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The University of Georgia. Georgia,

Tbilisi, 0175. M. Kostava Street 77, Building IV.

Tel: (+995 32) 255 22 22

Email: cjss_editor@ug.edu.ge

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Silver Coins of Queen Rusudan from Samshvilde

(Discovery of 2019)

Abstract

On July 24, 2019, a pit burial was discovered nearby to Samshvilde Sioni Cathedral ruins on the territory of the former settlement Samshvilde (Kvemo Kartli region, South Georgia). Despite the fact, that it was damaged by the occupation of the later periods, the artifacts revealed there helped to determine the burial's chronology and cultural context.

Besides the disarticulated human remains, completely corroded iron ring, pottery fragmtents and well preserved, ten silver coins were discovered in the grave.

The present article is the first publication dedicated to this discovery. It provides information about preliminary results and brings the new numismaitic finds into scientific circulation, as a new data for understanding history of Samshvilde and medieval Georgia in general.¹

¹ The bio-archaeological remains, palynological and textile samples are under research and will be published in a separate article in 2022.

Introduction

Sioni Cathedral is one of the most remarkable architectural monument on the territory of former settlement Samshvilde. According to old Georgian inscription ("Asomtavruli") which is presented on its eastern façade, it was built between of 759 - 777 (Chubinashvili, 1969. 27).

It is not clear when exactly the Cathedral was ruined, but following the tradition, this should happen after earthquake in the 10th century. This opinion is supported by the three nave basilica of the 10th century, standing near Sioni Cathedral ruins and in the masonry of which yellowish sandstone blocks, characteristic for Sioni Cathedral, are re-used.

In order to investigate these and other aspects, geophysical and archaeological works were planned and carried around Sioni Cathedral in 2015-2016 (Berikashvili, Gabunia, Gagoshidze, Odilavadze, Ivanishvili & Lomidze. 2015. pp. 115-125). During these two years 18 graves of high medieval period were discovered to the North and North-East of the Cathedral and based on the artifacts, all they belong to Samshvilde citizens of middle and high social status (Berikashvili, Grigolia, Kvavadze, Miuller-Bieniek & Coupal. 2017. pp. 10-16).

As an archaeological research on this part of Samshvilde indicates, it was very active urban area of the city and was closely connected with the cathedral. Moreover, after Sioni cathedral was destroyed, this area continued to function, but this time - as a cemetery and a certain number of graves must have been located here during this period.

From this perspective, the most particular importance had *Grave No.4*, which was discovered between archaeological trenches N8 and O8 to the north of Cathedral ruins (Fig. 1). The grave was located some 15 m. to the North from Sioni ruins and its depth reached 1.45 m from the present ground surface.



Figure 1. Samshvilde Sioni Cathedral. 2019. (Photo by D. Berikashvili)



Figure 2. Grave No. 4. Sioni Area. (Photo by D. Berikashvili)

Based on the present data, it is hard to imagine the original construction of the grave, as it has been damaged by subsequent construction activity. For the same reason, it is difficult to determine the initial position of the deceased, but it can be concluded, that we are dealing here with an person buried in a Christian manner. However, the archaeological material discovered in the grave help us to determine its chronological frames and cultural belonging.

Archaeological Finds

The corroded ring, a tall, ovoid jug, a yellowish, middle sized pot and well-preserved ten silver coins were discovered in the *Grave No. 4*.

It is noteworthy that the **ring** was placed on the finger of the deceased's right hand, and despite the skeletal damage, it was still fixed *in situ*. Due to the strong corrosion, it is difficult to determine the exact form of the ring, but based on the similar materials from different archaeological sites, it can be considered that the ring had simple, circular shape.



Figure 3. *Grave No. 4. Sioni Area. Samshvilde. (Photo by W. Gagné)*

Similar circular iron rings are well-known from Sioni cemetery (Ramishvili., 1970, p. 125. Pl. XXVII.3), Zhinvali cemetery (Mindorashvili. 2015. Pl. VII. 4, 5.), Amidasturi cemetery (Lagiashvili. 2011. p. 94, Pl. XX. 225) and from burials at Goriskana and Gheliskari (Mindorashvili. 2015. Pl. VIII.3) in Eastern Georgia.



Figure 4. Coroded Iron Ring from the Grave No.4. (Photo by D. Berikashvili)

Alongside the ring two pottery items were discovered in *Grave No.4*. The first is clay pot with two handles, and another - tall, ovoid jug with one handle.

The pot is 26 cm high, diameter of the mouth 21 cm and diameter of the flat base 19.5 cm. The shoulders of the pot are decorated with horizontal combed lines, and there are two opposed handles (Fig. 5,1). This type of pottery are well-known from Dmanisi (Djaparidze., 1969. Pp. 57-76; Djaparidze., 1956; Kopaliani. 1996. Pl. XLVI. 1), Rustavi (Archvadze., 1969. pp.120-135; Chikoidze., 2007. P.3. Pl. XXI, 6,8), Sioni (Ramishvili. 1970) and Narli Dara (Mindorashvili. 2013, pp. 212-226; Tvalchrelidze, Bakhtadze and others. 2014. Pp.128-158) and other archaeological sites of 10th-13th centuries.



Figure 5. 1. The pot with two handles from Grave No. 4. Samshvilde Sioni Area. 12th-13th cc.
2. The ovoid Jug from Grave No. 4. Samshvilde Sioni Area. 12th-13th cc.
(Restorer by T. Tordia; Photo by D. Berikashvili)

The second pottery item from Grave No. 4 is a tall, ovoid jug with one handle. Its extant height is 36 cm, diameter of the shoulders 23.5 cm and diameter of the base 12 cm. Despite the fact, that some parts are missing, it was still possible to reconstruct its shape and determine the date. Based on parallel materials from medieval archaeological sites such as: Rustavi fortress (Chikoidze. 2007. 3. Pl. XXIII.8-10), Dmanisi fortress (Kopaliani. 1996), Kvetera (Mindorashvili. 2010, pp. 268-269, Pl. IX) and Zhinvali (Ramishvili. 1983; Bakhtadze. 2013, p.97, p. 119; p. 100. Pl. 122) Samshvilde jug also belongs to 11th to 13th centuries.

Based on the typology and on the chronology of the pottery, the date of the *Grave No 4* can be determined by 11th and 13th centuries. Moreover, this date is absolutely supported by the numismatic finds from the same grave.

Numismatic Finds

During the excavation of *Grave No.4* ten silver coins were discovered. They were located on the right side of the body, between ribs and right arm. There were textile traces on some of the coins, which suggests that they were originally placed in a “Kisa” (a small wallet) that was placed in the grave. (Fig. 6).

Evenmore, it became clear, that we are dealing here with well-preserved silver coins of Queen Rusudan (1223-1245) of Georgia with Georgian-Arabic inscriptions on the obverse and reverse and image of Jesus Christ that makes their chronology indisputable. The coins differ in the terms of their quality and minting, but their virtual imagery is still identical²:

1: AR, D.: 25 mm: Wt.: 2.79 g (Pl. III.1)

Obverse: Frontal bust of Christ with nimbus. “IC XI” [“Jesus Christ”] to left and right. In the left hand ornamented book of Gospels, the cover of which is decorated with three relief beads. An “Asomtavruli” inscription surrounds the

² A single description will account for all the coins. Minor variations are noted in the catalogue.

image ፪፻፲፱፻፳፯ [in the name of God, was struck in the K'oronikon "un" (=1230)].

Reverse: the name Rusudan - ܪܫܢ ["RSN" – Rusudan] - within an ornamented frame. The whole surrounded by an Arabic inscription: ملكة الملكات جلال الدنيا (Queen of Queens; Glory of the World and Faith, Rusudan, Daughter of Tamar, Worshipper of the Messiah).



Figure 6. *The Coins from the Grave No 4. (Photo by D. Berikashvili)*

2: AR, D.: 26 mm; Wt.: 2.79 g (Pl. III.2). Obverse: As **1**. Heavily worn. Four relief beads. Reverse: As **1**. Arabic inscription slightly damaged.

3: AR, D.: 25 mm; Wt.: 2.83 g (Pl. III.3). Obverse: As **1**. Partly worn. Four relief beads. Reverse: As **1**.

4: AR, D.: 27 mm; Wt.: 2.62 g (Pl. III.4). Obverse: As **1**. Four (?) relief beads. IC XC ["Jesus Christ"]

Reverse: As **1**.

5: AR, D.: 28 mm; Wt.: 2.50 g (Pl. IV. 1). Obverse: As **1**. Three tips of a cross in nimbus. Four (?) relief beads. Reverse: As **1**.

6: AR, D.: 28 mm; Wt.: 2.72 g (Pl. IV. 2). Obverse: As **1**. Three tips of a cross in nimbus. Four relief beads. Reverse: As **1**.

7: AR, D.: 28 mm; Wt.: 2.60 g (Pl. IV. 3). Obverse: As **1**. IC XC ["Jesus Christ"]
Reverse: As **1**, except for central frame decorated with four circles alternating with five- and six-pointed stars.

8: AR, D.: 27 mm; Wt.: 2.45 g (Pl. IV. 4). Obverse: As **1**. Four relief beads.
Reverse: As **1**.

9: AR, D.: 27 mm; Wt.: 2.61 g (Pl. V. 1). Obverse: As **1**. Three tips of a cross in nimbus decorated with relief beads. Four relief beads on Bible. Reverse:
Reverse: As **1**, but with a six-pointed star beneath Rusudan legend.

10: AR, D.: 25 mm; Wt.: 2.52 g (Pl. V. 2). Obverse: As **1**. IC XC ["Jesus Christ"].
Five relief beads on Bible. Reverse: As **1**, except for central frame decorated with four circles alternating with five- and six-pointed stars.

Conclusions

As it can be seen from the description of the coins, despite the slight differences, all of them represent silver dramas of Queen Rusudan.

It is well known that in the previous period in Georgia, as well as in the whole of the Middle East, so-called irregular shaped copper coins were in use. The useage of copper alloy for minting the coins was associated with so called "Silver Crisis." But from the beginning of the 13th century, when the "Crisis" ended, the minting of the regular shaped silver coins began in Georgia during the reign of Queen Rusudan (Dundua, 2006. 223).

Although Rusudan's drama is one of the most impressive silver coin in Georgian numismatic, many questions related to it remain still unclear, in particular, the place of its emission. The main reason why there is still no clear answer to this question is fact, that the geographical location of the mint is not indicated directly on the coins. In addition, no written sources provide information about the innovation initiated by Queen Rusudan. It can be said therefore that all opinions expressed today regarding to this question still remain at the level of assumptions.

Only a few attempts have been made to identify the geographical areas where the Queen Rusudan's drama were minted. For example, Eugeny Pakhomov, Russian historian and numismatist considered, that the emission of Rusudan's silver dramas began in Western Georgia, in Kutaisi, when Queen Rusudan migrated there after the invasion of Jalal-Ad-Din into Eastern Georgia (Pakhomov 1910. 109).

Unlike Pakhomov, David M. Lang, the Professor of Caucasian studies at the University of London supported the hypothesis that the place of the mint of Rusudan's silver drama could be only in Tbilisi in 1230. This was the period, when Tbilisi was liberated and reoccupied by Georgians again after a long passage of time (Lang 1955. 31).

There is also the hypothesis proposed by Georgian numismatists Giorgi and Tedo Dundua, who assume, that Rusudan's drama was minted in "Tskhumi", present day Sokhumi in Abkhazia. This idea is not, however, supported by archaeological evidence and therefore needs more arguments (Dundua, 1995.27-28; Dundua G., Dundua T. 2006. 269; Dundua T., Dundua G. 2015. 82).

Although the subject of the present article is not an in-depth investigation of geographical area where Rusudan's silver drama was minted, we consider, that most realistic assumption is that of David M. Lang, who assumed Tbilisi to be main centre for emission of these coins. The geographical area of distribution and discovery of Rusudan's drama, confined mainly Eastern Georgia, also supports this hypothesis.

Another problematic issue related with Rusudan's silver dramas is that fact, that almost in every case their exact archaeological contexts are uncertain and coins are out of archaeological stratigraphy. Some rare exception is Zhinvali excavation, where five silver dramas were discovered by archaeologist Ramin

Ramishvili in 1973 (Ramishvili., Jorbenadze., others...1981. Pp. 129-143; Rcheulishvili. 1983. P. 63). Another example comes from Ujarma Citadel, where Rusudan's four silver dramas were unearthed by the archaeologist Giorgi Lomtadze (Lomtadze., 1953. Pp. 11-12).

Two more discoveries are associated with Khandaki village (Central Georgia) and Dedoplistskaro (East Georgia). In Khandaki, numismatist David Kapanadze discovered a drama with a "unique obverse and reverse" in 1915. This discovery is discussed by author in his work published in 1955 (Kapanadze., 1955. Pp. 70-71; Pl. VI; 1957. Pp.79-81). In addition, the discovery in Dedoplistskaro in 1989 has also high scientific value. The Dedoplistskaro coin hoard contains 60 coins, among which there are 38 silver dramas of Rusudan. The Dedoplistskaro hoard is carefully discussed by the numismatist Medea Tsotselia (Tsotselia, 2010. p.220).

In 2016 there appeared a summary of work done on these issues, in a publication that combined all the known cases of Rusudan's silver drama coinage (Paghava., Spanderashvili et al. 2016). There are discussions of distribution areas, the minting location, memorability, circulation, countermarking and alloy composition. Particularly important is alloy composition, as there is still a large lacuna in this sphere of studies in Georgian numismatics. Exceptions to the rule are published in 1943 (Kapanadze., 1943) and 2013 (Paghava., Geradze. 2013), where the results of Georgian and Ildegizid Medieval coin alloys are represented. It must be mentioned, that in present day numismatics only statistical, visual, iconographic and geographical data no longer meet the scientific challenges. We believe that alongside the traditional approaches, analyses based on physical-chemical, petrographic, archaeometric, spectral and other technical knowledge must be carried out when examining the new numismatic series.

In this regard, our article is no exception. Its main goal is to bring newly discovered, well-documented numismatic material into scientific circulation and to interested society. As for complex studies, this direction is still prioretical and as already mentioned, separate article will be dicated to these issues.

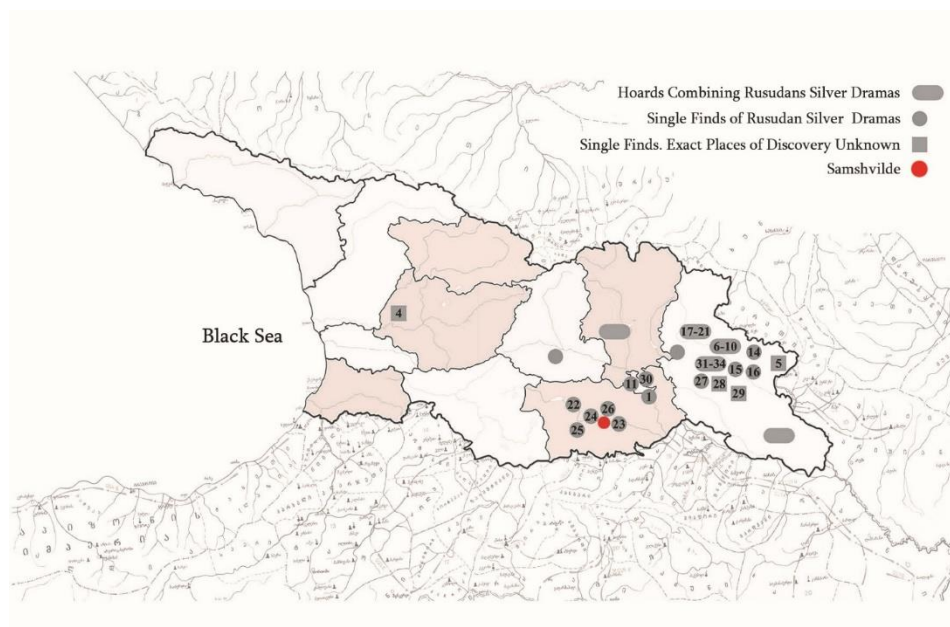
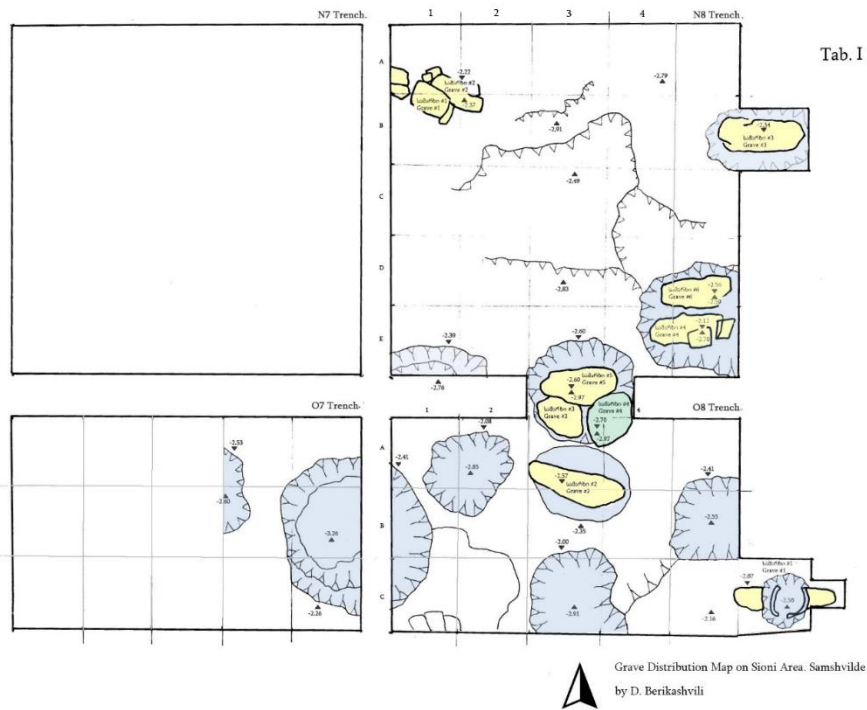


Figure 7. The locations where silver coins of Rusudan were discovered:

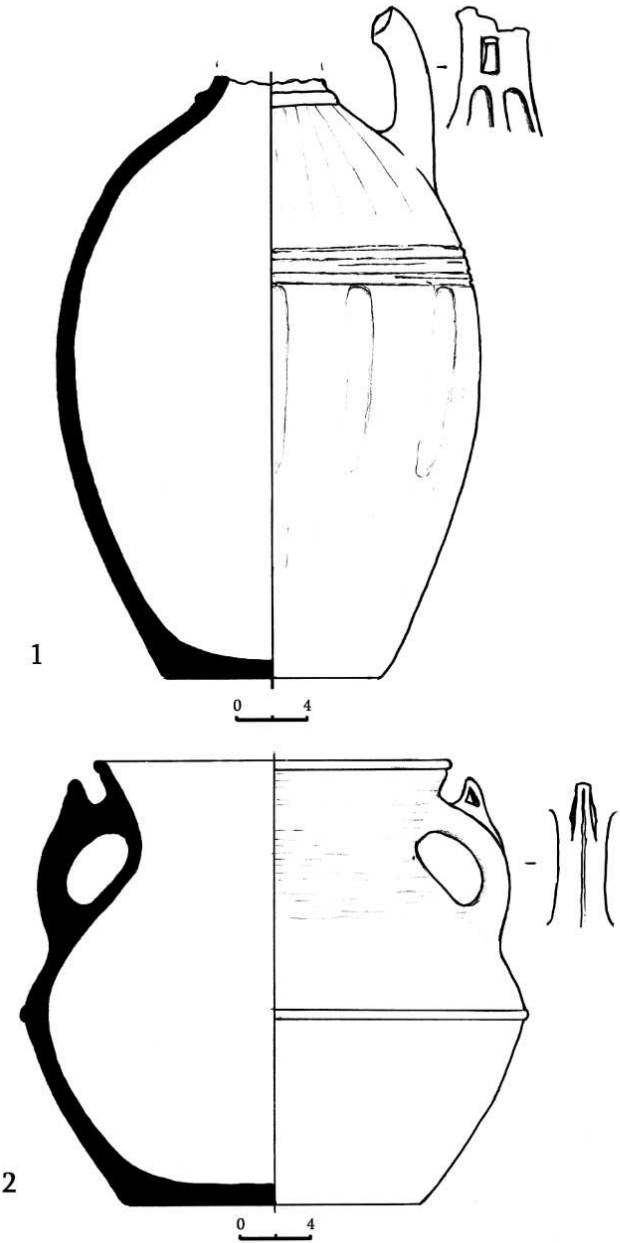
1. Tbilisi surroundings; 4. West Georgia. Exact location unknown; 5. Kakheti; 6-10. Telavi surroundings. "Telavi Hoard"; 11. Tbilisi. The gorge of Riv. Mtkvari; 14. Akhalsopeli, Kakheti; 15-16. Kvareli, Kakheti; 17-21. Akhmeta Region (?), Kakheti; 22-25. Kvemo Kartli; 26. Village Arakhlo. Bolnisi Region; 27. Manavi Castle surroundings; 28. Exact location unknown. Kakheti Region; 29. Kakheti Region; 30. Tbilisi surroundings. 31-34. "Manavi Hoard". Manavi Castle surroundings³.

³ The map of discoveries of Queen Rusudan's silver dramas (Material for the Corpus, Minting Location, Memorability, Circulation, Countermarking, Alloy Composition) by: Irakli Paghava, Roland Spanderashvili, Giorgi Gogava, Davit Mikeladze, Evgeni Chanishvili, Teimuraz Gabriadze. 2016. Tbilisi. The exact origin of some dramas are uncertain. For this reason these areas are not shown on the map. We express our gratitude to the all authors for sharing this map.

Tables



Tab. II



Tab. III



Tab.IV



Tab. V



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Plates

Pl. I. Grave distribution map on Sioni Area. Samshvilde.

Pl. II. The pottery discovered in Grave No. 4. Sioni Area. Samshvilde.

Pl. III-V. Silver Coins of Queen Rusudan of 13th century Grave =4. Sioni Area. Samshvilde.