

## The Role of Late Antique Silverware from Royal Necropolis in Studying the Social and Political Background in Caucasian Iberia

This article is a short discussion about relations between the kingdom of Iberia (East Georgia) and the surrounding empires in late antiquity<sup>1</sup>. Iberia has always been a crucial zone of cross-cultural encounter due to its strategic location. It was one of the principal points of contacts between eastern and western imperial powers throughout the centuries. Having control on the important trade-economic routes crossing the Caucasus, as well as on the most important Caucasian mountain passes, Iberian kings always had intense relations with the rulers of western and eastern Empires.

Late antiquity (BC 30 – mid 4<sup>th</sup> century AD) in the modern territory of Georgia is a period of formation and consolidation of the kingdom of Iberia in the east and Lazica in the west. This is a period when a powerful Roman Empire attempted to expand its territories in the east and the time of the rise of the Sasanian Empire. According to my research, the kingdom of Iberia plays an important role for both Romans and Persians, although Iberia's role in the politics in the region is widely discussed in literary sources.

Intention of this paper is not to offer a new interpretation of the historical events, but rather to give a picture of social and historical background based on the particular group of archaeological material. This is a collection of late antique silverware. Silverware, due to its value in society and use in diplomacy, is of a significance in interpreting the relations between Iberia and Rome, as well as between Iberia and the Parthian and Sasanian Empires. Precious metal vessels were often sent as a diplomatic gift from emperors and kings to the rulers of their allies and vassals - as a reward, payment or an inducement. Diplomatic ritual and gifting processes were very important for Roman and Sasanian Empires. Portable and precious silver vessels with figurative imagery were one of the main elements of diplomatic gift exchange. Rome as well as Sasanian Iran distributed silver vessels widely to their own subjects and client kings and many of the surviving examples depicting the kings or emperors belong to or imitate this category of object.<sup>2</sup> It is probable that diplomatic gifts were later redistributed by kings among the local elites. This helps to explain the territorial expanse of silverware.

According to the written sources and archaeological evidences, the kingdom of Iberia was a strong, politically independent power in the region from the second century AD. It was particularly strong during the reign of Pharasmanes II who was contemporary with emperors Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. Iberia's political independence was mainly due to the ways that the Iberian kings successfully used the strategic location of their country. Iberian elite often played a double political game – balancing between Rome and the Parthian and Sasanian Empires. This enabled them to preserve relative independence and enjoy the benefits of trade with the wealthy parts of both commonwealths<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Late Antiquity in this article corresponds to the period of BC 30 – mid 4<sup>th</sup> century AD according to the Georgian chronological scale

<sup>2</sup> Canepa 2009: 156

<sup>3</sup> Odisheli 2014: Ancient Georgia at the turn of the eras and Khaishi treasure. Pg. 187

At the early stage of late antique period material culture of Iberia reflects intensive relations with Rome and Parthia. But from the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD after the emergence of the Sasanian dynasty in the political arena, a shift appears in the material culture of elites in Iberia. Archaeological materials from the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century seem to illustrate Iberia's growing trade, economic, and diplomatic relations with Sasanian Empire.

As already mentioned above, Iberia had kept a relative independence but Rome's influence was significant. Therefore, material culture as well as written sources illustrate Iberia as an ally of Roman Empire. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD when the Caucasus becomes a buffer zone during the conflicts between the Rome (later Byzantium) and Persian Empire, Iberia seems to be heavily contested in the struggles between these powers. Key historical events from the history of late antique Iberia are worth mentioning: especially the claim of Sasanian governance first established in Iberia during the reign of Shapur I (240-270). There is a debate between scholars as to when Shapur I first gained the control over Iberia. It was perhaps as early as 253, or perhaps in 260 after Sasanians won the battle of Edessa against Rome and captured Roman Emperor Valerian. Very important to note is that coins of emperor Valerian have been discovered in elite burials from Iberia. This could perhaps point to the possibility that Shapur I gained control over Iberia after 260 as Valerian's coins in Iberia could point to the possibility that Iberia still was an ally of Roman Empire up to the point of his defeat<sup>4</sup>.

Sasanids lose their control in Iberia by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> century. According to the agreement 'Peace of Nisibis' in 298 (299) Iberia is listed as Roman controlled land. During the agreement Iberia took pro-Roman course in politics. Declaring Christianity as a state religion of Iberia in 326/336 in the times of the emperor Constantin the Great when Christianity becomes a dominant religion of the Roman Empire, is portrayed as an important motivation for the pro-Roman political stance of the Iberians. The 'Peace of Nisibis' did not last long and conflict renewed during the reign of the Sasanian King Shapur II. Iberia does not seem to be very active in this conflict, but according to the written sources ([Ammianus Marcellinus – quote passage](#)) it remained an ally of the Roman Empire. According to an agreement in 363 Armenia became a zone controlled by Sasanians. The same sources, that are strongly Roman in perspective and need to be used cautiously, narrate how Iberians helped Armenians against Persia. Sasanian king Shapur II is said to have conquered Iberia in 368. After this period the Romans seem to have left the Caucasus in 377 and the region becomes a part of the Sasanian Empire.

According to the agreement between Shapur III and Theodosius I in 387 the Caucasus was divided by Rome and Persia (quote sources here). Meanwhile what we consider to be the modern state of Georgia was split into two. The kingdom of Iberia under the control of Sasanian Empire while the kingdom of Lazica belonged to the Rome. First, Iberian kings managed to retain their autonomy but later they only had a nominal power while the country was effectively ruled by Persians. Iranian officials called (*Bidaxes*) ruled the country with the help of local governors also called *Bitaxes*. In the beginning Iberian *Bitaxes* were the most

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<sup>4</sup> We should note that the coins do not necessarily confirm the date of the burials or the grave goods as they may have had a long presence in Iberia.

important officials in the hierarchy after Iberian kings. When last monarch of Iberia Bakur III died in 580, Sasanian king Hormizd IV (578-590) abolished Iberian monarchy. Iberia became a Persian province. Sasanian political and cultural influence especially increases after this event which clearly reflected in material culture.

In the silverware we have an important group of Iberian material culture that reflects the shifting political situation and prevailing cultural influences described above. Silver vessels from Iberia are capable of telling us a story about the late antique historical and political influences. Their discovery context, decoration and inscriptions, their quantity and comparison contain significant information for us.

Around 147 pieces of the late antique silverware have been discovered in the territory of modern Georgia. They are spread all over the country and come from 22 different locations. Majority of the finds are considered to be the grave goods, while only few of them are recorded as a chance finds or hoards because there have not been any skeletal remains detected within their context.

Late antique silverware from west Georgia, Colchis (Kingdom of Lazica) points to the intensive cultural and political relations with the Roman Empire. Absolute majority of the vessels bear a style of Roman toreutics and are considered to be produced in the different provinces of the Roman Empire. These vessels indicate that Rome's cultural and political influence in west Georgia seems significant. There were Roman garrisons located in the forts established along the eastern Black Sea coastline. From the presence of the silver vessels we can assume that Roman cultural influence on the local elite culture was deep. A demand for Roman influenced luxury objects was likely important for both Romans living in Colchis and for a Romanised local elite.

Situation seems to be different in the kingdom of Iberia where several significant pieces of Sasanian silverware were discovered together with the large amount of Roman silver vessels. This presents a slightly more nuanced picture that both Roman cultural influence and Sasanian material culture were both present and contemporary. Both Roman and Sasanian interests saw Iberia as a key ally or a vassal country in the Caucasus.

The majority of the silverware comes from elite burials and we assume that depositing luxurious objects with deceased was an integral part of the burial ritual for Iberians in late antiquity. Luxurious objects were deposited in a grave to emphasize the status of the deceased. Accordingly, late antique silver vessels from Iberia come from the Royal necropolis of Armaziskhevi and Bagineti in Mtskheta and other rich burials excavated in Zguderi, Zhinvali, Bori, Sargveshi, Khovle, Tskhinvali, Ertso and other locations. A large numbers of elite burials, wealth in grave goods, were excavated in the previous century but the dating is mainly based on coins and other finds from the graves. Unfortunately, no radiocarbon dates were achieved during last century which makes it even more difficult to give a precise date for the burials. These remarkable finds from elite burials that belonged to local rulers and wealthy citizens are considered to be the most informative objects regarding the countries social and political situation. Their role is key in studying prevailing cultural trends, local beliefs, daily life, fashion and even the needs of society.

Most of the elite burials from Armaziskhevi and Bagineti royal necropolis are represented with tombs or sarcophagi. Other graves from different locations are characterised by sarcophagi, stone boxes or with the pit graves with wooden chamber. Burials are mainly individual (but we have occasions of more than one individual in a grave), skeletons are preserved in a very fragmentary state.

About 140 pieces out of 147 late antique silver vessels bear a style of Roman toreutics and are considered to be imported from the west (fig.2). There is a group of the vessels which could also be considered as a local production in terms of some particular details of ornamentation and shape. Silverware with western origins is represented by various forms: bowls, drinking and eating cups, jugs, saucepans and spoons, ladles, trays, beakers and etc. There is a group of high quality silverware from the Armaziskhevi and Bagineti Royal Necropolis that include royal imagery or inscriptions mentioning kings' names. Worth mentioning is the bowl with a portrait of Marcus Aurelius, another bowl with Antinous' portrait, the one with a bust of a bearded man which could represent emperor Hadrian. The dish from Bersuma bitaxes' burial with a Greek inscription mentioning king Flavius Dades is considered to have been sent by Roman Emperors to Iberian kings. In addition to this, written sources narrate about gift exchange events between Iberian kings and Roman emperors. Aelius Spartianus gives us information about the gifts sent by Emperor Hadrian for Iberian king Pharasmanes and his return gifts.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast with Roman silver vessels there are only seven pieces of silverware with probable Sasanian provenance discovered in Georgia. They all come from the territory of the kingdom of Iberia and belong to the period from mid-3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Each individual object has been studied by different scholars, but they have not yet been studied together, in one context. That is why this paper is a first attempt to put all objects together and discuss their relevance to Sasanian-Iberian relations. Silver vessels with Sasanian influence have been found in elite burials across various locations of Iberia: Armaziskhevi, Sargveshi, Magraneti, Khovle, Aragvispiri and Chermiskhevi (fig.3).

Five pieces out of seven are discovered in rich burials together with other luxurious objects with a mixed stylistic provenance, Roman, Parthian, Sasanian or local culture. Two of the vessels are recorded as chance finds as they were found by locals with no certain context. Elite burials in which silver vessels were deposited were mainly characterised by a sarcophagi or stone boxes, but we have an occasion of a pit grave with tile roof wooden chamber inside. Skeletal remains are badly preserved. Different luxurious objects, jewellery and coins were deposited together with a deceased to emphasise their high status in local hierarchy. Sasanian silver vessels are frequently found together with material that reflects Roman stylistic origins. Coins and other grave goods point to the coexistence of a local (Iberian), Roman, Sasanian and Parthian material culture in late antique Iberia.

Sasanian silver vessels from Iberia are of a great significance not only as a means to study Iberian-Sasanian relations, but also to study Sasanian toreutics in general. Some of the vessels from Iberia but are considered as the earliest examples of Sasanian toreutics. Some

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<sup>5</sup> Aelius Spartianus, The life of Hadrian, XIII

are unique for their shape and ornament and draw no exact similarity with Sasanian vessels but are certainly of a Persian style.

One of the earliest objects is the silver plate with a portrait in the central medallion discovered in burial 2 at Armaziskhevi Royal Necropolis in 1940 (fig.4). The plate has a ring foot and concentrically arranged four rows of concave disks on the surface. Portrait of a male resting on the stylized acanthus leaf is depicted in the central medallion. According to the style of cloth and the headgear, the portrait should represent an important official from Sasanian world. There is a partially damaged middle Persian inscription punched outside of the rim which is worthy for attention: "*Papak bitaxs the son of divine Ardashir – son of divine Papak, sends [this gift] to Arzames the bitaxs of [country] of Gurzan*".<sup>6</sup> The first Sasanian king Ardashir and Papak Pitiakhshes, who is thought to be the historical Papak attested to in Narseh's 'Paikuli inscription' (295 AD)<sup>7</sup>, are mentioned in the text. The plate belongs to the second half of the third century and was possibly made soon after the foundation of the Sasanian Empire. Armaziskhevi dish is the one among few vessels with a portrait in central medallion known from the Sasanian Empire. Moreover, it is considered to be one of the earliest among them.

Another early example of Sasanian toreutics is a cup found in the village of Sargveshi. It is a chance find from 1917 (fig.5). The shape of Sargveshi cup is entirely different from Sasanian silverware and is very similar to the Roman cups from early imperial period. It has a high foot and two raised handles and is partially gilded. The decorative style can certainly be called Sasanian.<sup>8</sup> Four medallions with two enclosing portraits of Sasanian King Bahram II (276-293), one of his wife, possibly Šāpūrduxtak and another of their son, Bahrām Sakān Šāh, are depicted between floral and zoomorphic motives. The iconography of each portrait is clearly of a Sasanian style. Each bust rests on a stylized acanthus-plant base. Sargveshi cup, was probably was made during the reign of Bahram II (276-293) whose image appears on it twice and is the only example of Sasanian silverware with medallion portraits which has a depiction of a king who can be identified with Sasanian crown. It is also considered as the only example with the Sasanian king as a bust in a medallion and is the earliest silver vessel with the representation of Sasanian king.<sup>9</sup> Sargveshi cup, together with the plate with Sasanian hunting scene mentioning the name Bahram, found in Abkhazia, north-west Georgia is considered as a diplomatic gift for Colchian elites by D. Braund. As he argues the presence of these vessels from Colchis is some indication of Sasanians' interests here.<sup>10</sup>

There are two very similar silver bowls found in east Georgia (Magraneti and Khovle) which deserve attention. Bearing the style of Archaemenid toreutics, the bowls belong to the period of late antiquity. No provenance of execution is known and there are no close parallels found outside of Georgia. Both bowls are of a circular shape and has a low ring foot. Their surface is richly decorated with concave almond shape disks arranged concentrically. Difference lies in the particular elements of the ornamentation.

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<sup>6</sup> Amiranashvili 1958: 89; Apakidze 1963:144

<sup>7</sup> Machabeli 1976: 108

<sup>8</sup> Prudence O. H., Mayers P., 1981: 11

<sup>9</sup> Prudence O. H., Mayers P., 1981: 24

<sup>10</sup> Braund 1994: 243

One of this bowls was found in the village of Magraneti. It was found in burial N1 at Kushanaant Gori cemetery in 1966-1967 (fig.6). In contrast of Khovle bowl this one has a monogram depicted in the central medallion. Identification of the symbol (monogram) is uncertain. According to one of the versions it could be considered a Sasanian symbol. Similar symbols are very typical for Sasanian glyptic and numismatic materials from later times<sup>11</sup>. According to another hypothesis, the symbol might be an insignia of the noble family to whom the bowl belonged<sup>12</sup>. An interesting detail about this burial is that a ring with early Christian monogram on it was also found although the burial does not reflect Christian ritual and is found together with a bowl with possibly a Sasanian symbol.

The bowl from Khovle come from an elite grave found by locals during construction works in 2004 (fig.7) and is partially gilded. Other objects found together with the bowls correspond to the relations with Roman, Parthian and Persian worlds.

Both of the bowls from Magraneti and Khovle are dated stylistically to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD according to the rest of the grave goods and the coins.<sup>13</sup> Provenance of the bowls is unclear. According to Georgian scholars these two bowls could be locally produced showing the influence of Persian toreutics.<sup>14</sup> In my opinion, there is a possibility of these bowls being examples of Parthian toreutics. According to surviving pieces we know that Parthian silverware widely adopted the style of Achaemenid toreutics. The shape of a bowls from Iberia draw a little similarity with the ones from Parthia preserved in the British Museum and the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, Washington. Nevertheless, the ornamentation of the bowl is rather different and corresponds to the characteristic décor of *phialai* from Achaemenid Empire. The fact that there were two Parthian coins found together with the bowl from Khovle strengthens an assumption about bowls Parthian origins. Yet, the argument is still unproven.

Two silver jugs unearthed in burial 13 at Aragvispiri Cemetery in 1974 are unique for their hybrid shape and ornament (fig.8). Shape is typical for metal jugs from Roman Empire. Surface is richly decorated with hunting scene relief ornaments. One of them depicts a rider accompanied with a dog hunting on deer. Man is in a right profile, sitting on the horse, holding a bow and arrow. Second jug depicts the same man (?) in a same position but hunting on boars. In both occasions animals are fleeing from the hunter but are wounded by arrows.<sup>15</sup>

There are different thoughts about the stylistic provenance. As it is well known, hunting scenes are very characteristic for Sasanian silverware and occur exclusively on circular plates and bowls with low ring feet. Most of the royal imagery from Sasanian silverware is represented in a process of hunting. The image and idea of the Sasanian king hunting and its message of sublimated violence and battlefield prowess was an important element of Sasanian official representation destined for foreign consumption.<sup>16</sup> However some scholars exclude the possibility of Sasanian provenance because of particular elements of the décor that do not fit the Sasanian style<sup>17</sup>. They assume the jugs must be produced locally, possibly

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<sup>11</sup> Ramishvili K. 1979: plate VIII

<sup>12</sup> Ramishvili R. 1979: 33

<sup>13</sup> Shatberashvili 2007: 87-96; No radiocarbon dates were achieved; no precise date is known.

<sup>14</sup> Ramishvili 1979: 79; Shatberashvili 2007: 92; Machabeli 1976: 121-128

<sup>15</sup> Ramishvili 1999: 71-75

<sup>16</sup> Canepa 2009: 158

<sup>17</sup> Ramishvili 1999: 71

before the décor of hunting scenes became an integral part for Sasanian toreutics. The unique combination of form and decoration makes it possible that they were made locally and are an original work of a craftsman.

As Sasanian rulers expanded the frontiers of their empires in different directions, they used to send silver vessels as a gift or inducement to these new territories, in much the same way as the Romans. This explains the fact that most of Sasanian silverware was found in the peripheries of the Empire. It is also conceivable that they were made by local rulers in imitation of Sasanian originals.<sup>18</sup> The jugs from Argavispiri might be imported from Sasanian world and could be considered as an earliest example of Sasanian toreutics with hunting ornaments, but perhaps they were made locally in Iberia by a craftsman who was familiar with Sasanian hunting scene decoration? The decoration of the jugs could depict a Sasanian influenced Iberian governor who wanted to depict himself as Sasanian rulers. That the jugs were discovered together with the coins of Emperor Valerian strengthens an assumption that they appeared in Iberia at the time of the Sasanians first conquest of Iberia.

The chronologically latest example of Sasanian silverware from Georgia belongs to the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century AD. It is a silver bowl found in Chermiskhevi in the 1990s (fig.9) as a chance find. Partially gilded silver bowl is of a hemispherical shape and its outer surface is richly decorated by relief ornaments. ornamentation includes the figures of two men holding the tool and basket, two heads of boar, 5 birds, 3 foxes, rabbit and two vineyards. A detail inscribed in a double circle in the central medallion is considered as an equal-armed cross<sup>19</sup>. On the other hand, the symbol could be a stylized floral, or simple geometrical ornament. Ornamentation of the bowl is characteristic of late Sasanian toreutics and finds parallels with other bowls and jugs preserved in different museums across the world.<sup>20</sup>

As I have already mentioned above, context of these vessels is very important in regards of studying the political and social background of the country. The fact that almost all of the vessels with probable Sasanian provenance are discovered together with the luxurious objects bearing Roman, Parthian, Sasanian and Iberian style point to the fact that reflected in local culture was the coexistence of different elements. There was a high demand from local elites for luxurious objects and Iberian elites enjoyed the benefits of trade and diplomatic relations with surrounding empires. That Sasanian vessels appear soon after Sasanians first conquered Iberia hints at the processes and diplomatic steps taken in the period and that, at some stage, they coexist with Roman high quality vessels points to Iberia's role in political and diplomatic relations between Rome and Persia. This seems especially true in the period from mid-third century until the end of 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (260-287), when Rome and Persia fought for the supremacy in the Caucasus.

Moreover, studying the late antique silverware from the kingdom of Iberia highlights the role silver vessels play as the earliest and direct archaeological evidences of Iberian-Roman and Iberian-Sasanian diplomatic relations. They indicate that having Iberia as an ally in the Caucasus was very important for Rome as well as for the Sasanian Empire. At the first stage of the late antique period in Iberia (date), trade-economic and diplomatic relations with Rome had more intensive character than with the Sasanian world. There was a high demand on

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<sup>18</sup> Harper P.O., Mayers P., 1981: 8

<sup>19</sup> Gagoshidze G., Gagoshidze I. 2014: 341-350

<sup>20</sup> Jug from British Museum, circular and hemispherical bowls from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Miho Museum, Cleveland Art.

luxurious objects in Iberian and Colchian elite which caused their import from the different provinces of the Roman Empire. Roman Emperors foreign policy in Iberia from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD was very much depended on the diplomatic relations perhaps to shore up their military activities against other foes. Sasanian kings in the beginning attempted to make Iberia an ally using diplomacy, which was later replaced with military methods. Overall, based on the finds from elite burials, especially the ones made of silver we can say that material culture in late antique Iberia was a coexistence of local, Roman, Parthian and Sasanian cultural elements. Silverware which always had a leading role in the context of diplomatic rituals of Sasanian king of kings and Roman emperors, is a group of archaeological materials that can hint at processes in the complex world of early Iberia's foreign policy.

Furthermore, Sasanian silver vessels from Iberia hold particular importance due to the fact that they come from precise find context while majority of Sasanian silver plates preserved in different museums across the world come from the private collections with no clear provenance. Two of the vessels from Iberia are considered the earliest examples of the Sasanian silverwork and royal imagery depicted on the silver plate. Other archaeological finds such as numismatic and glyptic materials are, of course, significant in outlining these relations, but the role of silver vessels is important as they present direct material evidence for Iberian-Sasanian relations.

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## Plates



Fig.1 General location of the Caucasus

## Quantity and comparison of the Roman and Sasanian silver vessels

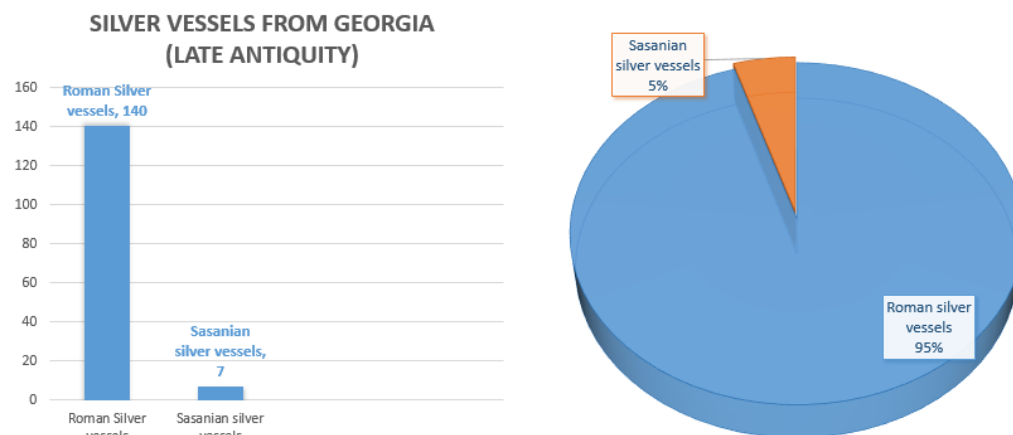


fig.2 Quantity of the late antique silver vessels from Georgia

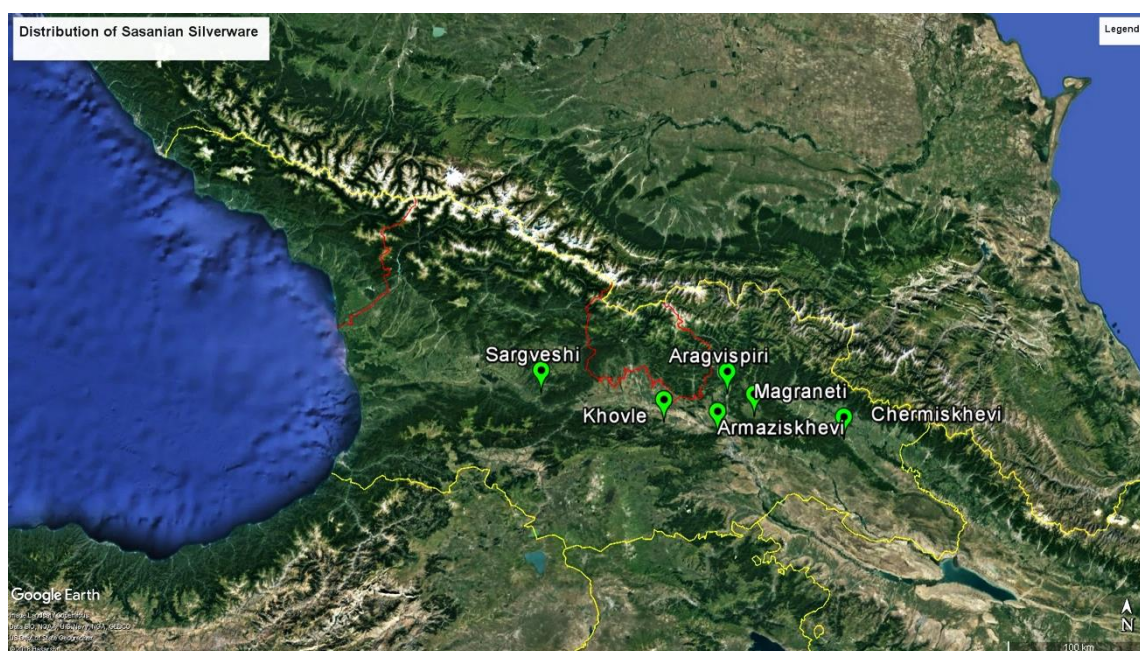


fig.3 Distribution of Sasanian silver vessels in Georgia





fig.4 Dish from Armaziskhevi  
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fig.5 Cup/Kylix from Sargveshi  
After Machabeli 1983



fig.6 Bowl from Magraneti



fig.7 Bowl from Khovle

*After Machabeli 1983*

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Fig.8 Jugs from Aragvispiri  
© Georgian National Museum



fig.9 Bowl from Chermiskhevi  
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