



Fragments

A project inspired by the Museum of Colchian Culture
Photographs/ texts / newsprint

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Brendan Jackson is a UK based artist who works with archive materials and heritage collections. His projects explore the relationships between people and place, looking at the connection between historical objects and the modern era. As an artist he is motivated to engage with themes that question and explore everyday life through individual and community experience - bringing together different voices and perspectives.



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The light flashes twice flashes every 7.5 seconds, first white then red, reaching far out across the sea. The glass is from the Fresnel works in Paris, with concentric rings of 'stepped' glass, thick ridges in the lens surface which bend the light slightly more than the one beneath it, so the light rays all emerge in a perfect, parallel beam that travels across the water. The first Fresnel lens was used in 1823 in the Cordouan light at the mouth of the Gironde estuary, which could be seen from more than 32 kilometres.

In the beginning the source of the light was an oil lamp; the lion heads on the exterior of the lantern roof are not merely decorative, they provide ventilation for the smoke. The keeper wears a linen smock so that the rough wool of the uniform will not scratch the optics or lens. Each morning he will clean the interior and exterior of the lantern panes, gently clean the optic with spirits of wine vinegar. He checks the glazing and caulking against air and water intrusion, ensuring there are no leaks in the roof above. The lantern room must be kept clean and free of accumulations of dirt, insects, birds or their nests. In the evening, the keeper again ascends the 152 steps to the lantern room and checks the wind direction. He adjusts the vents to allow just enough draft into the room, to keep the glass from fogging, and for the fumes from the fire to rise up out of the confined space.

All of this is by order of the reformer Tsar Alexander II, who has made the considerable investment in a new light. Made of cast iron, it was constructed in England at Easton & Amos, Southwark, in the great city of London. Southwark was then a centre for iron founding, wire making, glass making, anchor smithing - houses and factories cheek by jowl, separated only by narrow alleyways. These ironworks were known for producing centrifugal pumps, steam engines, turbines, hydraulic rams, as well as machinery for laying the Atlantic cable. In 1864, the viaduct carrying the railway from London Bridge to Waterloo is under construction, even as the lighthouse plates are being forged and prepared to be transported in parts by steamship to Batumi, thence by horse and cart to Poti. The keeper has little interest in this detail. He is a servant of the Empire, he undertakes his sacred duty, maintaining the light for the protection of mariners, guiding shipping to the safety of the harbour. The light will not fail, no matter the changes of circumstance.

Cast iron lighthouse key, 1864.



In the Eastern War, the Turks came again, surging through the scented, warm air. There are texts in the Qur'aan and Sunnah that prescribe the manumission of a slave to expiate sin, yet they send shiploads of captured children back to Constantinople for enslavement. Good Christians may also hang their heads in shame, for they are not exempt. The immutable rules of war dictate: take what you can, destroy the rest. With the incessant rains, their army is soon submerged in the Mingrelian mud. Before the Mohammedans are finally expelled they turn to the comforts of massacre, pillage and incendiarism.

'Zugdidi is no longer,' wrote Ekaterine Chavchavadze, the widow of David Dadiani, the buildings of her estate reduced to ashes, the contents dismembered and scattered. Everything that can be broken is smashed, everything that can be seared by flame is set alight. Vases, urns, statuary, chandeliers, furniture, fine porcelain, all reduced to charred splinters and dust. They leave nothing but dirt, disease and ruin behind them.

Even the remarkable botanical garden there, the product of sixteen years of careful labour, is erased. All fruits, flowers and plants cut down or taken away. Of all the wealth of the Dadiani castle, only a few fragments of broken tableware remain.

Tolstoy, who not so long ago was eating ice creams in Bucharest and spending his evenings at the Italian opera, is across the sea in besieged Sevastopol. Of the grim battlefields of this conflict he writes, 'You will see fearsome sights that will shake the roots of your being; you will see war not as a beautiful orderly and gleaming formation, with music and beaten drums, streaming banners and generals on prancing horses, but war in its authentic expression - as blood, suffering and death'.

Fragment of a porcelain set from Dadiani Castle (1850's), dedicated to David Dadiani, found on territory of Khulevi village.



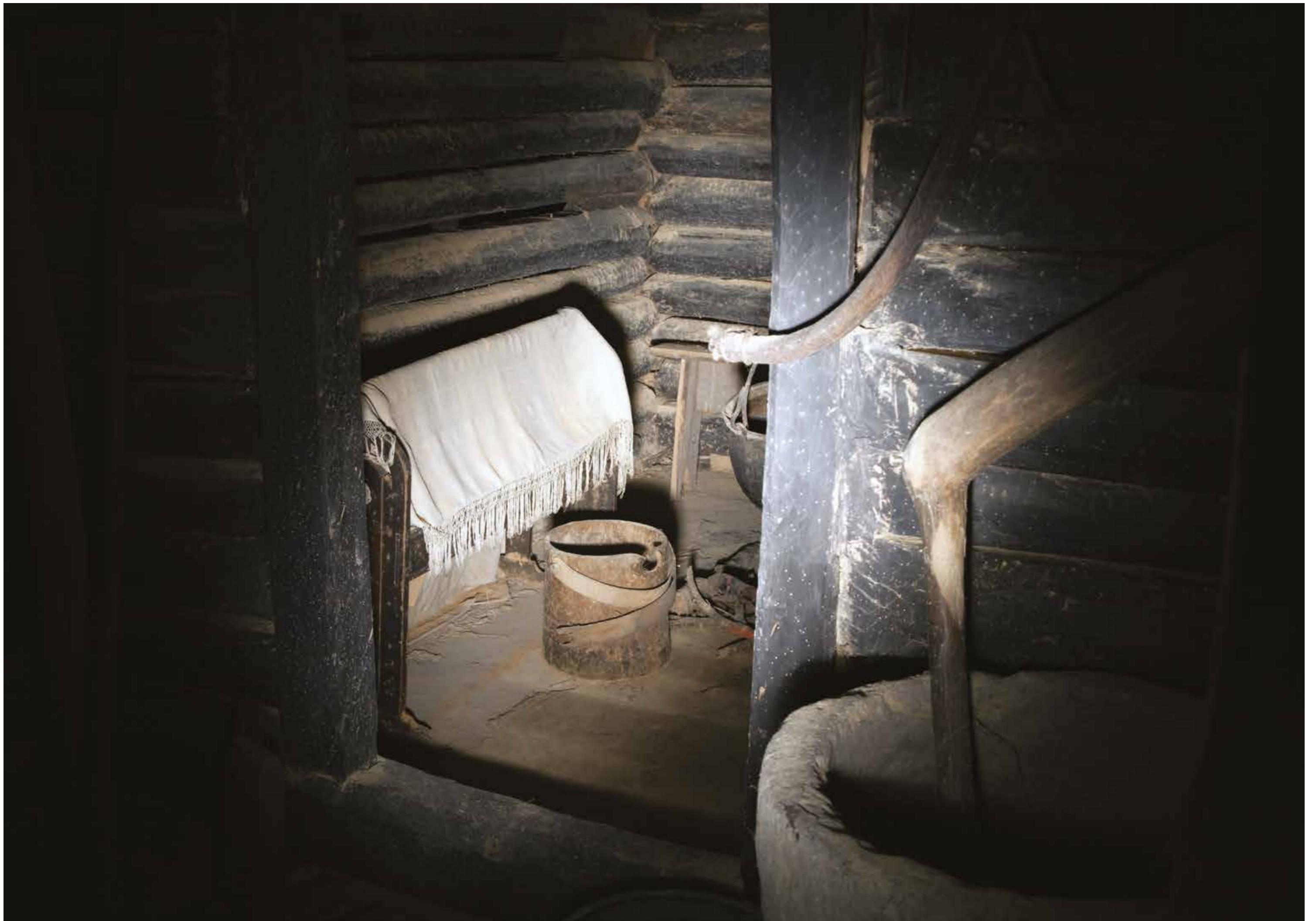
The birds wheel inland from the sea, passing low over Lake Paliastomi. Lifting her face to the rain, Chalciope would have seen them, known them all, and told some fanciful story or other to her sister of their heroic flight, of their comings and goings, with a warning of the inevitable mishaps when the Gods interfere and transform people into birds. Their extensive expertise in local pharmacopeia will be of no help.

The stories are passed down the ages by the Pontic Greek bards, conjoining hearsay and embellishments, offering scenes of their mythological exploits and marvels. Some favour the armed and dangerous female devotees of Dionysus, God of Intoxication, others the errant Prometheus, chained for 30,000 years to a rock for offering the gift of fire to humankind, his liver pecked each day by a Caucasian eagle.

This was long before the large-scale drainage imposed by the Soviets screwed up the wetlands, and the black stork, crane and the great white egret faced extinction. We are left with ancient tiny figures of birds, most probably pigeons or doves, tiny symbols of peace and abundance, which were part of religious ritual and rites of passage. If you see flying birds in your dream, they say it is a sign of prosperity for you. But if you dream of a solitary pigeon, then it portends change. In this subconscious wonderland, to dream of a pigeon means you will meet love in a short time and this will divide your life into ‘before’ and ‘after’.

Or it may even represent a longing to return home. Our modern feral pigeons care for none of these fanciful thoughts. They take roost in the tower of Niko Nikoladze and do not respect his reputation as poet, thinker and statesman, shitting unceremoniously on all his works.

Bronze pigeons, 7th-6th B.C, found on territory of Dvgaba in 1987.



He looks over to the young man at the end of the table and tells a story of that time. You see how it was, he says, Temo was a boy of six, his older sister had a baby, we needed to get a family cradle from Guria... In the early 1990's, everything was collapsing. This was the time of war and banditry and roadblocks. There were militias with guns everywhere, demanding tribute. All is change and motion, the centre cannot hold and things go from better to worse. In such times, what can you do but fall back on tradition?

When they drove back to Poti, with the cradle attached to the top of the car, there are many checkpoints and they are soon stopped by militiamen. They explain the situation. One of the men says, "Let them pass." One of the others disagrees. Yes, he clearly remembers getting out of the car, arguing for some time, Temo left sitting alone in the front seat. One of the militiamen leans in the window, pulls a grenade out of his pocket, gives it the boy. So as he looks round, the air heavy with sweat and alcohol, he sees Temo sitting there in the car, holding that weapon, that moment frozen in his memory. The militiaman says, "What am I doing? No, no, no, wrong pocket!" and then reaches into the other pocket for a packet of chewing gum, gives it the child, takes the grenade back. Maybe this guy is tired and not thinking, maybe he was making a little joke, maybe it was the drink, but the others started laughing at the situation. The tension broke. One of the guys finally says, "Come on, let them go on their way with their damn cradle."

And so they returned with the precious gift, this promise of a good life ahead, the chance to shape a bright future for the child, despite the hard years to come. That's how it was. I like to think that perhaps it was made of birch, the ancient tree of health and wisdom, but I don't know. Now let us toast to the future and wish each other peace and prosperity.

Cradle, installation at museum representing Kolkhetian peasant house.



Night had fallen. Dumas was separated from his companions, lost in a trackless forest, with no firearms, the howls of hungry wolves in the distance. Likely to be canis lupis campetris, a subspecies of grey wolf native to the steppe regions of the Caucasus. The Persians called this the land of the wolves with good reason. As a storyteller, he may know that there was once a warrior king in the east of the country who became a saint, The Holy and Right-Believing King Vakhtang, who was portrayed with the head of a wolf and wolf skin on his shoulders. Indeed, the origin of his name, in both Georgian and Persian, meant ‘wolf-bodied’.

His imagining fills the deep blue mists of the forest with unnatural wild creatures that walk on their hind legs. He is not keen to encounter them, in any shape or form, Le Grand Méchant Loup. He lets the reins hang loose, trusting the instinct of the horse to lead to safety. He believes that memory does not lose its way, even though the body may move in a different direction, towards the unknown, with chance as its guide.

He has been to St Petersburg, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Astrakan, Derbent, Tiflis, on this, the longest journey of his life. In February 1859, because of this unexpected detour, he misses the steamer at Poti. He fails to be impressed by the accommodation offered in this primitive place. He stays in a miserable room in a miserable inn at icy temperatures, the only source of heat a suffocating stove. He records this time as the most disagreeable of all his travels. He writes, ‘Poti est le paradis terrestre des cochons’. Poti may be a paradise for pigs, though better a pig below us than the jaws of a wolf behind us.

With works translated into 100 languages, he is the most successful writer of his generation. He never lets the facts get in the way of a good story, always concocting with his collaborators a fancy mix of reality and invention. What does Dumas dream of, these days and nights in Poti? Can he imagine that 144 years later that there will be a bronze statue of him erected here, sitting on his trunk, leaning on a cane - or that this cane will be later stolen? Perhaps he has no dreams at all, cold and miserable, awaiting a boat, stuck here in the relative safety of these bare walls, amidst the sludge of Poti.

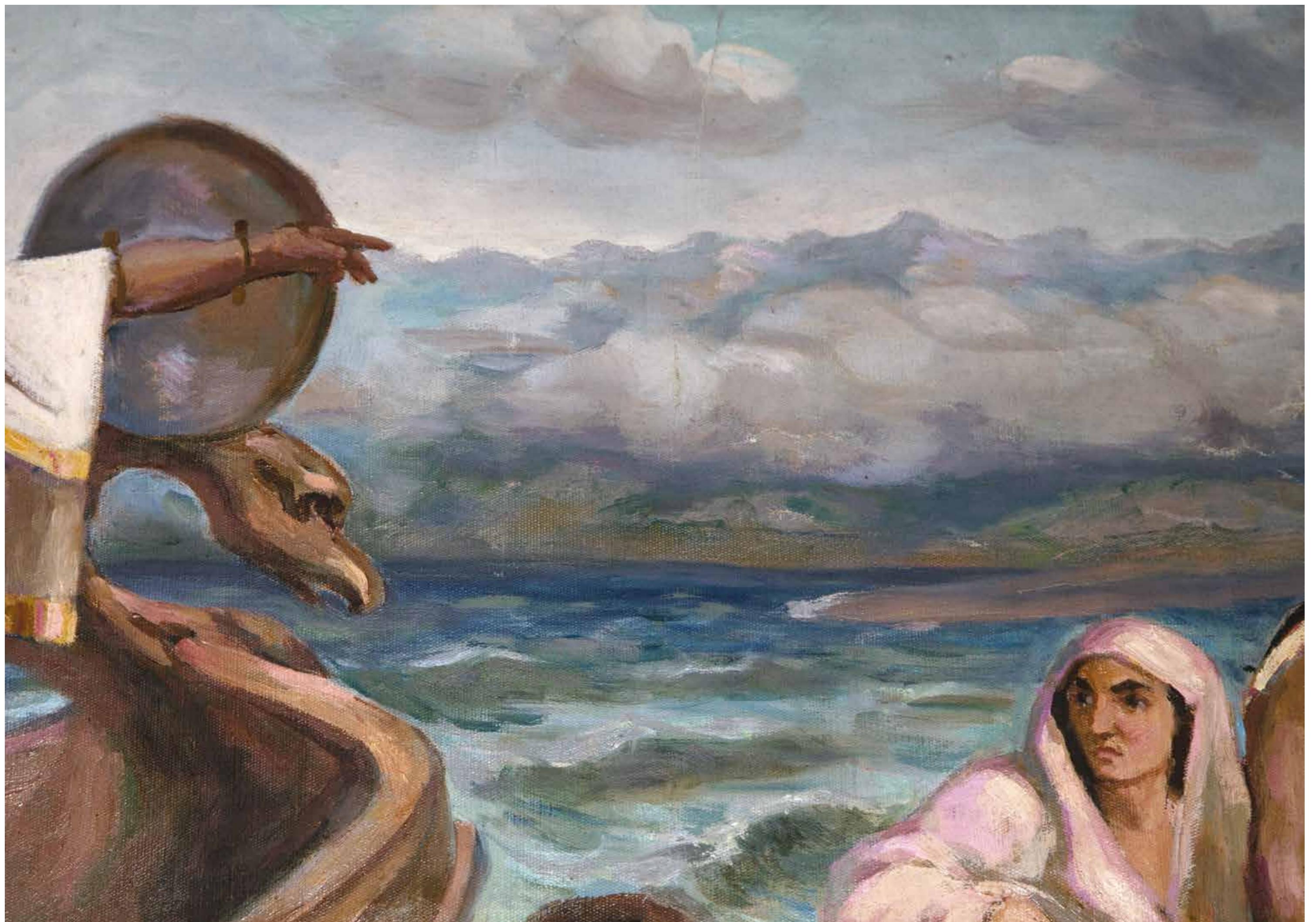
Animal heads, variously attributed to be dragons or wolves, approximately 2000 B.C.



Here he could imagine a real city arising from these pestilential swamps. He's a daydreamer of a rare practical kind. When he closes his eyes he no longer beholds a riverbank strewn with broken planks but sees three new bridges. On the marsh, he pictures twelve streets named after the Apostles. He takes his inspiration from Paris and other European citadels he has visited. He has abandoned the radicalism of his youth and sees economic growth as the essential element for national survival. He is enchanted by the idea of building a new port on this territory, serviced by a grand railway to the interior. First the port and from it the revenues to create the miniature city with all the scenery, the actors and the props he requires. He gathers the agents of change about him. 'It is interesting to notice that the political ideals of the country are borrowed from Western Europe. Excepting in Japan, perhaps, there is no such instance of a people passing directly from feudalism to liberalism...' writes John Oliver Wardrop in 1888. 'Parisian fashions, German rationalism, English sport and other products of our civilization are beginning to have an influence. The Rothschilds have not been slow to see that Trancaucasian wines, ores and oils are worth attention'.

Niko has also been paying attention to this enticing and troubling mix of the brave new age. He is 51 years old when he becomes Mayor and sets about transforming the town from a charming morass into a substantial seaport. He sees this is as a city of the future, raises taxes on ships entering the docks to subsidise the development. He bans the building of wooden houses, declares that houses in the city centre have to be built of stone and at least two storey's high. He brings a German architect, Edmund Frick, to help him realise his vision. In 1896, Niko takes the oldest structure, the foundations of the old Turkish fortress, removes the wooden construction added by the Russians and builds a Georgian style balcony around it, rising above the ancient stones. As a final flourish he puts a mechanical clock on the top floor, which he had brought from Paris. He makes this tower his home for a time, where he makes his careful plans. He is patient but time is not on his side.

Clock made by Horologer Paul Garnier, Rue Taitbout, Paris, 1870; installed in Niko Nikoladze tower.



The Argo is the first ship in recorded history (at least, in western history) to be named. The ship was built with help of the Goddess Athena, who inserted a fragment of the sacred century old Dodon oak, so that it could speak and render prophecies, transmitting by the whisper of its leaves the will of the Gods. As an early navigational aid, it warns them of calamity, helping to carry them over 1500 sea miles, beyond the known world, across the Black Sea, once called the Inhospitable Sea by the Greeks.

In the account by the Alexandrian poet Apollonius of Rhodes, from the 3rd century B.C, the Argonauts are heroes, their story is one of ‘famous deeds of men of old’. In reality perhaps they were adventurers at best, ambitious thieves at worst, attempting to retrieve exotic goods and esoteric knowledge. Or were they simply mariners too long at sea, full of exaggerated tales? On their journey they encounter dreadful monsters, beguiling sirens, sexy witches, savage birds, deadly elements both natural and God induced. Under cover of darkness, they finally land at the mouth of the Rioni river. Unsure of how they will be received at the palace of Aetes, as plunderers, colonisers, usurpers, they proceed with caution. They hide their boat in a shaded backwater and walk to the city of Aia; along the way they see bodies wrapped in untanned ox hides and suspended from willow trees, a sight that travelers in Georgia recount right up to the 17th century.

Herodotus considered the Rioni to be the boundary between Europe and Asia. Though in this ancient tale we may see the meeting of two cultures, where some speak of building bridges we may also see the seeds of conflicts over resources, over who can exploit the riches of the earth. Storytelling is central to our human existence; we need to tell stories to understand the other, to keep alive memories, to share experiences, or to find common ground. A story is a connection of cause and effect. Scientists tell us that by listening to a story the language processing parts in our brain are activated, and not only these – those areas in our brain that we would use when experiencing the events being described are also activated. ‘All sorrows can be borne,’ wrote Karen Blixen, ‘if you put them in a story, or tell a story about them.’ Here then is a story that has survived the rise and fall of many empires, the archetypal adventure into the unknown, full of wild optimism, betrayal and vengeance, dark powers, impossible odds, doomed romance.

Painting of the Argonauts by Geminiski (detail), 1945.



The word ‘shame’ comes from a variety of European words that literally mean ‘to cover, to veil, to hide’. He explains that these objects are known as the stones of sin – or wrongdoing – and describes how they would be hung on the person as a ritual of shaming by the community. The bigger sin, the bigger the stone. The more stones, the greater the number of sins for the whole world – the world being the village – to see. The historian has a dilemma. He says, “I wonder if I lived in this period, 700 - 600 years B.C, then how many stones would I be carrying?”

To calm the Gods, or the powers that be, these systems of appeasement are worked out, varying from place to place. Some civilisations merely offered incense or garlands, while others their children as sacrifices. In mythology people may be turned to stone for their deviations and misdemeanors – this idea of petrification finds a place even in contemporary tales such as The Hobbit or Harry Potter. These stones have been smoothed by river and tidal currents, feldspars breaking down and rounding far quicker than something largely made of quartz, though quicker in geological time is measured in the flow of centuries.

In the Netherlands of the Middle Ages a ‘shame flute’ was worn for the crime of being a bad musician; it was hung around the neck of the offender whose fingers would be stuck through the flute, with finger screws that would be tightened. Someone late to church was forced to wear a giant rosary. The Dutch word was schandstenen - ‘stones of shame’. Public humiliation in the form of a stock or pillory was a common punishment for centuries. Public whippings or floggings became a form of entertainment as well as admonishment. At the end of World War Two, think of those thousands of European women who had their heads shaved in front of cheering crowds, their punishment and degradation for associating with the occupying Nazi forces. Look at these stones and consider for a moment what may be your transgression and how will your society see fit to penalise you.

Stones, 7th century B.C., found in Ergeti.



Wikipedia only confirms my suspicion that the axe is the oldest tool in human history, used to split and cut wood, for farming and as a weapon or ceremonial object. Through the prism of history and archeology, these objects can tell several overlapping stories. They tell of the migration of skills, the penetration of new ideas as well as the trade of physical resources. All before the internet. He tells us that weapons like this were found in Hittite culture, but these axes are also modified, adorned with local ornamentation. This shows that people back then were able to adopt developed technologies, then transform them for use in their own culture. Eventually, when they stopped using the bronze axes as weapons, exchanging them for iron blades, they became purely ritual objects. Bronze does not corrode as easily as iron, however long it has been in the ground. Though the surfaces are pitted they have a protective patina from oxidization, which colours the metal from lime green to dark brown. Ores of copper and arsenic were abundant here, along with plenty of forest to provide fuel for burning. It takes 300 kg of charcoal to make 1 kg of copper, which itself is obtained from 30 kg of sulphide ore. The bronze came from a natural or sometimes artificial mix of copper and arsenic, which resulted in a stronger metal which was easier to cast and shape. You see, pure copper melts at 1084 degrees centigrade, whereas bronze melts at 950 degrees with arsenic or tin as the additive.

This mastery of metallurgy changed society. They heated the metal in crucibles, then cast it into moulds made from stone or clay. Once the metal cooled and solidified, it would be polished or hardened by beating the working edge with a hammer, thinning out the metal to increase its strength. Some axes were engraved or decorated as appropriate. He stares at the axe and wonders how many secrets there are still to be revealed in this Colchian earth? His Grandmother once told him, ‘Oh, when you are a historian, you will have good job, be in government, be respected. Perhaps you will be a Professor. You will be rich.’ If only this were so. Sometimes he thinks, Grandmother why did you encourage me to do this? If I studied law, maybe I would have good money today. Instead his head is full of history; Russian history, German history, Georgian history, not to mention the miscellaneous influences of all those Scythians, Urartians, Greeks, Byzantines and Persians.