



GEORGIA III. IRANIAN ELEMENTS IN GEORGIAN ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Ancient Georgian tribes had close cultural contacts with Near Eastern civilizations from the 18th century B.C.E. (Figure 3; Figure 4), as evidenced by the gold figurine of a stag (Sumerian influence) and the silver bowl with two friezes of relief decoration of a procession, and “tree of life” and animals (Hittite artistic traditions) from the Trialeti mound (Miron and Orthmann, pp. 30, 32). Iranian elements appeared from the middle of the 2nd millennium B.C.E., as they did in the art of the entire Caucasian region. Some objects, such as a bronze rhyton from eastern Georgia (Miron and Orthmann, p. 270, n. 196) were brought from the territory of ancient Iran, while bronze animal- and disc-headed pins, as well as pendant bells and openwork birds, were derived from ancient Iranian styles (Miron and Orthmann, pp. 248, 264-66). Daggers, swords, axes, adzes, pick-axes, and bidents also have close Iranian parallels (Miron and Orthmann, pp. 243-45, 322-24; Moorey, pls. 1-7; Haerinck, pl. 65).

Iranian elements continued to appear in weapons, horse harnesses, and bronze ornaments until the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st



millennium B.C.E. (Pogrebova, 1977, pp. 33-84; Tsetskhladze, 1999, pp. 478-82), but the vast majority of objects date from the 8th-7th centuries B.C.E. when the influence of the Luristan bronzes is clearly noticeable (Pogrebova, 1984). On bronze belts there are fantastic animals, people, and hunting scenes (Miron and Orthmann, pp. 118-19, 286-87; Urushadze, pp. 128-35; Mikeladze, 1995), and the image of two animals facing one another is found on pendants (Miron and Orthmann, p. 249; Pogrebova, 1984, p. 133). From Vani (western Georgia) originate clay figurines of two- or three-headed fantastic animals, animal-headed axes, etc. (Miron and Orthmann, pp. 144, 284, n. 230; Mikeladze, 1990, pl. xviii; Lordkipanidze, 1995, pp. 41-48; Moorey, p. 233; Muscarella, pp. 270-72). In this period a very distinctive shape of pottery, namely jugs with tubular handles (Mikeladze, 1990, pl. xv; [Figure 5c](#)), which is well-known from northwestern Iran (Ghirshman, p. 128; Dyson, 1965, fig. 7; Tuba Ökse, pp. 55, 59), appeared in Colchis (western Georgia). Another type of pottery, legged pots with wave ornament, must also have come to Colchis from Iran (Carter, p. 90). Gold beads, earrings, plates with animal decoration and pendants with granulations from Georgia, dating from the 10th-6th centuries B.C.E., have many features in common with gold objects of the same type from northern and western Iran (Gagoshidze, 1985, pp. 48-57). It is very difficult to demonstrate how these Iranian elements penetrated Georgian art. It is possible that there was some Iranian migration to the territory of ancient Georgia, but it seems more likely that these elements came through the neighboring state of Urartu (to Urartu can be traced the appearance of red-clay pottery in eastern Georgia; Muskhelishvili, pp. 17-30), and later through the Scythians who returned from the Near East by way of Colchis, some of them settling there (Pogrebova, 1984, p. 206; Tsetskhladze, 1995, pp. 314-15).

At the end of the 6th century the Colchian kingdom was established in western Georgia, and in the 4th century B.C.E. the Iberian state was formed in eastern Georgia (O. Lordkipanidze, 1979, pp. 48-73; Melikishvili, pp. 245-60; [Figure 3](#), above). According to Herodotus (3.97, 7.79), Colchis was not directly incorporated into the Persian Empire as one of its satrapies, but it paid tributes and was required to render gifts. It also provided auxiliary troops when required to do so. Probably, Colchis was used by Persians as a buffer state between their empire and the nomads of the southern Caucasus; Persian kings gave luxurious diplomatic gifts (Tsetskhladze, 1993-94, pp. 26-31; cf. Herodotus, 3.20-21, 7.116, 9.20; Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.2.27, 1.8.28-29; idem, *cyropaedia* 8.2.7, 8.3.1, 8.3.3) to the Colchian rulers and elite. This is witnessed by the finds in the rich graves of the local elite in Vani and Sairkhe: gold



Achaemenid bracelets, earrings, a pectoral, a phiale and bridle ornaments (three round cheek-plates with schematic depictions of Ahura Mazdā; [Figure 5a](#); see Nadiradze, pp. 55-57), silver phialai ([Figure 6a](#), [Figure 6b](#)), cups, a jug and a rhyton [Figure 5b](#)), a glass perfume-bottle and phiale (Makharadze and Saginashvili; [Figure 6c](#)), bronze and iron armor, bridle bits, etc. (Gigolashvili). All of these date from the middle 5th to early 3rd century B.C.E. and were probably manufactured in one of the satrapal production centres. Gold diadems from Vani have plaques with relief scenes of animals fighting, a motif so common in Iranian art (Tsetskhladze, 1993-94, pp. 11-49 with illustrations). These burials also contain seals and gems in the Graeco-Persian style (M. Lordkipanidze, 1975, pp. 109-12). Excavation of Sairkhe yielded a stone Doric capital decorated in relief with broad water lily leaves (Kipiani, pp. 15-22; Shefton, pp. 179-86; [Figure 7a](#)). Here another capital, a bull-protome, was found (Kipiani, pp. 12-15; [Figure 7b](#)). Both capitals date from the 5th-4th centuries B.C.E. and probably indicate the presence of some Achaemenid architects who decorated buildings for the local elite in the style of Persian court art. A 3rd century B.C.E. stamp on Colchian amphorae, representing the impression from a seal and depicting a horseman with a star, the crescent moon, and bird, demonstrates the penetration of the cult of Mithras into Colchis (Tsetskhladze, 1992, pp. 115-22). From the 4th century B.C.E. jar burials began to appear in Colchis and throughout Transcaucasia including Iberia, which may serve as an indication of Achaemenid expansion in this region (Noneshvili, pp. 12-54).

The culture of Iberia shows a much stronger Achaemenid influence than Colchis does. Although it is not clear whether Iberia was part of one of the satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire (Cook, pp. 78-79), archeological material enables us to suppose that it was. Some scholars, not without grounds, suppose the existence of local Iberian Achaemenid provincial workshops for the production of metal objects, including jewelry (Gagoshidze, 1996). It is possible that the so-called palace of the 5th-4th centuries B.C.E. with Achaemenid stone column bases (Furtwängler, pp. 190-91, figs. 10-11), which has been investigated in Gumbati, was the residence of the local Iberian satrap (Knauss, pp. 85-92). The well-known Akhalgori treasure, as well as treasures from Tsinskaro and Kazbegi, contain many Achaemenid objects (Smirnow, pp. 5-20; *Survey of Persian Art*, Pls. 118-19; Melikishvili, pp. 248-50). Achaemenid phialai are found in rich burials (Gagoshidze, 1964, pp. 66-69). Excavation of recent years has yielded glass perfume-bottles as well (Kacharava, p. 85, fig. 11). Ancient Iranian silver and clay vessels had a strong influence on Iberian local



pottery. Clay imitations of Achaemenid phialai and rhytons are found at many sites (Narimanishvili, pp. 47-50; Gagoshidze, 1979, pp. 81-84; Furtwängler, pp. 197-98, figs. 13.3, 14.1; [Figure 10](#)). From the 4th century B.C.E. large and small red painted vessels became widespread; they were decorated with animals, hunting and fighting scenes, geometric patterns (this type of pottery is also known from the Colchian hinterland not far from the Iberian border; Miron and Orthmann, pp. 133, 159-60; Gagoshidze, 1979, pp. 88-95; Narimanishvili, pp. 69-79; see [Figure 9a](#), [Figure 10](#) above, [Figure 11a](#), [Figure 11b](#)). The shape of pottery jugs with pairs of animal handles is another indication that Iberia was one of the Achaemenid satrapies in the classical period (Narimanishvili, pp. 282-83; [Figure 11](#)). This shape survived in Iberia until the 1st century B.C.E., e.g., the ram-shaped handle from Samtavro (Miron and Orthmann, p. 171). It is thought that in the 5th century B.C.E. there were special workshops that produced gems in the Achaemenid style (M. Lordkipanidze, p. 116).

The architecture of Iberia provides further examples of the presence of Iranian elements. Examples include a bull-protome capital from Tsikhiagora ([Figure 8a](#)) and capitals decorated in relief with lotus leaves from Dedoplis Mindori ([Figure 8b](#)), Shiogvime, and Sarkine, all of which date from the Hellenistic period (Kipiani, pp. 6-11, 49-58; Miron and Orthmann, p. 170). It is thought that the capitals were used in temples dedicated to fire-worship (Gagoshidze, 1979, pp. 21-23; Kimsiasvili and Narimanisvili). Excavation in Dedoplis Mindori yielded even more important material dating from the 1st-2nd centuries C.E., including a royal palace complex with a temple complex where fire was worshipped ([Figure 8c](#)) and bone plates for playing cards, with depictions of animals, hunting scenes, and Aramaic inscriptions (Gagoshidze, 1992, pp. 27-48; [Figure 12](#)). Another temple for fire-worship was found in Samadlo, dating from the 4th-2nd centuries B.C.E. (Gagoshidze, 1979, pp. 25-30, 65-66). An important find there was limestone fragments with relief scenes of mounted hunters pursuing a ram ([Figure 9b](#)). Stylistically, it probably belongs to the end of the Achaemenid period. This relief was used to decorate either the walls of a monumental building or an altar in a temple for fire-worship (Gagoshidze, 1979, pp. 65-66; idem, 1981, pl. xix, no. 236). Iranian elements are visible also in palace architecture, e.g., in Mtskheta, capital of the Iberian kingdom, where capitals in the royal palace show Iranian influence (Lezhava, pl. lix, no. 5; [Figure 8d](#)).

From the first centuries C.E., the cult of Mithras and Zoroastrianism were commonly practiced in Iberia. Excavation of rich burials in Bori, Armazi, and



Zguderi has produced silver drinking cups with the impression of a horse either standing at a fire-altar or with its right foreleg raised above the altar (Machabeli, pls. 37, 51-54, 65-66). The cult of Mithras, distinguished by its syncretic character and thus complementary to local cults, especially the cult of the Sun, gradually came to merge with ancient Georgian beliefs. It is even thought that Mithras must have been the precursor of St. George in pagan Georgia (Makalatia, pp. 184-93). Step by step, Iranian beliefs and ways of life penetrated deeply the practices of the Iberian court and elite: the Armazian script and “language,” which is based on Aramaic (see Tsereteli), was adopted officially (a number of inscriptions in Aramaic of the Classical/Hellenistic periods are known from Colchis as well; Braund, pp. 126-27); the court was organized on Iranian models, the elite dress was influenced by Iranian costume, the Iberian elite adopted Iranian personal names (Braund, pp. 212-15), and the official cult of Armazi (q.v.) was introduced by King Pharnavaz in the 3rd century B.C.E. (connected by the mediaeval Georgian chronicle to Zoroastrianism; Apakidze, pp. 397-401).

Iranian elements in ancient Georgian art and archaeology gradually ceased from the 4th century C.E. when Christianity became the official religion of the Georgian states.

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