



## ORBELI, IOSEF ABGAROVICH

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**ORBELI, IOSEF ABGAROVICH** (Arm. Hovsep' Ōrbeli; b. Tbilisi, 20 March 1887; d. Leningrad, 2 February 1961; [Figure 1](#)), orientalist and academician who specialized in Iranian studies, Armenian and Kurdish philology, and archaeology.

Iosef (Joseph) Orbeli was born in a family of intellectuals in Tbilisi, where he had his pre-university education in a Russian school. In 1904, he went to Saint-Petersburg and entered Saint-Petersburg University. He registered at the Department of Classical Studies of the Faculty for History and Philology and studied Classics, history, and philology, and he developed his interest in the history and culture of Armenia, Georgia, and Iran. It was a flourishing period of Oriental Studies in Russia. Distinguished scholars, such as historian Nicolas Adontz, Michael Javakhishvili, and the philologist [Nikolai Marr](#) were among the scholars whose lectures Orbeli had a chance to attend. In 1911 he graduated, specializing both in Classical and Oriental studies. The following three years he undertook a post-graduate program at the Oriental Department, where he advanced his knowledge of Persian and Arabic.

From 1906 to 1917, Orbeli participated in archeological excavations of Ani, the medieval capital of Armenia, and studied Armenian inscriptions found there. A corpus of these inscriptions was published in [Erevan](#) in 1962 and marked the beginning of a series of publications that are still being released. During 1911-12, Orbeli had a stay in Moks, an ancient region of Armenia., where he carried out researches on the local folklore as well as dialects of Kurdish and Armenian. As the result, he wrote a special study concerning the way of life



and customs of the local inhabitants. He judged that the Kurds had some customs that were similar to ones among Armenian medieval nobility.

He also prepared two dictionaries, which also illustrate some specific traits of the local social relationships, family traditions, and material and spiritual life of the population of Moks, in addition to being important for language studies (especially, phonetics). The Kurdish-Russian dictionary deals with the lexicon of the Kurdish dialect of Moks. Originally, Orbeli wrote Kurdish words with Armenian letters, but later he developed a precise system of transliteration based on the Armenian alphabet with some additional Cyrillic symbols. In the later edition of the dictionary (*Izbrannyye trudy v dvukh tomakh*), he used this transliteration but also provided a phonemic, Latin-based transliteration, the so-called “badyrkhan alphabet.” Orbeli had the chance to speak to many Kurds living in Moks, as well as with the head of the local Kurdish community. The second dictionary, *Kurdsko-russkiĭ slovar*, was devoted to the Armenian dialect of Moks.

In 1916, Orbeli, together with his teacher, the academician Nicolas Marr, participated in a Russian archeological expedition in the Lake Van region. During these years his main interest was a new branch of historical and philological studies, namely urartology (cf. [URARTU IN IRAN](#)). Together with Marr, he participated in the discovery of the Toprakkale obelisk. In 1920, Orbeli joined the Oriental Department of the State [Hermitage Museum](#) in Leningrad as a curator, and in 1926 he became the head of this department. He played an invaluable role in the development of this department, which is still one of the richest departments of the State Hermitage Museum.

In 1931, Orbeli participated in the second International Congress on Iranian Art and Archaeology in London and organized a rich exposition of art pieces from the State Hermitage and other Soviet museums. The great impression that this exhibition produced influenced the decision to organize the Third International Congress on Iranian Art and Archaeology in the USSR. In the same year, a permanent exhibition of the Oriental Department was opened in the Hermitage Museum as a result of his extensive scholarly work. In 1934, he was appointed the director of the State Hermitage Museum. He participated that year in the millenary celebration (*jašn-e hazāra*) of Ferdowsi in Tehran (1934; see [FERDOWSI iv](#)), where he delivered an article titled “The Sasanian silverwork, Art and Shah-Name.” He also took an active part in organizing the Third International Congress in Moscow and Leningrad (1935), in which a good number of well-known scholars from various points of the world



participated.

As the head of the Oriental Department and the director of the State Hermitage Museum, Orbeli undertook a brave initiative to protect the Hermitage treasures, which were often sold by the government to the Western countries. He wrote a letter on this matter to Joseph Stalin and received a positive response. Valuable artifacts continued to be sold, but at a reduced rate.

The art of Sasanian Iran, which had inspired craftsmen and artists of the [Caucasus](#) and Central Asia for many centuries, even after the fall of the [Sasanian dynasty](#), was one of the major subjects of Orbeli's research work. He continued the scholarly traditions established by J. I. Smirnov. The latter published his album *Oriental Silver* in 1909, which reproduced most of the pieces of Sasanian metalwork known by that time. Smirnov, however, failed to publish his comments to the album, which still remain in manuscript form. The results of his investigations were most probably well known to Orbeli, who was interested, not just in the different aspects of Sasanian art, but mainly in its influence on the art and culture of neighboring peoples. In his brief introduction to the album *Sasanian Silver* (Leningrad, 1935), he surveys the finds of Sasanian metal in Russia and suggests the possible ways they reached there. Many of his suggestions on the trade routes that functioned in antiquity were confirmed by later investigations. Ethnographic parallels allowed Orbeli to identify the function of some of the popular forms of vessels, such as "lobed bowls," which were used for fruits and sweets.

Orbeli did not write much about the technical aspects of Sasanian metal, since he was interested more in iconography and its development within the context of changing Iranian society. In particular he explained why all the pieces bearing the famous scene of "Bahrām Gur hunting" belong to the post-Sasanian time. Important is his statement that in Iran there was not just a single line along which the metalwork developed, that there were several local schools. Later finds of Sasanian silver have confirmed his ideas. (Cf. [ART IN IRAN v. SASANIAN ART.](#))

Throughout all his life, Orbeli demonstrated his considerable talent as a manager, which became quite evident during World War II. As soon as the aerial bombardments of Leningrad began, he organized shipment of the invaluable monuments kept in the Hermitage to the hinterland of the country. He himself stayed in the besieged city, where on 19 October 1941 he presided over a scholarly conference dedicated to the poet Neẓāmi. In the late autumn



of 1941, he held another conference, this time dedicated to ‘Ali-šir Navā’i. He spent the winter of 1941 in Leningrad, but in spring, due to his poor health, went to Yerevan. There, in 1943, he was elected the first president of the Armenian Academy of Sciences. Nonetheless, as early as in 1944, he returned to Leningrad to continue his work at the Hermitage as its director. He continued there with unflagging energy and enthusiasm until 1951, when he was abruptly dismissed from the directorship—an event that was totally unforeseen by either Orbeli himself or his colleagues.

Free from administrative duties, he devoted his attention to translating works of the medieval Armenian classics. Four years later, in 1955, Orbeli took the position of the head of the Oriental Faculty at Leningrad State University, and the following year he was appointed the head of Leningrad branch of the Institute for Oriental Studies, the USSR Academy of Sciences. Under him the Institute quickly grew into the largest center of Oriental studies in the USSR.

Orbeli died in 1961.

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