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Threads of Tbilisi

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Introduction

Tbilisi is a city of stories—a living mosaic cast in stone, mortar, melody, and aroma. Nestled on the banks of the Mtkvari River and wrapped in the emerald embrace of surrounding hills, Georgia’s ancient capital has long captivated all who wander through its winding alleys and sunlit boulevards. From the steam rising off its legendary sulfur baths to the pastel shimmer of eclectic wooden balconies, Tbilisi invites the senses to linger, to listen, and to savor.

Since its mythic founding in the 5th century, when King Vakhtang Gorgasali was lured here by bubbling hot springs and fate, Tbilisi has occupied a vital crossroads—both literally and metaphorically. Its streets have echoed with the footsteps of Silk Road merchants, Persian conquerors, Mongol armies, and craftsmen from as far away as Byzantium and Istanbul. Each arrival enriched the city’s architectural and cultural legacy, etching a palimpsest of civilizations upon the stones, facades, and traditions that define its present-day charm.

Yet Tbilisi is not merely a relic of its illustrious past. Over the centuries, it has weathered adversity, reimagined itself, and flourished anew. Clever artisans and bold visionaries—from puppet masters to avant-garde painters—have stamped their mark on the city’s creative soul. Modern bridges span ancient riverbanks; hip cafés buzz beside venerated churches; and every spring the city’s alleyways erupt in colorful celebration, their rhythms carrying the unmistakable pulse of perseverance and joy.

Equally seductive is Tbilisi’s culinary heritage, the beating heart of Georgian hospitality. Few rituals are as immersive as the supra—the legendary Georgian feast—where toasts ring out and tables groan under the weight of khinkali dumplings, molten cheese breads, and ruby-hued wines. In neighborhood markets, the city’s incomparable flavors are alive: walnuts and herbs, stone fruits, earthen amphorae of amber wine, and street vendors plying golden churchkhela. Each taste offers not just sustenance, but a story.

But what truly sets Tbilisi apart is its people. Warm-hearted and indomitable, they are guardians of tradition yet open to transformation, blending inherited wisdom with a sly, youthful energy. Visitors quickly become friends; customs are explained, not enforced; and the city, even amid rapid urban change, exudes a rare hospitality that feels both timeless and new.

In these pages, “Threads of Tbilisi” weaves together the city’s artistry, heritage, and flavors. More than a travelogue, this book is a cultural journey—meeting the makers, celebrating the festivals, and sampling the meals that make Tbilisi unforgettable.

Whether you are an armchair traveler, a future visitor planning your first stroll across the Bridge of Peace, or a curious soul captivated by hidden histories and recipes, this book is your invitation to explore Georgia's enchanting capital, one vivid thread at a time. Welcome to Tbilisi. Welcome to its story.

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CHAPTER ONE: Into the Mists of Legend: The Founding Myths of Tbilisi

Every great city carries within its ancient stones and winding pathways the whispers of its beginnings, and Tbilisi is no exception. More than a mere historical account, the tale of Tbilisi's genesis is imbued with folklore, a blend of royal decree and natural wonder that captures the Georgian spirit itself. While archaeological evidence suggests human settlements in the region date back to the 4th millennium BC, and a fortress existed here by the late 4th century AD, the enduring narrative of the city's founding centers on a king, a falcon, and a remarkable discovery.

The most celebrated legend tells of King Vakhtang I Gorgasali of Iberia, a monarch who reigned from approximately 447 to 502 AD. One day, as the story goes, King Vakhtang was enjoying a hunt in the heavily forested lands near his then-capital, Mtskheta. The area that would one day become Tbilisi was, at this time, nothing but dense woodland, a wild expanse teeming with game.

The hunt was underway when the king's falcon, a prized hunting bird, soared after a pheasant. The chase led them deep into the forest, and the birds eventually disappeared from the king's sight. When King Vakhtang and his retinue finally tracked them down, they made an astonishing discovery. Both the falcon and the pheasant had fallen into a hot spring, and tragically, had been scalded to death by the boiling waters.

King Vakhtang, rather than being distressed by the loss of his birds, was utterly captivated by the natural phenomenon he had stumbled upon. The idea of warm, naturally occurring springs in the heart of this wild territory struck him with profound significance. Recognizing the immense potential of such a place—its strategic advantages, its protected position between mountains, and its natural bounty—he decided on the spot to establish a city there.

This moment of serendipity, the king's fascination with the thermal waters, is said to be the very origin of Tbilisi's name. The word "Tbilisi" itself is derived from the Old Georgian word "Tpili," which translates directly to "warm." Thus, Tbilisi became known as the "warm location" or "city of warm sources," a direct homage to the sulfuric hot springs that became its defining feature and continue to be a major attraction to this day, particularly in the historic Abanotubani district.

The legend further states that King Vakhtang's son and successor, King Dachi, fulfilled his father's vision by moving the capital of Iberia from Mtskheta to Tbilisi in the early

6th century. King Dachi is also credited with completing the construction of the fortress walls that delineated the city's new boundaries, further solidifying its importance. From this point onward, Tbilisi began its steady growth, largely due to its advantageous position on critical trade and travel routes connecting Europe and Asia.

While this mythical account is deeply ingrained in Georgian cultural identity and remains widely popular, archaeological findings offer a broader perspective. Excavations have revealed that the area of present-day Tbilisi was indeed settled by humans as early as the 4th millennium BC. Furthermore, written records from the latter half of the 4th century AD confirm the existence of a fortress built during the reign of King Varaz-Bakur around 364 AD. This fortress later fell into Persian hands towards the end of the 4th century but was recaptured by the Georgian kings by the mid-5th century.

Therefore, while King Vakhtang Gorgasali may not have "founded" the city from an entirely uninhabited forest, historical evidence suggests he played a crucial role in its development, possibly by revitalizing or rebuilding existing structures like the Abanotubani baths or the Metekhi palace. His decision to make it the capital certainly elevated its status and spurred its growth, transforming what was likely an important existing settlement into a true urban center. This blend of historical fact and captivating myth contributes to the unique allure of Tbilisi, a city whose very name speaks to the geothermal wonders that sparked its legendary birth.

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