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# The Origins of Modern Georgian Lexicography: Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani

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## Abstract

‘West meets East’ – this is the main theme of the 12th International Conference on Historical Lexicography and Lexicology 2020 and its aim is to ‘celebrate European lexicography from Portugal in the West to Georgia in the East’. This concept of the Conference is an opportunity for me to present to the international audience of lexicographers Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, a Georgian lexicographer, writer, diplomat, public figure (1658 - 1725). His *Georgian Dictionary*, so-called *Sitqvis Kona* is virtually the first complete explanatory dictionary of the Georgian language.

Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani could be styled an Academy of Georgia, exactly the way Samuel Johnson was called an Academy of the Island by his contemporaries for his *Dictionary of the English Language*. Like Samuel Johnson, Orbeliani compiled his Dictionary alone, toiling over its three editions for almost 40 years. Unlike their French and Italian colleagues, who worked on dictionaries inside academies, they were alone, developing their unique lexicographic principles and laying the foundations of lexicography of their languages and countries.

It is the fate of a representative of a small nation to remain unnoticed, in the majority of cases, for the outer world. This International Conference is a possibility for me to pay tribute to his name and make his legacy known beyond his homeland.

The paper will discuss lexicographic principles of Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani, developed by the end of the XVII century: his way of defining words, which reminds of the tradition of Aristotelian philosophy, known as a definition ‘*per genus proximum et differentias specificas*’, i.e. by stating the superordinate class to which something belongs, together with the specific characteristics that differentiate it from the other members of the class; his principle to include in entries synonyms or related words of headwords and define them, thus documenting hundreds of unique concepts lexicalized in the Georgian language. Much of this vocabulary was lost in the following centuries and if not the *Georgian Dictionary* of Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani we could have lost a big part of our culture.

Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani’s *Georgian Dictionary* was greatly appreciated by the Georgian people. Its popularity equalled the popularity of *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin* by the great Georgian mediaeval poet Shota Rustaveli. As a result, up to 150 surviving manuscripts of the dictionary have come down to our times, which were copied in the XVIII century and in the first half of the XIX century. *Georgian Dictionary* was first printed only in 1884, some 160 years after its author’s death.

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**Keywords:** Georgian Lexicography, Sulkhan, Saba Orbeliani, lexicographic principles, definitions

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