment, household items, musical instruments, and so forth. Each of these categories imposes different requirements on the leather in terms of strength, elasticity, wear resistance, resistance to repeated flexing, resistance to moisture, and other performance characteristics. Among these, footwear leather is particularly demanding, because shoes must function under especially challenging conditions and therefore require high durability. This was even more critical in earlier periods, when walking surfaces provided limited friction and poor elastic-damping properties.

Another crucial requirement for footwear is the ability to maintain balance during walking and standing, which depends directly on the physico-mechanical properties of the base materials—especially the sole—as well as on the shape and dimensions of the supporting surface. Early footwear,

as suggested by surviving artefacts, often lacked a distinct sole; a single piece of leather covered the entire foot and was fastened at the back with straps (see Fig. 1). The operational durability of such footwear is highly questionable, especially in relation to wear resistance, slip resistance, stability, resistance to repeated bending, and protection against mechanical impacts on the foot. These issues require detailed investigation, and the authors' research group is currently undertaking comprehensive studies in this field, the results of which will be presented in future publications.

Conclusion

Analysis of the history of leather processing and use in Georgia demonstrates that it constitutes a centuries-old, continuous tradition that integrates local natural resources, technological practices, and cultural norms. Leather production in Georgia is ancient and has undergone numerous transformations, yet archaeological evidence, written sources, and ethnographic materials consistently show that it was an integral part of the economy and everyday life. The population of Georgia has long been engaged in agriculture, sheep breeding, and trade, activities that naturally fostered a close connection with leather processing and craft production. Archaeological finds attest to the use of leather for a wide range of purposes in Colchis and other regions of Georgia from very early times. This cultural and technological heritage has preserved its distinctiveness and today represents an important component of Georgian material culture, while also providing a foundation for the contemporary Georgian leather and leather-goods industry.

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