

# GOETHE MEDAL 2016 LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR DAVID LORDKIPANIDZE BY FRIEDERIKE FLESS

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Honoured awardees,  
Professor Lordkipanidze,  
Mr President,  
Professor Lehmann,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are not many archaeologists of whom we can say that their work contributed to rewriting the history of humankind. But we have to say this about David Lordkipanidze. With his research, he fundamentally rewrote the chapter on the evolution of early humans and gave Georgia a central place in this chapter.

When, as he just said in the film, he came to Germany in 1989 as a doctoral student, his home country of Georgia was generally known from Greek mythology. The saga of the Argonauts who stole the Golden Fleece in Colchis seems to reflect that wealth of gold findings that David Lordkipanidze's father made known worldwide through his significant archaeological work and many exhibitions.

But at that time, the sites in Georgia did not yet play a special role in the reconstruction of the evolution of early humans. This changed with the seminal excavations in Dmanisi. I can only imagine his surprise when David Lordkipanidze found the bones of a rhinoceros in the excavation of the medieval settlement of Dmanisi. Recalling Dürer's famous woodcut, perhaps we can imagine this as possible. Yet when the animal bones revealed an entire spectrum of African fauna, very early stone tools came to light and, in the end, skeletons of early hominids were found, he opened up a new chapter to early human history.

When he presented the lower jaw of an early human at a congress in Frankfurt shortly before his doctorate in 1992, the professional world expressed great incredulity. But it quickly gave way to the realization that his research in Dmanisi had uncovered one of the most important archaeological sites for the evolutionary history of early humans.

David Lordkipanidze's work soon revealed that the valid models for the evolution of man had to be fundamentally changed. The site shows that the migration of early hominids out of Africa did not take place 1 million years ago, but much earlier, 1.8 million years ago. But his research also showed that the advance of *Homo erectus* led to very different regions than had been thought. The bridging function of the land between the Black and Caspian Seas, which it would never lose in its history, is quite distinct. But it also became clear that the physique of early humans of Dmanisi were equipped differently than had been assumed.

So it is not surprising that David Lordkipanidze's research was published in the most prestigious international journals such as *Science* and *Nature* and was received eagerly by the professional world. His more than 130 publications bear witness to his enormous scientific productivity. But they also reflect the enormous breadth of his interests.

David Lordkipanidze, who was born in Tbilisi on 5 August 1963 and studied first there and later at the Russian Academy in Moscow, today dominates the scientific debate in the fields of Paleolithic research and paleoanthropology like no other specialist. His interests are much broader in scope, however. They are focused not only on the evolution and migration of early humans and their early cultural techniques, but also the transfer of knowledge about our common past. He is a globally networked, polyglot scholar who significantly shapes the scientific network of his country.

For him, however, science is not only for scientists. It belongs in the public space of museums, exhibitions and education at the excavation sites. As director general of the National Museum of Georgia, he therefore strongly and successfully ensures that scientific findings are related in a way that is universally understandable. And anyone who has ever heard a lecture by him knows that he is a brilliant mediator and narrator of history.

In his work, he tells pivotal stories that open up new worldviews and correct preconceptions. Through his research, he tells stories of the benevolence and attentiveness among the group that lived in Dmanisi, such as the story of an individual who, ill and toothless, was no longer able to provide for herself, but survived through the care of the group. This is a behaviour that does not fit into our widespread notions of unsophisticated early humans.

He also tells the story of a culture of mobility and migration that began with the early humans and at the same time tells how culture and cultural techniques were disseminated along with the migration.

David Lordkipanidze not only explores the phenomenon of cultural dialogue, but has also made a special contribution to cultural dialogue in our time. It is compellingly logical that the Goethe Medal is being awarded to him today. But this is also logical since the namesake of the award itself was interested in questions of evolution and studied skulls. Goethe as a natural scientist and his interest in the development of humankind are the stuff of another talk that I would prefer to leave to the expert in the field, today's awardee, David Lordkipanidze.