

A Story of Encounters

Georgia's Cultural, Artistic, and Historical Heritage



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ART & HISTORY MUSEUM

HANNIBAL

A Story of Encounters

Georgia's Cultural, Artistic, and Historical Heritage

edited by
Bernard Coulie & Nino Simonishvili



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Preface

We are honoured and pleased by the extraordinary opportunity to present the exhibition *Georgia: A Story of Encounters* at the Art & History Museum, as part of the europalia georgia festival in Brussels. The exhibition covers the period from the formation of Georgian civilisation to the end of the late medieval period.

Many Europeans know Georgia thanks to the Myth of the Golden Fleece or that of Prometheus chained in the Caucasus mountains. However, as it has been scientifically demonstrated, the very beginnings of European human culture in the broader sense are also to be found in Georgia – the area where the Eurasian branch of the human race came into its own.

Situated at the junction of Europe and Asia, during the centuries, Georgia has been an important place for intercultural relations between representatives of many nations, who lived in or crossed the country. Whilst remaining open to various impulses from Achaemenid, Greek/Roman, Persian, Arabo-Muslim, Byzantine, Seljuk, Ottoman, and Russian culture, Georgia developed its own, very unique culture and retained its own language. With its writing system, poetry and song, art, and architecture, Georgian culture exemplifies both its national distinctiveness and cultural connection with surrounding peoples.

When we accepted the invitation of europalia to present this exhibition, we realised that any attempt to show the whole Georgian civilisation and culture in its continuity and development would be an enormous undertaking. This is why the exhibition has been assembled with exceptional care by a team of Georgian and Belgian specialists to build up a general picture of the complex Georgian history and open a new, dynamic way of understanding the country as a crossroads for the exchange of ideas, economic goods, and artistic practices.

The exhibition illustrates how sharing specific images, architectural elements, ornamental motifs, and artistic techniques contributed to establishing Georgian identity. It emphasises to what extent the current social and cultural consciousness is inextricably linked to the historical past.

Completing the exhibition and catalogue of such a scope in a short period of time has been a challenge. In this process, Georgian professionals received valuable assistance from many partners and institutions. Therefore, we wish to express our sincere gratitude to all contributors, in particular to our collaborating partners in Brussels. We especially thank the eminent foreign authors of the catalogue as well as the world-class museums and libraries for lending their exceptional works. I would also like to thank all Georgian participants for their commitment to this project.

Thea Tsulukiani
Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth of Georgia



Preface

The exhibition *Georgia: A Story of Encounters* was born of a fierce desire to present to the European public the history, art and culture of Georgia, a country with a profoundly European outlook but still relatively unknown to the continent's inhabitants.

At the crossroads between East and West, at the intersection of North and South, Georgia has always been a meeting point and passageway for the mighty powers surrounding it over the centuries, from the Greeks, Romans and Persians, to the Byzantine, Mongol and Ottoman empires. The ancient local cultures that developed here have spread throughout the region and been enriched by influences from elsewhere. This has created an incredibly rich heritage that we are proud to showcase in the heart of Europe at the europalia georgia festival.

This exhibition, along with more than fifty artistic events of all disciplines that the festival is presenting in and around Belgium over a period of almost four months, will, I hope, provide insights into the unique blend that is Georgian culture as well as the current challenges facing this dynamic country, reflected in the work of artists past and present.

This story of encounters is also the story of the teams involved in putting this exhibition and catalogue together: curators, conservators, authors, lenders, and coordinators from Georgia, Belgium and elsewhere. I would like to warmly thank them for their involvement, and in particular the Georgian Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, the National Museum of Georgia, and the Art & History Museum in Brussels, which will be hosting some of Georgia's most emblematic treasures this autumn and winter.

Baron Philippe Vlerick
Chairman of europalia international

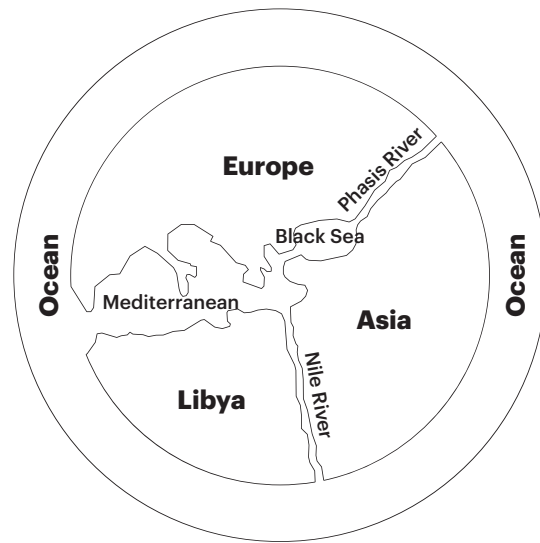
p.2
Queen Tamar, fresco of the north wall
of the Dormition church, cave monastery
of Vardzia (1184-1186)

p.4
Ascension of the Cross, Ishkhani Cathedral,
painting in the dome, 1032
Tao-Klarjeti historical province of Georgia

p.6
Angel, fresco from the Saint Nicholas
church, Kintsvisi, Shida Kartli (1205-1206)

Introduction: A Brief History of Georgia

Georgia lies at the junction of two continents [map 3], Europe and Asia, a geographical position clearly reflected in Georgian civilisation, which has been influenced by Western as well as Eastern culture. A continuous centre of cultural and economic exchange, the region was invaded by Achaemenid Persians, Romans, Parthians and Sasanians from Persia, Arabs, Byzantines, Seljuks, Mongols, Ottomans, as well as Russians of the Tsarist Empire.



The position of Georgia between east and west, and north and south favoured the integration of the country into the economic networks while also transforming it into a target for the neighbouring powers competing for influence in the region. Cultural exchanges took place through dynamic and transformative networks, contributing to the way Georgians defined themselves and other nations. The unified and distinct geography of the country and the multitude of cultural influences that went with it offer a framework to understand some of the artistic expressions which often build on both Christian and non-Christian traditions [cat. 1, 2] but transmute into a new and original synthesis that make Georgian culture distinct from the related Mediterranean civilisation.

A striking feature of Georgian culture is its uninterrupted continuity through all periods, suggesting that the ancestry of modern-day Georgians is autochthonous and that they have remained where they evolved: palaeontological and archaeological evidence suggest that homo erectus, the earliest form of human being, was present in this area over 1.8 million years ago. Proto-Georgian tribes inhabited the territory of the Caucasus by at least the Neolithic period, in the 6th and 5th millennia BC, if not earlier. As the Bronze Age yielded to the Iron Age at the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, these tribal groups began to reshape themselves into strong and widespread unions [cat. 3, 4].

Map 3
Possible rendering of Anaximander's map of the world

A map, attributed to Anaximander (ca. 610 BC – ca. 546 BC), a Greek philosopher from Miletus, is supposed to be the first map of the world. The Phasis river (now Rioni river, main river of Western Georgia), was seen in the antique world as the separation between Europe and Asia.



Fig. 1
Map of Colchis, Iberia, Albania and Armenia Maior
From *Maps of the Ancient World: Lithographed from an atlas to Ptolemy's Geography*
Rome, 1478
Edited by N. Donis; Ulmae: L. Hol, 1482



the spiral pendants of the Ananauri necklace with its refined pectoral are more skilfully made than those found in Ur.

Golden objects with granulation already appeared during the first phase of the Trialeti Middle Bronze Age culture on the spherical hollow beads, and the pendant with agate inlay and carnelian insets in cloisonné found in Kurgan 8 at Trialeti [cat. 32], is similar to the one from Ur of the Akkad Period; both items must thus be dated before 2,100 BC.

Although looted in Antiquity, some remaining grave goods from Trialeti Kurgan 14 still distinctly demonstrate the involvement of Trialeti culture communities in long-distance interconnections during the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. This kurgan contained an agate amulet in the shape of a human leg, similar to those spread in Egypt during the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period, and a cylindrical carnelian bead etched with white transverse lines thought to be of Harappan beadwork and similar to that distributed over a vast area extending from Indus to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, and three amber beads, possibly from the Baltic region.

The anchor-type axe offers additional evidence for far-distance interconnections of Southern Caucasia [cat. 33]. Among fewer than 20 samples found throughout the greater Near East and Egypt, four come from Southern Caucasia and display the highest manufacturing quality. Only Southern Caucasian ones have filigree decorating the edges of these axes. Three of them are made of bronze and one of silver, found in the kurgan of Karashamb, along with a silver goblet depicting scenes of a battle, hunting, sacrifice and other rituals. A silver goblet similar in shape and style was found in Kurgan 5 at Trialeti. The iconography of the image on this goblet parallels Mesopotamian images, particularly in the central figure sitting on a stool and holding a cup in their upraised hand [fig. 14]. It also parallels the iconography of Kültepe seals of Anatolia's Old Assyrian Colony Period, though the Trialeti and Karashamb vessels predate this period.

Trialeti and the Aegean

Interactions between Caucasia and the Aegean might have existed since the Early Bronze Age. However, unchallenged contacts between these regions are evidenced for the Middle Bronze Age, coinciding with the second and the third

Fig. 12 (left)
Detail of one of the two four-wheeled wooden carts found in Ananauri (kurgan 3)

Fig. 13 (right)
Golden artefacts excavated in Ananauri (kurgan 3), Mid-3rd mill. BC
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia



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Fig. 14
Goblet, 3rd-2nd mill. BC
Silver – Trialeti, Tsalka, kurgan 5, Kvemo Kartli
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia

This goblet, made from a single silver sheet, is encircled by two friezes of hammered relief figures. In the upper part, a ritual procession is depicted: 22 walking figures holding goblets and wearing masks and ritual garments march towards the sacrificial altar and the central figure, behind whom surges the tree of life. In the lower frieze, five stags and four does walk in a row.



31

Cat. 31
Openwork pectoral, beads and pendants, Mid-3rd mill. BC
Gold – Ananauri, kurgan 2, Kakheti
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia



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Cat. 33
Anchor type axe, 2nd half of the 3rd mill. BC
Bronze – Tetrtskharo, Bedeni kurgan 12, Kvemo Kartli
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia



Cat. 32 (opposite)
Necklace, late 3rd mill. BC
Gold, cornelian, agate
Trialeti, Tsalka, kurgan 8, Kvemo Kartli
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia

Fig. 15
Rapier, 22nd-19th c. BC
Bronze – Lilo, kurgan 1, Tbilisi
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia

Scholars today believe that rapiers, along with swordsmanship combat techniques, were first invented in Southern Caucasia during the Trialeti culture near the end of the third millennium BC and then spread first to the Aegean (Crete and mainland Greece) and from there to other parts of Europe.

phases of the Middle Bronze Age Trialeti culture in Southern Caucasia, the end of the Middle Minoan period in the Aegean, and the beginning of the Mycenaean Age in mainland Greece.

Long thrusting bronze swords, known as “rapiers” [fig. 15], appear in Southern Caucasia in kurgans belonging to the second phase of the Trialeti culture predating the earliest long swords of type A in the Aegean. Comparative typological studies of rapiers and radiocarbon analyses suggest that swordsmanship originated in Southern Caucasia near the end of the 3rd millennium BC, and then it spread to the Aegean and eventually to Europe, where it became the foundation of European militarism. The southern Caucasian rapiers themselves stemmed from the great swords of Central and Northeast Anatolia (Alaca Höyük, Horoztepe, ca. mid 3rd mill. BC).

The royal tombs of Alaca Höyük and the kurgans of the Trialeti culture, including those in which rapiers were found, also share funeral customs with bucrania, shown with a pair(s) of bull skulls and the bones of their limbs as if the bulls would take the deceased to another world. This belief echoes the symbolism of the Horns of Consecration in the Aegean since the bulls’ horns were sought to mediate between our world and the next.

Painted spirals in the form of sea waves, depicted on *pithoi* from Kurgan 5 and 17 of Trialeti, are comparable with a similar pattern found mainly on Middle Minoan Cretan palatial ceramics called Kamares Ware. Except for spirals, one of the Trialeti *pithoi* (Kurgan 17) depicts a rhomboid-shaped symbol (probably a stylised bucranium) characteristic exclusively of Trialeti culture. The relief ornament depicted on the *pithos* from the Middle Bronze Age Kurgan 8 of Namgalamitsebi (Tbilisi) [cat. 34] is similar to the ornament in the form of sea waves, but also echoes the Early Bronze Age spiral patterns, suggesting the continuation of the Kura-Araxes traditions in the Middle Bronze Age. Sea wave-like spirals are also decorating gold items, like the unique gold goblet from Trialeti Kurgan 17 [fig. 16]. The goblet is decorated with filigree patterns set with coloured stones such as red sardonyx, carnelian, jet, amber and lapis lazuli.

The multi-handled knobbed vessels from Trialeti are comparable to the Middle Minoan II and IIIB great palatial *pithoi* of Knossos and Phaestos in Crete. The pattern of ropes depicted on both types indicates the function of ropes used to transport these containers. The copper cauldrons from the Kurgan 15 of Trialeti and the Shaft Grave 4 at Mycenae are almost identical. The bronze buckets from Trialeti Kurgan 15 and the Shaft Grave 5 at Mycenae are similar in shape and roughly the same size, and the system of fixing the handle is identical for both. A matching bucket with a lower ring-shaped base but precisely the same system of fixing the handle comes from the intermediary territory at Kültepe in Anatolia. The bronze socketed spearheads with ringed shafts coming from the third phase of the Trialeti Middle Bronze Age culture assemblages (e.g. Trialeti Kurgan 15, Lori Berd Tomb 77) [cat. 35] are like the ones spread widely in the Near East and the Aegean.



Amirani, the Georgian Prometheus

Nothing looks more Hellenic than the myth of Prometheus, who captures the heavenly fire at the dawn of humankind! A wise Titan who, as his name indicates, always thinks (-metheus) before (pro-) acting, unlike his brother Epimetheus, who only thinks afterwards (epi-). What a surprise for the foreigners who take the Georgian Military Road, from Mtskheta to Vladikavkaz, to see in the distance, at the top of Mount Gergeti, the church which overhangs the cave where Amirani, the Georgian Prometheus, is chained! Could the Greek legend, told by Hesiod and Aeschylus, be of Georgian origin? Amirani, whose name derives from Mithra (-mir-), the god of fire, is for the moment hidden in the stone; from him will spring the spark that will set the world on fire at the end of time.

According to the myth, the son of Dali, goddess of hunting, and of a mortal, the hunter Darejan, is endowed with such a mighty force that it threatens the diversity of species and the balance of the elements. In vain his mother tried to restrain him by making him be born before term. Adopted by two human brothers, Usip and Badri, who guide him with wise advice, he has many struggles against monsters and demonic giants, even kidnapping Qamar, the daughter of the demon king.

Tired of accumulating victories that are too easy, he challenges God, the only possible adversary of his size. The game consists of a mountain toss, with each contestant snatching and tossing the other's mountain further. God had rigged the event. Amirani is chained, with his dog and his sword, under a rocky mass that he could not lift.

Once a year, the captive's cave opens. His chain, licked incessantly by his dog, is so worn that a blow of sword would be enough to cut it, but the weapon, which lies at two steps, is out of reach for him. A lost hunter, who could not go back down to the plain before the night, tries to rescue Amirani but he does not have the strength and, sadly, while he goes home to fetch a hook to break the chain, the rock closes on the prisoner.

Various versions of the story of Amirani reveal a process through which it was transformed over time, but the legend itself is traced between 3,000 and 2,000 years BC. The first literary treatment of the legend dates from the 12th century AD and marks the emergence of native secular literature which brings together and mixes Georgian, Persian, Arabic, and Greek folk motifs in both form and content [cat. 40].

The work entitled *Amiran-Darejaniani*, dating from the end of the 11th or the early 12th century and attributed to Mose Khoneli, is a kind of chivalric novel based on the Amirani epic. Several episodes of the epic are included and illustrated, in particular the hero's battle with monsters, which is the subject of the illustration. In the epic, Amirani fights three dragons: one white, one red, and one black.

Cat. 40
Amirandarejaniani (H-384)
Mose Khoneli, Date of copy: 1824
copy of David Tumanov
Paint on paper
Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts



Chapter 2

Georgia in Antiquity





Cat. 49
Diadem, 5th c. BC
Gold – Sairkhe, grave 13, Imereti
GNM – Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts



Cat. 50
Bracelets, 5th c. BC
Gold – Vani, grave 11, Imereti
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia

bull. The adaptation of compositions to a triangular frame suggests familiarity with Archaic Greek relief sculpture on temple pediments, while details of animal faces and legs indicate an awareness of Assyrian and Achaemenid Persian models. With clear and precise contours and convincing depictions of animals' features, the harmoniously structured three-figure compositions suggest the work of a skilled master.

The formal elements of silver diadems discovered in Colchis resemble those of the golden diadems discovered in the same region, with the major difference that their lozenge-shaped plaques are usually ornamented with geometric patterns and a rosette in the centre; one such golden diadem has been found in Sairkhe [cat. 49]. The distribution of this type of diadem is mainly confined to the territory of Colchis.

Arm bracelets reflecting both local rounded forms and the Achaemenid style (with concave reverse sides and animal heads) were clearly in favour among some members of the Colchian aristocracy [cat. 50]. A splendid gold pectoral with a fibula and a pendant decorated with inlaid cloisonné images of griffins and birds (4th c. BC) discovered in Vani appears to have been imported from Egypt [cat. 51].

The archaeological material is evidence that Colchis occupied between the 6th and 4th centuries BC a region influenced by both the Greek world in the west and the Achaemenid world in the east. But these contacts resulted less in a fundamental transformation of Colchian culture than an original adaptation of new artistic forms to ancient local traditions.

Following the eastern campaign of Alexander the Great (d. 323 BC), key political, economic, and cultural changes impacted the Mediterranean world and the Near East, also influencing ancient Georgia. Intensive relations with the Hellenistic world resulted in the strengthening, in both Western and Eastern Georgia, of the influence of new impulses emanating from various cultural centres, which were reflected in all areas of life (including the spread of Greek beliefs and concepts such as placing coins in the graves of the deceased, the gradual development of stone architecture, and the adoption of tiles as a covering for the roofs of buildings).

From the second half of the 4th century BC, under the influence of Greek examples from Sinope, Colchis began producing amphorae and local tiles. Greek lettering executed on amphorae, *kvevris* (*pithoi*), and tiles also began to appear in this period among other markings made upon these items prior to firing.



Cat. 51
Polychrome pectoral with griffins and birds
First half of 4th c. BC
Gold, turquoise, glass – Vani, grave 6,
Imereti
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia

Found in Vani in the tomb of a rich woman in her twenties, this pectoral illustrates the encounter of cultures on Georgian soil. While the fibula is a typical Anatolian object, the shape of the pendant, its technique and motifs clearly reveal some Egyptian influence, although it was probably produced by Persians, with the later addition of chains with pomegranate-shaped endings, a typical Colchian jewellery motif.



55



56



57

Cat. 55
Torso of a young man, 100-200 BC
Bronze – Vani, Imereti
GNM – Otar Lordkipanidze Vani Archaeological Museum

Cat. 56
Lamp decorated with elephant heads and the representations of Dionysos, Ariadne and Herakles, Middle of the 1st c. BC
Bronze – Vani, Imereti
GNM – Otar Lordkipanidze Vani Archaeological Museum

Cat. 57
Lamp with representations of Zeus-eagle and Ganymede, Middle of the 1st c. BC
Bronze – Vani, Imereti
GNM – Otar Lordkipanidze Vani Archaeological Museum



Cat. 58
Buckle with a representation of Herakles fighting the Nemean lion, 3rd-1st c. BC
Gold – Vani, Imereti
GNM – Otar Lordkipanidze Vani Archaeological Museum

writing. One of these inscriptions includes the personal name “Arsans”, and the second a plea addressed to a goddess. A fragment from a long religious inscription was also discovered here on part of a bronze plate.

In the 5th and the first half of the 4th century BC, the occurrence of a demographic crisis of some form can be discerned in a number of regions of Eastern Georgia (Kartli), but by as soon as the middle of the 4th century BC, intensive town building began together with developed artisanship and trade. This phenomenon is referred to in Georgian historiography as the “Urban Explosion”. The towns built during this period include the former town Samadlo, built at the confluence of the Ksani and Mtkvari rivers, where a citadel is located upon the slopes of two high hills, whereas the town’s urban settlement was constructed opposite this on the left bank of the river Mtkvari. Doric capitals and an architrave have been discovered at the site of the former town, as well as ruins of buildings with unfired brick walls on stone foundations. Archaeological material indicates that Samadlo was a centre of ceramics production where tiles were produced as well as *pithoi* that were painted or dyed red. Especially striking is a large crater-like vessel which features scenes in a band configuration of men dancing around, fighting, and hunting in addition to birds and four-legged animals. Imported vessels have also been discovered here, including black-lacquered and red-lacquered ceramics from Asia Minor.

A site near the village of Kavtiskhevi (in the River Kavtura Gorge) was the location of the intricately planned Tsikhia Gora Temple Complex (4th-3rd c. BC), which was surrounded with a defensive wall. The complex consisted of a quadratic temple and associated agricultural buildings, including a granary, a bakery, and a cellar.

Discoveries have been made at Akhagori [cat. 59], Qanchaeti, Tsikhiagora and Algeti of grave sites of members of a ruling social class dating to the second half of the 4th century or the beginning of the 3rd, containing an abundance of gold and silver jewellery, some of which demonstrate influences from Colchian goldsmithery; examples include gold temporal adornments featuring twin

set in a gold clasp featuring a depiction of a bearded man and a woman gazing at one another accompanied by another inscription in Greek: "Zevakh is my life. Karpak". Experts believe Karpak to have been the man's name and Zevakh that of his wife. These gemstones attest to the spread of Roman fashions of dressing among the Iberian nobility; Karpak and Zevakh are clad in a tunic and a mantle and are also wearing hairstyles that accord with Roman fashion.

In addition to gemstones featuring portraits produced by local artists (dating to between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD) [cat. 65], we encounter examples featuring depictions of scenes and figures from mythology (Actaeon's transformation into a stag, Pallas Athena, Tyche/Fortuna, Fortuna-Isis, Athena/Minerva, Nike/Victoria, Zeus, Helios, Apollo and others).

Of particular interest among numismatic material are widespread imitations of Alexander the Great's gold stater [cat. 66], denarii of the Emperor Augustus, and Parthian drachms. Roman aurei entered Iberia in the same period which, together with Augustan denarii, became the major form of tender from second half of the 1st century.

From the 1st century AD, Syrian-made glassware and Italian toreutic work spread widely throughout Iberia. Between the 1st and the 3rd centuries AD, the nobility of the kingdom of Iberia used two international languages and writing systems – Greek and Aramaic. Of special interest are writing materials found in a grave dating to between the 3rd and 5th centuries AD in the courtyard of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta which include a gold inkpot, silver pens and a silver pen case decorated with gilded relief depictions of the nine muses and silver miniature figures of Homer, Demosthenes and Menander.

From the 430s AD, following the declaration of Christianity as the state religion of the kingdom of Kartli, a new phase in the history of ancient Georgia began in which Georgian Christian culture took shape.

Goldsmithery was a specially advanced branch of artisanship in the Kingdom of Kartli. Some of the earliest jewels in gold, incrustated with garnet, come from Ureki. The technique later became well-known in the goldsmithery of Goths, Sarmats and Merovingians [cat. 64].

Cat. 63
Belt and Buckle, 3rd-4th c. AD
Gold, garnet – Ureki hoard, Guria
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia

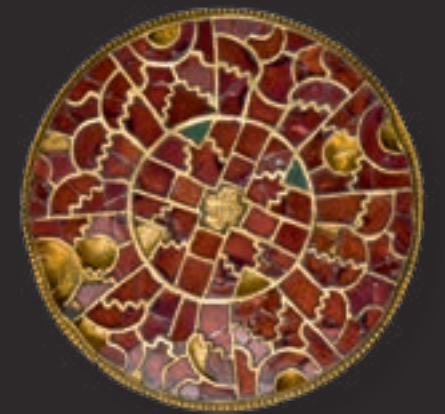
Cat. 64
Merovingian disc fibula, 551-625 AD
Gold, garnet – Marilles, Belgium
Royal Museums of Art & History, Brussels

Cat. 65
Clasp with an intaglio, 2nd-3rd c. AD
Gold, cornelian, garnet
Kldeeti cemetery, Imereti
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia

Cat. 66
Local imitation of Alexander the Great's stater, 1st c. AD
Gold
GNM – Simon Janashia History Museum of Georgia



63



64



65



66

The Myth of the Golden Fleece

The legend of the Golden Fleece is part of an ancient cycle of stories about the Argonauts. The legend most likely recounts the first journey of the Greeks to the shores of the Black Sea in the Mycenaean period.

The legends of the Argonauts have their basis in a conflict between Pelias, who ruled in Iolcus, and his nephew Jason. When the latter demanded the return of the royal throne, which Pelias had perfidiously taken from Jason's father, Pelias told Jason that he must first return home the fleece of a miraculous flying ram which had once saved Phrixus and then been sacrificed. The fleece was in the distant country of Aea, or Colchis, in possession of the mighty king Aeetes, and was guarded by a formidable dragon. The route to that country took them through numerous deadly perils, including the Planctae or "clashing rocks".

The myth of the journey undertaken by the Argonauts to retrieve the Golden Fleece from distant Colchis traditionally dates their journey to the years preceding the Trojan War (around 1300 BC). Reference is indeed made to the Argonauts and to their ship, Argo, in Homer's poems: Jason is mentioned in the *Iliad*, while Jason, his father Aeson, King Aeetes and his sister, the sorceress Circe, are mentioned in the *Odyssey*, as are "the Argo famed of all" and in this context, the main exploit of the Argonauts, their sailing past the Planctae (Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 135-139; XI, 256-259; XII, 59-72). The first mention of the Land of Colchis is found in a fragment attributed to Eumelus of Corinth (*Corinthiaca*, fragment 2), while Hesiod, writing at about the same time as Homer, mentions the main river of Colchis – Phasis – in his *Theogony*, and also mentions Aeetes, Medea, and Jason. Later stories or fragments of works dedicated to the Argonauts are preserved, for instance the *Fourth Pythian Ode* of Pindar (466 BC), the *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes (3rd c. BC), the *Argonautica* of Gaius Valerius Flaccus (1st c. AD), or the *Orphic Argonautica* (4th-5th c. AD).

Antiquity developed two readings of the myth, a mythological one, whereby the Golden Fleece was perceived as a symbol of royal power, and, during the Hellenistic period, a more rationalistic reading, in which the Golden Fleece symbolised the wealth of Colchis. Proponents of this new conception attempted to connect the Golden Fleece with the gold of Colchis or with the technique used to obtain it. For example, Appian, who writes in his *Mithridatic Wars*, 103: "... Many streams issue from Caucasus bearing gold dust so fine as to be invisible. The inhabitants put sheepskins with shaggy fleece into the stream and thus collect the floating particles, and perhaps the golden fleece of Aeetes was of this kind." According to Strabo (I, 2, 39), the golden fleece is a symbol of the country's metal wealth: "... the wealth of the regions about Colchis, which is derived from the mines of gold, silver, iron, and copper, suggests a reasonable motive for the expedition, a motive which induced Phrixus also to undertake this voyage at an earlier date."

Stories of the Argonauts' heroism are presumed to have become especially popular in the 8th-7th centuries BC after the beginning of the "Great Greek colonisation" of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, when regular commercial, economic and cultural contacts between the Greek world and the Black Sea coast began [cat. 67].

Cat. 67
Red-figure chalice crater,
attributed to the Peintre des Enfers (4th c. BC)
Face A: Medea, Jason & Pelias
2nd half of the 4th c. BC
Clay, paint – Apulia, Italy
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Department of Greek,
Etruscan and Roman Antiquities



Jason, from Colchis to Bruges: The Burgundian Order of the Golden Fleece

The Order of the Golden Fleece is founded by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy [cat. 68], in Bruges on 10 January 1430, a few days after his marriage to Isabella of Portugal. The creation of a new order of chivalry meets the political objectives of the duke. He indeed intends to gather around him the most notable and influential members of the aristocracy of his territories, attaching them to his service through loyalty and honour as it was at this time that communal autonomies start to develop and compete with the central power. At an international level, the new order aligns itself with the British Order of the Garter and the French Order of the Star, placing therefore the Duke of Burgundy on a par with his royal colleagues. The idea of the “fleece” reflects the importance of cloth and wool industry which was part of the duke’s estates.

The reference to the myth of Jason is not coincidental. The young Philip the Good had opportunities to look at scenes from this myth at his grandfather’s castle in Hesdin where they had been represented in murals by Melchior Broederlam. At the beginning of the 14th century the popularity of the Arthurian legend is temporarily declining, while references to Greek myths, especially founding myths, expand and foreshadow the spirit of the Renaissance. Many cities, like Venice, willing to compete with the fame of Rome, forge stories linking the origin of the city to the myth of the Trojan war, and indeed Philip the Good most probably knows about the myth of Jason through the narrative told in the *History of the destruction of Troy* written by the 13th century Italian scholar Guido delle Colonne, as the Royal Library in Brussels preserves some manuscript copies of that work coming from the library of the duke. Guido delle Colonne reports a peculiar version of the legend of Jason in which the hero comes back home bringing the fleece to which the head and the legs of the sheep are still attached. This explains the form of the emblem of the order, a sheep – and not only a fleece – hanging from a necklace [cat. 69]. Needless to say, the Oriental flavour also contributes to the popularity of Jason’s myth. Nevertheless, reference to a pagan myth remains difficult to accept for many people at the time, and Jason is sometimes replaced by the Old Testament figure of Gideon. The biblical *Book of Judges* recalls that God, in order to convince Gideon that he had been chosen to save Israel, made a sheep’s fleece remain dry when the earth was humid and remain humid when the earth was dry. Medieval scholasticism interpreted this miracle as a symbol announcing the virginal motherhood of Mary, patroness of the order [cat. 70, 71].



Cat. 68
(Copy after) Rogier van der Weyden
(1399/1400-1464)
Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy
15th c.
Oil on wood
Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp - Flemish Community



Cat. 69
Pendant of the Order of the Golden Fleece,
1501-1600
Gold – The Netherlands (historical region)
Royal Museums of Art & History, Brussels



Cat. 70
Guillaume Fillastre (1348-1428), *Histoire de la Toison d'or*
Illuminated by Maître du Wavrin de Londres, 1468-1472
Parchment – Bruges
KBR – Royal Library of Belgium, Ms 9027, folio 8v



Cat. 71
Christine de Pisan (ca. 1364-ca. 1431), *L'Epistre d'Othea*
Adapted by Jean Miélot
Illuminated by Loyset Liédet, 1460
Parchment – Lille
KBR – Royal Library of Belgium, Ms 9392, folio 57v



Chapter 3

The Formation of Medieval Georgia

(4th-9th Centuries)

Between Rome and Persia: The Christianisation of Georgia

“In Georgia there hardly exists any hill or mountain without a church of Saint George.”

Whatever the origin of the current Georgian flag, it looks quite similar to the banner of the Cappadocian martyr, victim of Diocletian (203-205). On a 14th century enamel, the valiant rider pierces a mischievous dragon covered with multi-coloured scales with his spear, while the beast tries to entangle the horse's hooves in the multiple rings of its sinuous body. This monster is the emblem of Iranian mythology, enemy of Georgian Christianity. However, the name of the country – Georgia – does not derive from that of the saint, but from an ancient Iranian toponym, Gurji. The Georgians call themselves Kartvels (in English “Kartvelians”) and name their homeland Sakartvelo.

Christianisation came a hundred years later than Saint George and through a completely different channel. There were, since the Hellenistic age, many Jews in Mtskheta, the royal city of the Kartvels. They worshipped freely, had their own synagogue and cemetery, spoke Aramaic and traded with their co-religionists from Syria and Palestine. Some of them heard about Christ. The chronicle of the *Conversion of Kartli* tells us that one, named Elijah, of priestly race, went from Mtskheta to Jerusalem, attended the trial of Jesus, refused to condemn him and piously collected on Calvary the seamless tunic. The tunic is said to be still hidden in the cathedral of Mtskheta, and it appears in the heart of the coat of arms of the Bagrationi kings.

The new faith soon spread beyond the Jewish community to the rest of the population. The apostle was a foreign “captive” named Nino. She lived for three years as a hermit in a leafy hut on the edge of the city. The miraculous healing of a child, and later of Queen Nana, made her reputation. However, King Mirian still remained incredulous. It took an eclipse of the sun to convince him: plunged into darkness during a hunting trip, he invoked the God of Nino and Nana and the light of day came back to him at once and the king was baptised with all the inhabitants of the town. “Baptism” in Georgian is therefore *natlis-gheba*, meaning “to receive the light”.

Nino, who would later be sainted, had the first church built in the royal garden: a square chapel supported by wooden columns on stone bases. Legend has it that, as the most vigorous men and even oxen could not raise the last column, the saint stayed in prayer all night and the column miraculously came to be placed by itself as soon as the king returned. The magnificent cathedral built in the 11th century on the site of this humble shrine is still called *Svetitskhoveli*, “The Living Column”. Mirian and Nino wrote to Emperor Constantine, who was more delighted to hear of the birth of a new Christian people than if he had conquered a new province.

He sent them Bishop John and Priest James to establish the cult and create a native clergy. At John's request, instead of a bronze idol with eyes of precious stones perched on the mountain overlooking Mtskheta on the other side of the river, Nino erected a cross. Disappointed by the rusticity of the symbol, a raw piece of wood, the people shrugged their shoulders and turned away. Taking pity on their incredulity, God shone a light on the sign of salvation. The miraculous cross was left in the open air for a long time, but since the end of the 6th century it has been housed in the beautiful domed church of Jvari.



Icon of Saint George, patron saint of the Ubisi monastery (Imereti)
14th century
Tempera on wood



This fragment (top right) synthesises Islamic style – the extensive use of geometry, and in particular the eight-pointed star – with Christian symbolism. The peacock represents, among other things, resurrection into eternal life. The eight-pointed Islamic star occupies the symbolic place normally taken in Christian art by the octagon representing rebirth, since, according to tradition, it was on the eighth day after his arrival into Jerusalem that Christ rose from the dead.

Cat. 78, 79, 80, 81
Fragments of an altar screen with images of a peacock, eight pointed star and grapes, 8th-9th c.
Limestone – Gveldesi, Kaspi Region, Shida Kartli
GNM – Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts

The reception and cultural assimilation of these elements went far beyond copying, as they were intentionally selected for the ideas they carried, in full awareness of their meaning and symbolic connotations, which were in accordance with the artistic, aesthetic, and, in some cases, ideological visions of the Georgian society. The Georgians deliberately drew inspiration from the achievements of the advanced neighbouring cultures – of the Byzantine Empire and of Sasanid Persia – they were familiarised with. If the association of Georgian traditions with these external motifs created a particular artistic language, these borrowings did not fundamentally affect the Georgian religious art: pictorial themes and ideas were received and transformed to respond to the aesthetic notions and spiritual needs of Georgian society.

The Arab invasions in the middle of the 7th century led to a weakening of the Byzantine-Persian influence in Georgia. Although the Arab conquests and the rise of Islam placed the regional Christian communities in relative isolation, they did not halt the development of spiritual and cultural life in Georgia. Paradoxically, in this difficult and politically unstable period, the country experienced a great religious and cultural uprising, and the spiritual power of Christianity reached its peak. It was a period of a large development of ecclesiastic activity in Georgia, that also saw the inauguration of the cult of local saints. The 8th and 9th centuries represent a new stage in the development of Georgian art, with the formation of a new mentality. It was during the Arabic rule that Georgian literature experienced its greatest growth and original Georgian hymnography appeared. Local artistic production based on previous traditions was also stimulated. Together with stone reliefs adorning church façades, monumental stone crosses and chancel barriers (Telovani and Tsirkoli churches, Usaneti and Kataula stone crosses, Gveldesi chancel barrier), mural painting developed, and repoussé and painted icons and cloisonné enamel objects were produced (murals of Telovani church, Martvili encolpion, Zarzma icon of Transfiguration). Another innovation is the growing significance of inscriptions: a word in pictorial compositions becomes equal by its semantic importance to image and visual forms were systematically consolidated by words [cat. 77].

This “transitional” period is characterised by an active search for new artistic forms and offers a new conventional artistic language, aiming at creating a symbolic image, focusing on spiritual aspects. While the iconoclast movement prevailing in Byzantium during a large part of the 8th to the 9th centuries condemned the representation of images of saints and religious figures, the Georgian Church continued the veneration of icons. But the prolonged contact with Byzantium fuelled the transmission of its spiritual values to Georgia, where artefacts like the Usaneti stone cross or the Gveldesi chancel barrier [cat. 78, 79, 80, 81] attest that, even if the anti-icon movement did not spread in Georgian art, the ideological struggle of the iconoclastic period contributed to a certain extent to the process of departing from the antique forms and the rooting of a more dematerialised and abstract style.



Cat. 77
Antefix with Georgian *asomtavruli* inscriptions, 8th-9th c.
Terracotta – Bosleti, Artvin province (present-day Turkey)
GNM – Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts