

Medieval Georgian Coinage: A Cross-Cultural Introduction

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Abstract

This article surveys the medieval coinage minted on Georgian lands to the Mongol age. Aimed at college-level pedagogy, it underscores the benefits of contextualizing this rich numismatic record regionally, ecumenically, and cross-culturally. The Christianization of the region named for the Caucasus Mountains, which accelerated after the royal conversions of the fourth century, heightened the isthmus' long-standing cross-cultural condition. Meanwhile, Caucasia's traditional socio-cultural orientation southwards, especially towards Iran, did not come to an end with the entrenchment of Christianity. Since the Iron Age, Caucasia has been an active component of the Iranic (Persianate) world. The formation of the dār al-Islām and its extension across Caucasia did not thwart the southwards orientation. In Georgian lands, Islamic types and Arabic inscriptions were commonplace on the local coinage produced by Muslims and Christians alike. The Georgian Bagratids, identifying themselves as a Christian Byzantine-like dynasty, continued to deploy Islamic types on their coinage even during its "Golden Age" in the eleventh to early thirteenth century. At the same time, the nexus of the Iranian and Persianate world, on the one hand, and Caucasia, on the other, endured and evolved. The chronological span investigated here is appropriately bookended by coins embodying imperial hegemonies whose epicenters were located in Iran (i.e., the Sasanians and the Ilkhans).

Introduction

A nagging paradox undergirds the study of medieval Caucasia. Despite having been one of Eurasia's most dynamic cross-cultural hubs, the isthmus crowned by the Caucasus Mountains is often cast as an exotic periphery. Caucasia has rarely been investigated as a cohesive region on its own terms, let alone as a viable and principal object of study. Rather, Caucasia's past has been carved up by, and put into the service of, competing ethno-national histories.¹ Though pervasive across the globe, such master narratives are inherently limited owing to their essentializing and privileging nature.² Against this charged historiographical

1. National(ist) formulations may have commendable social and political functions, e.g., responses to imperial oppression. But nations might also be reconstituted and even made under imperial impulses; see Ronald Grigor Suny, "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations," *Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 4 (2001): 862–96; Victor A. Shnirelman, "Politics of Ethnogenesis in the USSR and After," *Bulletin of the National Museum of Ethnology* 30, no. 1 (2005): 93–119; and Arsène Saparov, *From Conflict to Autonomy in the Caucasus: The Soviet Union and the Making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh* (London: Routledge, 2017).

2. For modern Caucasia, see David Leupold, *Embattled Dreamlands: The Politics of Contesting Armenian*,

backdrop, Caucasia's regional status has been further obscured in two ways. First, the body of scholarship produced outside the isthmus is predisposed towards its Armenian elements,³ thus relegating the rest of Caucasia to the fringes of an already exotified and marginalized Armenia. Second, Christianity's ubiquity among Armenians, Georgians, Caucasian Albanians, and their neighbors animates the primary attachment of late antique and medieval Caucasia to the Christian Romano-Byzantine⁴ Empire and Commonwealth.⁵ From the eighteenth century, this image was stoked by the Christian pursuits of elites in the Russian Empire (and in a more restricted way, the USSR), Eastern and Western Europe, and North America—not to mention those from Caucasia's Christian communities, whose autonomous identity was eroded under the tsars and largely disappeared under the Soviets. The resultant vision of Caucasia, infused with Eurocentric ideas, projected the isthmus as an outpost of Christian European "civilization," albeit an exotic and perilous one that was not and could not be fully European. In actuality, the Christianities of pre-modern Caucasia were far more entangled with those of Syria, Mesopotamia, eastern Anatolia, the Holy Land, and Iran.⁶ Caucasia is a reminder of the fallacy of equating Christianity and Europe.

Time and again, academics have treated Caucasia's constituent traditions as (exotic) reservoirs from which specific information might be surgically extracted for the histories of Afro-Eurasia's great cultural and imperial powers. Divested of context and nuance, excerpted "facts" are meant to supplement studies of the Sasanian Empire, the Romano-Byzantine Empire, (Eastern) Christendom, the *dār al-Islām*, and the Mongol Empire, among others. When coupled with practical linguistic challenges, the peculiar imaginaries of a nationalized Caucasia embedded within imperial frameworks have brought serious consequences. The artificial separation of Northern Caucasia and the traditionally sedentary

Kurdish, and Turkish Memory (New York: Routledge, 2020).

3. The main exception is research produced by Georgians and/or aligned with the master narrative of the Georgian nation. For scholarship's peculiar Armenocentrism, consider the otherwise excellent *Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire*, in which multiple chapters are devoted to Armenians, but none to the Caucasus region, and which does not include serious engagement with its other peoples, especially Christian Georgians and Albanians (Jonathan Shepard, ed., *Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c. 500–1492*, rev. ed. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019]). This is not to say that Caucasia's component lands and peoples did not have differing historical impacts, and so forth. In terms of relative numbers, Armenians constituted medieval Caucasia's largest population. Still, the reduction of Caucasia to Armenia and Armenians cannot be justified historically. In recent centuries, the active and far-flung Armenian diaspora has popularized Armenian studies in a manner not achieved by its Georgian and Azeri counterparts.

4. On the applicability of "Byzantine" to the Christian phase of Roman history, see Anthony Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019).

5. On the Byzantine Commonwealth, see Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1453* (New York: Praeger, 1971); and Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

6. On Caucasia's Christianities, see Vrej Nerses Nersessian, "Armenian Christianity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry, 23–46 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Stephen H. Rapp Jr., "Georgian Christianity," in *ibid.*, 137–55; and Christopher Haas, "The Caucasus," in *Early Christianity in Contexts: An Exploration across Cultures and Continents*, ed. William Tabbernee, 111–41 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

peoples to the south has been heightened.⁷ In addition, specialists on southern Caucasia are rarely proficient in more than one of its three main modern languages: Armenian, Georgian, and Azeri, let alone the extinct Caucasian Albanian language.⁸ Competence in older idioms like Classical Armenian and Old Georgian has been—and remains—uncommon, especially outside their requisite ethno-national spheres. Researchers based outside Caucasia often rely heavily, if not exclusively, on Russian.⁹ This may be a matter of practicality, but Caucasia's representation has been profoundly impacted. For example, limited reliance on specific local languages and the prioritization of national narratives have reinforced the notion of Caucasia as having been situated *between* major cultures and empires.¹⁰ A peripheral Caucasia becomes an interstitial space between “bigger and better” things.¹¹ Alternately the isthmus between the Black and Caspian Seas is reduced to a passive “bridge” linking Eurasia's great “civilizations.”

Georgia's medieval coinage demonstrates the limitations of these historiographical imaginaries and opens wider vistas upon Caucasia and western Eurasia, including the Islamic world. This essay accentuates the Caucasus isthmus' multi- and cross-cultural past, as well as the agency and adaptability of its peoples, by engaging Georgian coinage as a “primary” source for college-level pedagogy, including courses on Islamic, Eastern Christian, and Eurasian history, as well as those on cross-cultural encounters and the global Middle Age(s).

Coins have been minted in what was and is Georgia since antiquity—though with abundant starts and stops, by a variety of authorities, and not always by and principally for Georgian peoples. The numismatic record is impressive, stretching from ancient Greek colonies, through late antique and medieval Georgian kingdoms, and on to the Russian Empire and today's sovereign Republic of Georgia, *Sak'art'velos respublika*.¹² Interrogations of this

7. While there are some significant differences between them, the severance of northern and southern Caucasia persists. One variance is northern Caucasia's integration with the Eurasian Steppe. On this see, e.g., John Latham Sprinkle, “Political Authority in North Caucasian Albania, 800–1300” (PhD diss., SOAS University of London, 2018); and Nicholas John Barrie Evans, “Mountains, Steppes and Empires: Approaches to the North Caucasus in the Early Middle Ages” (PhD diss., Wadham College, University of Oxford, 2016).

8. On Caucasian Albania and its recently deciphered script, see Jost Gippert and Jasmine Dum-Tragut, eds., *Caucasian Albania: An International Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

9. E.g., Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), a book whose accolades are well-deserved; and James Forsyth, *The Caucasus: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

10. Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “Caucasia in Late Antiquity: Between the Byzantine and Iranian Worlds?,” in *Sasanian Studies: Late Antique Iranian World = Sasanidische Studien: Spätantike iranische Welt 2* (2023): 229–52. There are many examples of research evoking Caucasia as an “in between.” A recent example is Robert G. Hoyland, “Caucasian Elites between Byzantium and the Caliphate in the Early Islamic Period,” in *The Islamic-Byzantine Border in History: From the Rise of Islam to the End of the Crusades*, ed. D.G. Tor and Alexander D. Beihammer, 78–99 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

11. On Caucasia as an “interstitial zone,” see Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 203.

12. This survey primarily focuses on coins struck in lands with majority Georgian populations. However, a variety of other coinage circulated in this space; see I.L. Dzhaganian, *Inozemnaia moneta v denezhnom*

numismatic history have been shaped by the modern prioritization of nation-states, and especially by the insistence upon a primordial and essentialized Georgian nation with a linear, unbroken history.¹³ This conviction informs, for example, an official postage stamp from the Republic of Georgia celebrating the three-millennium existence of the “Georgian state system” (see Fig. 1).¹⁴ As proof of this extraordinary claim, the stamp touts the ancient, late antique, and medieval coinage struck in Georgian lands.



Fig. 1.
Scott 2010 Standard
Postage Stamp Cat-
alog, #GE 239 (A67),
spring 2000.

Issued at the dawn of the new millennium, the commemorative sheet depicts seven coins across 3,000 years of Georgian (and, as it happens, Caucasian¹⁵) history. The coins are superimposed over the cap of a stone column from the fifth-century Bolnisi Sioni

obrashchenii Gruzii V-XIII vv. (T'bilisi: Mec'niereba, 1979).

13. On the modern Georgian nation, see Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); idem, ed., *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). Unlike many patriots in Caucasia today, I accept the definition of nations as a specifically modern phenomenon, as has been established by numerous scholars including Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and Ronald Grigor Suny. For a divergent view, see Davit' Musxelišvili, Giorgi Čeišvili, and Alek'sandre Daušvili, *K'art'veli eris konsolidac'ii etapebi da t'aviseburebani uxsovari droidan dgemde* (T'bilisi: Universali, 2016), with English summary, “Consolidation Stages and Peculiarities of the Georgian Nation (from the Ancient Time till Today),” at 695–97.

14. Cf. “The history of Azerbaijani statehood is about 5,000 years old” (Yagub Mahmudov, *On the Issue of Azerbaijani Ethnogenesis*, trans. András Soproni [Budapest: European Folklore Institute, 2010], 11), copyrighted by the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan in Hungary and thus indicating some manner of connection with the Azerbaijani government.

15. In this essay, “Caucasian” is the attributive of Caucasia, i.e., the Caucasus region. It is never used in a modern racial sense.

basilica, the oldest extant church structure in Georgia.¹⁶ The stamp features a coin—both obverse and reverse in this instance only—from a Greek settlement on the eastern Black Sea littoral, an area now part of western Georgia; three coins from the medieval kingdom ruled by the Georgian Bagratid dynasty; a Georgian imitation of a silver coin from Byzantine Trebizond in northeastern Asia Minor, which arose after soldiers of the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople in 1204; an imperial Russian coin emblazoned with the Georgian-language “Tp’ilisi” (T’bilisi in modern orthography), the name of Georgia’s chief city;¹⁷ and a present-day fifty *t’et’ri*¹⁸ piece of the Georgian Republic.

The numismatic history of lands dominated by Georgian peoples is genuinely old. But to classify all such coins as “Georgian” without explanation is misleading.¹⁹ Although coins were already being produced in the Greek colonies near ancient Colchis in the sixth century BC or so,²⁰ we cannot say they were minted by any Georgian community or principally for their use. By nationalizing the past, our commemorative stamp communicates a carefully-tailored message in harmony with the Georgian national narrative. And it underscores the necessity of historicizing the remarkable inventory of coinage associated with Georgians and what was and what would become Georgia.

Received ethno-territorial designations complicate our inquiry. “Georgia” is an exonym and is absent from the Georgian language except as a very recent loan for targeted commercial and political purposes. Already in medieval Europe, Georgia was thought to echo the local, ancient devotion to St. George.²¹ In fact, Georgia and associated European terms like the French *Géorgie* and German *Georgien* ultimately derive from Persian Gurjistān (گرجستان), to which Arabic Jurzān (جرزان) is related.²² The Russian *Gruziia* (Грузия) shares this pedigree.

16. Some of the earliest surviving Georgian inscriptions adorn Bolnisi Sioni; see Valeri Silogava, *Bolnisi užvelesi k’art’uli carcerebi* (T’bilisi: Mec’niereba, 1994), with English summary, “The Oldest Georgian Inscriptions of Bolnisi,” at 93–109.

17. The pre-modern Georgian spelling of T’bilisi (თბილისი) is Tp’ilisi (ტფილისი; the sound of aspirate *p* is akin to *f*). The city’s name is rendered in Russian and other languages as Tiflis (Russian Тифлис, though also Soviet and post-Soviet Тбилиси), Tiflis, and so forth.

18. Today’s *lari* consists of one hundred *t’et’ris*. *T’et’ri*, “white,” is the medieval Georgian appellation for silver coinage. In other contexts, the term is associated with the Moon and St. George.

19. Georgia is hardly unique in this regard.

20. Colchis is a Greek toponym. Its land was incorporated within the Old Georgian term Egrisi, broadly denoting Georgian territories on the eastern rim of the Black Sea in what would become western Georgia.

21. This association is already mentioned in the thirteenth century by Jacques de Vitry: see Kevin Tuite, “The Old Georgian Version of the Miracle of St. George, the Princess, and the Dragon: Text, Commentary, and Translation,” in *Sharing Myths, Texts and Sanctuaries in the South Caucasus: Apocryphal Themes in Literatures, Arts and Cults from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, ed. Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev, 60–94 (Leuven: Peeters, 2022), esp. 60–61; and David Tinikashvili and Ioane Kazaryan, “Crusaders and Georgia: A Critical Approach to Georgian Historiography,” *Kadmos* 6 (2014): 31–49, at 31–32.

22. On the Persian and Arabic terms, see Goč’a Jap’arize, “K’art’velebisa da sak’art’velos arabuli saxelcodebebi,” in *Sak’art’velosa da k’art’velebis aǧmnišvneli uc’xouri da k’art’uli terminologia*, ed. Giorgi Paičaze, 121–45 (T’bilisi: Mec’niereba, 1993) (English summary, “The Arabic Designations of the Georgians and Georgia,” at 144–45); and

Subsumed within these toponyms and their companion ethnonyms is a panoply of Georgian peoples. From their historical genesis, perhaps in the second millennium BC, the various Georgians have shared a distinctive, multifarious, and evolving cultural package. A stalwart pillar of this identity—stressed by the modern national narrative—is the Georgian language, a non-Indo-European tongue.²³ By the end of the Iron Age, Georgian peoples are attested in Mesopotamian and Mediterranean written sources. In the later stages of the Achaemenid Empire, the area Georgians call K'art'li, the artery of which is the Kura (Mtkvari) River, achieved political, cultural, and economic primacy. K'art'li is roughly equivalent to the Asiatic Iberia (Ἰβηρία) of Graeco-Roman sources. The dominant people in K'art'li called itself *k'art'veli* (ქართველი), that is K'art'velian or Kartlian,²⁴ and its language—*k'art'uli ena* (ქართული ენა), what Euro-Americans term the Georgian language. In the medieval era, the meanings of *k'art'veli* and its inanimate form *k'art'uli* were flexible. As the Bagratid monarchy consolidated power, *k'art'veli* was extended to all “Georgian” peoples in the realm, including inhabitants of Kaxet'i (Kakheti), Tao-Klarjet'i, Samegrelo (Mingrelia), Imeret'i, and lands once called Egrisi, which encompassed what the Greeks identified as Colchis (Κολχίς). From the eleventh century, Georgian writers applied the toponym Sak'art'velo, “the domain of the K'art'velians,” to the entire realm.²⁵ But as the literary, numismatic, and linguistic records attest, other Georgian peoples retained their distinctiveness. The kaleidoscopic temper of Georgian identity is manifest in the Arabic word *abkhāz* (ابخاز), strictly designating an inhabitant from the region of Ap'xazet'i (Abkhazia) but by which Islamic sources may intend the unified Georgian kingdom. This all-Georgian realm came into existence with the first durable political union of Ap'xazet'i and K'art'li, that is to say, eastern and western Georgia.

The various Georgians lived mainly within Caucasia, the isthmus named for the fabled Caucasus Mountains, which stand along its northern expanse (see Fig. 2).

K. Tabataže, “Sak'art'velosa da k'art'velebis aǧmnišvneli terminebi X–XV ss. sparsuli cqaroebis mixedvit’,” in *ibid.*, 210–54 (English summary, “Terms Designating ‘Georgia’ and ‘Georgians’ in Persian Historical Sources of the 10th–15th Centuries,” at 253–54).

23. The linguistic roots of Georgian languages are evident in the third and fourth millennia BC; see Yakov G. Testelet, “Kartvelian (South Caucasian) Languages,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Languages of the Caucasia*, ed. Maria Polinsky, 491–528 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). On Ancient Caucasia’s archaeological cultures, see Antonio Sagona, *The Archaeology of the Caucasus: From Earliest Settlements to the Iron Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

24. On local and foreign designations for “Georgia” and “Georgians,” see Giorgi Paičaze, ed., *Sak'art'velosa da k'art'velebis aǧmnišvneli uc'xouri da k'art'uli terminologia* (T'bilisi: Mec'niereba, 1993), which includes English summaries of the various chapters. The Asiatic Iberians mentioned in Graeco-Roman sources are not to be confused with the Iberians of the Iberian Peninsula in far western Europe.

25. Stephen H. Rapp Jr., *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts*, CSCO, vol. 601, subsidia, vol. 113 (Louvain: CSCO, 2003), esp. ch. 11, “Sak'art'velo,” 413–40.

Fig. 2.
Caucasia as
photographed
by the Terra
Modis satellite,
September 2004.
Image source:
NASA.



Above all, pre-modern Caucasia was a zone of convergence and encounter. It is the arena where the Eurasian Steppe dissolves into Asia Minor and the Iranian world, the last of which the Sasanians called *Ērānšahr*. Despite persistent ethnocentric, nationalizing, and mythologizing imaginaries, Caucasia was a durable and dynamic cross-cultural space overlapping with its neighbors; it was not merely a bridge or interstitial space between Eurasia's well-known cultures, societies, and empires. To varying degrees, the isthmus was integrated (oftentimes simultaneously) into those Eurasian worlds; its peoples actively contributed to those enterprises, and they often exhibited tremendous adaptability and agency. Western Eurasia's imperial powers were lured by Caucasia's strategic location and bountiful human and natural resources. Achaemenids, Seleucids, Arsacids, Romans/Byzantines, Sasanians, Umayyads, Abbasids, Seljuqs, Mongols, Timurids, Safavids, Ottomans, and others intervened in Caucasia, to pilfer its resources, and to claim (parts of) the region as their own. All the while, Caucasia remained a distinctive socio-cultural organism. In terms of human geography, it was an enduring cross-cultural nexus whose interlinked inhabitants articulated distinctive, but flexible, identities. Caucasia was a coherent world region, but it was also a diverse one.²⁶ From this perspective, it was not unlike the cross-cultural nodes of Central Asia and the Horn of Africa, all three of which are routinely depicted as peripheries despite their historical centrality.

26. On Caucasia as a world region, see Stephen H. Rapp Jr., "Chronology, Crossroads, and Commonwealths: World-Regional Schemes and the Lessons of Caucasia," in *Interactions: Transregional Perspectives on World History*, ed. Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Arnand A. Yang, 167–201 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005); Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, eds., *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories and the Making of a World Area* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007); and Georgi Derluguian, "The Caucasus: A Rock in the Grinding Wheels of World History," in *Beyond the Pale: The Holocaust in the North Caucasus*, ed. Crispin Brooks and K. Feferman, 25–47 (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020). For a seemingly less dynamic "technology transfer" in late antique Georgia, see Frank Schleicher, *Iberia Caucasia: Ein Kleinkönigreich im Spannungsfeld großer Imperien* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2021), 320–24.

Ancient Caucasia was home to an assortment of local and regional kingdoms. Established in the ninth century BC, Urartu first conjoined lands on what came to be called the Armenian Plateau into a political entity.²⁷ Urartu is the oldest imperial enterprise anchored chiefly in the isthmus, though its direct reach does not appear to have extended into today's Republic of Georgia, and it spawned the earliest Caucasus-produced written sources in a local language. Another early polity, Colchis, occupied the eastern rim of the Black Sea. Ancient and medieval Greeks fetishized Colchis in myths about the fantastic odyssey of Jason and the Argonauts. We know far more about the mythical Colchis than its historical counterpart. Precisely when historical Colchis emerged as an autonomous polity is uncertain, though the Greeks encroached on its authority by implanting colonies along the coast beginning as early as the eighth century BC.²⁸ These Greek settlements produced the first coinage in what would become Georgia, the earliest specimens of which date from about the sixth century BC. The silver coin pictured in Figure 3 belongs to a type modern Georgian scholars call "Colchian *t'et'ris*," *kolxuri t'et'rebi*, termed *kolxhidki* in English and Russian.²⁹



Fig. 3.
Hemidrachm from Colchis,
ca. 400 BC.

AR. Obverse: female head facing right; reverse: the head of a bull, also facing right. Typical diameter: 11–12 mm; typical weight: 1.2–2.6 g. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, #1–2, pp. 6–8; Bennett, *Catalog*, #9–13.

Image source: private collection.

27. Paul E. Zimansky, *Ecology and Empire: The Structure of the Urartian State* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1985); Roberto Dan, *From the Armenian Highland to Iran: A Study on the Relations between the Kingdom of Urartu and the Achaemenid Empire* (Roma: Scienze e lettere, 2015); and A.T. Smith, "Imperial Archipelago: The Making of an Urartian Landscape" (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 1996).

28. On Colchis and its Graeco-Roman image, see David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC–AD 562* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). Georgian *Kolxet'i* (and its related forms) is a later term based on Greek. An early attestation appears in Vaxušti (d. 1757), *Ağcera samep'osa sak'art'velosa*, which has been published as vol. 4 of S. Qauxč'išvili, ed., *K'art'lis c'xovreba* (T'bilisi: Sabčot'a sak'art'velo, 1973), 775₂₅ (*kolxida*).

29. On *Kolxhidki*, see Lara Fabian, "The Meanings of Coins in the Ancient Caucasus," *Historische Anthropologie* 27, no. 1 (2019): 42–47.

In the second to first century BC, another series was minted in Colchis when it fell under the hegemony of Mithridates Eupator of Pontus (see Fig. 4).³⁰ The reverse features the Greek inscription ΔΙΟΣΚΟΥΡΙΑΔΟΣ (*Dioskuriados*), the Greek Milesian colony Dioscurias, with a central image of the *thyrsos*, a Greek symbol of fertility.³¹ This is the first known coinage bearing an inscription to be produced in what were, and what would become, Georgian lands.³²

Fig. 4.

Dioscurias. Obverse: caps of the Dioscuri; reverse: Greek inscription *Dioskuriados*.

AE. Typical diameter: 14–19 mm; typical weight: 1.4–7 g. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, #5, p. 11; Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*, plate #A17; Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika*, #19, pp. 40–41; Dundua and Dundua, *K'art'uli numizmatika*, vol. 1, ##20–21; Bennett, *Catalog*, ##32–33.

Image source: private collection.



Inland, a powerful kingdom arose in Armenia in the second century BC under the Artaxēsīd (Artaxiad) dynasty. Tigran the Great (r. 95–55 BC), its most famous representative, commanded an empire stretching across southern Caucasia and pushing southwest to Syria and the Mediterranean. Tigran's coins feature Greek inscriptions and conform to prevailing Hellenistic numismatic patterns (see Fig. 5).³³

30. On Mithridates Eupator, see Duane W. Roller, *Empire of the Black Sea: The Rise and Fall of the Mithridatic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

31. On Dioscurias, see Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 106–9.

32. Some *kolkhidki* display individual Greek letters; see Kirk Bennett, *A Catalogue of Georgian Coins* (Santa Rosa, CA: Stephen Album Rare Coins, 2014), 21.

33. Its lappets may be a local feature; see Christina Maranci, *The Art of Armenia: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 25.



Fig. 5.
Tigran II (r. 95–56 BC).
Tetradrachm struck ca.
80–68 BC.
AR. Obverse: King Tigran,
crowned; reverse: Greek
inscription “King Tigranēs”
on either side of Tychē of
Antioch, holding laurel
branch. The river deity
Orontēs swims on the right.
Diameter: 26 mm; weight:
15.5 g. Image source: [CNG
Coins, #4450202 \(382993\)](#)

The Greek and Hellenistic dimensions of Caucasia’s earliest coinage fuel scholars’ persistent assertions of the region’s deep integration into the Graeco-Hellenistic-Roman Mediterranean. While abundant links and mutual influences existed,³⁴ too often these are exaggerated and examined in isolation.³⁵ Though an inconvenient truth for modern patriots and policy makers, as well as Classicists, Byzantinists, and others, Caucasia’s political, social, cultural, and economic life was oriented principally to the south across pre-modern times. Of special importance, Caucasia was integrated into the cross-cultural Iranian world from the Iron Age.³⁶ The Irano-Caucasian nexus intensified under the Arsacid Empire, when waves of migration brought Parthian nobles permanently to the isthmus. Parthian expatriates mixed with the local populace and acculturated. This infusion bolstered the existing Iranian (Persianate)³⁷ matrix of Caucasia. In late antiquity, the three main realms of inland southern Caucasia—Armenia Major, K’art’li in eastern Georgia, and Caucasian Albania—were ruled by royal families of mixed Parthian and local backgrounds. In the fourth century, beginning with Trdat IV of Armenia (r. 298/299–ca. 330), Christianity was adopted by the kings and elites of all three polities. As it happens, Christianization did not suddenly and forever catapult southern Caucasia into the Romano-Byzantine orbit. Christian elements were adapted and injected into the identities of local peoples. Yet in many respects existing cultural, social, and political identities—which were heavily Iranian—endured but were Christianized.³⁸

34. On Georgian peoples and lands, see Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*; and A. Furtwängler, I. Gagoshidze, H. Löhr, and N. Ludwig, eds., *Iberia and Rome: The Excavations of the Palace at Dedoplist Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*, Schriften des Zentrums für Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte des Schwarzmeerraumes (Langenweißbach: Beier & Beran, 2008).

35. On later Armenian ties to the Mediterranean world, see Kathryn Babayan and Michael Pifer, eds., *An Armenian Mediterranean: Words and Worlds in Motion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

36. See esp. Cyril Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1963); the many publications of Nina Garsoïan, including those collected in *Church and Culture in Early Medieval Armenia* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 1999) and *Studies on the Formation of Christian Armenia* (London: Routledge, 2018 [2010]); and those of James R. Russell assembled in *Armenian and Iranian Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, 2004).

37. A concept normally associated with the Islamic epoch.

38. Esp. the publications of Toumanoff and Garsoïan.

Any inquiry into medieval Georgia must address the Bagratid monarchs, who wielded power for a millennium down to the nineteenth-century annexation by the Russian Empire. The preponderance of medieval Georgia's coinage was minted under Bagratid auspices and, in the case of the Abbasids and Mongols, the Bagratids' imperial overlords. In addition, most medieval Georgian coinage seems to have been produced in or near K'art'li, the political axis of Bagratid Georgia. That being said, Georgian royal courts and their mints tended to be mobile.³⁹ The majority of the coins surveyed below are products of the Bagratids' gathering of Georgian lands, the apex of the medieval Bagratid kingdom, its transformation into a pan-Caucasian empire, and its subsequent atrophy into a more compact and debilitated realm.

The polity of the Bagratids was fundamentally cross-cultural. The Georgian Bagratids belonged to a pan-Caucasian family with origins to the south, in areas dominated by Armenians.⁴⁰ Paralleling the royal resurgence engineered by their Armenian kin, Georgian Bagratid princes took control of the presiding principate in 813. This institution, called *erist'avt'a-mt'avrobay*, administered eastern Georgia during the *interregnum* commencing ca. 580. In 888, the Georgian Bagratids restored kingship and pursued political consolidation across Georgian lands, gradually recovering areas Muslims had dominated since the seventh century. Owing to the creative efforts of the Bagratid prince Davit' *kuropalatēs* (d. 1000), the districts on both sides of the Surami ridge—the customary geographical demarcation of eastern and western Georgia—were conjoined into a stable long-term polity for the first time. By the early twelfth century, the Bagratids and the allied Georgian Church had transformed the unified Georgian kingdom into an isthmus-spanning empire. At its zenith, the Bagratid Empire encompassed Georgia, northern Caucasia, the lands of the former Albanian kingdom and western Azerbaijan, Caucasian Armenia, eastern Anatolia, and northwestern Iran. Its Armenian possessions included lands that had constituted the small kingdoms of the Armenian Bagratids.⁴¹ Unlike their Georgian brethren, Armenian Bagratid kings did not usually mint their own coinage. Instead, the Georgian coinage of the Bagratid Empire circulated widely in Armenia and what had been Caucasian Albania.⁴²

39. Evidenced by recent finds at the extensive Samšwilde site: Davit' Berikašvili and Maia Patarize, *Samšvildis ganzi = Samshvilde Hoard* (T'bilisi: Sak'art'velos universitetis gamomc'emloba, 2019).

40. The Bagratids' genesis, identity, and history are fiercely debated among modern Armenians and Georgians, both of whom claim the Bagratids as their own. From a regional perspective, the Bagratid house, with distinctive Armenian and Georgian branches emerging towards the end of late antiquity, is best characterized as pan-Caucasian. For a curious attempt to establish the Georgianness of the Bagratids based on numismatic evidence from the third century BC, see T'edo Dundua, "Bagrati, že bivratisa," in *Bagationebi samec'niro da kulturuli memkvidneoba*, ed. Roin Metreveli, 69–76 (T'bilisi: Bagratovant'a saxli, 2003), with English summary, "Bagrat, Son of Bivrat (Towards a Genesis of the Georgian Royal Family—the Bagratids)," at 74–76.

41. On Armenian Bagratid and Arcruni kingdoms arising in the ninth century and disappearing in the eleventh, see K.N. Iuzbashian, *Armiānskie gosudarstva epokhi Bagratidov i Vizantiia IX-XI vv.* (Moskva: Nauka, 1988); and Nina Garsoian, "The Independent Kingdoms of Medieval Armenia," in *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, ed. R.G. Hovannisian, 1:143–85 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

42. X. Mušelyan, *Hayoc' patmut'yan dramagitakanə = Kh. Mousheghian, The Numismatics of Armenian History* (Erevan: Anahit, 1997), 127–32. But in the second half of the eleventh century, after the Seljuk conquest

Today's confident national narratives usually ignore or sidestep cross-cultural history. To do otherwise would shift the spotlight from a dominant *ethnie*. The Georgian master narrative conforms to this pattern. An example is the sharp line it draws between Christianity and Islam. Military battles involving Christians and Muslims are often depicted as religious and "civilizational" clashes, as is the case with the Battle of Didgori Plain in August 1121, which curtailed Seljuk authority and accelerated the defeat of the Islamic amirate headquartered at T'bilisi/Tiflis.⁴³ Notwithstanding the pervasive historiographical imagery, Muslims and Islam have long been an integral part of Caucasian society, and vice versa, a situation that has continued to the present day.⁴⁴ Medieval Georgian coinage is an artifact of this long cross-religious and cosmopolitan condition. While religious tension is evident in our medieval sources,⁴⁵ so too is an array of cross-cultural and cross-religious phenomena. These take many forms and may be cooperative, mutually beneficial, or confrontational. Among the literary products of this cosmopolitan milieu is the epic poem *Vep'xistqaosani* (ვეფხისტყაოსანი), *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, credited to Šot'a Rust'aveli.⁴⁶ An original Georgian masterpiece through and through, *Vep'xistqaosani* is simultaneously a Persianate epic with as many (and perhaps more) overt Islamic elements as Christian ones. The same trait is exhibited in neighboring epic literatures, including the Armenian *Sasna crer* (Մասնակի ծներ), *Daredevils of Sasun*, and the Byzantine *Digenēs Akritas* (Διγενῆς Ἀκρίτας), the last of whose protagonist Basil has a mixed Byzantine-Cappadocian and Arab bloodline. In short, the cross-cultural and cross-religious fabric of Caucasia's epics is evident across the isthmus and is reflected in a range of literary, visual, and material sources, including coinage.⁴⁷

of Ani (then controlled by Constantinople), the Bagratid rulers of Lori briefly minted copper coins of a Byzantine type (p. 130) and with the first numismatic inscriptions in Armenia. For this series, see also David M. Lang, "Supplementary Notes on Kiurike II, King of Lori in Armenia and His Coins," *Museum Notes (American Numismatic Society)* 6 (1954): 183–91.

43. A.C.S. Peacock, "Georgia and the Anatolian Turks in the 12th and 13th Centuries," *Anatolian Studies* 56 (2006): 127–46, esp. 130–31.

44. E.g., Alison Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam: Islamic Rule and Iranian Legitimacy in Armenia and Caucasian Albania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and the pathfinding research of Vladimir Minorsky, some of whose essays are assembled in *The Turks, Iran and the Caucasus in the Middle Ages* (London: Variorum, 1978).

45. Such tensions in Caucasia are hardly unique to Muslim-Christian relations. There were also, for example, occasional disagreements and hostility between co-religionist Georgians and Byzantines.

46. Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, trans. Venera Urushadze (T'bilisi: Sabčot'a sak'art'velo, 1986). A more recent translation into English provides a superb modern literary interpretation but is not a close rendering of the original; see Shota Rustaveli, *The Knight in the Panther Skin*, trans. Lyn Coffin, with Dodona Kiziria and Nodar Natadze (T'bilisi: Poezia Press, 2015).

47. On encounters of Christianity and Islam in medieval Caucasia, see Sergio La Porta, "Conflicted Coexistence: Christian-Muslim Interaction and Its Representation in Medieval Armenia," in *Contextualizing the Muslim Other in Medieval Christian Discourse*, ed. J. Frakes, 103–23 (New York: Palgrave, 2011); Antony Eastmond, "Art and Identity in the Thirteenth-Century Caucasus," in *CNES Colloquium Series Art and Identity*, 3–40 (Los Angeles: G.E. von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies, UCLA, 2000); and Lynn Jones, "'Abbasid Suzerainty in the Medieval Caucasus: Appropriation and Adaptation of Iconography and Ideology,'" *Gesta* 43, no. 2 (2004): 143–50.

Published Surveys of Georgian Coinage

Scholarly surveys of Georgian coinage are most plentiful in Russian and Georgian. Despite their ages, the two most important surveys in any language are E.A. Pakhomov's *Monety Gruzii* (1910, reprinted in 1970)⁴⁸ and Demetre Kapanadze's *Gruzinskaia numizmatika* (1955),⁴⁹ both of which are written in Russian. Lately, the father-and-son team of Giorgi and T'edo Dundua have assembled a Georgian-language catalog under the title *K'art'uli numizmatika*, the initial installment of which appeared in 2006.⁵⁰ In addition, an English adaptation of the Dunduas' numismatic investigations has been published in Athens (second edition, 2021).⁵¹ These works offer many benefits, especially through their core descriptions and images. However, much of T'edo Dundua's research positions coinage as incontrovertible proof of Georgia's primordial belonging to Europe and "Western civilization" across the *longue durée*. It leverages ancient, late antique, and medieval coinage to prove the worthiness of Georgia's coveted membership in the EU and NATO.⁵² Needless to say, the patriotic and European dreams of Dundua and the cross-cultural and transregional ones at the crux of the present survey palpably diverge.

Occasionally, medieval Georgian coinage has attracted attention outside the former USSR,⁵³ although published resources in Western European languages are scarce. Early contributions include those of trailblazers Marie-Félicité Brosset, Victor Langlois, and Joseph Karst.⁵⁴ Published some seventy years ago, David Marshall Lang's *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia in Transcaucasia* (1955) remains essential reading. Lang's survey highlights the specific holdings of the museum of the American Numismatic Society in New York City.⁵⁵ For reasons that will become clear, the ANS houses Georgian coinage

48. E.A. Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii* (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1970). An unpublished English translation by H. Bartlett Wells is available at the ANS library in New York.

49. D.G. Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika* (Moskva: Izd-vo AN SSSR, 1955).

50. Giorgi Dundua and T'edo Dundua, *K'art'uli numizmatika*, vol. 1 (T'bilisi: Artanuji, 2006).

51. T'edo Dundua and Giorgi Dundua, *Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics*, 2nd ed. (Athens: Demetrius Siatras, 2021).

52. E.g., T'edo Dundua, *Georgia within the European Integration as Seen in Coinage: Catalogue of Georgian Coins* (T'bilisi: Meridiani, 1999); and T'edo Dundua, Akaki Čik'obava, and Emil Avdaliani, *Moneta, rogorc' propogandis sašualeba k'art'uli numizmatikuri žeglebis mixedvit' = Coin[age] as a Means of Propaganda according to Georgian Numismatics* (T'bilisi: Meridiani, 2020). The political shadow of Zviad Gamsaxurdia and his time looms large; see Stephen H. Rapp Jr., "Dismantling 'Georgia's Spiritual Mission': Sacral Ethnocentrism, Cosmopolitan Nationalism, and Primordial Awakenings at the Soviet Collapse," in *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands*, ed. Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum, 162–81 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

53. E.g., Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

54. Marie-Félicité Brosset, *Rapport sur l'ouvrage intitulé Numismaticheskije fakty gruzinskogo tsarstva et Revue de numismatique géorgienne* (SPB: n.p., 1847); Victor Langlois, *Numismatique de la Géorgie au moyen âge* (Paris: n.p., 1852); idem, *Essai de classification des suites monétaires de la Géorgie: depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1860); and Joseph Karst, *Précis de numismatique géorgienne* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1938).

55. David M. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia in Transcaucasia*, Numismatic Notes and

within its Islamic cabinet. Supplementing Lang for the end of antiquity is Lara Fabian's "Numismatic Communities in the Northern South Caucasus 300 BC–300 AD."⁵⁶ Further to these, in 2014, *A Catalogue of Georgian Coins* was published by Kirk Bennett, a former US Foreign Service officer. Its abundant images and accompanying descriptions are an excellent reference.⁵⁷ However, this tome was privately published, and this may help to explain its unevenness of historical and historiographical engagement. Of greater scholarly value is Bennett's *The Tiflis Dirhams of Möngke Khān*, published by the ANS in 2020. While again wanting for sustained historical context, its scrutiny of coins minted on Georgian territory in the name of the fourth Mongol khan Möngke (r. 1251–59) is unparalleled.⁵⁸

Publicly-accessible databases featuring Georgian coinage include the "[Online English-Georgian Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics](#)" maintained by T'bilisi State University⁵⁹ and, more generally, the "[Oriental Coins Database](#)."

Historiography (Old and New) and Other Resources

As open Christianization quickened across late antique Caucasia, local Christians invented distinctive scripts for the Armenian, Georgian, and Caucasian Albanian languages at the turn of the fourth and fifth century.⁶⁰ Translated, adapted, and original literatures emerged soon thereafter. In Georgian, the oldest extant original text is usually identified as *The Passion of Šušānik* by Iakob C'urtaveli (Jacob of Tsurtavi).⁶¹ This nearly-contemporaneous hagiographical work recounts the martyrdom of an Armenian Mamikonean princess

Monographs, vol. 130 (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1955). See also idem, "Notes on Caucasian Numismatics," *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6th series, 17 (1957): 137–46; and idem, "Coins of Georgia in Transcaucasia Acquired by the American Numismatic Society, 1953–1965," *ANS Museum Notes* 12 (1966): 223–32.

56. Lara Fabian, "Numismatic Communities in the Northern South Caucasus 300 BCE–300 CE: A Geospatial Analysis of Coin Finds from Caucasian Iberia and Caucasian Albania," in *Sinews of Empire: Networks in the Roman East and Beyond*, ed. Håkon Fiane Teigen and Eivind Heldaas Seland, 37–69 (Oxford: Oxbow, 2017).

57. Bennett, *A Catalogue*.

58. There are numerous article-length studies of specific Georgian coins and series. One of the most prolific Georgian numismatists is Irakli Paghava, whose English-language works include: "The First Arabic Coinage of Georgian Monarchs: Rediscovering the Specie of Davit IV the Builder (1089–1125), King of Kings and Sword of the Messiah," in *The 3rd Simone Assemani Symposium on Islamic Coins*, ed. Bruno Callegger and Arianna D'Ottone, 220–61 (Trieste: EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2012); "Regional Numismatic Interaction across the Christian-Muslim Frontier in the 11th Century Caucasus (Case Study of the Kingdom of K'akhet-Hereti and the Shaddādid Emirate)," in *Axlo aǧmosavlet'i da sak'art'velo*, 13:220–29 (T'bilisi: Ilias saxelmcip'o universiteti, 2021); and with Vaso Sapanadze, "Three Hoards of Davit IV—Rusudan Epoch: New Material for Meta-Analysis," in *Al XIX-Iea Simpozion de Numismatică: Programul și rezumatele comunicărilor Chișinău 21–22 Octombrie 2021*, 13–16 (Chișinău: Muzeul Național de Istorie a Moldovei, 2021).

59. T'edo Dundua is a prominent contributor to this valuable resource.

60. On the late antique Armenian tradition of Maštoc' having invented scripts for all three Caucasian peoples, see Abraham Terian, *The Life of Mashtots' by His Disciple Koriwn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

61. Korneli Kekeliže, *K'art'uli literaturis istoria*, vol. 1 (T'bilisi: Sabčot'a sak'art'velo, 1960), 113–22; and Michael Tarchnišvili with Julius Assfalg, *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur*, *Studi e Testi*, vol. 185 (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1955), 83–87.

towards the end of the fifth century.⁶² Across southern Caucasia, the writing of history became a priority, though we observe a divergence between the Georgian and Armenian experiences. Original historiographical narratives were articulated on behalf of particular Armenian noble houses (*naxarars*) already in the fifth century. By contrast, the earliest surviving Georgian historiography appears only from the end of the eighth century. From the start, its texts were fiercely royalist, even when the monarchy was in abeyance (ca. 580–888). Narratives like *The Life of the Kings*, *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali*, and its untitled continuation seem to be based substantially upon an earlier—but lost—written tradition in Georgian that existed already in the sixth century.⁶³

In their received form, the oldest Georgian historiographies have reached us in two medieval compilations. In the tenth century texts were assembled celebrating eastern Georgia's fourth-century conversion. This compendium, called *Mok'c'evay k'art'lisay* (*The Conversion of K'art'li/Georgia*), is anchored by the hagiographical *Life of Nino*.⁶⁴ Subsequently, in the eleventh century, royal and royalist histories were edited (and perhaps gathered) by the archbishop Leonti Mroveli in a collection called *K'art'lis c'xovreba* (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*, literally *The Life of Georgia*). Additional texts were added through the early modern age.⁶⁵ In European languages, *K'art'lis c'xovreba* is popularly called the “Georgian Chronicles.” However, none of its components are calendrically-arranged chronicles. And scholars have an unfortunate habit of homogenizing the collection instead of recognizing and engaging its distinctive texts.⁶⁶ Up through and including King Davit' II (r. 1089–1125), the English translation of Robert Thomson is recommended.⁶⁷ For subsequent histories through the Mongol period, the best (and sometimes only) English translations belong to the recent tome edited by a specialist on modern Georgia, Stephen Jones.⁶⁸ While invaluable, these versions are plagued by some odd renderings and inconsistencies.

62. On the English translations of early Georgian hagiography, see David Marshall Lang, *Lives and Legends of the Georgian Saints*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976; repr. London: Routledge, 2022). A related Armenian version of this *vita* also survives: Krikor Maksoudian, trans., *The Passion of Saint Shushanik: A New Translation of the Principal and Lesser Texts* (New York: St. Vartan Press, 1999).

63. Stephen H. Rapp Jr., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

64. For an English translation, see Constantine B. Lerner, *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography: The Early Medieval Historical Chronicle The Conversion of K'art'li and The Life of St. Nino* (London: Bennett & Bloom, 2004).

65. For a superior critical Georgian edition of the compendium's medieval components, see S. Qauxč'išvili, ed., *K'art'lis c'xovreba*, vols. 1–2 (T'bilisi: Saxelgami and Sabčot'a sak'art'velo, 1955 and 1959).

66. Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “The Making of *K'art'lis c'xovreba*, the So-Called Georgian Chronicles,” *Sacris Erudiri: Journal of Late Antique and Medieval Christianity* 56 (2017): 465–88; and idem, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*.

67. Robert W. Thomson: *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles, the Original Georgian Texts and the Armenian Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), based on the critical edition by Qauxč'išvili cited above.

68. Stephen Jones, editor-in-chief, *Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History of Georgia* (T'bilisi: Artanuji, 2014). These translations are based on a new/updated critical edition: Roin Metreveli, editor-in-chief, *K'art'lis c'xovreba* (T'bilisi: Artanuji, 2008).

Material culture, including art and architecture, is a rich source for medieval Caucasian history. This is especially true for Bagratid rule, whose written, visual, and material sources often overwhelm Georgia's pre-modern past—precisely as the Bagratids intended. For the periods addressed below, the architectural studies on the Georgian southwest by Vakhtang Djobadze are vital reading in English.⁶⁹ Robert Ousterhout's recent *Eastern Medieval Architecture* devotes an entire chapter to Georgia and Armenia.⁷⁰ The iconography of medieval Georgian coinage is part and parcel of the artistic representation of kingship, a topic for the Bagratids specially investigated in Antony Eastmond's splendid *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*.⁷¹

The most important English-language publication on late antique and early medieval Caucasia is Cyril Toumanoff's magisterial but underappreciated and misunderstood *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (1963). Because of its cross-cultural and pan-regional methodology, *Studies* is often dismissed by patriots and nationalists. The origin and evolution of Georgian historiography from late antiquity to the Mongol conquest are also interrogated in my *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography* and *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*.⁷² The intersection of Georgian and Islamic history is revisited in my recent entry in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*.⁷³ But considerable work remains. Recently, a specialized study of Caucasia in the Mongol age was published by Lorenzo Pubblici.⁷⁴ Readers desiring a comprehensive overview of Georgian history in English are directed to Ronald Suny's *Making of the Georgian Nation* and Donald Rayfield's *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia*.⁷⁵ On early political history through the sixth century AD, particularly from a Graeco-Roman vantage, David Braund's *Georgia in Antiquity* is highly recommended.

69. E.g., Vakhtang Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries in Historic Tao, Klarjet'i, and Shavshet'i* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1992). For the pre-Bagratid period, see Annegret Plontke-Lüning, *Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien: Die Entwicklung des christlichen Sakralbaus in Lazika, Iberien, Armenien, Albanien und den Grenzregionen vom 4. bis zum 7. Jh.* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007).

70. Robert G. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture: The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), ch. 19, "Development of Regional Styles III, The Caucasus: Armenia and Georgia," 454–77.

71. Antony Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

72. Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography* and *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, both cited *supra*.

73. Stephen H. Rapp Jr., "Georgia, Georgians until 1300," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam Three Online*, ed. Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2020). For elsewhere in Caucasia, see Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam*.

74. Lorenzo Pubblici, *Mongol Caucasia: Invasions, Conquest, and Government of a Frontier Region in Thirteenth-Century Eurasia (1204–1295)*, trans. Andrew Smaldone (Leiden: Brill, 2022). See also Bayarsaikhan Dashdondog, *The Mongols and the Armenians (1220–1335)* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

75. Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012). See also his *Literature of Georgia: A History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). Groundbreaking for its time is W.E.D. Allen's *A History of the Georgian People from the Beginning Down to the Russian Conquest in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1932), the first serious study of Georgian history in English.

An assortment of high-quality maps is featured in the *Historical Atlas of Georgia* prepared under the editorship of historical geographer Davit' Musxelišvili.⁷⁶ Though giving precedence to the various Armenias, Robert Hewsen's *Armenia: A Historical Atlas* is also a valuable guide to Georgian lands and peoples.⁷⁷

Georgian Scripts and Transliteration

Unlike Armenian, the Georgian language is not Indo-European; and it is neither Turkic (as is Azerbaijani) nor Semitic. Instead, Georgian stands as the principal member of the South Caucasian or K'art'velian (*k'art'veliuri*) linguistic family. Since late antique and medieval times, Georgian has been written in three distinctive but related scripts. The uncial *asomt'avruli* script—alongside scripts for Armenian and Caucasian Albanian—was invented under a Christian impulse sometime around the year 400. The miniscule *nusxuri* and currently-used *mxedruli* are products of the early medieval era, during Bagratid rule. Unintentionally echoing Caucasia's infamous linguistic diversity (medieval Islamic writers dubbed the region the “Mountain of Languages”), there are multiple schemes by which modern scholars transliterate Georgian. In general, linguists prefer to mark glottal consonants whereas historians and social scientists tend to mark aspirate ones. Because it aligns with the standard scholarly transliteration of Armenian according to the Hübschmann-Meillet-Benveniste scheme, this essay employs the latter Georgian system, illustrated here with the *mxedruli* script.

ა	ბ	გ	დ	ე	ვ	ზ	ე̄	თ	ი	კ
a	b	g	d	e	v	z	ē	t'	i	k
ლ	მ	ნ	ო	პ	ჟ	რ	ს	ტ	უ	ვ
l	m	n	y	o	p	ž	r	s	t	w
ჟ	ფ	ქ	ღ	ყ	შ	ჩ	ც	ძ	წ	ჭ
u	p'	k'	g'	q	š	č'	c'	ž	c	č
ხ	ჯ	რ	ჰ							
x	q'	j	h							

Differences in the three scripts are illustrated by this initial phrase from the Georgian *Passion of St. Stephen*:

<i>asomt'avruli:</i>	ԾՈՂԹԸ ԺՆԹ ԿՏԻՆՐԻՆԹԸ ...
<i>nusxuri:</i>	Ճողաբ ժնա սրաբքիսա ...
<i>mxedruli:</i>	დღეთა მათ პილასტოსთა ...

76. David Muskhelishvili, editor-in-chief, *Historical Atlas of Georgia* (T'bilisi: Artanuji, 2023).
 77. Robert H. Hewsen, *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, with cartographer-in-chief Christopher C. Salvatico (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). For the modern period, see Arthur Tsutsiev, *Atlas of the Ethno-Political History of the Caucasus*, trans. Nora Seligman Favorov (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

None of the three Georgian scripts internally differentiates between majuscules and minuscules. Non-specialist transliteration schemes normally omit diacritical marks and strive to reflect literal sounds, thus specialist ž = (English) *zh*; ġ = *gh*; š = *sh*; č = *ch*; c = *ts*; ž = *dz*; and x = *kh*. The Georgian letter *j* is sometimes rendered *dzh*, i.e. Russian д + ж. Georgian č may be transcribed *tch*.

Variants in transliteration have yielded a mind-numbing assortment of spellings in published works. Thus, the city მცხეთა is rendered Mc'xet'a according to the system utilized here. However, Mcxeta or Mtskheta or even Mtskhetha may be given elsewhere. The name of the pioneering scholar ივანე ჯავახიშვილი is Ivane Javaxiřvili according to our transliteration. But alternate renderings include Dzhavakhishvili or Dzhavakhov, the last of which echoes the Russianized Джавахов. The Georgian suffixes *-řvili* (*-shvili*) and *-že* (*-dze*) of family names denote "son of."

Acknowledgments

The inclusion of a particular image in the following survey is the result of several factors, including access and clarity. Photographs may feature damaged or incomplete specimens. In such cases, the description normally reflects the entire known series, specific coins of which may preserve (more) complete inscriptions, superior states of preservation, and the like. Images are duly credited as they appear in the text.

Trained primarily in the history of Byzantium and the wider world at the University of Michigan, my repertoire of research languages includes Georgian, Armenian, Greek, and Russian, but not Arabic, Persian, or Mongolian. I am dependent upon the good work of others for the text and translation of numismatic inscriptions in these languages. For Arabic and Persian, a thousand thanks are due to Dr. Alison Vacca. The commentary below captures but flashes of the rich linguistic and historical nuance Dr. Vacca shared in her extensive comments on earlier drafts this survey. In addition, I am grateful for the expertise shared by Drs. Alexander Akopyan and Giorgi Čeiřvili. Back in the summer of 1992, I was first set on my numismatic journey by Dr. Rudi Lindner and a residency at "camp coin" at the American Numismatic Society under the watchful eye of Dr. Michael Bates. Last and certainly not least, Julie Nelson—truly a resplendent lexical and syntactic *bumberazi*—grappled with my academicspeak and offered many improvements. Unless otherwise indicated, all views and any errors are mine and mine alone.

Survey of Medieval Georgian Coinage⁷⁸

In the century before the Prophet Muḥammad, Sasanian Iran intensified its hegemonic grip over Caucasia, a strategic crossroads that had long attracted the rival interests of Iran and Rome.⁷⁹ Ctesiphon finally dismantled the fading K'art'velian Chosroid monarchy around

78. This survey is not comprehensive. Rather, it isolates particular coins the author deems to be representative and especially suitable for integration into college coursework.

79. On Georgia, Caucasia, and the Sasanians, see Toumanoff, *Studies*; Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*. For the strategic Darial Pass through the Caucasus, see Eberhard W. Sauer et al., *Dariali: The 'Caspian Gates' in the Caucasus from Antiquity to the Age of the Huns and the Middle Ages: The Joint Georgian-*

the year 580, thus extending its suppression of the Armenian Arsacids achieved back in 428.⁸⁰ For the Georgians, the political tide seemed to have turned with the last great war of antiquity.⁸¹ This sentiment grew stronger when the Romano-Byzantine emperor Heraclius (r. 610–41) personally marched through Georgian and Caucasian lands during his assault of the Iranian heartland.⁸² Despite the Sasanians' humiliation, the dwindling of their empire, and its looming subjugation to Arab forces, Iranian and Iranic modes of rulership would be favored across regions and religions for centuries to come.⁸³

Sasanians conceivably produced their own coinage in Georgia, yet no mint mark associated with T'bilisi or other Georgian settlements is known.⁸⁴ However, K'art'velian imitations of Sasanian silver drachms were minted during the final war of antiquity or its immediate aftermath.⁸⁵ Though crudely executed, the series—perhaps stretching across the reigns of multiple presiding princes—closely adheres to Sasanian models.

Fig. 6.

K'art'velo-Sasanian drachm of Step'anos I or II, ca. 590 - ca. 650. Georgian National Museum, T'bilisi, #5870. AR. Typical diameter: 25–30 mm; typical weight: 3–4 g. Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*, ##1–14, pp. 18–36; Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika*, ##30–38, pp. 46–48; Dundua and Dundua, *K'art'uli numizmatika*, vol. 1, ##35–42; Bennett, *Catalog*, 26–28.



[Image source.](#)

British Dariali Gorge Excavations & Surveys of 2013–2016, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2020).

80. For this year, though with little engagement of Georgia and Georgians, see Giusto Traina, *428 AD: An Ordinary Year at the End of the Roman Empire*, trans. Allan Cameron (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

81. James Howard-Johnston, *Witness to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and idem, *The Last Great War of Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Both of these important publications prioritize Armenian sources and neglect Georgian ones. For Armenia in the age of Heraclius, see also Christina Maranci, *Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).

82. In Georgian territories, Sasanian and Roman coinage continued to circulate together, though it is only with the age of Heraclius that numbers of Roman coins became more significant. On Sasanian coinage found in Georgia, see M.V. Tsotselia [Cocelia], *Katalog sasanidskikh monet Gruzii* (T'bilisi: Mec'niereba, 1981), with English summary at 265–68; and eadem, *History and Coin Finds in Georgia: Sasanian Coin Finds and Hoards*, Collection Moneta, vol. 30 (Wetteren: Moneta, 2003).

83. For the context, see Matthew P. Canepa, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE–642 CE* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

84. Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 325. A Sasanian mint operated in neighboring Armenia.

85. Toumanoff, *Studies*, 428–34.

Some specimens, including the example pictured in Figure 6, were struck in the name of a local Christian presiding prince named Step'anos (Stephen). Two such princes of this name are known in early Georgian historiographical texts: Step'anos I (r. ca. 590–627) and Step'anos II (r. 637/642–ca. 650).⁸⁶ The series, which exhibits a number of variations, may preserve coins issued in the name of both men. The obverse is framed around the profile image of a ruler, who according to Sasanian numismatic practice should be the *šahan šāh*.⁸⁷ His distinctive crown has been simplified, as is characteristic of all imagery on this series. Indeed, the mint masters and their laborers appear not to have had refined skills and tools. This may suggest the use of local workers and/or limited technologies. In the field around the ruler's portrait appears the full name Step'anos (𐌖𐌸'𐌶𐌱𐌸𐌹𐌺) in Georgian *asomt'avruli* script. The reverse features two attendants flanking a pedestal topped by a Christian cross, which replaces the Zoroastrian altar on conventional Sasanian coinage.

There are several “firsts” associated with this remarkable series. If produced under Step'anos I, this was the first time an eastern Georgian ruler had a Judaeo-Christian name instead of a local Iranic one. Whether minted by Step'anos I and/or II, the series incorporates the earliest Georgian-language inscriptions on coinage, as well as the first instance of the name of a K'art'velian ruler appearing in a numismatic context.⁸⁸ Finally, this is the oldest example of Christian imagery having adorned coinage produced in Georgian lands.⁸⁹

The pliable application of Sasanian numismatic types is evident elsewhere during the transition from Sasanian to Islamic power. Arab-Sasanian coins are a well-known example.⁹⁰ Georgia and its peoples, along with their neighbors in Caucasia, belonged to this transregional phenomenon. Furthermore, the adaptation of numismatic schemes drawn from an empire to Caucasia's south is not unique: the practice continued through the

86. Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 323–29; and Schleicher, *Iberia Caucasia*, 213–25. Early Georgian texts also give the spelling Step'anoz.

87. The Christian Chosroids, the royal family of eastern Georgia removed by the Sasanians ca. 580, represented themselves as Sasanians even though their primary Iranian ancestry was Parthian Mihrānid. It is not impossible that Step'anos imagined his own likeness to adorn this coin. On the Chosroids as Sasanians, see Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 243–58.

88. Some specimens have Georgian abbreviations of the presiding prince's name. For contemporaneous Georgian inscriptions on the church of Juari (modern orthography Jvari) perched above the ancient capital, see Antony Eastmond, “Art on the Edge: The Church of the Holy Cross, Jvari, Georgia,” *The Art Bulletin* 105, no. 1 (2023): 64–92. Step'anos I and II contributed to the construction of Juari; one or both rulers are depicted on its exterior stone reliefs. The earliest Georgian inscriptions, executed on stone, date to the fifth century and have been found in eastern Georgia and the Holy Land. For the latter, see Yana Tchekhanovets, *The Caucasian Archaeology of the Holy Land: Armenian, Georgian, and Albanian Communities between the Fourth and Eleventh Centuries CE* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). Inscriptions in other languages from before the fifth century are attested in today's Georgian Republic; their languages include Armazic (a local form of Aramaic) and Greek. On the power and prestige of monumental inscriptions in Georgian, see Antony Eastmond, “Textual Icons: Viewing Inscriptions in Medieval Georgia,” in *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*, ed. Antony Eastmond, 76–98 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

89. On the multi- and cross-religious fabric of the Sasanian Empire, see Richard E. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

90. Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces under Early Islam*, 195.

medieval period and into early modern times.⁹¹ Christianization and Christian identity did not require a primary connection to the Romano-Byzantine Empire or the rejection of an Iranian and/or Iranic orientation.

With the demise of the central Sasanian authority in the mid-seventh century, Caucasia's southern flank lay exposed to Islamic incursions. Because of its location, Armenia bore the brunt of Islamic expansion in the region,⁹² but Albania and eastern Georgia were also targeted.⁹³ The Arabs and their allies seized T'bilisi, the largest Georgian settlement and former royal seat. The inhabitants of Tiflīs, its Arabic name, obtained a written letter of protection from the commander Ḥabīb b. Maslama, who campaigned across the isthmus.⁹⁴ Tiflīs subsequently became the headquarters of an amir and home to a significant Arab community.⁹⁵ Three dynasties would dominate the Tiflīs amirate: the Shu'aybids, the Shaybānids, and the Ja'farids. About Tiflīs' early Muslim citizens, Ibn Ḥawqal writes: "they are people of pure *sunna* according to the old schools of law (*madhdhāhib*), who place importance on the science of *ḥadīth* and esteem those who study it."⁹⁶ The Tiflīs amirate breathed life until its defeat by the Georgian Bagratid King Davit' II *ağmašenebeli* in 1122, not long after the Battle of Didgori.⁹⁷

The coinage produced by these amirs rigorously follows Islamic conventions and models. In fact, regardless of the issuing authority and its religious affiliation, the application of Islamic types and Arabic (and Persian) legends is commonplace on coinage minted in Georgia through the end of the medieval epoch (see, for example, Fig. 8).⁹⁸

91. Caucasia's southward cultural orientation plays out in myriad other ways. The late antique Christianization of Armenian, Georgian, and Albanian lands has roots in the south, in places like Syria, the Holy Land, and Iran. In Georgia, the Jerusalemite liturgy was favored until the early Bagratid period. For the importance of Georgian sources in reconstructing the Jerusalemite liturgy, see Daniel Galadza, *Liturgy and Byzantinization in Jerusalem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The First Christian Hymnal: The Songs of the Ancient Jerusalem Church* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2018). But too often these kinds of inquiries do not take into due consideration the Georgian cultural context.

92. Aram Ter-Ghewondyan, *The Arab Emirates in Bagratid Armenia*, trans. Nina G. Garsoïan (Lisbon: Livraria Bertrand, 1976). See also Sergio La Porta and Alison M. Vacca, *An Armenian Futūḥ Narrative: Lewond's Eighth-Century History of the Caliphate* (Chicago: Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago, 2024).

93. The idea of the early Islamic organization of southern Caucasia into an administrative unit designated Armīniyya is widespread in scholarship. For a more nuanced interpretation, see Vacca, *Non-Muslim Provinces*, 43–77.

94. Al-Balādhurī, cap. 42 = Hugh Kennedy, trans., *History of the Arab Invasions: The Conquest of the Lands, A New Translation of al-Balādhurī's Futūḥ al-Buldān* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2022), 213.

95. Overview in Garnik Asatrian and Hayrapet Margarian, "The Muslim Community of Tiflis (8th–19th Centuries)," *Iran & the Caucasus* 8, no. 1 (2004): 29–52.

96. Quoted in Alison Vacca, "Nisbas of the North: Muslims from Armenia, Caucasian Albania, and Azerbaijan in Arabic Biographical Dictionaries (4th–7th Centuries AH)," *Arabica* 62 (2015): 521–50, at 539.

97. Also noted in Armenian sources, e.g., Tim Greenwood, trans., *The Universal History of Step'anos Tarōnec'i* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), cap. 30, 294.

98. Three hoards from the Lagodexi district of Kaxet'i demonstrate the circulation of Sasanian coins alongside Arab ones into the ninth century; see T'amar Lomouri, *P'ulis mimok'c'evīs istoriisat'vis šua saukuneebis sak'art'velošī*, ed. T'inat'in K'ut'elia (T'bilisi: Artanuji, 2005), 16–46 ("Sasanur-arabuli p'ulebis sami kaxuri ganzi.")



Fig. 7. The heavily restored Kala Fortress above T'bilisi's old city. Photograph by the author.



Fig. 8. Al-Muktafi, Abbasid dirham with mint mark of Tiflis and date AH 294. AR. Typical diameter: 23–31 mm; typical weight: 2.9–3.3 g. Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*, 40–41; Bennett, *Catalog*, 31. Image source: Baldwin's Islamic coin auction 20, lot 287.

From the end of the reign of the Umayyad 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) through the tenth century under the Abbasids, standard caliphal dirhams were sometimes struck under the Tiflis amirs. A few specimens display mint marks for Tiflis and Jurzān (Georgia).⁹⁹ In addition, the Tiflis amirs produced their own distinctive coinage, which also conformed to standard Islamic types.

99. Irakli Paghava and Severiane Turkia, "New Mintname 'Georgia' ('Jurzān'): Researching the History of Georgia and the 'Abbāsīd North in the 8th–9th Centuries," *Ukraïns'kii numizmaticheskii shchorichnik = The Ukrainian Numismatic Annual* 5 (2021): 228–58. Umayyad and Abbasid mints operated in neighboring Armenia (and in Albania), thus continuing numismatic tradition established by the Sasanians.

Fig. 9.
Dirham of ‘Alī b.
Ja‘far, probably
1027/1028.
AR. Typical
diameter: 21–25
mm; typical
weight: 4 g.
Image source,
duplicated
in Bennett,
Catalogue, #88.



This dirham of ‘Alī b. Ja‘far (Fig. 9) probably dates to AH 418 (= 1027/1028 AD).¹⁰⁰ The obverse Arabic legend reads: “There is no god || but God alone || who has no associate || al-Qādir bi-Ilāh” (لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له || القادر بالله). A marginal Arabic legend identifies the location of the mint: “the city of Tiflīs.” The reverse Arabic inscription proclaims: “Muḥammad is the messenger of God || The *amīr*, the victorious || the triumphant Abū al-Ḥasan || ‘Alī b. Ja‘far” (محمد رسول الله || الامير المظفر || المنصور ابو الحسن || علي بن جعفر).

The Tiflīs amirate overlaps with the ascent of the Georgian Bagratids, who staked their diplomatic reputation on resistance to Muslim rule and warmer, but measured, relations with Constantinople. In 813, the Bagratid house acquired control of the presiding principate, the weakened and largely subservient political institution that had replaced the monarchy after its dissolution by the Sasanians towards the end of the sixth century. This was a critical step towards the restoration of the monarchy, an act achieved by the Bagratid Adarnase in 888.

By design, the Georgian Bagratids closely associated themselves with Christian Byzantium.¹⁰¹ To an unprecedented extent they adapted Byzantine models of rulership, melding them with existing Georgian and Iranian ones.¹⁰² This process brought the Georgian monarchy and church into closer harmony. The latter had commenced its own selective “Byzantinization” in the seventh century, a phenomenon entangled with Heraclius and the permanent schism with the Armenian Church—and everything these episodes represent.¹⁰³

100. The date is missing on our specimen, but there are epigraphic grounds for 418 AH: see Zeno. On the multifaceted coinage of ‘Alī b. Ja‘far, see Gotcha I. Japaridze, “On the Coins of the Tbilisi Amīr ‘Alī b. Ġa‘far,” *Bulletin d’études orientales* 50 (1998): 97–107.

101. For the Byzantine context, see Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

102. Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “From *Bumberazi* to *Basileus*: Writing Cultural Synthesis and Dynastic Change in Medieval Georgia (K‘art‘li),” in *Eastern Approaches to Byzantium*, ed. Antony Eastmond, 101–16 (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2001).

103. On the Armeno-Georgian schism, see Nikoloz Aleksidze, *Narrative of the Caucasian Schism: Memory and Forgetting in Medieval Caucasia*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 666, subsidia, vol. 137 (Louvain: CSCO, 2018). On the early “Byzantinization” of Georgian ecclesiastical art see, e.g., Zaza Sxirtlaže

Because T'bilisi and much of eastern Georgia remained under Islamic dominion, Bagratid consolidation and expansion proceeded initially from the southwest, the main districts of which Georgians called Tao, Klarjet'i, and Šavšet'i. These are often subsumed under the term Tao-Klarjet'i, lands whose mixed Georgian and Armenian population was located on the plural and porous frontier with Byzantine Anatolia. On the whole, the prospect of Georgian-Byzantine interaction increased.¹⁰⁴

Georgia's growing value to Constantinople and the vitality of the southwestern domains, in which were anchored a constellation of influential Georgian monasteries,¹⁰⁵ is apparent in the handbook on rulership composed by the Byzantine scholar-emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos (r. 913–59). Two chapters of his *De administrando imperio* are devoted to the Caucasian "Iberians." Constantine's main interest is directed at the "Iberian" Bagratids based in Tao-Klarjet'i.¹⁰⁶ Across the period, the most renowned member of this house was Davit' *kuropalatēs* (David *curopalates*, d. 1000). As the Georgian Bagratids continued to adapt and evolve Byzantine modes of rulership, they engaged other facets of Byzantium as never before. Eventually, these Bagratids saw themselves as commanding a parallel Byzantium in the East and as superseding the emperors at Constantinople by virtue of their supposed biological descent from the Old Testament King David. Georgia's contemporaneous significance to Byzantium is evident during the rebellion of Bardas Phokas against Basil II (r. 976–1025).¹⁰⁷ Davit' *kuropalatēs* provided Basil with "Iberian" troops, which were instrumental in putting down the revolt. The emperor rewarded his Georgian ally with additional Caucasian lands, but relations soured. Basil expanded the so-called Theme of Iberia and after the *kuropalatēs*' death recouped the gifted territory.¹⁰⁸ Tensions further inflamed when the *kuropalatēs* adopted a Georgian kinsman as his heir, thus ensuring the fusion of eastern and western Georgia under the Bagratid banner.

The Bagratids' selective "Byzantinization" and Davit's direct ties to the empire—not to mention ongoing tensions with the Tiflis amirate and other Islamic powers—help to explain his coinage's engagement with Byzantine types. However, these were streamlined and adapted to the local milieu (see, for example, Fig. 10).¹⁰⁹

(Skhirtladze), *Adreuli šua saukuneebis k'art'uli kedlis mxatvroba: t'elovanis jvarpatiosani* (T'bilisi: Sak'art'velos sapatriark'os saeklesio xelovnebis kvlevis c'entri, 2008), with English summary, "Early Medieval Georgian Monumental Painting: Telovani Church of the Holy Cross," at 304–30.

104. A consequence of the burgeoning relationship was the production of Georgian manuscripts on Byzantine territory; see Zaza Skhirtladze and Darejan Kldiashvili, "Georgian Manuscripts Produced in Eleventh-Century Constantinople," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 76 (2022): 311–98.

105. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries*.

106. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, caps. 45–46 = ed. Gy. Moravcsik and trans. R.J.H. Jenkins, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1967), 204–23.

107. Psellus, *Chronographia*, I.16 = E.R.A. Sewter trans., *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers: The Chronographia of Michael Psellus*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1966), 36.

108. Few sources survive for this Byzantine administrative unit: Catherine Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976–1025)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. "The Katepanates of Iberia and Vaspurakan," at 360–67. See also V.A. Arutiunova-Fidanian, *Armiano-vizantiiskaia kontaktnaia zona (X–XI vv.): rezul'taty vzaimodeistviia kul'tur* (Moskva: Nauka, 1994), English summary at 233–35.

109. Tedo Dundua and Leri Tavazde, "Georgian Coins with Byzantine Iconography and Imperial Titulature of

Fig. 10.

Davit' *kuropalatēs*, late tenth century.

AR. Typical diameter: 23–24 mm;
typical weight: 3–3.1 g. Pakhomov,
Monety Gruzii, #15, pp. 52–53;

Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika*,
#44, p. 55; Dundua and Dundua,
K'art'uli numizmatika, vol. 1, #49.

Image source: Kuleshov, "Georgian
Silver Coins Struck with the Name
of David Kuropalates" (but note
Kuleshov's attribution).



The stringent iconoclasm of this series reflects, in part, the tradition of Islamic-type coinage in Georgia and among Georgians. Its succinct inscriptions are entirely in Georgian *asomt'avruli*. The obverse presents an abbreviated legend "Christ, forgive || Davit'" (ჰქრისტე იშვილ დავით). The reverse celebrates Davit's esteemed Byzantine honorific, *kuropalati* (დავით კუროპალატი), each letter having been placed in one of the four fields of the central cross—a reminder of the Bagratids' devotion to Christianity.

Davit' *kuropalatēs* inaugurated the long apogee of the medieval Georgian kingdom, a span modern Georgians laud as their "Golden Age."¹¹⁰ The Bagratids and their partners, including the Georgian Church, imagined Georgia as an autonomous Christian kingdom with an autocephalous church perched on Byzantium's strategic eastern edge. One might expect contemporaneous Georgian coinage to have been ardently Byzantine or at least to have abandoned Islamic types. But local conditions dictated otherwise, as is illustrated by a series produced under Bagrat III (r. 1008–14), the first monarch to rule a unified medieval Georgian kingdom. In contrast to the austere coinage of Davit' *kuropalatēs* with its exclusive, albeit limited, use of Georgian and featuring of a Christian cross, these later coins of Bagrat III are patterned on a standard Abbasid type and employ Arabic inscriptions.¹¹¹ However, the reverse margin of some specimens is populated by a Georgian-language legend, the first such occasion in Georgia's numismatic history (see, for example, Fig. 11).

the Georgian Kings," *Ivane jaxvišvilis saxelobis t'bilis saxelmcip'o universitetis sak'art'velos istoriis instituti šromebi* 12 (2017): 457–61; and Tedo Dundua, "Review of Georgian Coins with Byzantine Iconography," *Revista "Quaderni ticinesi di numismatica e antichità classiche"* 29 (2000): 387–96. Viacheslav Kuleshov, "Georgian Silver Coins Struck with the Name of David Kuropalates," *Samlad Glädje* (2019): 193–96, which ascribes this coin to a late-ninth century Davit' adorned with the honorific *kuropalatēs*.

110. Entrenched and romantic notions of a Georgian "Golden Age" are critiqued by James Baillie in "The Prosopography of High Medieval Georgia: A Digital Approach" (PhD diss., Universität Wien, 2023).

111. The use of Arabic on Georgian coins is unrelated to the translation of Christian texts from Arabic into Georgian. This activity was centered in the Judean Desert in the eighth through tenth century. In most cases, these translations are of Greek originals that were put into Arabic and finally into Georgian. See Tamara Pataridze's "Christian Literature in Arabic in the Early Islamic Period (8th–10th C.): The Circulation of Texts and Ideas between the Greek, Syriac, Arabic, and Georgian Communities," *Le Muséon* 132, nos. 1–2 (2019): 199–222; and eadem, "Christian Literature Translated from Arabic into Georgian: A Review," *Annual of Medieval Studies at Central European University* 19 (2013): 47–65.

kuropalatēs. Finally, among the Georgians there was a long-standing tradition of adapting, and sometimes co-opting, coinage of nearby empires to exploit imperial prestige and modes of political authority. In this sense, we see a parallel between the Abbasid-like dirham naming Bagrat III and the Sasanian-like drachm of Step'anos I/II.

In the early- and mid-eleventh century, Georgian Bagratid monarchs projected their realm as an integral and leading component of Eastern Christendom and the Byzantine world. Georgian art, literature, and coinage were enlisted to the cause.

Fig. 12.
Bagrat IV (r. 1027–72).
AR. Typical diameter: 26–27 mm; typical weight: 1.6–1.8 g. Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*, #17–18, pp. 57–60; Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika*, #45, pp. 55–58; Dundua and Dundua, *K'art'uli numizmatika*, vol. 1, #51–56; Bennett, *Catalog*, #100–31. [Image source: CNG Coins, #83000461 \(153543\)](#).



This series of Bagrat IV (r. 1027–72)—continued with modifications under his successors Giorgi II (r. 1072–89) and Davit' II (r. 1089–1125)—calculatedly highlights the Christian identity of the realm and the authority of the Bagratid king (see Fig. 12). The latter is certified, in part, by Byzantine honorifics.¹¹⁵ The obverse presents the nimbate bust of the Blachernae Mother of God. This choice constitutes a deliberate and dramatic break with the Islamo-Georgian tradition of numismatic iconoclasm. Although there are variations, specimens of this series can display a marginal Greek inscription around the halo: “Holy Mother of God [*Theotokos*]” (Η ΑΓΙΑ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΣ). The reverse presents an abbreviated marginal Georgian *asomt'avruli* legend identical to that on the dirham naming Bagrat III: “Christ, exalt Bagrat, king of the Ap'xaz” (ჰ'ԻՇԾՊԿԼԵՐՇՓԷՆԵՇԾԻՊԻ). This declaration continues in the central inscription: “and *sebastos*” (ՃՇՆ || ԴՇՆ || ԲՁՆԻ). Some variants for Bagrat and his successors yield alternate Byzantine titles, e.g., *nōbelissimos*.

As the Georgian Bagratids tightened their grip over central Caucasia, they clashed not only with Islamic powers but also with the Christian rulers of Kaxet'i (Kakheti) in far eastern Georgia. Kaxet'ian monarchs governed lands straddling eastern Georgia and the former realm of Albania and styled themselves as *chōrepiskopoi*-kings, creatively fusing the

115. On the evolution of Byzantine honorifics alongside an evolving local lexicon of rulership, see Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “Sumbat Davit'is-dze and the Vocabulary of Political Authority in the Era of Georgian Unification,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, no. 4 (2000): 570–76.

authority of autonomous “rural bishops” and dynastic monarchs.¹¹⁶ (The basis of their claim upon *chōrepiskopos* is uncertain.) Underpinning the political friction of K’art’li and Kaxet’i was a shared Georgian culture and historical experience. The combination of Islamic types with Arabic inscriptions and occasional Christian imagery characterizing Georgian Bagratid coinage was mirrored by Kaxet’i’s *chōrepiskopoi*-kings.



Fig. 13.
Kwrike III, king
of Kaxet’i (r.
1014–37/1039). AR
(and AR/billon).
Diameters: 17–23
mm; weights: 2.7–5.7
g. Bennett, *Catalog*,
#134a-b. [Image
source](#), Creative
Commons
Attribution-
Share Alike 4.0
International

For instance, the obverse Arabic legend on Figure 13 applauds Kwrike III (r. 1014–37/1039): “The just king || Abū al-Faḍl Qr || ki son of David” (المملك العدل || ابو الفضل قر || كى بن داود). The marginal inscription in Arabic, not visible on our specimen, invokes Islam: “There is no god but God alone who has no associate, al-Qādir bi-Amr Allāh” (لا اله الا الله وحده لا شريك له القادر) (بامر الله). The reverse deploys a generic Christian image of St. George on horseback defeating Diocletian.¹¹⁷ An abbreviated Georgian *asomt’avruli* inscription identifies the figure as “Saint || Giorgi [i.e. George]” (საინტ || გიორგი). Examples of this coin are quite rare, but their findspots in Siwnik’ and northern Azerbaijan evince Kaxet’i’s strategic setting and regional entanglements. According to Alexander Akopyan and Aram Vardanyan, mints of the Kaxet’ian monarchy were possibly located at Lori, in the Tašir-Dzoraget region, and at Macnaberd in Gardman-P’arisis, today in Azerbaijan.

116. Leri T’avaže, *K’orepiskoposi da mep’e: kaxet’is politikuri istoria VIII–XII saukuneebši* (T’bilisi: Kolori, 2022); and Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “Georgian Images of Caucasian Albania,” in *From Albania to Arrān: The East Caucasus between the Ancient and Islamic Worlds (ca. 330 BCE–1000 CE)*, ed. Robert G. Hoyland, 191–216 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2020).

117. This series was specially investigated by Aleksandr Akopian and Aram Vardanian, “Monety Kvirike III, staria Kakheti i Ereti,” in *Semnadtsataia vserossiiskaia numizmaticheskaia konferentsiia, Moskva-Pushchino 22–26 apr. 2013 goda: tezisy dokladov i soobshchenii*, 43–44 (Moskva: Triumph print, 2013). See also A.V. Akopian and D.L. Aleksanian, “Giandzhinskii klad i mednyi chekan kakhetskogo tsarstva,” *Epigrafika Vostoka* 31 (2015): 147–70, with English summary, “The Ganja Hoard and Copper Coins of the Kingdom of Kakhet’i,” at 24. On warrior saints in Georgian art, see Nina Iamanidzé, *Saints cavaliers: culte et images en Géorgie aux IV^e–XI^e siècles* (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2016).

Kwrike was succeeded by his nephew Gagik (r. 1037/1039–58). A unique coin of Gagik was discovered in northwestern Azerbaijan—in what had been Caucasian Albania—and published by Akopyan and Vardanyan in 2015.¹¹⁸ The specimen is 18 mm in diameter and weighs 2.6 g. Two standing figures dominate the obverse. On the left is a figure with a Byzantine-like crown and wearing Byzantine-like robes. The individual on the right is adorned with a nimbus. The reverse consists of an Arabic inscription: “... the just king || Abū al-Faḍl Jāḥiq || b. Dāʿūd Quriqī king || ...” (؟... || ملك || (بن) داود قرقي ملك || ...). An outer marginal legend is illegible. Though the extant coinage of the *chōrepiskopoi*-kings of Kaxet’i is exceedingly rare, our examples suggest deployment of the creative mixing of Islamic, Byzantine, and local imagery characterizing Georgian Bagratid coinage.

Surprisingly little coinage survives for one of the most famous and powerful monarchs in Georgian history: Davit’ II *ağmašenebeli*, “the Builder,” who ruled from 1089 until 1125.¹¹⁹ Among Davit’ II’s accomplishments was the decisive defeat of the kingdom of Kaxet’i. This triumph belongs to a larger process: the unified Georgian kingdom’s transformation into a pan-Caucasian empire. Meanwhile, Byzantine honorifics attained their apex, and Davit’ II was successively styled *panhypersebastos* and then *basileus*,¹²⁰ that is, emperor. Thereafter, Davit’ *ağmašenebeli* intentionally abandoned Byzantine honorifics and prioritized Georgian/Caucasian terminology, symbols, and regalia.¹²¹

Fig. 14.

Davit’ II (IV) *ağmašenebeli*
(r. 1089–1125).

AE. Diameter: 27 mm;
weight: 10.7 g. Pakhomov,
Monety Gruzii,
supplementary list #B28;
Dundua and Dundua,
K’art’uli numizmatika,
vol. 1, #58; Bennett,
Catalog, #133. Image
source: [British Museum](#),
[1857,1226.7](#), Creative
Commons license CC BY-
NC-SA 4.0.



118. Alexander Akopyan and Aram Vardanyan, “A Contribution to Kiurikid Numismatics: Two Unique Coins of Gagik, King of Kaxhet’i and of David II of Loḥi (Eleventh Century),” *The Numismatic Chronicle* 175 (2015): 211–15. An image of the coin is available [online](#).

119. He is widely styled Davit’ IV in Georgian-language publications. Our survey follows the reckoning of Cyrille Toumanoff, *Les dynasties de la Caucasic chrétienne de l’Antiquité jusqu’au XIXe siècle: tables généalogiques et chronologiques* (Roma: n.p., 1990), 135. On his coins, see now Maia Patarize, *Davit’ ağmašenebeli: numizmatikuri memkvidreoba* (T’bilisi: Artanuji, 2022).

120. Darejan Kldiašvili [Darežan K’ldiašvili], “L’Icôn de Saint Georges du Mont Sinaï avec le portrait de Davit Aymašenebeli,” *Revue des études géorgiennes et caucasiennes* 5 (1989): 107–28.

121. On his depiction in local dress at Ateni Sioni, see: Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*, 49. For application of the notion of “cross-cultural dressing” to the Bagratids of this period, see Erik Thunø, “Cross-Cultural Dressing, the Medieval South Caucasus and Art History,” in *The Medieval South Caucasus: Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia, and Georgia*, ed. Ivan Foletti and Erik Thunø = *Convivium: Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean*, supplementum (2016): 149–52.

The reign of Davit' *agmašenebeli* is consistently advanced as a watershed in Georgian history.¹²⁴ Davit' vanquished the Tiflīs amirate in 1122 and the city was integrated into the pan-Caucasian Bagratid Empire. Meanwhile, an increasing number of Muslims fell under direct Georgian control. Commerce involving Muslim merchants and products from Islamic lands continued to prosper. Davit's son and successor Demetre I (r. 1125–54) accelerated Georgia's expansion and won impressive gains against the Seljuks. The fame of the Bagratids traveled far and wide across cultural, linguistic, and religious communities.¹²⁵ In distant Khurāsān, for example, an Islamic chronicle from Bayhaq refers to “the king of the Abkhāz Dīmītriyūs, son of Dāvūd ... surnamed Sword of the Messiah [*Ḥusām al-Masīḥ*] ...”¹²⁶ Back in Georgia and Caucasia, the Muslim population reached an accommodation with Bagratid rule—and vice versa. An account by Ibn al-Azraq addresses the treatment of T'bilisi's Muslim populace by Demetre. It attests to tension and rivalry existing alongside cross-cultural interaction:

For that year he abrogated their taxes, services, payments by installments and the *kharāj*. He guaranteed to the Muslims everything they wished, according to the pact which is valid even today. In it [it is stipulated] that pigs should not be brought over to the Muslim side nor to the town, and that they should not be slaughtered there or in the market. He struck dirhams for them, on one side of which stood the names of the sultan and the caliph, and on the other side stood the names of God and the Prophet, on him be peace, whereas the king's own name stood on a side of the dirham.¹²⁷ It was cried in the town that [the king] permitted [the shedding of] the blood of him who harmed a Muslim. He granted to them the call to prayer, the prayers and reading [of the Qur'ān] in public, and also guaranteed that on Fridays sermons and public prayers should be held and prayers be said from the pulpit for the caliph and the sultan, and for no one else. He also guaranteed that no Georgian or Armenian or Jew should enter the baths of Ismā'īl in Tiflīs. He assessed a Georgian at a rate of five dinars per annum, a Jew¹²⁸ at

124. Roin Metreveli has authored several narratives about the period, but they are suited mainly for a non-specialist audience, e.g., *The Golden Age: Georgia from the 11th Century to the First Quarter of the 13th Century* (T'bilisi: Artanuji, 2010). More scholarly is Mariam Lordkipanidze [Lort'k'ip'anize], *Georgia in the 11th–12th Centuries*, ed. George Hewitt (T'bilisi: Ganat'leba, 1987).

125. On “transconfessional histories” of the medieval Middle East, see Jack Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East: Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 7 et sqq.

126. Minorsky, “Caucasica in the History of Mayyāfāriqīn,” 31.

127. See Bennett, *A Catalogue*, #136, p. 55, for a coin of Demetre I whose Arabic obverse legend reads: “King of kings || sword of the Messiah || Dmitri.” In the center appears Georgian *asomt'avruli d* (ძ), i.e. “Demetre.” The Arabic reverse legend is difficult to read but includes “al-Muqtafi li-Amr Allāh” and “Commander of the Faithful,” both of which refer to the Caliph.

128. The Jewish presence in Georgian lands is genuinely old. For an accessible and popular account, see Eldar Mamistvalishvili, *The History of the Georgian Jews* (T'bilisi: Georgian Academic Book, 2014). See also Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “Religious Plurality and Mixture in the Persianate North: Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Manichaeans in Late Antique Georgia,” *Entangled Religions* 13, no. 3 (2022). For Armenia, see Michael E. Stone and Aram Topchyan, *Jews in Ancient and Medieval Armenia: First Century BCE to Fourteenth Century CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

four dinars, and a Muslim at three dinars. He was extremely kind to the Muslims; he honored the scholars and ṣūfīs ...¹²⁹

In this context, Islamic types made a resurgence in Georgian coinage. From this juncture through the early modern era, Georgian coinage was principally Islamic in terms of its basic visual program (see, for example, Fig. 16).



Fig. 16.
Giorgi III (r. 1156–84).
AE. Irregular diameters
and weights. Pakhomov,
Monety Gruzii, #49, pp.
81–82; and Dundua, *K'art'uli
numizmatika*, vol. 1, #67; cf.
Bennett, *Catalog*, #143. Image
source: private collection.

The obverse of this series of Giorgi III (r. 1156–84) features the Georgian *asomt'avruli* letter *g* (Ⴀ), “Giorgi,” positioned in the center of a geometric pattern of five linked heart-shaped rosettes, outside of which are ornamental designs interspaced with an Arabic inscription: “Giorgi, king of kings, sword of the Messiah” (كيوركوي ملك الملوك حسام المسيح). This epithet is identical to the one proffered for the Georgian King Demetre by the Islamic chronicle from Khurāsān cited above. This phrase became a standard title for Georgian Bagratid monarchs, at least on coinage, and only in Arabic. On the reverse of this series of Giorgi III is a geometric pattern centered on star. An Arabic inscription is distributed across the fields of this shape: “al-Muqtafī li-Amr Allāh, Commander of the Faithful” (المقتفى لامر الله امير المؤمنين).



Fig. 17.
Giorgi III (r. 1156–84).
AE. Typical diameter: 20–25
mm; typical weight: 2.6–6.3 g.
Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic
History of Georgia*, #9, p. 21;
Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*,
#51, pp. 82–83; Kapanadze,
Gruzinskaia numizmatika,
##56–57, pp. 62–63; Dundua and
Dundua, *K'art'uli numizmatika*,
vol. 1, ##68–69; Bennett, *Catalog*,
##144–45.
Image source: private collection.

129. Minorsky, “Caucasica in the History of Mayyāfāriqīn,” 33–34 (slightly modified).

Unlike the practice in the Romano-Byzantine Empire, portraits of Georgian monarchs are rare in numismatic contexts.¹³⁰ The most famous exception is the following series, also struck by Giorgi III (see, for example, Fig. 17).

Giorgi III's likeness fills the obverse. The king is adorned in Byzantine-like vestments and wears a Byzantine-like crown surmounted by a cross. He sits cross-legged with a falcon on his arm. To his left appears an abbreviated Georgian *mxedruli* inscription that reads "Giorgi" (გ[იორგ]ი). This is the first attestation on coinage of *mxedruli*, a script introduced in the early eleventh century.¹³¹ Some specimens bear a Georgian date executed in *asomt'avruli*: ԲԿԾ, "394." In the early medieval period, Georgians created their own calendrical system, the *k'oronikoni* (ქრონიკონი), which consisted of 532-year paschal cycles and calculated 5,604 years from the creation of the world until the birth of Christ. According to this calendar, ԲԿԾ, "394" corresponds to 1174 AD. On this series, the word *k'oronikoni* is abbreviated as *k'rk* (ქრკ).¹³² The reverse features an Arabic legend: "King of kings || Giorgi, son of Demetre || sword of the Messiah" (ملك الملوك || كيوركى بن ديمطري || حسام المسيح).

This visual presentation of Giorgi III is paralleled in Islamic coinage produced by the Seljuks and Ayyubids, who ruled in Syria and Egypt. For instance, a sitting cross-legged king is featured on this series minted by Saladin in AH 586/1190 AD (see Fig. 18).

Fig. 18.
Dirham of
Saladin. AH
586/1190 AD.
AE. Diameter:
28 mm;
weight: 12.2 g.
Image source:
David
Collection.



130. On artistic representations, see Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*.

131. *Mxedruli* is attested in royal charters and other administrative documents from at least ca. 1030; see T'. Enuk'ize, V. Silogava, and N. Šošiašvili, eds., *K'art'uli istoriuli sabut'ebi IX–XIII ss* (T'bilisi: Mec'niereba, 1984).

132. For the Georgian *k'oronikoni*, see V. Grumel, *La Chronologie = Traité d'Études Byzantines*, vol. 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque Byzantine/Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), esp. ch. 11, "L'ère des Romains, le Koronikoni, et l'ère mondiale des Géorgiens," 146–53; E. T'qaishvili, "Georgian Chronology and the Beginnings of Bagratid Rule in Georgia," *Georgica* 1, no. 1 (1935): 9–27; and Stephen H. Rapp Jr., "Imagining History at the Crossroads: Persia, Byzantium, and the Architects of the Written Georgian Past," 2 vols. (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1997), 2:500–4.

Similar imagery adorns coins minted at Erzurum in the AH 620s/1220s AD in the name of Rukn al-Dīn Jahānshāh b. ʿUğhril, ruler of the Seljuks of Rum. Another example was produced by the Mesopotamian Ayyubids under al-Ashraf Mūsā, and struck at Mayyāfāriqīn in AH 607–17/1210–20 AD. According to a study by Maia Pataridze, the basic imagery of the sitting king as found on the Georgian series of Giorgi III did not appear on Islamic coinage before 1174. In her view, it is a Christian Georgian numismatic model—itsself generically indebted to Islamic types—that influenced subsequent Islamic series and not the other way around.¹³³ But this chronology and conclusion are not at all certain. Beyond question is the cross-cultural and -religious sharing of such imagery, which appears in yet other contexts, such as Cilician Armenia under its Christian monarch Levon III, who reigned from 1301 until 1307 (see Fig. 19).



Fig. 19.
Cilician king Levon III
(r. 1301–7).
AE. Diameter: 21 mm;
weight: 4.1 g.
[Image source.](#)

Islamic types dominate the plentiful copper coinage produced under Giorgi III's daughter and successor T'amar (r. 1184–1213),¹³⁴ the first woman to rule as Georgian monarch in her own right (see Figs. 20, 23, 24).



Fig. 20.
T'amar (r. 1184–1213).
AE. Irregular diameters and weights.
Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, #10, pp. 23–24;
Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*, ##118–31,
pp. 90–93; Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika*, ##60–63, pp. 64–65;
Dundua and Dundua, *K'art'uli numizmatika*, vol. 1, ##71–72; Bennett,
Catalog, ##159–73d.
Image source: private collection.

133. Maia Pataridze, “On the Origin of [the] Coin Type Spread in the Near East (Coin of the Georgian King Giorgi III [1174]),” *Sak'art'velos mec'nierebat'a erovnuli akademiis moambe/Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences* 16, no. 4 (2022): 135–39.

134. Her death may have transpired a few years earlier; see Goč'a Japarize, “T'amar mep'is gardac'valebis t'arigis šesaxeb,” *Saistorio krebuli* 2 (2012): 348–63.

Mint masters adhered to the same basic design as Giorgi's first coin above (Fig. 16), making use of geometric patterns and text in both Georgian and Arabic. The obverse of Figure 20 is constructed around T'amar's name, appearing as a signature in *mxedruli* script (see Fig. 21). Such calligraphic signatures are called *xelrt'va* (ხელროვა).

Fig. 21.
T'amar's *xelrt'va*.
Image source: Kober,
courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#)

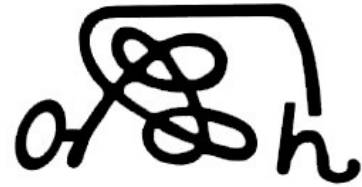


Fig. 22.
Fresco of T'amar and
father Giorgi III at
Varzia.
Photograph by the
author.

Our *xelrt'va* is surrounded by a geometric design incorporating rosettes.¹³⁵ On the edge of the obverse is a Georgian *asomt'avruli* legend, only partially visible in Figure 20: “In the name of God, was struck this silver [!] piece in [the year] 407 [of the] *k'oronikoni* [= 1187 AD]” (ᄎᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎᄎ ᄎᄎᄎᄎ). Through the reign of T'amar's daughter Rusudan, Bagratid coinage was copper; the term “silver” (*verc'xli*) is deployed here in the generic sense of “money.” A variant of this series furnishes the date 430 *k'oronikoni* (= 1210 AD). An Arabic legend fills the reverse: “The great queen || glory of the world and faith || Tamar daughter of Giorgi || champion of the Messiah || may God increase his [!] victories” (الملكة المعظمة || جلال الدنيا والدين || تمار بنت كيوركى || ظهير المسيح || اعز الله (انصاره)). A marginal inscription adds: “May God increase her glory and extend her shadow and strengthen her prosperity” (ضاعف الله جلالها ومدّ ظلها وايد اقبالها). Our example is counterstamped, a common practice on Georgian coinage of this era. The precise meanings of such contemporaneous counterstamps have yet to be resolved.¹³⁶

T'amar's accession as monarch ignited internal controversy. Some male elites objected to a woman ruling as *mep'e*, “king” or “monarch” (Georgian lacks a grammatical gender, but *dedop'ali* with its root *deda*, “mother,” denotes “queen” and “queen consort”). Meanwhile, T'amar's advocates insisted on her legitimacy. Unusually, two separate royal histories are devoted to her reign: *The Histories and Eulogies of the Crowned* and *The Life of T'amar*. Both are transmitted uniquely in the corpus *K'art'lis c'xovreba*. Although her first marriage to the Rus'ian prince Iurii Bogoliubskii ended in unhappy divorce, her second husband Davit' Soslani, an Alan (Georgian Ovs), is sometimes depicted as sharing power with her. However, the ascension of Davit' Soslani did not halt the dispute about T'amar's gender. With this in mind, we must return to the wording “his victories”¹³⁷ and “champion” (replacing the customary “sword”) in the Arabic inscription translated above. According to David Marshall Lang, “This may either be a grammatical oversight, or may refer to the preceding line, where the Queen is given the masculine title of Champion. This confusion is hardly surprising, especially when it is remembered that T'amar bore the Georgian title of *Mep'e*, which means King.”¹³⁸ The same considerations pertain to the coinage of T'amar's daughter examined below. While “champion” may be a masculine designation in Arabic, in the same inscriptions T'amar and Rusudan are styled as “queen,” an inherently feminine term.¹³⁹

135. On these rosettes, see Irakli Paghava, “A New 4-Line-Reverse Variety of the 6-Rosette Irregular-Shaped Copper Coins of Queen Tamar,” *Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society* 189 (2006): 5-8.

136. On the counterstamps, see Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika*, 71-73.

137. Grammatically, “his” could refer to God: Alison Vacca, private correspondence, May 15, 2023.

138. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, 24, fn. 1.

139. In private correspondence (May 15, 2023), Vacca notes that Muslim women minted coinage in the thirteenth century. The Arabic word “sultan” (not feminized) is sometimes deployed on the coinage of Raziyya, sovereign of the Delhi sultanate and the first Muslim woman to rule in South Asia. But in other coins, “Raziyya actually used the same exact title as T'amar: the glory of the state and religion, where she feminized ‘glory.’”

Multiple numismatic series were released in T'amar's name. Not only was the Georgian economy flourishing, but the visual component of coinage might buttress perception of the queen regnant's legitimacy and fitness to rule¹⁴⁰—and address the spectrum of linguistic, cultural, and religious communities within the Bagratid Empire. The series, often bearing the date 1200, is arranged around the Bagratid emblem found on coinage and border markers,¹⁴¹ a symbol adapting the Byzantine military standard known as the *labarum* that was associated with the first Christian Roman emperor Constantine the Great.¹⁴²

Fig. 23.

T'amar and second husband
Davit' Soslani, 1200.

AE. Typical diameter:
25–27 mm; typical weight:
6–7.5 g. Lang, *Studies in
the Numismatic History
of Georgia*, #11, pp. 26–27;
Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*,
#60, pp. 94–95; Kapanadze,
Gruzinskaia numizmatika,
#64, pp. 65–66; Dundua
and Dundua, *K'art'uli
numizmatika*, vol. 1, #73;
Bennett, *Catalog*, #175. Image
source: private collection.



On the obverse of Figure 23, the emblem of the Bagratid house is flanked by the abbreviated names of T'amar (ⴗⴑ) and her consort Davit' (ⴗⴑ) in Georgian *asomt'avruli*. These names are afforded equal visual weight, although T'amar's appears first when reading left to right. Above these, Georgian *asomt'avruli* characters indicate the date *k'oronikoni* 420 (= 1200 AD). A variant of this series lacks any date. Our specimen is counterstamped below the emblem. The reverse consists of an Arabic legend: “Queen of queens || glory of the world and faith || Tamar daughter of Giorgi || champion of the Messiah” (ملكة الملكات || جلال الدنيا والدين || تاملار بنت كيوركي || ظهور المسيح).

140. On responses to T'amar's gender, see now Nikoloz Aleksidze, *Sanctity, Gender and Authority in Medieval Caucasia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 189–226.

141. On the border markers, see D.G. Kapanadze, “Rodovoi znak Bagrationov na gruzinskikh srednevekovykh monetakh,” *Numizmaticheskii sbornik*, pt. 2 = *Trudy gosudarstvennogo istoricheskogo muzeia* 26 (1957): 77–81.

142. See Irakli P'agava [Paghava], “Šuasaukunovan k'art'ul monetebze gamosaxuli p'iguruli nišnebis interpretac'ia: heraldikuri p'igura da ara monograma,” *Heroldi* (2016): 73–83, with English summary, “Figured Symbol on Medieval Georgian Coins: Alternative Interpretation,” at 115; and Stephen H. Rapp Jr., “The Coinage of T'amar, Sovereign of Georgia in Caucasia: A Preliminary Study in the Numismatic Inscriptions of Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Georgian Royal Coinage,” *Le Muséon* 106, nos. 3–4 (1993): 309–30.

and the monarch relocated to western Georgia as the Mongols gathered the entire isthmus under their hegemony.¹⁴⁵ As Rusudan’s political authority faded, Caucasia’s economy rebounded after a brief period of stagnation. In these conditions, the striking of silver coinage resumed—but with a clear marker of Georgia’s Christian identity (see, for example, Fig. 27).



Fig. 27.

Rusudan (r. 1223–45).
AR. Typical diameter:
21–22 mm; typical weight:
1.6–3.4 g. Lang, *Studies in
the Numismatic History
of Georgia*, #14, p. 31;
Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*,
#67, pp. 107–10; Kapanadze,
Gruzinskaia numizmatika,
##76–77, pp. 70–71; Dundua
and Dundua, *K’art’uli
numizmatika*, vol. 1, ##87–
88; Bennett, *Catalog*, ##203–
19. [Image source.](#)

The obverse of this series, for which several variations exist, features a facing Christ adorned with a halo and holding the Gospels. Around the image are the abbreviated Greek words “Jesus Christ” (IC || XC). A circular marginal inscription in Georgian *asomt’avruli* reads: “In the name of God [this coin] was struck in *k’oronikoni* 450 [= 1230 AD]” (ἸΗΣΟΥ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ ἸΝ ὌΝΟΜΑΤΟΣ ΘΕΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΑΤΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΠΟΛΕΩΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΠΟΛΙΤΕΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΤΑΝΟΗΣΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΤΑΝΟΗΣΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΤΑΝΟΗΣΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΣ ΚΑΤΑΝΟΗΣΗΣ). According to Lang, “The design of the bust of Christ on the obverse is taken from the nomisma of the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus III Botaniates (r. 1078–81). This explains why these silver dirhams are referred to in Georgian medieval charters as ‘Botinati’ or ‘Botinauri.’”¹⁴⁶ In the center of the reverse field is the abbreviated Georgian *asomt’avruli* “Rusudan” (რუსუდანი) surrounded by an Arabic marginal inscription: “Queen of queens, glory of the world and faith, Rusudan, daughter of Tamar, champion of the Messiah” (ملكة الملكات جلال الدنيا والدين روسدان (بنت تمار ظهير المسيح).

In the mid-thirteenth century, the Mongol Ilkhan dynasty established its base in northern Iran and southern Caucasia. Though usually portrayed as a catastrophe, over the long term Mongol rule sparked a cultural and economic efflorescence in Georgia even as the traditional political order was destabilized.¹⁴⁷ This pattern was repeated across Mongol Eurasia. Under the Mongols, Caucasia’s cross-cultural condition was further magnified, as is evidenced by the visual program of this magnificent series of Davit’ VII Ulu (see, for example, Fig. 28).¹⁴⁸

145. Pubblici, *Mongol Caucasia*.

146. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, 31.

147. On Caucasia and the cross-cultural world of Mongol Eurasia, see Antony Eastmond, *Tamta’s World: The Life and Encounters of a Medieval Noblewoman from the Middle East to Mongolia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and rejoinder by Zaroui Pogossian, “Women, Identity, and Power: A Review Essay of Antony Eastmond, *Tamta’s World*,” *Al-‘Uşūr al-Wuṣṭā* 27 (2019): 233–66.

148. Cf. the date in Bennett, *Catalog*, 93.

Fig. 28.

Davit' VII Ulu, 1247.
AR. Typical diameter:
20–23 mm; typical
weight: 2.2–2.8 g.
Pakhomov, *Monety
Gruzii*, #72, pp. 128–29;
Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia
numizmatika*, #84,
p. 75; Dundua and
Dundua, *K'art'uli
numizmatika*, vol. 1, #95;
Bennett, *Catalog*, #244.
Image source: [CNG Coins](#),
[#4440481 \(382592\)](#)



The obverse of this series features the king on horseback. The rider is adorned with a crown reminiscent of the coin of Giorgi III above (Fig. 17). To the king's left is an abbreviated Georgian *asomt'avruli* rendering of Davit' (ՃԳ). To his right is an abbreviated *asomt'avruli* marginal inscription indicating *k'oronikoni* 467 (= 1247 AD). We also observe the star of Solomon, a visual signal of the Bagratids' claimed descent from the biblical Prophet-King David. The reverse is dominated by a Persian legend acknowledging the authority of the Mongol Ilkhan: “By the power of God || dominion of Güyük || Khan—the slave || King Davit” (بقوة خدا دولة كوك || قان بنده || داود ملك). To the right is a marginal inscription in Persian/Arabic: “struck at Tiflīs” (ضرب تفلیس).

This series of Davit' VII Ulu has contemporary parallels in nearby Christian and Islamic polities.¹⁴⁹ For example, a similar numismatic model had already been deployed by the Seljuks of Rum (see Fig. 29).

Fig. 29.

Rukn al-Dīn
Sulaymān II Shāh,
1199–1200.
AR. Diameter: 23.5
mm; weight: 2.9 g.
Image source: [David
Collection](#).



149. My thanks to Alison Vacca for suggesting these parallels.

Closer to the time of Davit' VII Ulu and in a Christian milieu, the same design was adapted in Cilician Armenia by its Levon II (r. 1270–89) and his successors (see Fig. 30).¹⁵⁰



Fig. 30.
Levon II, king of
Cilician Armenia (r.
1270–89).
AR. Typical diameter:
~21 mm; typical
weight: ~2.5 g. Image
source: [CNG Coins](#),
#85000114 (169034)

The coinage struck in Georgian lands under the aegis of the Ilkhanids is extensive and testifies to the geo-political and economic significance of the Caucasus isthmus for the Mongols.¹⁵¹ Across much of their empire, Mongol coinage—including that produced by the Ilkhans—favored Islamic types. In Mongol Georgia, this practice is in harmony with previous coinage (minted since the Arab conquest) and, of course, with the coins struck across the Islamic Middle East, including Iran. The pattern is evident on coins issued under the Great Khan Möngke (r. 1251–59).



Fig. 31.
Great Khan Möngke, 1258.
AR. Typical diameter: 21-
25 mm; typical weight:
2.2-2.8 g. Lang, *Studies in
the Numismatic History of
Georgia*, cf. #657-658, p.
41; Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia
numizmatika*, cf. #92-93, pp.
77-78; Dundua and Dundua,
K'art'uli numizmatika, vol.
1, #107; Bennett, *Catalog*, cf.
##262-L and 263; Bennett,
*Tiflis Dirhams of Möngke
Khan*, 84 (bottom, actual coin
pictured here). Image source:
private collection.

150. E.g., Ruben Vardanyan, "Corrections to Deep-Rooted Errors in the Attribution and Classification of Coins of the Cilician Armenian Kingdom, Part 1," *Aramazd: Armenian Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12, no. 1 (2018): 129–54.

151. Pubblici, *Mongol Caucasia*, esp. 153ff.

The obverse of Figure 31 consists of an Arabic legend within a square: “Möngke Kh || an the greatest || the just” (مونيكا قا || ان الاعظم || العادل). The margin contains another Arabic inscription: “this dirham was struck at Tiflīs” (ضرب هذا الدرهم تفليس). The layout of the reverse is similar. It features an Arabic legend set within a square: “There is no god but || God alone || who has no associate” (لا اله الا || الله وحده || لا شريك له). The marginal Arabic inscription provides the *hijrī* date Sha‘bān 656 (= August–September 1258 AD). A small star of Solomon is incorporated into the obverse; it is accompanied by a *tamga* (used by Möngke’s father Tolui, a son of Chingiz Khan) on the reverse. The dual signs of authority have thus been visually staked.

It is worth noting that T‘bilisi/Tiflīs was not the only locale producing coinage in Mongol Georgia (see, for example, Fig. 32).

Fig. 32.

Davit‘ Narin, 1265.

AE. Typical diameter:

16–25 mm; typical weight:

1.7–7.5 g. Pakhomov, *Monety*

Gruzii, ##69–70, pp. 125–26;

Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika*, ##82–83, pp.

74–75; Dundua and Dundua,

K‘art‘uli numizmatika, vol.

1, #93; Bennett, *Catalog*,

##238–39.

Image source: private

collection.



The obverse of this series supplies a Georgian *asomt‘avruli* rendering of Davit‘ (ᄃᄆ) surrounded by a Persian legend: “Khan’s || servant, ruler || of the world || King Davit’” (|| قان ملك داود ملك || بنده شاه || جهان ||). On both sides of the last line of Persian text is a date executed in Georgian *asomt‘avruli*: *k‘oronikoni* 465 (= 1265 AD). The reverse Persian/Arabic legend proclaims: “The city of || Dmanisi <variant: Tiflīs>, || may God prosper it! || [AH] 642” (|| شهر || دمانسي || عمرها الله ||). Alongside T‘bilisi, mints were occasionally active to the south, in places like Dmanisi and Axalc‘ixe (Akhaltzikhe). The recent discovery at Samšwilde (modern Samšvilde), also in southern K‘art‘li, of mobile machinery for striking coins¹⁵² reminds us of the portability not only of (some) Georgian mints but also of the monarchy itself, even at the height of Bagratid power. The court was wherever the monarch happened to be.

The fragility of the Bagratid crown persisted from the 1230s through the early modern period. Occasional attempts to rekindle past glory and to exploit royal imagery from the bygone age of Davit‘ II and T‘amar proved ephemeral. Within this period, at the end of the thirteenth century, King Demetre II (r. 1273–89) resurrected the Bagratid family emblem featured nearly a century earlier on the coinage of T‘amar.

152. “Medieval Treasure Trove with Queen Tamar Reign’s Coins Found in Georgia,” TASS Russian News Agency, August 3, 2018.



Fig. 33.
Demetre II, 1280.
AE. Typical diameter:
20–25 mm; typical weight:
1.7–3.2 g. Pakhomov,
Monety Gruzii, #80, p. 169;
Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia
numizmatika*, #100, p.
82; Dundua and Dundua,
K’art’uli numizmatika,
vol. 1, ##112–13; Bennett,
Catalog, ##342–43. Image
source: private collection.

On the obverse of Figure 33 we find an ornamented frame around the abbreviated Georgian *asomt’avruli* name Demetre (ԾԴ). Around this is an abbreviated Georgian *asomt’avruli* inscription *mp’* (ԺՓ), *mep’e*, “king”; some specimens yield *mp’t’* (ԺՓԷ), an abbreviation of the extended title *mep’et’-mep’e*, “king of kings.” Occasionally, a date also appears: *p’* (Փ), i.e. *k’oronikoni* 500 (= 1280 AD). The reverse features a stylized Bagratid emblem and abbreviated marginal Georgian *asomt’avruli* inscription: “We believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (ԼԵՐԺՆ ԹՇԹԻ ԺԻ ԾՇ ՆՆԻ ՔԻ).

Some Ilkhanid coinage minted in Georgia acknowledges local rulers and their commitment to Christianity. For example, this series of Mongol dirhams was struck in Georgian lands in the name of Abaqa (r. 1265–82).



Fig. 34.
Dirham of Ilkhān Abaqa
(r. 1265–82).
AR. Typical diameter:
21–23 mm; typical weight:
1.9–2.7 g. Lang, *Studies in
the Numismatic History
of Georgia*, #21, pp. 47–48;
Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*,
162–63; Kapanadze,
Gruzinskaia numizmatika,
#97, p. 80; Dundua
and Dundua, *K’art’uli
numizmatika*, vol. 1, #114;
Bennett, *Catalog*, ##305e–
310. Image source: private
collection.

The obverse of Figure 34 consists of a Mongol legend executed in Uighur script: “Of the khaqan || in the name || by Abaqa || struck.” Meanwhile, the reverse Arabic legend proclaims: “In the name of the Father || and the Son and the Spirit || Holy—God || One” (بِسْمِ الْاَبِ وَالْاَبْنِ وَرُوحِ الْقُدْسِ اِلَهٍ وَاحِدٍ). A Christian cross is integrated into the final line.

To Abaqa’s reign also belongs a remarkable Georgian series that uniquely supplies text in Mongol, Arabic, and Armenian. This is the only instance of the Armenian language appearing on Georgian coinage. The inclusion of an Armenian phrase may situate the production of these coins in southern Georgia, perhaps in Dmanisi or Axalc‘ixe, an area where a significant Armenian population lived and still resides today. Many of the known specimens were found in southern Georgia.

Fig. 35.
Ilkhān Abaqa (r. 1265–82).
AE. Typical diameter:
19–21 mm; typical weight:
2–4 g. Pakhomov, *Monety
Gruzii*, supplemental
table V34; Kapanadze,
Gruzinskaia numizmatika,
#106, p. 86; Bennett,
Catalog, #359. Image
source: private collection.



The obverse of Figure 35 is framed around a large cross; an abbreviated Armenian inscription occupies its four fields: “Lord God Jesus Christ” (ՏՐ || ԱԾ || ՅՍ || ԶԱ). Along the four edges is an Arabic inscription: “In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God” (بِسْمِ الْاَبِ وَالْاَبْنِ وَرُوحِ الْقُدْسِ اِلَهٍ وَاحِدٍ). The reverse presents a Mongol inscription in Uighur script acknowledging the Ilkhan: “Of the khaqan || in the name || by Abaqa || struck.”

Abaqa’s grandson Ghāzān (r. 1295–1304) was the first Ilkhan to convert to Islam. Islamic formulae thenceforth become commonplace on the Mongol Ilkhanid coinage minted in Georgia.

Fig. 36.
Dirham of Ilkhan Ghāzān
(r. 1295–1304).
AR. Typical diameter: 20–21 mm;
typical weight: 2–2.5 g. Lang,
*Studies in the Numismatic
History of Georgia*, #25, pp. 52–53;
Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*, p.
177; Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia
numizmatika*, #108, p. 89;
Dundua and Dundua, *K‘art‘uli
numizmatika*, vol. 1, #127; Bennett,
Catalog, #363–363a. Image source:
private collection.



For example, the obverse legend on Figure 36 is in Arabic: “God || There is no god but || struck at Tiflīs || Muḥammad || is the Messenger of God” (|| ضرب تفلّيس || محمد || الله || لا اله الا || رسول الله). On the sides, positioned vertically, appears another Arabic inscription: “God bless him” (صلى الله عليه). The Mongol reverse legend is executed in the Uighur script: “Of heaven || by the power || by Ghazan || struck.” Between the third and fourth lines is added an Arabic inscription: “Ghāzān Maḥmūd” (غازان محمود). To the left of the reverse inscription are three unusual symbols. Perhaps these are the special designs that, according to Rashīd al-Dīn, were introduced by Ghāzān to impede counterfeiting.¹⁵³

Our survey concludes with a detour from traditional Islamic types and a deliberate imitation of Byzantine coinage. The Byzantine originals were produced not in Constantinople but in the kingdom of Trebizond on Caucasia’s frontier with Anatolia, along the Black Sea. This Byzantine “successor state” arose after the Fourth Crusade seized control of Constantinople in 1204. Even after the Byzantines regained the Queen of Cities in 1261, the Empire of Trebizond—administered by scions of the Komneni house, biological kin of the Georgian Bagratids¹⁵⁴—continued to live an autonomous political existence. Although Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in May 1453, Byzantine Trebizond held out until 1461. Back during Trebizond’s heyday, in the later thirteenth century, Georgians imitated its silver aspers. In Georgian they are called *kirmaneuli*, that is, coins of Kyr Manuel, the first Byzantine ruler of Trebizond.¹⁵⁵ The following series is based on the coinage of John II (r. 1280–97), emperor of Trebizond.



Fig. 37.
Kirmaneuli, imitation of an asper of John II (r. 1280–97), emperor of Trebizond. AR. Typical diameter: 18–24 mm; typical weight: 1.2–3.1 g. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, 81–87; Pakhomov, *Monety Gruzii*, 193–203; Kapanadze, *Gruzinskaia numizmatika*, #114, p. 96; Dundua and Dundua, *K’art’uli numizmatika*, vol. 1, ##99–102; Bennett, *Catalog*, ##477–81. Image source: private collection.

153. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, 53.

154. Cyril Toumanoff, “On the Relationship between the Founder of the Empire of Trebizond and the Georgian Queen Thamar,” *Speculum* 15, no. 3 (1940): 299–312. See also Michel Kuršanskis, “L’Empire de Trébizonde et la Géorgie,” *Revue des études byzantines* 35 (1977): 237–56.

155. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, 82.

The obverse of Figure 37 portrays John II, standing, with a *labarum* in his right hand. Below and to the emperor's left is the seal of Solomon. The reverse depicts St. Eugenius with traces of his name in Greek: EYTENIOΣ. As noted by Lang, "... the cult of St. Eugenius was local and peculiar to Trebizond, and quite unfamiliar in Georgia."¹⁵⁶ Though their extant numbers are relatively high, the fact remains that *kirmaneuli* are a digression from the Islamic and Islamic-type coinage that had dominated across Georgian lands beginning with the Tiflīs amirate.

Concluding Observations

1. For pedagogy and research alike, Georgia's rich numismatic heritage is a gateway to the diversity of cultures, languages, and religions characterizing medieval Caucasia. The peoples inhabiting the isthmus between the Black and Caspian Seas were remarkably plural and cosmopolitan. A durable but evolving cross-cultural condition defines Caucasia as a cohesive world region.

2. Caucasia's principal socio-cultural orientation southwards is clearly reflected in Georgia's coinage, whose types, legends, and visual programs often diverge from the Christian religious artwork adorning Caucasia's churches and monasteries.¹⁵⁷ Despite the relatively rich survivals of religious art, Christianity was only one facet of medieval Georgian identity. Furthermore, the Christianity of the Georgians was Iranic/Persianate.

3. Though Georgia's political elites sometimes pursued ties to the Romano-Byzantine Empire, as is true for the Bagratid kings and emperors, their Christian affiliation should not be equated with a Romano-Byzantine identity. The Iranic/Persianate bedrock undergirding the society and cultures of southern Caucasia remained intact after Christianization. However, it was constantly evolving.

4. In Georgian contexts, Sasanian numismatic models deployed at the end of late antiquity by local presiding princes gave way to Islamic ones that were initially used by the Tiflīs amirs and then by the Christian Bagratids. In both cases, prevailing imperial models were oriented southwards and did not emanate chiefly from the Romano-Byzantine Empire.

5. Even at the zenith of their empire, the "Byzantinizing" Bagratid house authorized and adapted Islamic numismatic types, a phenomenon characterized by the recurrent use of inscriptions in Arabic and an aversion to imagery. In some cases, the Bagratids may have employed Islamic technologies and Muslim mint masters. The assertion in contemporaneous Georgian histories of the Bagratids representing a dramatic break with the past is an intentional ideological distortion.

6. The Mongols further applied and evolved Islamic numismatic types in Georgia. A strategic point of convergence, the Caucasus isthmus was an integral component of the Mongols' trans-Eurasian enterprise, and with northern Iran was the geographical base of the Ilkhanid dynasty.

156. Lang, *Studies in the Numismatic History of Georgia*, 82.

157. Compare with the adaptation of Islamic culture and norms by leaders of the Jacobites: Philip Wood, *The Imam of the Christians: The World of Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, ca. 750–850* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

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