

Ancient Georgia and pre-Islamic Iran: Issues of Cultural Relations in the Light of Glyptic Data

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In memory of Professor Ketevan Javakhishvili (1932-2021)

Abstract: In addition to the many realms of fine arts, the issues of Georgian-Iranian cultural interactions of pre-Islamic periods that merit our particular interest were adequately expressed in such a minor form of arts as glyptic, beginning from the Achaemenian days up to the Sasanian period. Glyptic artifacts, which demonstrate part of Iranian culture, were discovered during various archaeological excavations in Georgia. While some of these items were imported, others were produced locally under the influence of Iran. The discovery of metal shield rings in Georgia, particularly in the eastern region that was once part of ancient Iberia, has posed a significant challenge for historians. These artifacts are believed to be locally produced and some may reflect artistic patterns associated with the Achaemenid kingdom. The majority of the Sasanian artifacts discovered in Georgia are excellent seals. They began to arrive in East Georgia mainly from the 4th century AD. Due to the beginning of intensive trade with Sasanian Iran and the gradual strengthening of Iran's political positions in the South Caucasus, which was followed by the dissolution of the Kartli kingdom in 532, the widespread use of Sasanian seals started in the second half of the 5th century and continued during the 6th and 7th centuries. Almost all of the common themes and subjects found in Sasanian glyptics can be observed in the glyptic artifacts in Georgia. These include depictions of nobility, deities, animal-versus-hero fights, fantastical creatures, humans, birds, and plants, as well as monograms. The Sasanian

period saw a significant increase in cultural exchanges between Georgia and Iran, which had a lasting impact and influenced both later Georgian Christian monuments and contemporary local art products.

Keywords: Iberian Kingdom, Ancient Iran, Iranian Glyptics, Ancient Cults, Mithra, Anahita in Georgia

Introduction

The topic concerning cultural relations of ancient Georgia with its Oriental neighbors is very important and, of course, complex. In addition to the many fields of arts, such as architecture, reliefs, ceramic art, metalwork, jewelry, and glassware, the issues of artistic interactions between Georgia (mostly Iberia, the 4th century BC - the 4th century AD), the East Georgian Kingdom, known later as the state of Kartli (from the 4th century AD)) and pre-Islamic Iran¹, which merit our special attention, were appropriately reflected in such a minor category as glyptic arts. This theme stands out for its diversity of features, as well as the special range of regional varieties.

The archaeological excavations carried out at different times in Georgia revealed glyptic material, which falls into the Iranian cultural circles (ca. the 6th-5th centuries BC - the 6th century AD). Some of these artifacts were imported, and some others, under Iranian influences, were local productions.²

In our survey, we aim to introduce several distinguished samples of these highly artistic and well-researched glyptic objects to the scholarly world and to clarify essential issues about the cultural relationship between Georgia and ancient Iran.

Among these materials, the most ancient and remarkable ones are Achaemenid seals found in Georgia.

Samples of Achaemenid Glyptic Artifacts in Georgia

As is widely known, J. Boardman distinguished three main styles in the Achaemenid glyptics: the Royal Style, in which there are two subcategories, namely Oriental and Occidental; the Greek Style, and the mixed one (Boardman 1970, 305-322). Achaemenid glyptic artifacts are distinguished by a variety of forms and materials. They may be cylindrical, conical, pyramidal, scarabeoid, multifaceted, and usually made of milky or blue chalcedony as well as white and blue-sky sapphire, while agate and carnelian were seldom used. Despite the relatively modest number of patterns, six Achaemenid seals have

¹ About the Iranian impact on ancient Georgian art, see Tsetskhladze 2001, 470-480.

² For the background of the discovery of ancient Oriental glyptic artifacts in Georgia, especially the Iranian ones, see Javakhishvili 2015, 5-36, in particular, pp. 6-24.

been found in Georgia that amply illustrate the range of Achaemenid glyptic style. All these seals were analyzed by the distinguished Georgian archaeologist K. Javakhishvili (2007, 117-128; 2009, 85-93; 2015, 5-14).



FIGURE 1. The Location of the Sites Discussed (© the authors)

1. In 1962, in the Racha region (Western Georgia), in the village of Joisubani the Georgian archaeologist G. Gobejishvili discovered the agate cylindrical and striped seal (Fig. 2; Glyptic Fund (GF) of the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia (now part of the National Museum of Georgia), size: 26x11 mm), on which the tree of life is depicted in low relief, albeit clearly, and on both sides of it are winged lions standing on their hind legs with their heads turned backward symmetrically (see Fig. 3).

K. Javakhishvili noted that this cylinder, with its shape and the extremely beautifully rendered massive figures it represented, belongs to the Achaemenid glyptic Oriental Style group, which consist mainly of cylindrical and conical seals with Mesopotamian (Assyrian and Babylonian) themes. The artistic style of this group of seal depictions is reminiscent of the Achaemenid palace monuments and might be dated back to the 5th century BC or slightly earlier (Javakhishvili 2007, 118; 2009, 86).

2. In the village of Takhtidziri, part of the Kareli district (Eastern Georgia), a dark blue, slightly violet-colored chalcedony-sapphire conical seal was found during the archaeological expedition led by I. Gagoshidze in 1996 in tomb no. 8 (Fig. 4; surface: 23x20 mm, height: 32 mm), which is generally dated to the 4th-3rd centuries BC. On the slightly projecting surface of the seal, a stylized tree of life is portrayed in a shallow, yet

distinct and clearly refined form. Symmetrical images of wild goats standing on their hind legs are displayed on either side of it (Figs. 4 and 5).



FIGURE 2. Georgian National Museum 1241
(© the authors)



FIGURE 3. Georgian National Museum 1241; seal
impression (© the authors)

K. Javakhishvili claimed that Takhtidziri conical seal's image style could be dated to the first half of the 5th century BC, since it exhibited the monumentality and sculptural quality typical of the Oriental Style group of seals (Javakhishvili 2007, 119-120; 2009, 87).



FIGURE 4. Georgian National
Museum 1450 (© the authors)



FIGURE 5. Georgian National
Museum 1450 (© the authors)



FIGURE 6. Georgian National
Museum 1450; the seal
impression (© the authors)

3. In 1985, at Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Iberia (East Georgia), in the valley of Samtavro, in a luxurious burial (no. 905, dated back to the Roman times), a milky-colored chalcedony pyramid seal was found (Fig. 7; surface:20x15 mm, height: 26 mm; see Apakidze and Nikolaishvili 1996, 36-37, table XL, 4, and LVI, 2). A winged deity with a serrated crown is represented rather clearly on the seal's somewhat projecting surface (Figs. 7 and 8). He is taking hold of the tails of two winged, open-mouthed lions that are

turning their heads back toward his outstretched hands. The seal has a symmetrical composition, with fairly flat portrayals and vaguely modeled figures.

Based on the shape, depiction, material, and subject depicted, K. Javakhishvili claimed that the seal belonged to the Occidental Royal Style. This style is a simplified and mannerized version of the Oriental Royal Style. The depictions of this style lack modeling and are rougher.

Furthermore, this topic is exclusively Iranian, in contrast to the previous ones that were mostly focused on Mesopotamian themes; Persian kings and heroes are frequently depicted fighting lions and other animals or monsters while wearing tiaras or crowns with spikes. It was suggested by K. Javakhishvili that this seal should be dated to either the first half of the 5th or the end of the 6th century BC (Javakhishvili 2007, 121; 2009, 88).

4. At Mtskheta, on the Baiatkhevi site located to the north of the Samtavro valley, during the expedition directed by V. Nikolaishvili in 1982, a tabloid chalcedony seal (Fig. 10) was discovered in tomb no. 21 dated to the Roman era (the Great Mtskheta State Museum; inventory no. 101-35-108; surface: 23x18 mm, height: 12 mm; see Nikolaishvili and Giunashvili 1995, 120, figs. 977-981, 1218). Different images are depicted on each of the four sides of this seal.

A Persian rider, or warrior, with a Persian head covering, tightly fastened wrapping, and shoes with long, pointed toes is deeply and clearly carved on the lower wide-form side of the seal. The warrior is hurling a spear at a lion that is standing on its hind legs in front of him (Fig. 11). The horse is raised on its hind legs and keeps its tail unbound, in contrast to the Persian style. Both figures' movements appear to be quite stagnant.



FIGURE 7. Georgian National Museum 1579 (© the authors)



FIGURE 8. Georgian National Museum 1579 (© the authors)



FIGURE 9. Georgian National Museum 1579; the seal impression (© the authors)

A Maltese terrier dog is shown on the upper small facet (Fig. 12), while running deer and Persian gazelle are shown on the other two side facets (Figs. 13 and 14). Animals are represented clearly and realistically, yet there is also a sense of restriction in the way the figures move (Javakhishvili 2007, 123; 2009, 88-89).



FIGURE 10. Georgian National Museum 101-35-108 (© the authors)



FIGURE 11. Georgian National Museum 101-35-108 (© the authors)

The polyhedral form of seals originated from Anatolia and belonged to the group of the so-called “Greco-Persian” or “Greco-Oriental” seals. This category of Greco-Persian gems typifies not quite Greek or completely Achaemenid works of art, but the glyptic type that was simultaneously influenced by both Greek and Achaemenid cultures. Therefore, Greco-Persian art as a whole represents art production of the peripheral parts of the Achaemenid Kingdom, being initially in a close connection with Greek (especially eastern Greek, Ionian), as well as the Iranian official palace art style. In this context, ancient Greek-Iranian cultural unity, their mutual influences, and mutual manifestations look quite organic on the Greco-Iranian glyptic monuments (Nikulina 1994, 15-20). Many scholars considered that the west of Asia Minor and Cyprus were the places where Greeks and Persians were met and in the second half of the 5th century BC - 4th century BC the “Greco-Persian” (“Greco-Oriental”) or “Mixed Style” seals were spread from the Aegean world to India and from the coast of the Black Sea to the Nile (Boardman 1970, 303, 320-322, also Gagoshidze 2009, 14-17; Javakhishvili 2015, 12).

The Mtskheta polyhedron seal, with its shape and style of image execution, belongs to the group of Greco-Persian seals and is dated to the second half of the 5th century BC or the first half of the 4th century BC (Javakhishvili 2007, 124; 2009, 90).

5. The S. Janashia Museum of Georgia purchased burial artifacts discovered in 2000 by chance in the village of Jimiti in Sagarejo district (Eastern Georgia). Among these artifacts was a yellowish-white, semi-transparent chalcedony small scaraboid-shaped seal (Fig. 15; surface: 22x18 mm, height: 7 mm). The rider wearing a high-rise cap is superficially and schematically represented on the seal’s surface, battling a long-horned bull in front of him.

The seal’s composition is fairly flat and volume-deficient. This seal’s theme is Greco-Persian, but its style may be more in line with the so-called “Bern group seals” (see

Gagoshidze 2009, 15) and is more influenced by Persian art (Javakhishvili 2007, 124-125; 2009, 90-91). The seal is dated to the 3rd century BC (Javakhishvili 2009, 91).



FIGURE 12. Georgian National Museum 101-35-108
(© the authors)



FIGURE 13. Georgian National Museum 101-35-108
(© the authors)



FIGURE 14. Georgian National Museum 101-35-108
(© the authors)

6. Additionally, the milky chalcedony scaraboid-form little seal with translucent stripes (Fig. 16; surface: 15x13 mm, height: 6 mm), which was probably found in the Bolnisi district, could be related with the “Bern seal group” both thematically and stylistically (the lion’s figure might be compared with the one depicted on a jasper scaraboid belonging to the same group (Boardman 1970, fig. 975; Javakhishvili 2007, 125n55; 2009, 91). A generic and schematic depiction of an open-mouthed lion attacking what appears to be a deer is seen on the seal’s flat surface (Fig. 16). This seal is also dated to the 3rd century BC (Javakhishvili 2009, 91).³

The seals listed above are all imported, and it turns out that the seals from the tombs are discovered in late archaeological complexes. This fact must surely be taken into account while examining the connections between Georgia and the Achaemenid Kingdom.

The metal shield rings (4th-3rd centuries BC) discovered in ancient Iberia are a significant topic for elucidating Achaemenid-Georgian cultural relations.

Georgian and Russian scholars (M. Lortkipanidze, M. Maksimova, I. Gagoshidze, K. Javakhishvili) believed these rings to be indigenous goods, while some may have been inspired by Achaemenid art (Javakhishvili 2009, 91-92).

Two gold rings (Figs. 17 and 18) with images of amazing creatures (griffins: GF no. 861; intaglio’s diameter: 18 mm, ring’s diameter: 23 mm; GF no. 862; intaglio’s diameter: 19x17 mm, ring’s diameter: 20 mm) are part of the treasure of Akhalgori and have no analogies (Lortkipanidze 1981, 30-36). They are shown with their backs facing the viewer, and their large wings are conveyed shown as bent over the bottom and rising from the back above.

³ K. Javakhishvili (2007, 125) first assumed that this scaraboid could be dated by the 4th century BC or even later, while in her further publication (Javakhishvili 2009, 91), she definitely attributed this seal to the 3rd century BC.



FIGURE 15. Georgian National Museum 1438
(© the authors)



FIGURE 16. Georgian National Museum 1588
(© the authors)

J. Boardman (1968, 67-68) refers to these wings as thick and rounded, while B. Kuftin (1949, 60-61) characterizes them as sickle-shaped. Similar griffins on silver shield rings were discovered in Algeti (GF no. 777) and Takhtidziri (Fig. 19; shield: 15x13 mm, ring: 21x25 mm; Fig. 20, shield: 20x17.5 mm, ring: 22x19 mm).



FIGURE 17. Georgian National Museum 861
(© the authors)



FIGURE 18. Georgian National Museum 862
(© the authors)

K. Javakhishvili claimed that Achaemenid monumental art had an influence on the creation of this form of griffins, which dates to the 4th-3rd century BC (Javakhishvili 2015, 10).

A bronze ring was discovered by R. Ramishvili in burial no. 9 in Kamarakhevi, Mtskheta district (Ramishvili 1959, 16, table 2, fig. 10). This ring is adorned with the engraved image of a standing “Persian lady” in profile (see Fig. 21 for a silver copy; intaglio: 21x15 mm; ring’s diameter: 24 mm).⁴ This theme is very common in Greco-

⁴ The original bronze ring with the initial inventory number “N 48” was lost, and its silver copy is preserved in M. Lortkipanidze’s archive at S. Janashia Museum of Georgia (Fig. 20).

Persian glyptic art (Richter 1968, nos. 503 (1-2), 506-508, 510; Boardman 1970, 352-353, plates 854, 879, 880, 891; Javakhishvili 2015, 10).



FIGURE 19. Georgian National Museum 1442
(© the authors)



FIGURE 20. Georgian National Museum 1464
(© the authors)

The figure has been executed in low relief, in an abstract and sketchy manner. Nevertheless, the image on the seal is quite apparent, particularly the plait that hangs freely on the back, and the right hand that is raised to the face and holds an object that might be a flower. The woman holds a ring-shaped diadem in her lowered left hand. Despite the abstract characteristic of the image, her body maintains a kind of liveliness and dynamism, which is achieved by bulging breasts and a rump, as well as by a peculiar posture, that is, the body is slightly bent at the waist and the right leg is put forward. The representation is more strengthened by the alternation of curling-tip shoes. The big-sized head is especially sharply executed. Also noteworthy are the distinct facial features. Only the chin and nose are indicated by horizontal strokes, while the hands and plait are highly schematically rendered by vertical lines.

A ring with its peculiar stylistic features of the image, technique, artistic presentation, characterized by a different shape of plait or clothes, was rightly identified by M. Lortkipanidze as a local production belonging to the circle of Greco-Persian seals that included the “Mixed Style” artifacts, in particular those with Achaemenid motifs. Consequently, the intaglio presented a locally produced artifact that was directly influenced by the non-Persian “Mixed Style” stone-cutting (Lortkipanidze 1981, 49, table II/7).

The ring was dated by M. Lortkipanidze to the latter part of the 5th century BC (Lortkipanidze 1969, 45; 1981, 45-47, table 2/7 and 2/7a). We believe (see Ramishvili



FIGURE 21. Georgian National Museum (© the authors)

2021, 24) that the ring may be dated to the first half of the 4th century BC based on the shape of the seal and its shield as well as the depiction of the woman with attributes such as a lotus-like flower and a ring-shaped crown that closely resemble the portrayals of the “Persian lady” found on scaraboids and Asia Minor polyhedral artifacts that are dated to the first half of the 4th century BC (Boardman 1970, 354, pl. 903; Nikulina 1994, 473).

The bronze bracelets with oval backs and stylized depictions of snake heads on the ends (Fig. 22) and the hinges with cylindrical heads (Fig. 23) found in grave no. 9 in Kamarakhevi should confirm this dating, as they are consistently dated to the first half of the 4th century BC (Gogiberidze 2003, 48, fig. 23, 24; 2008a, 6, 7).

The seals of the privileged class of the Achaemenid Kingdom feature the depiction of a “Persian lady” (Lortkipanidze 1981, 50). This motif may be attributed to a privileged stratum of society in the Mtskheta region, considering that burial No. 9 in Kamarakhevi is particularly complex in terms of inventory (Ramishvili 1959, 15).

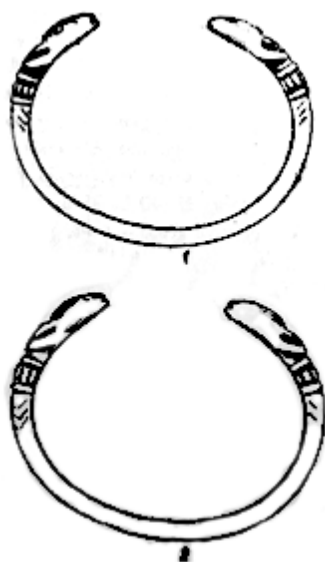


FIGURE 22. Georgian National Museum 42, 43
(after Ramishvili 1959, 16, fig. 9)



FIGURE 23. Georgian National Museum 40, 41
(after Ramishvili 1959, 15, fig. 8)

Further schematic depiction of a “Persian lady” is represented on the oval shield of a silver ring from the 7th burial in Takhtidziri, in the Kareli region, East Georgia. The ring (Fig. 24; shield: 15x11 mm, ring’s size: 21x22 mm) is open arc-shaped, the ends of which are crossed over each other.

A woman wears a long, waist-length dress. She has a thick and very long plait. Her elbow is depicted as bent and upraised. She is holding a small cup in her hand, and an unknown object is depicted below the hand (Fig. 24).

Stylistically, the image from Takhtidziri is completely different from that of the Kamarakhevi depiction of a woman and is made in a peculiar, very schematic and coarse

manner. The image hardly bears any resemblance to the “Persian lady” mentioned above. Due to its shape, the ring represents a synthesis of the 7th and 9th groups of J. Boardman’s classification and dates back to the 4th century BC (Boardman 1970, 214, 217 (with a table); Javakhishvili 2015, 10). However, if we take into account that the image of the “Persian lady” is very schematic, and the shield is oval-round, then we could possibly place it in the 4th-3rd centuries BC.

Regarding the symbolic depiction of the “Persian lady” on the Kamarakhevi and Takhtidziri seal impressions, considering its characteristics (a ring-shaped crown, a cup, and a lotus-like flower), it may be associated with the worship of the goddess Anahita.

Since the woman does not have a jagged crown on her head, we believe that she is not Anahita herself. However, the fact that she is holding a lotus or lily flower, a ringed crown, or a cup suggests that she is engaged in a ritual that is dedicated to Anahita and is an expression of gratitude for her protection of the family and fertility.

The official worship of Anahita (Old Persian: Anāhitā; New Persian: Nāhīd; Armenian: Anahit; Greek: Anaitis; Georgian: Anahita) in Iran is mainly associated with the reign of King Artaxerxes II (404-358 BC; see Saadi-nejad 2021, 121). Her cult was widely spread in Armenia, Cappadocia, Pontus and Lydia (Russel 1987, 235-260; Boyce, Chaumont and Bier 1989; Javadi and Nikoei 2017, 51-60). It is conceivable that a similar process took place in Georgia as well, and the existence of Anahita or similar goddesses should not cause doubt.

Some scholars claim that she might have been syncretized with local deities like the goddess of hunting Dali, the goddess of the sun Barbal-Borbal-i, or Tsa (Sky) or Tsiskris varskvlavi (Sky star), the goddess of love and fertility (Apkhazava 1979, 88-89). It seems that the cult of Anahita has existed in Iberia since the 4th century BC. The fact that the cylindrical pins discovered with the ring in Kamarakhevi (Fig. 21) have a striking resemblance to the similarly shaped object from the Amudarya hoard which is held by a man’s figure (Fig. 25) may theoretically support this opinion.



FIGURE 24. Georgian National Museum 1444 (© the authors)



FIGURE 25. A. Cunningham Collection (after Zeimal 1979, 34, fig. 1)

The figure is silver and dated to the 5th century BC. According to R. Ghirshman, this is the “royal priest” who is holding not the tied bundle of *barsom*, but a flower (Ghirshman 1963, 246). The treasure, along with this statue, was donated to the temple of Anahita. It is therefore probable that the Kamarakhevi cylinder-head pin is associated with the cult of Anahita and represents a fairly simplistic representation of the flower.



FIGURE 26. Georgian National Museum FA A 133:1618 (© the authors)

The fact that an Anahita-type goddess existed and was highly worshipped in Ancient Georgia is supported by the later archaeological materials, such as Dedoplis Mindori (Gora) site (East-Central Georgia), where the temple complex of the 1st century BC was discovered, and one of the main cults must have been of the goddess Anahita (Apkhazava 1979, 88-89). Near the temple, close to the village Aradeti, a high-relief image of the goddess on a medallion made of gold plate was found (Fig. 26). The goddess is represented with a diadem, necklace and earrings, and a crescent moon rises above her head (Dedoplis Gora Fund of S. Janashia Museum, inv. no. FA A 133:1618; diameter: 3.2 cm; depth of the relief: 1.0-0.1 cm; see Gagoshidze 1974, 70-71; 2008b, 172, table 73, cat. 153).



FIGURE 27 A. Georgian National Museum (after Gagoshidze 1981, table LXII)

The provenance of this artifact, whose image resembles Anahita, should leave no doubt that the Iranian goddess Ardvi Sura Anahita is represented on the plate. The image of Anahita is also found in other regions of Georgia, such as Samadlo and Algeti (East Georgia). The long-haired goddess depicted on the Samadlo golden tablets (the 3rd century BC) conceivably is a local fertility goddess who may have already been identified with Ardvi Sura Anahita at that time (Fig. 27A; Gagoshidze 1981, table LXII).

It seems that the same deity is depicted on the buckles found in Algeti (4th century BC; Fig. 27 B; dimension: 4.7 cm). The pictures of waterfowl wearing these buckles and illustrating goddesses like Aphrodite, Cybele, and Anahita should support this theory (Gagoshidze 1979, 117-118).



FIGURE 27 B. Georgian National Museum 27-65:3,4 (© the authors)

Samples of Parthian Glyptic Artifacts in Georgia

Parthian artifacts in ancient Georgian glyptic material (the 1st-3rd centuries AD) are hardly discernible. There is only one seal that we know of, and it is a ten-faceted seal made of translucent glass with a yellowish-white color, that was discovered in the Urbnisi necropolis in Eastern Georgia (GF no.1033; dimensions: 16x8 mm). The seal is molded. The investiture scene is shown on its lower flat surface (Fig. 28, original (on the left), and an impression (on the right)).



FIGURE 28 A. Georgian National Museum 1033
(© the authors)



FIGURE 28 B. Georgian National Museum 1033,
the impression (© the authors)

K. Javakhishvili (1972, 11, 12, no. 141; 1975, 112-122, table I/1, 2, 3; 2015, 20, table IV, 22) published and analyzed the seal for the first time. The composition shows two figures. The first person depicted sits on a high-backed, long-legged throne with a pointed hat (*kulah?*) and hands a crown with ribbons (a symbol of power) to the second person standing in front of him, who is bareheaded and wears a long robe with long sleeves. The garment is tied with a belt and draped with wide folds. According to K. Javakhishvili, the Urnisi seal supposedly depicted a Parthian king who gave power to a satrap, or the head of a city or region.⁵

A close analogy of this seal from Urnisi is not found, although multifaceted seals were not uncommon in the Persian-circle glyptics. Seals of this form have been produced in the Near East from the late Achaemenid period until the 1st century AD. As for the scene depicted on the seal, it is widely represented on ancient Iranian coinage and some artistic works. Single details (the shape and decoration of the throne, the clothing of the characters, the crown) can also be found on ancient Iranian coins and monuments (Javakhishvili 1975, 117-119).

Thus, the Urnisi seal has similarities with the monuments of ancient Iranian art based on its shape, depiction and other compositional elements, suggesting that it belongs to the category of fine art.

According to K. Javakhishvili, the composition of the seal's scene can be dated to the end of the 1st or early 2nd century AD, and the nearest analogs are the art relics of the Parthian period. Also, the Parthian period has been suggested as the date of the burial complex where the seal was found (Javakhishvili 1975, 119).

Currently, no counterparts for this seal have been discovered, making it challenging to determine with certainty where it was made locally. It appears to be a part of the hitherto unidentified class of Parthian seals, which preserved ancient (oriental) Iranian customs without succumbing to Hellenistic influence (Javakhishvili 1975, 121; 2015, 20).

The contents of a series of seals (1st-3rd centuries AD) depicting the horsemen found in Georgia are noteworthy as they allow us to trace the spread of Mithraism in pre-Christian Georgia. Studies suggest that Mithra, a god mentioned in the Avesta, has been illustrated in artistic works, particularly in his capacity as a rider.⁶

It is well-known that the worship of Mithra originated in the Indo-Iranian region, but by the early years of the Christian period, Mithraism had spread far beyond Iran's borders and appeared to be a "world religion".⁷

⁵ Specifically, V. Lukonin noted that in royal investiture scenes from the Parthian era, power was conferred by the king of kings, not by a god (Lukonin 1971, 115; see also Javakhishvili 1975, 120n63).

⁶ For two recent publications on Mithra's iconography in ancient Iranian tradition, see Shenkar 2014, 102-114; Vertienko 2016, 49-54.

⁷ About Mithra in the Indo-Iranian tradition with comprehensive bibliographical information, see Schmidt 2006; see also Beck, 2002. Additionally, on oriental and western forms of Mithraism and its spread in the Roman Empire, see Gordon 2015, 451-455.

It is not unexpected that Mithraism found significance in ancient Georgia as it soon spread to all peoples where the worship of luminaries was widely accepted (see Makalatia 1926, 181-194; 1938, 1-47).

Mithraism became well-established in the Kingdom of Pontus in the 1st century BC, when Kartvelian ancestry made up a sizable portion of the populace. According to some scholars, if Mithridates VI, the King of Pontus had defeated the Roman Empire (during 88-63 BC), Mithraism may have become widely practiced and might have even replaced Christianity in this region (see Kekelidze 1945, 343; Vachnadze and Giunashvili 2021, 61-62).



FIGURE 29. Georgian National Museum 18-55:66 (© the authors)

It should be noted that Mithraism effectively extended in Rome, and in the 2nd-3rd centuries AD, a new strong wave of Mithraism “returned” to the Near East and the Caucasus (Ramishvili 2010, 146), this time, of the Roman Empire. Archaeological artifacts discovered in Georgia suggest that the cult of Mithras was widely practiced throughout the region. For instance, horse representations of the sun deity that are shown on the undersides of silver plates standing in front of the fire altar from Armaziskhevi (see Fig. 29; diameter: 24.4 cm, depth: 7 cm, medallion’s diameter: 6.6 cm), Bori⁸, Zghuderi, and Aragvispiri (Nemsadze 1969, 45-56; Amiranashvili 1971, 97-99; Machabeli 1983, 11-12, 22-23, 27-28, 104) have long been associated with this cult.

⁸ For the latest and considerably different interpretation of the horse depiction with the fire altar on the Bori plate, see Jerusalimskaya 2004, 50-63.

Furthermore, a substantial hoard of copper coins was discovered near the temples in the Bichvinta (Pitsunda) settlement. The majority of the coins feature the so-called Mithra the rider (Dundua 1975, 280-412; Dundua and Silagadze 2010, 24, 35).

In addition to coins, the images of Mithra-riders have also been found on glyptics discovered in Georgia: Urbnisi (Figs. 30 and 32), Zhinvali (Fig. 33), Karsniskhevi, Samtavro (Fig. 31) and Kutaisi (Ramishvili 2019, 58-85). These gemstones are dated to the first centuries AD. A collection of these intaglios were employed as ring stones. They are oval, constructed of glass, and feature riders on a rearing horse in profile on their surface. Their cloak is flying in the wind, and they have on headgear like *bashlyk* (see Fig. 30). Each of these riders is shown in profile, tilted vertically and devoid of any divinely symbolic features.



FIGURE 30. Georgian National Museum 1010
(© the authors)



FIGURE 31. Georgian National Museum 587
(© the authors)

Another, slightly later set of oval gemstone intaglios (3rd-4th centuries AD) is known that were used as ring stones. A rider is engraved on their surface, whose visual characteristics are very similar to the seals discussed above. He is sitting on a rearing horse and his short cape flows in the air, but the composition descends horizontally over the seal (Figs. 30 and 31).

The riders are wearing a Phrygian cap adorned with rays. The horse has raised his foreleg in front of the altar, which contains fire. There is a tree of life behind the riders with a twisted snake at its foot. Seals are constructed of sardion, which is a distinct substance, and the picture is cut on the slightly protruding, non-flat surface of the intaglio.

The equestrian figure on the Zhinvali gemstone shows similarities to the seal mentioned earlier (Fig. 33). Nevertheless, it is revealed that the image portrays a distinct variation of the rider, as depicted on this gem from Zhinvali, another site in the East Georgian kingdom, along with Urbnisi.



FIGURE 32. Georgian National Museum 1107
(© the authors)



FIGURE 33. Georgian National Museum 1854
(© the authors)

The horsemen with Phrygian hats depicted on the gem-intaglios of the second group exhibit a broader presence, encompassing both western (Kutaisi) and eastern (Mtskheta-Samtavro, Karsniskhevi, Urbnisi) regions of Georgia. This suggests a wider distribution and influence of this iconographic motif across different parts of the East Georgian kingdom.

We believe that the gemstones are local productions, as all three types were discovered in Georgian territory and may be related to the cult of Mithra supported by the court. However, the god depicted here is most likely a syncretic Mithra associated with a local deity that has been represented symbolically as a horse.

Two silver jugs depicting a noble rider in a hunting scene were found in Aragvispiri tomb N 13 (see Ramishvili 1975, 10, 12, 15; 2018, 148-151).⁹ Drawings of the depictions on jugs were presented for the first time by K. Ramishvili (1999, 71-72). On one vessel (Fig. 34; height: 22.5 cm, diameter of the middle part: 11.5 cm, approximate diameter of the base: 5.5 cm), an Iberian noble man is hunting deer, while on the other one he is hunting wild boars (Fig. 35; height: 23.5 cm, approximate diameter of the middle part: 12 cm, diameter of the foot: 5.2 cm). In the fresco from Dura-Europos dating back to the 2nd century AD, we see a depiction of a hunt scene featuring Mithra riding while shooting deer with an arrow (see Frye 1972, fig.101; Frye 2002, fig. 95). The visual compositional features of this scene bear similarities to those on the jugs.¹⁰

The uniqueness of the compositions depicted on the Aragvispiri should be noted, as they are considered indigenous productions dating back to the 50th year of the 3rd century. It is important to highlight that these jugs cannot be linked to Sasanian metalwork due to their distinct characteristics (Ramishvili 1999, 72).

⁹ These artifacts are on permanent exhibition at the S. Janashia Museum; inv. no. 5-975-29 and 5-975-30.

¹⁰ On religion and culture at Dura-Europos and especially on Mithraeum, see Gnoli 2016, 126-143.

In late Roman Georgia, various artistic disciplines seem to have developed in distinct ways, despite the prevalent influence of Achaemenid and Parthian art styles. This suggests that local artistic styles were able to develop their own unique characteristics during this period (Ramishvili 1999, 74).

The South Caucasus cultural tradition drew inspiration for its dynamic hunting scenes from eastern neighbors, particularly Syria, where such motifs were prominent, particularly during the late Assyrian era. The hunting scenes depicted on the Aragvispiri jugs, as opposed to the Dura-Europos mural, exhibit independent features resulting from the fusion and reciprocal influence of local and eastern (Parthian-Syrian) traditions. This highlights the dissemination of Mithraism in eastern Georgia during that period.

However, the Achaemenid-Parthian or Syrian prototypes of hunting scenes were not dimly repeated in Eastern Georgia, but rather creatively, under the strong influence of their indigenous sources.

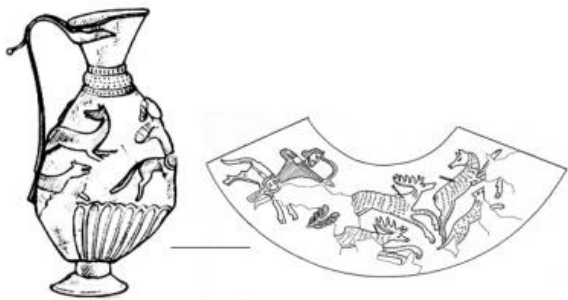


FIGURE 34. Georgian National Museum 5-975-29
(after Ramishvili 2019,82, table V, 8)

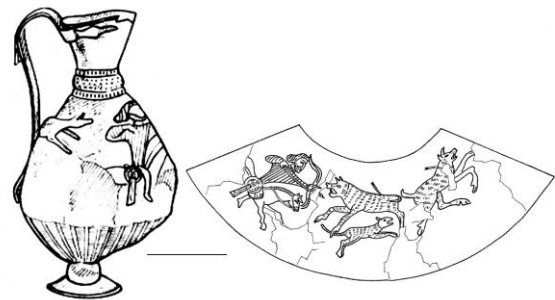


FIGURE 35. Georgian National Museum 5-975-30
(after Ramishvili 2019,82, table V, 8)

Hunting scenes depicting horsemen and footmen with spears on Mithra's sacred animal, the boar¹¹, are engraved on bone plates found in Dedoplist Gori and dated to the 1st century AD (Gagoshidze 2008, 88-103, table 36/50, 51, 53; table 37/59).

The artifacts are local productions and exhibit Georgian engraved images that combine elements of Achaemenid and Greco-Persian traditions (Fig. 36; dimensions: 4.1x3.67x0.30 cm; Fig. 37; dimensions: 4.04x4.09x0.44 cm; see also Gagoshidze 2009, 17, table II/16).

¹¹ Regarding the image of a boar, which in ancient Iranian mythology was considered to be the sacred animal of Mithra, see Vertienko 2014, 271-280, especially pp. 271-272. The boar is also associated with Veretragna; see, for instance, Gnoli and Jamzadeh 1988.



FIGURE 36. Georgian National Museum 27-977:6725 (after Gagoshidze 2008, plate 36, no. 50)



FIGURE 37. Georgian National Museum 27-977:6653 (after Gagoshidze 2008, plate 37, no. 59)

At the base of a silver cup discovered in Zghuderi, there is a highly expressive portrayal of a boar and a dog, both of which are gilded (Fig. 38; see also Nemsadze 1969, table III/2; Machabeli, 1983, 117; Braund et al. 2009, 54-55).¹² As per K. Machabeli's interpretation, the boar is associated with the Iranian god Veretragna. The open border of the cup, decorated with wavy fluted pattern, is locally made though influenced by Roman and Asia Minor toreutics (Machabeli 1976, 89). The cup is dated to 245 AD.



FIGURE 38. Georgian National Museum 190-65-31 (© the authors)

¹² The cup is on permanent exhibition at the S. Janashia Museum. Diameter: 29-30.5 cm, depth: 8.5 cm, diameter of the medallion: 11.6 cm.

Samples of Sasanian Glyptic Artifacts in Georgia

The rise of the Sasanians in the 3rd century AD (ca. 224) was of great importance for the historical development of states in the South Caucasus, especially the Iberian Kingdom (later Kartli).

The Iberian Kingdom's relations with its powerful neighbor, Iran, were complex and profound, encompassing political, economic and cultural features that influenced various sides of Georgian civilization throughout the Sasanian period (3rd-7th centuries AD). The earliest records of Sasanian-Georgian cultural interactions belong to the late 3rd and early 4th centuries AD.

Sasanian glyptics began to enter the state of Kartli in the 4th century, while Roman glyptic items were common in Iberia during the period of political and cultural exchanges between the Iberian Kingdom and the Roman world, which lasted from the 1st to the 3rd centuries (Javakhishvili 2015, 20).

Some Sasanian gemstones first appeared in the early 4th century, mostly in eastern Georgia, eventually replacing Roman ones. It is worth noting that the lack of glyptic content was a prevalent characteristic of Kartli at the beginning of the 4th century. According to K. Javakhishvili (2015, 20), this can be attributed to the limited influx of Sasanian glyptic items and the waning flow of Roman gems into Iberia. While Roman gemstones persisted into the 4th century, their availability dwindled over time.

During the latter half of the 4th century, the substitution of the Sasanian gemstones with the Roman ones continued, as demonstrated by the ornamentation of Iberian ring stones ("Armazian type"). In certain instances, Sasanian gems had already been incorporated, while in others, Rome gemstones had been reinserted (Javakhishvili 1972, 105-106; 2015, 20).

The beginning of intensive trade with Sasanian Iran and the gradual strengthening of Iran's political positions in the South Caucasus, followed by the abolition of the Kartli Kingdom in 532, were the main causes of the large-scale distribution of Sasanian gemstones in the 6th and 7th centuries (Ramishvili 1979, 55; Javakhishvili 2015, 20).

Numerous Sasanian glyptic items discovered in Georgia are presented in various collections of the Georgian National Museum (in the Great Mtskheta State Archaeological Museum-Reserve, in the Dzalisa Archaeological Museum-Reserve, in the Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia, in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts and in the Tbilisi History Museum). The majority of these glyptic artifacts are stored in the S. Janashia Museum's Glyptic Fund, totaling more than 100 items.

Sasanian engraved gems found in Georgia (stone seals, seal impressions, ring stones, bullae) were mostly discovered in different parts of Eastern Georgia, such as Mtskheta district, Tbilisi, Telovani, Sartichala, Vashlijvari, Rustavi, Magraneti, Zhinvali, Akhaltsikhe, Kogoto, Jinisi, Kachreti and other sites (Ramishvili 1979, 4; Javakhishvili 2015, 20).

The bulk of Sasanian glyptic artifacts found in Georgia are typically intaglios, which come in a wide range of forms (Ramishvili 1979, 43-56; Javakhishvili, 2015, 20-21). Several Sasanian gems are inscribed. The glyptic artifacts found in Georgia include portraits of noblemen, deities, animal-versus-hero battles, humans, fantastic animals, birds, plants, and monograms (*neshans*). The corpora include nearly all the major Sasanian glyptic styles and subjects (Javakhishvili 2015, 20-21; Ramishvili and Giunashvili 2023, 139-155). While some of these items were imported, others were influenced by Sasanian culture and developed into unique local works of art.

Renowned Georgian archaeologist K.I. Ramishvili conducted a systematic study of the Sasanian glyptics discovered in Georgia. She presented the results of her extensive research in her important work *Sasanian Gems in Georgia* and included a comprehensive catalog with 120 examples (Ramishvili 1979; see also Javakhishvili 2015, 20; Giunashvili 2019, 143).

We would like to present just a few original examples of these remarkable glyptic objects that combine Iranian (Zoroastrian) and Christian (Biblical) iconography.

A particular gem found in 1939 in Samtavro burial N 17 deserves special attention: this is an orange sardion intaglio set in a silver ring (Fig. 39 (the original inventory number was 65N); intaglio: 13x12 mm, ring's height: 23 mm; see also Maksimova 1950, 271). On its oval and flat surface, a bearded man wearing long, wrinkled robe is carved in profile, standing in front of a burning altar (*ateshdan*) performing a ritual.¹³ There is a ram behind him, with twisted horns, to be sacrificed. The person depicted on the gemstone is presented in a simplified, linear style with deep, rough lines (Maksimova 1950, 271, table III, 83; Ramishvili 1979, 103-104, table V, 54; Javakhishvili 2015, 23, table V, 19). This style is characteristic of the 5th-6th centuries.



FIGURE 39. Georgian National Museum 293 (© the authors)

¹³ K.I. Ramishvili (1979, 103-104) and K. Javakhishvili (2015, 23) assumed that the man had his hands raised, while, according to J. Lerner (2007, 43) “the standing figure grasps something that could be a “knife instead of barsom”, see also 1977, catalog no. 43, with publication notes; 2007, 43n14.

The male figure depicted on the gemstone leaves no doubt that the scene being portrayed is that of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, a well-known Biblical sacrificial theme. This theme was prevalent in late Sasanian glyptic art, and the seal discovered in Georgia is a distinguished example of this style. Along with the story of Abraham and Isaac, other Biblical stories, such as those of Daniel in the lion's den, were also commonly depicted in Sasanian glyptic art during this time (Javakhishvili 2015, 23).¹⁴

Another exceptional gem with Sasanian-Christian motifs is kept in the S. Janashia State Museum (Fig. 40; intaglio: 28x21 mm; seal's height: 23 mm), which was acquired from the private collection of L. Sabakhtarishvili's. The gemstone, made of black talc stone, is set in a gilded ring.

The gem features a high altar decorated with long ribbons, upon which a cross is displayed. Surrounding the cross are seven small dots. Flanking the altar are two bearded, long-haired male figures. These men are depicted wearing long garments, bareheaded, and without weapons. The attire is smooth and flat above, while wrinkled below.

The ring was examined by M. Tsotselia who expressed the opinion that the scene depicted on this gemstone is a replica of an anonymous Georgian-Sasanian coin featuring a cross (see an example of the anonymous coin in Fig. 41 of the online catalogue of Georgian numismatics).¹⁵



FIGURE 40. Georgian National Museum 1309 (© the authors)

¹⁴ For bibliographic references on this Biblical topic in Sasanian glyptic art with all existing concepts, see Lerner 2007, 39-57; see also K. Javakhishvili 2015, 23.

¹⁵ During the later period of the Sasanian rule, in the 6th-7th centuries, Georgian-Sasanian (or Kartwelo-Sasanian) coins were produced in Kartli. The production of these coins began after the Sasanian containment of the Georgian monarchy around 580, more likely 588 (according to Toumanoff's dating). For the historical-numismatic and cultural value of these coins, including anonymous coins depicting a cross on the altar, see in detail: <http://geonumismatics.tsu.ge/public/en/catalogue/types?type=32>; see also Rapp 2014, 325-329.

The coin is believed to have been minted between 591 and 593 (Dundua 1976, 46). Therefore, the gemstone must have been created after the coin was minted. M. Tsotselia considers this intaglio gem a representation of local glyptic production, highlighting the evident influence of Sasanian culture. In addition to Sasanian numismatics, it also reflects the local artistic tradition and religious beliefs of the time (Tsotselia 1997, 235-239).



FIGURE 41. Georgian National Museum QF No. 1571 (online catalog of Georgian numismatics)

Conclusions

The examples provided illustrate the longstanding cultural interactions between Georgia and Iran that have persisted for centuries. The influence of Achaemenid art on local glyptic and other monuments during the formation of the Iberian Kingdom, 6th-3rd centuries BC, is a testament to these contacts. Although Iranian glyptic products declined during the Parthian period due to the increasing influence of the Roman Empire in Kartli, they did not disappear completely. Cultural contacts between Iran and Georgia intensified significantly during the Sasanian period, leaving a lasting mark on contemporary local art products as well as later Christian monuments in Georgia. These exchanges highlight the close cultural, political, economic, and trade relations that have existed between Georgia and pre-Islamic Iran throughout history.

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