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## 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 surrounding empires in late antiquity based on the silver vessels.<sup>1</sup> The paper, which is a part of my PhD research, was presented at the BANEA Conference 2020 in Oxford.

The kingdom of Iberia had 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 a control on the important trade-economic routs crossing the Caucasus, as well as on the most important Caucasian mountain passes, Iberian kings always had intensive relations with the rulers of western and eastern Empires.

Late Antiquity on 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 of powerful Roman Empire's attempt to expand his territories in the east and the time of rise of the Sasanian Empire. According to my research subject kingdom of Iberia seems to be an important land for Romans and Persians, although Iberia's role in the politics in the region is widely discussed in literal sources.

Intention of this paper is no 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 materials. This is a group of a late antique silverware. Silverware due to its value in society and mean for 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 send as a diplomatic gift from emperors and kings to the rulers of their allies and vassals as a reward or an inducement. Diplomatic ritual and gifting process was 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

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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

imitate this category of object.<sup>2</sup> It is probable that diplomatic gifts were later redistributed by kings among local lords. It explains silverware's territorial widespread.

According to the written sources and archaeological evidences, 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 Emperor Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. Iberia's political independence was mainly due to the strong politics played by Iberian kings, who successfully used the strategic location of their country. Iberian elite often played a double political game off Rome against Parthia and Sasanian Empire. This enabled them to preserve relative independence and enjoy the benefits of the trade with the wealthy parts of both commonwealths<sup>3</sup>.

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 emerge of Sasanians in the political arena, massive changes appear in the material culture.

Archaeological materials from the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century illustrates Iberia's intensive trade economic and diplomatic relations with Sasanian Empire as well as with the Rome.

As already mentioned above, Iberia had 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 with the struggles between those powers. Important historical events from the history of late antique Iberia are worthy for mentioning: Sasanian governance was first established in Iberia during the reign of Shapur I (240-270). There is a debate between scholars when Shapur I first gained the control over Iberia 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 were discovered in the rich burials from Iberia. This could perhaps point to the possibility that Shapur I gained the control over Iberia not before 260 as Valerians coins in Iberia could point to the possibility that in times of Valerian, Iberia still was an ally of Roman Empire? 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 becomes the Roman controlled land. During the agreement Iberia took pro-Roman course in politics. Declaring Christianity as a state religion was an important fact to prove Iberians' pro-roman politics. The 'Peace of Nisibis' didn't last long and conflict had been renewed by Sasanian King Shapur II. Iberia does not seem to be very active in this conflict, but according to the written sources (Marceliane) it still remains as an ally of the Roman Empire. According to the agreement in 363 Armenia becomes a zone controlled by Sasanians. Same sources narrate how Iberians helped Armenians against Persia. Answer to

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

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

this, Sasanian king Shapur II conquered Iberia in 368. After the Rome had finally left the Caucasus in 377 it becomes a part of the Sasanian Empire. According to the agreement in 387, the Caucasus was divided by Rome and Persia. Meanwhile modern territory of Georgia was split into two. The kingdom of Iberia appeared 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 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.

Silverware is an important group of Iberian material culture that reflects the whole political situation described above. Silver vessels from Iberia are capable to tell us a story about late antique historical and political background. Their discovery context, decoration and inscriptions, their quantity and comparison contain significant information for us.

Around 147 pieces of the late antique silverware is discovered on 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 as there are no any skeletal remains within their find 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 terevics and are considered to be produced in the different provinces of the Roman Empire. It is easy to explain their distribution across the country. Rome's cultural and political influence in west Georgia was as remarkable as in Iberia if not even more intensive. There were roman garrisons located in the Roman forts established along the eastern Black Sea coastline. Roman cultural influence on the local society was big, therefore, there was a demand on the luxurious objects which was so important as for the romans living in Colchis as for the Romanised local elite.

Situation seems to be different in the Kingdom of Iberia. There are several pieces of Sasanian silverware discovered together with the large amount of Roman silver vessels, which emphasis that not only Rome was interested in having Iberia as an ally or a vassal country in the Caucasus.

Due to the fact that majority of the silverware come from the rich burials we assume that depositing luxurious objects with deceased was an integral part of the burial ritual for Iberian elite in Late Antiquity. Luxurious objects were deposited in a grave to emphasis 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 amount of rich burials was excavated in previous century. Dating is mainly based on the coins and other finds from the graves. Unfortunately, no radiocarbon dates were applied during last century which makes it even more difficult to give a precise date for the burials. Remarkable finds from rich burials belonged to local elite are considered as the most informative objects regarding the countries social and political situation. Their role is big to study locals' beliefs, daily life, fashion, needs of society and etc.

Most of the rich burials from Armaziskhevi and Bagineti royal necropolis are represented with tombs or sarcophagus. Other graves from different locations are characterised by sarcophagus, 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 very fragmentarily.

About 140 pieces out of 147 late antique silver vessels bear a style of Roman terevotics and are considered to be imported from the western world (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 Armaziskhevi and Bagineti Royal Necropolis including with 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 Greek inscription mentioning king Flavius Dades and etc. This particular group is considered to be sent by Roman Emperors to Iberian kings. In addition to this, written sources narrate about gift exchange events between Iberian King and Roman Emperors. Aelius Spartianus gives us an information about the gifts sent by Emperor Hadrian for Iberian King Pharasmanes and his return gifts.<sup>4</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 about Sasanian-Iberian relations based on them.

Silver vessels with Sasanian influence are revealed in the rich burials spread in the 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 bearing a style of Roman, Parthian, Sasanian or local culture. Two of the vessels are recorded

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<sup>4</sup> Aelius Spartianus, The life of Hadrian, XIII

as a chance find as they were found by locals with no certain find context. Rich burials in which silver vessels were deposited were mainly characterised by sarcophagus 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. In most of the occasions Sasanian silver vessels are found together with the ones with Roman 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 for their mean to study Iberian-Sasanian relations, but also to study Sasanian toreutics in general. Some of the vessels from Iberia are considered as the earliest examples of Sasanian toreutics, while some are unique for their shape and ornament, and some draw no exact similarity with Sasanian vessels but are certainly of a Persian style.

One of the earliest object is the silver dish with a portrait in the central medallion discovered in Burial 2 at Armaziskhevi Royal Necropolis in 1940 (fig.4). The dish 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 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. The inscription was read differently by different scholars. Sh.

Amiranashvilis version of the inscription is: *“Papak bitaxs the son of divine Ardashir – son of divine Papak, sends [this gift] to Arzames the bitaxs of [country] of Gurzan”*.<sup>5</sup> The first Sasanian king Ardashir and Papak Pitiakhshes, who supposedly is the historical person Papak from Narseh ‘Paikuli inscription’ (295 AD)<sup>6</sup>, are mentioned in the text. The dish belongs to the second half of the third century and was supposedly executed 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 the earliest among them.

Another earliest example of Sasanian toreutics is the cup found in the village of Sargveshi. It is a chance find from 1917 (fig.5). 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. Decoration of it is certainly to be called as Sasanian.<sup>7</sup> Four medallions with two enclosing portraits of Sasanian King Bahram II (276-293), one of his wife Šāpūrduxtak and another of his son Bahrām Sakān Šāh is depicted between floral and zoomorphic motives. Iconography of each portrait is clearly of a Sasanian

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<sup>5</sup> Amiranashvili 1958: 89; Apakidze 1963:144

<sup>6</sup> Machabeli 1976: 108

<sup>7</sup> Prudence O. H., Mayers P., 1981: 11

style. Each bust rests on a stylized acanthus-plant base. Sargveshi cup, which probably was made during the reign of Bahram II (276-293) whose image appears on it twice, 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 an only example with the depiction of Sasanian king as a bust in the medallion and as the earliest silver vessel with the representation of Sasanian king.<sup>8</sup>

There are two very similar silver bowls found in east Georgia (Magraneti and Khovle) which deserve attention. Bearing a style of Archaemenid toreutics, bowls belong to the period of late antiquity. No provenance of execution is known for us as 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.

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 uneasy. According to one of the versions it could be considered as a Sasanian symbol. Similar symbols are very typical for Sasanian glyptic and numismatic materials from later times<sup>9</sup>. According to another version symbol could be considered as an insignia of the noble family to whom the bowl belonged<sup>10</sup>. Interesting fact about this burial is that the local nobleman who owned the ring with early Christian monogram on it, was buried with no Christian rules together with the bowl with possibly a Sasanian symbol.

The bowl from Khovle come from the rich grave found by locals during construction works in 2004 (fig.7). It 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 back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD according to the rest of the grave goods and the coins.<sup>11</sup> Provenance of the bowls is unclear. According to Georgian scholars these two bowls should be produced locally by the influence of Persian toreutics.<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, there is a probability of these bowls being examples of Parthian toreutics. There are no many objects preserved from Parthian silverware as it was melted and reused later by Sasanians. According to survived pieces we know that Parthian silverware has widely adopted the style of Achaemenid toreutics. The shape of a bowls from Iberia draws 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

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<sup>8</sup> Prudence O. H., Mayers P., 1981: 24

<sup>9</sup> Ramishvili K. 1979: plate VIII

<sup>10</sup> Ramishvili R. 1979: 33

<sup>11</sup> Shatberashvili 2007: 87-96; No radiocarbon dates were applied, no precise date is known.

<sup>12</sup> Ramishvili 1979: 79; Shatberashvili 2007: 92; Machabeli 1976: 121-128

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, not precise provenance is known to us.

Two silver jugs unearthed in burial 13 at Aragvispiri Cemetery in 1974 are unique for their 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>13</sup>

There are different thoughts about their provenance. Some of the scholars exclude their Sasanian provenance because of some particular elements of the décor<sup>14</sup>. As they assume, jugs must be produced locally, just before the décor of hunting scenes became an integral part for Sasanian toreutics. 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 ruler representation destined for foreign consumption.<sup>15</sup> It points to the possibility that they were made locally and was an original work of a craftsman. At times Sasanian rulers expand the frontiers of their empires in different directions, they used to send silver vessels as a gift or inducement to these new territories. It explains the fact that most of Sasanian silverware was found in the peripheries of the Empire. But it is also conceivable that they were made by local rulers in imitation of Sasanian originals.<sup>16</sup> Most likely the jugs from Argavispiri should be considered Iberian products by a craftsman who was familiar with local and Sasanian artistic elements. Jugs were discovered together with the coins of Emperor Valerian which strengthens an assumption that they appeared in Iberia just after the Sasanians first conquest of Iberia.

The 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 1990s (fig.9). It is a chance find with no certain find context. 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>17</sup>. On the other hand, the symbol could be a stylized floral, or simple geometrical ornament.

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<sup>13</sup> Ramishvili 1999: 71-75

<sup>14</sup> Ramishvili 1999: 71

<sup>15</sup> Canepa 2009: 158

<sup>16</sup> Harper P.O., Mayers P., 1981: 8

<sup>17</sup> Gagoshidze G., Gagoshidze I. 2014: 341-350

Ornamentation of the bowl is characteristic for the late Sasanian turetics and finds parallels with other bowls and jugs preserved in different museums across the world.<sup>18</sup>

As already mentioned above, discovery context of these vessels are 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 local culture was a coexistence of different cultural elements; that there was a high demand from local elite on luxurious objects; that Iberian elite enjoyed the benefits of trade and diplomatic relations with surrounding empires; that Sasanian vessels appear soon after Sasanians first conquest of Iberia; that at some stage they coexist with Roman high quality vessels which probably points Iberia's double political and diplomatic relations with Rome and Persia (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 following:

- Silver vessels are among the earliest and direct archaeological evidences of Iberian-Roman and Iberian-Sasanian diplomatic relations.
- 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, trade-economic and diplomatic relations with Rome had more intensive character than with the Sasanian world.
- There was a high demand on luxurious objects in Iberian and Colchian elite which caused their massive 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 rather than the military activities.
- Sasanian kings in the beginning had an attempt to make Iberia as an ally using diplomacy, which was later replaced with military methods.

overall, based on the finds from rich 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 the group of the archaeological materials which is so important for the study of Iberia's foreign policy. Furthermore, Sasanian silver vessels from Iberia have a 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 find contexts. Moreover, two of the vessels from Iberia are considered as an earliest example of the Sasanian silverwork and royal imagery depicted on the silver plate. Other archaeological

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<sup>18</sup> Jug from British Museum, circular and hemispherical bowls from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Miho Museum, Cleveland Art.

finds such as numismatic and glyptic materials, of course, are of a significance to prove these relations, but the role of silver vessels is big as they could be considered as the earliest and the most direct archaeological evidences for Iberian-Sasanian relations.

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