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“The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” by Shota Rustaveli: Salutogenic Aspects

Ramaz Shengelia¹, Levan Jojua²

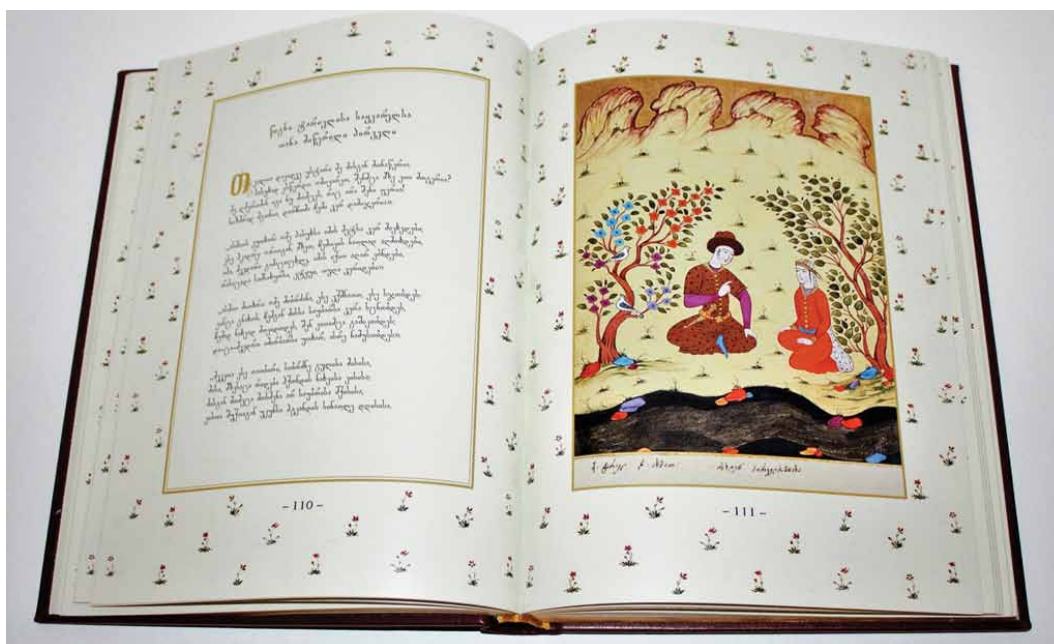


Figure 1. Photographic edition of the 17th-18th century manuscript of the poem (the so-called Tsereteli manuscript).

Abstract

The article provides a discussion of the specific salutogenic aspects of medical knowledge in Shota Rustaveli’s “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” – a distinguished piece of Georgian literature. Consideration of specific passages from the poem and corresponding commentary demonstrates the author’s medical knowledge, as he stresses the significance of positive emotions, a healthy environment, and mood on human health, thus having a therapeutic effect.. Regarding the knowledge reflected in similar scientific literature, which is significant for the history of Georgian medicine, the work offers a more specific and, in some cases, newer vision of the salutogenic aspects in “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”. Along with the author’s knowledge, we emphasise the fact that during that period, there was a logical link between the medical-biological thinking of the era known as the “Golden Age”. This connection represents a natural expression of the level of the scientific sphere, simultaneously with cultural and political progress in the country. In addition to providing an overview of specific medical areas in “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”, the article will explore the scientific and other literature of the era and a later period, where similar approaches are described. The issues discussed in the article, regarding their nature and different aspects, could be of interest for studying the history of medicine of that specific era.

Key Words: *Shota Rustaveli, didactic poetry, salutogenesis*

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Introduction

“The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” by Shota Rustaveli (12th c.) is a poem woven into the fabric of the Georgian people (Fig. 2), which influenced and shaped the mentality, moral, and ethical values of many generations of the nation throughout the centuries. The poem is written in 16-syllable lines, employing syllabic-tone, and masculine-ending rhythms. This poetic masterpiece has played a paramount role in the formation and development of the form of Georgian poetry.

The poem belongs to the chivalric romance genre and was written during the period when similar literary works appeared in Europe (Chretien de Troyes (1180s), Wolfram von Eschenbach (1195-1216), Robert de Boron (1190-1199). Against the background of typological similarity and certain analogies in plots, “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” is much more comprehensive and informative for understanding the spiritual and material essence of the most successful Georgian state during the time of its composition.

One could argue that the series of crusader wars, which began at the close of the 11th century, served as a means for Western countries to comprehend the Oriental world, and became a catalyst for specific philosophical and literary influences. In terms of its worldview, the poem evidently possesses a Renaissance character, despite being written well before the Western European Renaissance.

The poem “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” has been translated into numerous languages globally and was included in the World Cultural Heritage list.

The poem encompasses a vast, profound, and at times sacred knowledge, spanning from cosmogony to the natural and exact sciences. It contains very interesting, practically significant, and conceptually valuable details of the medical-biological sphere. In the era known as the “Golden Age” of Georgia, political and cultural advancements were paralleled by significant progress in literature, science, and education. The country hosted two academies, Gelati and Ikalto, where, according to researchers, alongside the traditional quadrivium and trivium disciplines^{1,2}, higher education in the medical and biological fields was also offered.^{3,4} The study of “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” commenced as early as the 1930s⁵, when the foundation was laid for studying fiction in the context of scientific development.

Method and results

Textual study of “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”

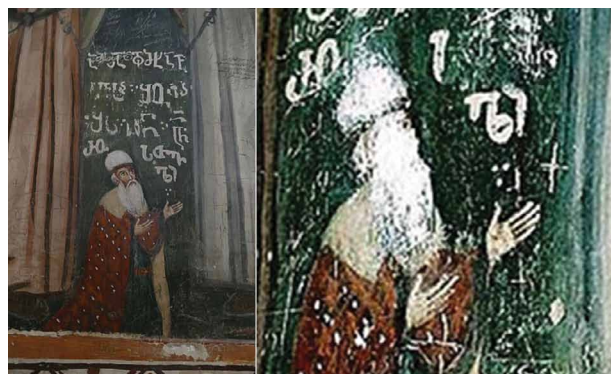


Figure 2. On the left: A fresco in the Cross Monastery of Jerusalem, where Shota Rustaveli ended his life after becoming a monk. Shota Rustaveli is dressed in secular clothes typical of a Georgian nobleman, and he has a purple-coloured mantle with a collar of karakul fur draped over his shoulders. He wears a Georgian hat made of white fur trimmed with black and kneeling and standing before the great fathers of the Church - Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus. 12th cent? 17th cent? On the right: The fresco after being vandalised by extremists in 2004. It was later restored.

The poem was compared with Georgian classical medical literature of around that period: the “Incomparable Medical Handbook” [UstoroKarabadini] (10th c.) and “Medical Book” (13th c.), anatomical-physiological tractates translated from Greek in the relevant era: “On Human Nature” by Nemesius of Emesa (4th – 5th c.), “On the Making of Man” by Gregory Nyssen (4th c.), “Elements” by Proclus the Successor (5th c.), “The Fountain of Knowledge” by John of Damascus (7th c.). We attempted to identify the conceptual genesis of one or another passage. Specific medical correlations in “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” were extensively analysed by Professor Michael Shengelia who, among various other aspects, emphasised an area of particular interest to us – the significance of the environmental conditions and emotions for health.³

In this article, we provide some passages of a medical nature from “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”⁶ with an English translation, part of which will be accompanied by brief explanations.⁷ The episodes provided here discuss one principal aspect –the favourable impact of a healthy environment, positive emotions, good mood, and spirits on human health. This impact has been repeatedly emphasized in medical texts of Late Middle Ages. Indicatively, in the “Regimen Sanitatis Salerni” written in 1,200 A.D. for an Anglorum Regi (King of England). “Si tibi deficient medici, medici tibi fiant,- Haec tria: mens laeta, requies, moderata diaeta” (i.e. “if you lack medical men, let these three things be your medicine: humour, rest and sobriety”). Also the recommendation : “He would cure this man, who has depression, with anything

pleasant and soothing, which comes from the hearing and melody; these are effective as the conversations and narrations of his earnest and desired friends are” is found in the Vlemmydes’ or Planoudes’ motto supplied in the prose text of the “Correlation between fever and urines” (13th cent). Both quotations correspond to earlier ideas of Plato who reputedly taught that “when a soul loses its harmony then melody and rhythm assist it in regaining its peace and order”. (Reported by Ath. Diamandopoulos in his treatise “Musical Uroscopy”, Patra: Achaikes Ekdoseis, 1996).

As mentioned above, motifs regarding the use of positive emotion, aesthetic pleasure, and appreciation of the beauty of nature for the improvement of health frequently appear in the poem. Tariel, the protagonist, desires to mount a horse, ride, and enjoy the view of nature, the river, and the fields in order to improve his depressive condition and get better. It should be noted that these pieces of advice are formulated as medical prescriptions in the poem and they should not be regarded as simple advice to a friend; this demonstrates systemic medical education.

I said: ‘Lord, my heart is much stronger now. I feel able to ride.

I long to mount a good horse and travel the kingdom far and wide.’

They brought me a horse and I mounted him. The king rode by my side. (362,2,3,4).

To help Tariel finally improve his health and mood as soon as possible, even the King arranges a feast, hunting, games, and songs:

‘I went to court. The king said: ‘You are no longer sick. Is that clear?’

He made me mount quiverless, did not allow me even a spear.

He mounted, and let fly the falcons. Every pheasant hid with fear;

All the king’s archers formed into ranks. All of them started to cheer” (373).

‘After coming in from the plain, we made a feast at home that day.

Singers and minstrels were not silent. Each had his musical say” (374,1,2).

Tariel himself attempts to cure his sadness and sorrow and get better:

‘I strove to be happy, too, but my anguish overmastered me.

I thought of her and from the fire in my heart could not get free.

I took all my comrades to my house. They called me an aloe-tree.

I drank and feasted to hide the pain and grief that tormented me”(375).

The most comprehensive and prominent description of the use of positive emotions for healing is described in Avtandil’s advice given when he found Tariel in an enfeebled state. Avtandil did his best to improve his condition, and asked the stressed and weakened Tariel:

‘Don’t send me away heart-broken. Just grant me one desire, I plead.

Let me see you, ravisher of my soul, on horseback. Mount your steed.

Perhaps that will be enough: the present grief I feel will recede.

I shall certainly go and leave you then, and to your will pay heed.”

Avtandil multiplied his pleading. “Mount!” he continued to say.

He knew being on his horse would chase Tariel’s sadness away.

He bent the reedy stem of his body, looked down where The Knight lay.

Tariel sighed and moaned no more. Avtandil forced him to obey. (899; 900).

Avtandil believed in the healing power of riding, the beauty of nature, and generally, positive emotions. Thus, he expected that mounting the horse even once would yield the desired results, regarding the author’s remark “He knew that mounting the horse would dispel his sorrow”.

Tariel followed Avtandil’s advice and got better as a result:

‘He made the other’s graceful form sway as he took him to the plain.

They rode a while. He looked better in the saddle, holding the rein” (901,3,4).

Avtandil believed that riding alone was not sufficient; he attempted to influence his friend through pleasant conversation as well:

The Knight entertained Tariel; he spoke words as if they could cure.

For his sake, he moved coral-coloured lips in phrases to assure,

Words to make young an aged listener’s ears: such was their allure.

He dispelled his grief, and gave him the strength and vigour to endure (902).

Rustaveli emphasised the power of words in influ-

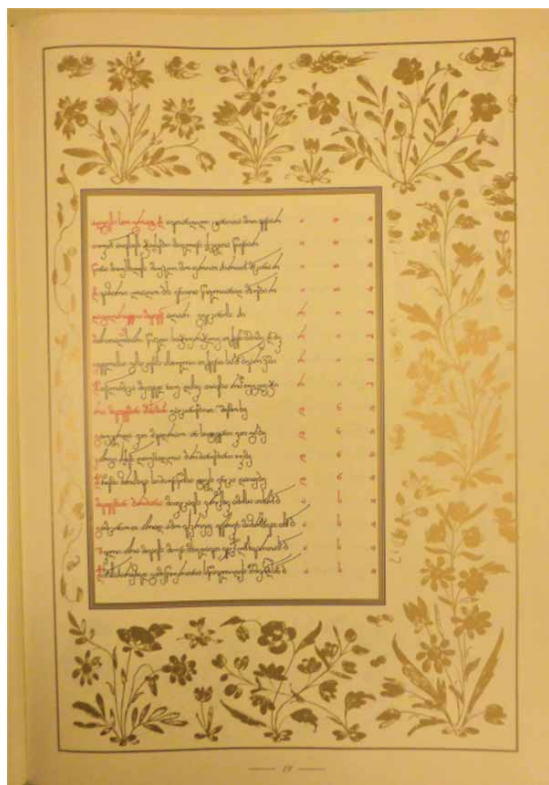


Figure 3. Page 19 of Shota Rustaveli, Vep'xistqaosani.

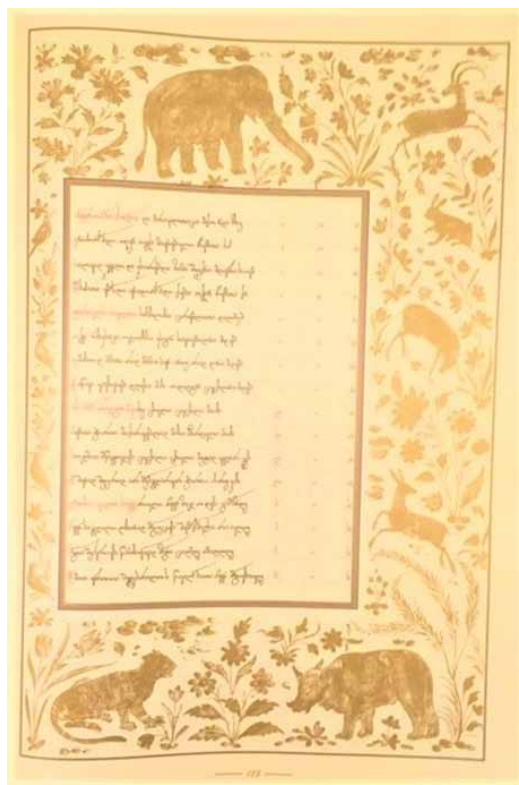


Figure 4. Page 113 of Shota Rustaveli, Vep'xistqaosani.



Figure 5. The slipcase of the facsimile is handmade and has been decorated using cloisonné enamel. It was designed and created by the traditional Georgian jewellery company, Zarapxana.

encing a sick person. Avtandil attempted to improve his friend’s condition through verbal impact, recalling the treasure said by the “scientists”, and “wise men”, as he is well aware of the importance of “treatment with words”. Finally, Tariel, who has lost his mind due to sadness and sorrow, said “something meaningful”, due to the efforts of the “healer of the conscious” (Avtandil).

Thus, in “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”, the significance of the value of words, the beauty of nature, songs, music, aesthetic pleasure, and all positive emotions in general for enhancing one’s health is not coincidental, nor is it merely highlighted as a result of the author’s empiric observations. Rather, it is portrayed as a specific teaching, a distinct system of treatment: almost all characters in the poem resort to this healing method when they need it (Tariel, Rostevan, Avtandil) as if following ancient Georgian medical traditions, such as the “Book of Healing”⁸ (13th century), an outstanding Georgian medieval medical work. In this, a separate chapter is dedicated to the positive impact of walking, including slow walking as well as the influence of one’s environment on human health, such as in the above-mentioned passages of the poem “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin”. The favourable influence of a healthy environment, the enjoyment of beautiful sights, pleasant music, or songs is also discussed in the 16th-century

medical book, “Iadigar Daudi”. Similar passages can be found in late medieval period literature; for example, Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani’s “The Book of Wisdom and Lies” mentions that medicines alone are not sufficient for healing the sick. Factors such as mood, belief, mental satisfaction, and psychical impact are regarded as significant in the healing process.

Conclusion

To conclude, “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” provides a full-scale description of the medical-aesthetic measures firmly accepted in ancient Georgian medicine, which is quite logical, considering the cultural and educational environment within which Georgian literary and specific scientific works of that period were written.

In this article, following the discussion of the episodes from “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” provided here, we can briefly formulate the following conclusion:

1. The author of “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” had extensive and systemic knowledge in the field of medicine and, particularly, in the salutogenic area, which is of interest to us.
2. The literary work emphasises the significance of a

healthy environment and positive emotions.

3. The medical and aesthetic knowledge exhibited by the characters in the poem is not arbitrary; it is intimately connected to the evolution of medical and biological thought during that era.
4. The level of political and cultural-educational development of the poem’s era is organically linked to scientific progress, specifically in the field of medicine.
5. The medical knowledge in “The Knight in the Panther’s Skin” was based on and preconditioned by the existing translated and original literature.

Georgian scientific literature provides a discussion of the history of Georgian medicine in this respect, showcasing an interest in the aforementioned issues across past centuries. Furthermore, this article highlights the significance of examining such literature. The attempt to provide a broader perspective on these issues from different viewpoints is a fundamental component of this article.

Recently, the British Library collections have been enriched by generous donations of a facsimile from the Art Palace of Georgia - Museum of Cultural History (Fig. 3, 4 and 5).

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

«Ο Ιππότης με το Δέρμα του Πάνθηρα» του Shota Rustaveli: υγιεινοδιαιτητικές απόψεις

Ramaz Shengelia, Levan Jojua

Το άρθρο παρέχει μια ανάλυση συγκεκριμένων πτυχών της υγιεινοδιαιτητικής αγωγής που υπάρχουν στο έργο του Shota Rustaveli «Ο Ιππότης με το Δέρμα του Πάνθηρα» - ένα εξέχον έργο της Γεωργιανής λογοτεχνίας. Η εξέταση συγκεκριμένων αποσπασμάτων του ποιήματος και του σχετικού σχολιασμού καταδεικνύει τις ιατρικές γνώσεις του συγγραφέα, ο οποίος τονίζει τη σημασία των θετικών συναισθημάτων, ενός υγιούς περιβάλλοντος και της διάθεσης για την ανθρώπινη υγεία. Όσον αφορά τις γνώσεις που αποτυπώνονται στην αντίστοιχη επιστημονική βιβλιογραφία, η οποία είναι σημαντική για την ιστορία της Γεωργιανής ιατρικής, το έργο προσφέρει μία πιο συγκεκριμένη και, σε ορισμένες περιπτώσεις, πιο καινούρια θεώρηση τους. Μαζί με τις γνώσεις του συγγραφέα, τονίζουμε το γεγονός ότι κατά τη διάρκεια εκείνης της περιόδου, που είναι γνωστή ως «Χρυσή Εποχή», υπήρχε μια λογική σύνδεση μεταξύ ιατρικής και βιολογικής σκέψης. Η σύνδεση αυτή αποτελεί φυσική έκφραση του επιπέδου ανάπτυξης στην επιστημονική σφαίρα, ταυτόχρονα με την πολιτιστική και πολιτική πρόοδο της χώρας. Εκτός από την επισκόπηση που παρέχεται για συγκεκριμένους ιατρικούς τομείς στο έργο «Ο Ιππότης με το Δέρμα του Πάνθηρα», το άρθρο θα εξετάσει την επιστημονική και μη βιβλιογραφία της εποχής και μίας μεταγενέστερης περιόδου, όπου περιγράφονται παρόμοιες προσεγγίσεις. Τα θέματα που αναλύονται στο άρθρο, όσον αφορά τη φύση τους και τις διάφορες πτυχές τους, θα μπορούσαν να παρουσιάσουν ενδιαφέρον για τη μελέτη της ιστορίας της ιατρικής της συγκεκριμένης εποχής.

Λέξεις Κλειδιά: Shota Rustaveli, Διδακτική ποίηση, υγιεινοδιαιτητική αγωγή

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