

New Perspectives on 'The Land of Heroes and Giants': Georgian Sources for Sasanian History¹

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At the end of his illustrious reign, the aging Vaxtang Gorgasali (r. 447-522) led his troops onto the battlefield one last time. Although the K'art'velians² of eastern Georgia triumphed against a formidable Sasanian force, the hero-king was mortally wounded. With Roman and Sasanian soldiers bitterly engaged on the edge of his realm, the injured Vaxtang sought refuge within the walls of the Ujarma fortress, a favorite stronghold of the monarchy in the district of Kaxet'i. On his deathbed, the king summoned the notables of eastern Georgia and pronounced: "You, inhabitants of K'art'li,³ remember my good deeds because from my house you received eternal light, and I honored you, my kin, with temporal glory. Do not despise our house, nor abandon the friendship of the Greeks."⁴

Vaxtang Gorgasali is one of the most cherished heroes of Georgia, a former Soviet republic nestled between the Black and Caspian Seas. But Vaxtang's fame is not simply an outburst of modern nostalgia. Already in the autumn of Late Antiquity, Vaxtang epitomized an autonomous central authority capable of meeting threats domestic and foreign. Under Bagratid rule, a time of intense—but selective—"Byzantinization" of Georgian society, Vaxtang exemplified the ideal of a unified Georgian kingdom that was an active and equal participant in the diverse Byzantine Commonwealth.⁵

¹ I am grateful for the opportunity to have presented this material at the Samuel Jordan Center for Persian Studies at the University of California—Irvine in February 2013. I wish to thank Dr. Touraj Daryaei, the center's director, and Julie Nelson for their assistance with this essay. For an expanded treatment, see Rapp, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: The Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature* (forthcoming).

² On the transliteration of Georgian, see the table below.

³ Iberia in Graeco-Roman sources.

⁴ *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali* (1955: 203), English translation by Robert W. Thomson in *Rewriting Caucasian History* (1996: 222-223). For a table of the page correspondences of the critical edition by Simon Qauxč'išvili and Thomson's translation, see Rapp (1998: 18-23).

⁵ The Bagratids seized the presiding principate in 813 and dominated K'art'velian higher politics for a thousand years.





Central and northern Caucasia. MODIS image by NASA's Terra satellite, November 2008. Photograph courtesy of NASA.

Investigations of late antique and medieval Georgian history have long been projected through the lens of the Byzantine experience.⁶ Vaxtang's injunction to the eastern Georgian élite seems to validate this approach. However, *when considered as an organic whole*, the episode's host text—the anonymous *Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali* composed in Georgian around the year 800—depicts Christian K'art'li and the entire region defined by the Caucasus Mountains as an integral element of the expansive Iranian world. This is Ērān in its broadest sense, a cohesive multi- and cross-cultural enterprise we might call the Iranian Commonwealth.⁷ As it happens, the Iranian flavor and orientation of *The Life of Vaxtang* are by no means isolated: the entire corpus of late antique Georgian literature⁸ is encoded with numerous facets of the dynamic Irano-Caucasian nexus.⁹ Georgian literary monuments are therefore a significant albeit underappreciated source for Iranian history, especially in its Sasanian phase. At the same time, other Georgian evidence, including linguistic and numismatic, helps to illuminate this cultural bond.

From the outset we must establish the historical context in which these sources were created. Although Christianization's revolutionary aspects have been prone to exaggeration, there can be no question that Georgian literature was enabled by the conversion of *Caucasia's*

⁶ Morony (2010) extends the concept of Late Antiquity to Sasanian Iran.

⁷ An idea inspired by explorations of the Byzantine Commonwealth, especially Obolensky (1971) and Fowden (1993), and also by the cross-cultural dimensions routinely emphasized in the publications of Richard Frye.

⁸ And, significantly, the entire corpus of literature produced in late antique Caucasia.

⁹ For a survey of Georgian literature in English, see Rayfield (1994). See also Abulaže (1960) and Tarchnishvili (1955). For Armenia and Iran, see the publications of Nina Garsoïan (especially the articles assembled in Garsoïan [1985 and 1999]), James Russell (especially the articles collected in Russell [2004]), and Tim Greenwood (e.g., Greenwood [2010]).

peoples to Christianity.¹⁰ Especially crucial in the dynamic, long-term process of Christianization was the baptism of the ruling families of Caucasia's three monarchies and their aristocracies.¹¹ The kings of Armenia Major, K'art'li, and Caucasian Albania (which shares only its name with the later Albania in the Balkans), were all converted in the first half of the fourth century. The Armenian Trdat was the first to be baptized, an event which likely took place in 314. The eastern Georgian Mirian followed as early as 326 and no later than 337. By mid-century the Albanian Uṛnayr embraced the Christian God.

Christianization ignited and was accompanied by several transformations. One of the most profound was the creation of scripts for the three principal tongues of southern Caucasia. While usually treated as discrete, ethnically-confined inventions, the distinctive but related Armenian, Georgian, and Albanian scripts resulted from a single, multifaceted project cutting across cultural and political lines.¹² In most respects, Caucasia's Christianization was a pan-regional, cross-cultural phenomenon reflecting Caucasia's inherent cohesiveness alongside its tremendous diversity. It also shows the region's intimate connections with its neighbors as we observe, for instance, with the Christianization of acculturated Parthian families in Caucasia and with Cappadocia's role in the conversions of Armenia Major and possibly eastern Georgia.¹³ Accordingly, any study of Late Antiquity strictly isolating Armenians, K'art'velians, or Albanians yields a fundamentally incomplete picture.

¹⁰ On Christian Caucasia as a coherent region, and its dynamic long-term Christianization, see the essays collected in Rapp and Crego (2012). For the various Georgian lands in Late Antiquity as seen primarily through Classical and archaeological sources, see Braund (1994). For an overview of Georgian history in English, see Suny (1988) and now Rayfield (2012). Still recommended is the somewhat dated Allen (1932).

¹¹ In terms of direct evidence, we know surprisingly little about the nobility's contribution to the Christianization of Caucasia.

¹² The Armenian Maštoc' (Mesrop) may have played a central role in this regional project. On Koriwn's *vita* of Maštoc', see Koriwn (1941), French translation by Jean-Pierre Mahé in Koriwn (2005-2007). But existing manuscripts of this *vita* post-date the Armenians' Council of Dvin III (at which time the K'art'velian Church was excommunicated) and therefore may have been manipulated to reflect later political and theological positions.

¹³ Starting in the ninth/tenth century, Georgian sources describe the illuminatrix Nino as a Cappadocian.





Georgian inscriptions at Kumurdo, Javaxet'i.

Georgian, Armenian, and as they exist, Albanian¹⁴ written sources are more than monuments to discrete ethno-linguistic communities: all are part of a regional, highly-integrated corpus of Christian *Caucasian* evidence.¹⁵ Whether narrative, epigraphical, numismatic, or linguistic, these sources attest the region's deep integration into the Iranian Commonwealth, a union whose roots stretch back to Achaemenid times. Caucasia's membership in the Iranian socio-cultural world continued in the Hellenistic, Parthian, and Sasanian ages, and persisted, in still-evolving forms, under Arab, Mongol, Timurid, Ottoman, Safavid, and Russian hegemony. The Christianization of the lands immediately south of the Caucasus Mountains did not spell the demise of the Irano-Caucasian bond.

The protracted Christianization of Caucasia's three monarchies commenced in the early Sasanian period and continued through the end of the empire. In the fifth century, less than a hundred years after the baptism of the K'art'velian King Mirian, the earliest specimens of original Georgian writing were produced. Most prominent among them are several ecclesiastical inscriptions and at least one and perhaps two extant original narratives. Because the first Georgian script—the majuscule *asomt'avruli*—was created expressly for consolidating and expanding Christianity (translated Gospels were among the oldest Georgian works), it is not surprising that the first written monuments in Georgian are religious in origin, content, and purpose. Insofar as narratives are concerned, from the second half of the fifth century we possess one and conceivably two tales of martyrdom: *The Passion of Šušanik* by the priest Iakob C'urtaveli (Jacob of Tsurtavi); and, very possibly, the short anonymous *Life of the Children of*

¹⁴ See Gippert *et al* (2008). Extant specimens of Albanian writing are exceedingly rare.

¹⁵ For medieval Armenian and Georgian historiographical literature, see Thomson (1996). On the necessity of a pan-Caucasian approach, see Garsoïan and Martin-Hisard (2012) and Rapp (2006).

Kolay.¹⁶ Another *passio* devoted to a Christianized Iranian—and, it would seem, a former Manichaean—named Gwrobandak-Evstat'i was created at the start of the seventh century.¹⁷

The conventional scholarly view holds that surviving Georgian historiographical texts, “histories” if you will, were not composed until the seventh and eighth centuries. This is curious considering that neighboring Armenians were creating historiographical literature as early as the fifth century. In a forthcoming monograph to be published by Ashgate, I shall argue that a lost Georgian history was put into writing already towards the end of the sixth century. So far as can be discerned, this narrative mimicked—but did not merely translate or adapt—the lost Sasanian *Xwadāy-nāmag*.¹⁸ The lost Georgian tradition, existing in written and oral forms, served as a basis for several of the earliest surviving Georgian histories, including *The Life of Vaxtang* (ca. 800) as well as *The Life of the Kings* (also ca. 800), a foundational text commemorating the eastern Georgian experience from remote ethnogenesis down to the Christianization of the monarchy in the fourth century.

In order to better grasp the syncretic nature of the evidence for the Sasanian world contained in Georgian literary sources, we should consider a parallel example provided by a remarkable series of K'art'velian coins minted in the late sixth and early seventh century.¹⁹ Its visual program, punctuated with succinct textual legends, is predicated upon the same syncretic mechanism at the heart of contemporaneous Georgian literature.



K'art'velo-Sasanian drachm with obverse Georgian inscription stefanos, *STEP'ANOS*. The object may have been used as a necklace; the position of holes suggest the obverse image of the *šāhan šāh* would have been displayed, but precisely when this coin might have been used in this manner is unknown. Georgian National Museum, T'bilisi, #33148. Photograph courtesy of the Georgian National Museum.

¹⁶ Reliable English translations of these Georgian *vitae*, including the *vita* of Gwrobandak-Evstat'i, are presented in Lang (1976). For a recent overview, see Martin-Hisard (2011).

¹⁷ On Gwrobandak-Evstat'i's theorized connection to a Manichaean congregation in Ganzak prior to his Christian initiation, see Mgaloblishvili and Rapp (2011).

¹⁸ Rapp (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Other aspects of Sasanian history are enlightened by abundant remnants of Georgian material culture, including sumptuous silver bowls, for which see Harper and Meyers (1981), 24-25 *et seq*, and Henning (1961).

The majority of the extant coins of the K'art'velo-Sasanian (or Ibero-Sasanian) series are drachms bearing the simplified image of *šāhan šāh* Hormizd IV (r. 579-590).²⁰ The coin pictured here, struck in the name of the K'art'velian presiding prince Step'anos I (var. Step'anoz), purposefully combines a triad of legitimizing visual motifs: first, the conventional late Sasanian numismatic formula, including the image of the “king of kings”; second, strategically placed in the field around the *šāhan šāh*'s image, an *asomt'avruli* Georgian inscription explicitly identifying the K'art'velian ruler; and, third, the transformation of the standard representation of a Zoroastrian altar and its attendants into a more abstract design surmounted by a Christian cross.

These locally-minted coins are reminders that the Sasanians were the imperial power possessing the greatest capability to intervene in eastern Georgia. Thus, it was the Sasanians who suppressed an already debilitated K'art'velian royal authority toward the end of the sixth century. The K'art'velo-Sasanian coinage issued under local presiding princes—and not kings, whose power had lapsed—also signals that Christianization had not shattered the enduring multifaceted Irano-Caucasian cooperative. But Caucasia's Christianization had injected a new strain of diversity into the Iranian world and in a sector of the enterprise dominated by non-Iranian peoples and significant colonies of acculturated Parthians.

It is worth emphasizing the extent of the Sasanian imperial coinage found in Georgia. Overall, hundreds of Sasanian coins have been found in K'art'li and adjacent Georgian districts. The earliest derive from the third century, but exemplars from the fifth and sixth centuries are especially common. Whereas later Roman coinage is represented from the start of the fifth century, numismatist Medea Tsotselia surmises that they were more likely “of minor importance and Sasanian silver drachms dominated...”²¹ Like their Parthian counterparts, which are plentiful for the first centuries BC and AD, Sasanian coins are concentrated primarily along the Kura (Mtkuari, mod. Mtkvari) River, K'art'li's defining geographical feature and its chief communications and transportation artery. Along the Kura and its tributaries were located many of eastern Georgia's most important cities and settlements, including the capitals Mc'xet'a (Mtskheta)—with its royal hilltop citadel Armazis-c'ixe, i.e., the fortress of Armazi/Ahura Mazdā²²—and, from the sixth century, Tp'ilisi (T'bilisi).²³

Most of the Sasanian coins found in Georgia belong to hoards. For example, in 1970 a small cache of Sasanian drachms was discovered at Bolnisi in southern K'art'li, one of the centers of the politically and culturally vibrant Armeno-Georgian marchlands. The Bolnisi hoard consists of twenty-eight Sasanian drachms struck under the authority of Pērōz (r. 459-484);

²⁰ See now Akopian (2011).

²¹ Tsotselia (2003: 23). See also Tsotselia (1981).

²² On Mc'xet'a, see now Tsetskhldze (2006/2007).

²³ By tradition, Tp'ilisi was founded by Vaxtang Gorgasali. The city's remains of a Zoroastrian temple are described in Daryae (2008b).



dated specimens derive from the period 464-466.²⁴ These coins were minted while Vaxtang Gorgasali sat on the K'art'velian throne. Considerably larger is the Cit'eli-cqaro (Tsiteli-tskaro) hoard from southeastern Georgia. Its 1268 Sasanian coins are dispersed among the reigns of Xusrō I (531-579, 96 specimens), Hormizd IV (579-590, 743 specimens), and Xusrō II (590 and 591-628, 429 specimens). A testament to the contemporaneous balance of imperial power, the Cit'eli-cqaro hoard contains only ten Romano-Byzantine coins; all bear the name of Heraclius (r. 610 to 641).²⁵ Of no small importance is the fact that Heraclius himself passed through eastern Georgia during the Byzantine campaign against the Sasanians in the 620s, thus magnifying Constantinople's influence and cementing the K'art'velian Church's nascent Chalcedonian affiliation.²⁶



Basilica of Bolnisi Sioni.

The smaller Bolnisi hoard was discovered not far from one of the most ancient Georgian churches: the basilica of Bolnisi Sioni (Zion). The interior and exterior decorations of Bolnisi Sioni typify a visual culture shared with the Iranian world to which Caucasia belonged. The carved head of a sacred bull is still visible high on the interior wall of the church's baptistry.

²⁴ Abramishvili and Tsotselia (1977). The Bolnisi coins display a variety of mint marks, including Khurāsān, Fārs, Media, and Kermān. On the possible association of the Sasanian mint WLC with eastern Georgia, see now Heidemann (2013: 415-418).

²⁵ Dzhlagania (1980: 5-6 and 35) and Dzhlagania (1982: 129 and 132). See also Tsotselia (2002).

²⁶ Rapp (2003) and Kaegi (2003: 141-147).





Sculpture of a sacred bull in the baptistry of Bolnisi Sioni.

Abstract carving on the structure's exterior also evinces an Iranian connection. But the most dramatic evidence of the enduring Irano-Caucasian web²⁷ is found in an exterior inscription, the oldest *dated* specimen of Georgian writing. The *asomt'avruli* inscription celebrates the foundation of the basilica:

[With the help of the H]oly Trinity, the foundation of this holy church was laid in the twentieth [y]ear of [the reign of] King Pero[z] and was completed fifteen years [later, i.e., around 493 AD].²⁸ God will have mercy on whoever worships here. And God will also have me[r]cy on whoever will pray for Bishop Davit', the builder of this holy church. [Amen.]²⁹

King Peroz is none other than *Šāhan šāh* Pērōz, in whose name were struck the coins of the Bolnisi hoard.

Though Bolnisi Sioni's foundational inscription and other Georgian epigraphical sources open a valuable contemporaneous window onto K'art'velo-Iranian relations in the Sasanian period, the most substantial written materials are original Georgian hagiographical and historical texts composed between the fifth and the turn of the eighth/ninth century. The differences among these two genres of Georgian narrative monuments must be stressed. The early *vitae* (especially *passiones*) are textual promotions of Christianity and portray local agents of the Sasanians as a menace. Often, however, they treat the Sasanian Empire with copious indifference. In contrast, the oldest historiographical sources openly admire Sasanian Iran and

²⁷ McNeill and McNeill (2003), for large-scale interactive webs.

²⁸ Alternately, "fifteen years into the reign of Kavād."

²⁹ For the inscription, see Silogava (1994: 36), including the alternate reading mentioned in the preceding footnote. See also *K'art'uli carcerebis korpusi* (1980: 64-66).

sometimes envision Sasanian Zoroastrianism as an honorable faith. Such admiration is most poignantly articulated in the ca. 800 *Life of Vaxtang*. During a joint Sasanian-K'art'velian campaign in the legendary East, Vaxtang entered into single combat against the king of the Sinds. In the contest's initial verbal spar, Vaxtang is made to declare:

“... I came here in person to succor the Iranians. This was indeed right, first because of [our shared] kinship, and then for this purpose, that although the Iranians are not in the true religion yet they know God the Creator and believe in the spiritual life. But you [Sinds] are completely ignorant of God and do not understand, like horses and mules.”³⁰

The Christian Vaxtang's justification of his close relationship with Sasanian Iran proceeds along biological and religious lines. First, the monarch acknowledges the genetic connection of the Sasanians and his dynasty, the Xuasroiani (usually anglicized as Chosroid), whose members, to a substantial degree, were acculturated Parthian Mihrānids. Second, Vaxtang stresses the sharing of a Creator deity by Christians and Zoroastrians. Elsewhere Vaxtang confidently extols Iran as “queyanaÁYgmirTa da goliaTTa” (*k'ueqanay gmirt'a da goliat't'a*), “the land of heroes and giants.”³¹ In Georgian literature such words are never proffered on behalf of the Roman and Byzantine empires. To grasp its full impact the declaration must be placed alongside the Iranic models of heroism and kingship featured in the oldest Georgian historiographical works.³²

Holistic evaluations of the Georgian narrative sources for Sasanian history necessarily proceed along two primary tracks.³³ First, and perhaps less obvious, is how the texts are written. Literary sources are textual monuments and must be treated as such. Put another way: literature is produced under particular circumstances by certain constituencies for specific audiences. Identifying the author, intended audience, architecture, and context in which a text was composed— and then how it was transmitted across time in various manuscript redactions and recensions—is at least as important as what a text literally says. Origin, transmission, and context are crucial. Literature has its own history.

Regardless of genre and origin, early Georgian narratives ranging from biblical translations to original historiographical sources deploy a vocabulary studded with terms adapted from and shared with Iranian languages.³⁴ Parthian and Middle Persian are the most prominent, but other Iranian languages are represented, including East Iranian. From Hellenistic through medieval times, the brightest indication of this intimate linguistic connection is onomastic. K'art'velian proper names are an important gauge of the active membership of

³⁰ *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali* (1955: 193₆₋₁₀), English trans. by Thomson in *Rewriting Caucasian History* (1996: 209).

³¹ *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali* (1955: 170₉).

³² Rapp (2001) and *infra*.

³³ Deeper analysis in Rapp (2003, 2009, and 1997).

³⁴ Extensively cataloged in Andronikašvili (1966).

eastern Georgia, and the whole of Caucasia, in the Iranian Commonwealth. And they are a reminder of the sharp social and cultural differences between Caucasia and the Mediterranean world dominated by the Romano-Byzantine Empire. In the Sasanian epoch, the following monarchs sat upon the eastern Georgian throne:

| | | |
|-----------------|---|--|
| 216-234 | VAČ'E (vaCe) | *Wačak (?) ³⁵ |
| 234-249 Arm. | BAKUR I (bakur) | Pakur < Mlr. <i>bagpuhr</i> , "son of a god"; ³⁶ Bakur; see also below |
| 249-265 | MIRDAT II (mirdat) | Mehrdād, "created by Mehr/Mihr"; Arm. Mihrdat |
| 265-284 | ASP'AGUR I (asfagur) | possibly < OIr. <i>*asparauka-</i> , "having bright horses" ³⁷ |
| 284-361 | MIRIAN III (mirian) | var. Mirean; Mihrān; cf. Mirdat; ³⁸ Arm. Mihran ³⁹ |
| 363-380 | BAK'AR I (baqar) | Bahkar; Arm. Bakur; ⁴⁰ see also above |
| 365-380 | MIRDAT III (mirdat) | see above |
| 380-394 | VARAZ- BAK'AR II (varaz-baqar) | Varāz-Pakur < MPers. <i>varāz</i> , "wild boar"; Arm. Varaz |
| 394-406 | TRDAT (trdat) | Tirdād, "created by Tīr"; Arm. Trdat ⁴¹ |
| 406-409 | P'ARSMAN IV | Farsamana, but the Iranian background is |

³⁵ Andronikašvili (1966: 466-467).

³⁶ *The Epic Histories* (1989: 363-364).

³⁷ Abaev (1949: 157 and 177). See also Schmitt (1985: 13-38, esp. 20-23).

³⁸ *The Life of Vaxtang* obliquely equates Mirdat with Mirian through the name of Vaxtang's sister Mirianduxt, literally "daughter of Mirian." Their father was Mirdat V.

³⁹ Movsēs Xorenac'i (1913: 230-234), II.85-86.

⁴⁰ Movsēs Xorenac'i (1913: 328₁₇), III.54.

⁴¹ See Garsoïan in *The Epic Histories* (1989: 416-417) and Č'xeidze (1987: 95-105, 98).

| | | |
|---------|------------------------------|--|
| | (farsman) | uncertain— <i>p'ar-</i> is probably related to <i>xwarrah</i> via an older Iranian <i>farnah</i> ; Arm. P'arsman |
| 409-411 | MIRDAT IV (mirdat) | see above |
| 411-435 | ARČ'IL (arCil) | probably an indigenous Iranian name, but the etymology is uncertain ⁴² |
| 435-447 | MIRDAT V (mirdat) | Miθradāta, “given by Miθra [Mithra]”; Arm. Mhrdat |
| 447-522 | VAXTANG I (vaxtang) | cf. Vərəθraϥna, Vahrām; var. MPers. Vrθangj; Arm. Vahram |
| 522-534 | DAČ'I (daCi) | Dārčīhr |
| 534-547 | BAKUR II (bakur) | see above |
| 547-561 | P'ARSMAN V (farsman) | see above |
| 561-? | P'ARSMAN VI (farsman) | see above |
| ?-580 | BAKUR III (bakur) | see above |

Early K'art'velian historians occasionally link Georgian and Iranian royal names. About the first king of K'art'li to embrace Christianity, *The Life of the Kings* relates:

... [he] was called Mihran in Persian, but Mirian in Georgian.⁴³

Mirian/Mihran was a recently-arrived Parthian Mihrānid prince who assumed the K'art'velian throne. The hybrid dynasty he established is known locally as the Chosroids. But the received tradition obfuscates this background. Thus, the same ca. 800 text endows Mirian with an exaggerated pedigree, portraying him as the first-born son of an unspecified Sasanian *šāhan*

⁴² “Arjil” in Movsēs Xorenac'i (1913: 341₃), III.60.

⁴³ *The Life of the Kings* (1955: 64₈), English trans. by Thomson in *Rewriting Caucasian History* (1996: 75).



šah so as to adorn K'art'li's royalty with Sasanian *xwarrah*.⁴⁴ For its part, the ca. 800 *Life of Vaxtang* explains both the name and sobriquet of its hero:

Four years later Sagduxt [the daughter of the Sasanian viceroy of neighboring Albania] conceived and bore a son, who was called Varan-Xuasro-T'ang in Persian, but he was called Vaxtang in Georgian.⁴⁵

Embedded in a subsequent account of a battle pitting K'art'velian against Sasanian troops is an explanation of Gorgasali:

Now King Vaxtang had had made a helmet of gold; on the front it had a wolf, and on the back a lion. On whichever side the K'art'velians were being defeated, there he would advance and destroy the Iranian troops, like a lion [slaying] onagers. Therefore the Iranians were quite unable to fight him because they recognized him, on whom the wolf and lion were inscribed. And when they saw Vaxtang they would say: "*Dur az Gorgasal*," which means: "Flee the head of the wolf." Hence King Vaxtang was named Gorgasali.⁴⁶

The robust linguistic connection was by no means confined to proper names. Consider these representative adjectives and nouns from the hagiographical treatments of Sts. Šušanik, Gwrobandak-Evstat'i, and the nine children of Kolay. The following words exemplify a far larger assemblage of Iranian loans commonly used in the oldest surviving specimens of Georgian literature:

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| AMBORI (ambori) | "kiss" < Parth. * <i>hambōδ</i> ; Geo. via Arm. <i>hamboyr</i> ⁴⁷ |
| AMBOXI (amboxi) | "mob" < Parth. <i>hambōh</i> ; Arm. <i>ambox</i> ⁴⁸ |
| ATROŠANI (atrošani) | corrupted <i>artošani</i> , "[Zoroastrian] fire temple"; |

⁴⁴ There is no reason to doubt the inferred/reported intermarriages of Caucasian Parthians (and especially Arsacids and Mihrānids) and Sasanians. But Mirian's identification as the first-born son of a *šāhan šah* should not be accepted literally.

⁴⁵ *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali* (1955: 143₅₋₇), English trans. by Thomson in *Rewriting Caucasian History* (1996: 157-158).

⁴⁶ *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali* (1955: 180₉₋₁₄), English trans. by Thomson in *Rewriting Caucasian History* (1996: 197).

⁴⁷ *Vita Evstat'i* (1963/1964: 41₂₅), cap. 6. See also Andronikašvili (1966: 222-223), Schmitt (1986: 450), and Bielmeier (1994: 34).

⁴⁸ Iakob C'urtaveli, *Vita Šušanik* (1963/1964: 20₂₁ and 21₃), cap. 9. See also Schmitt (1986: 451 and 454) and Andronikašvili (1966: 223-224).

| | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| | | Arm. <i>atrušan</i> ; both probably < Parth. <i>āturš-</i> , “fire” (cf. MPers. <i>ātaxš</i>) ⁴⁹ |
| AXOVANI (axovani) | | “heroic” < Mlr. <i>axw axwān</i> , “being, existence, world”; Arm. <i>axoyan</i> ⁵⁰ |
| BAGINI (bagini) | “god, lord”; | “temple, sanctuary” < Parth. <i>baγ</i> , MPers. <i>bay</i> , lord”; Arm. <i>bagin</i> ⁵¹ |
| DIASPANI (diaspani) | <i>despan</i> ⁵² | “messenger, envoy” < Mlr. <i>bayaspān</i> , “[royal] messenger, envoy”; cf. Parth. <i>biaspān</i> ; Arm. |
| EŠMAKI (eSmaki) | | “devil, Satan” < MPers. <i>xēšm</i> , “anger, Wrath” ⁵³ |
| KERPI (kerpi) | | “idol” < Mlr. <i>kirb</i> , “body, form”; Arm. <i>kerp</i> ⁵⁴ |
| MARZAPANI (marzapani) | | “ <i>marzbān</i> ,” MPers. <i>marz[o]bān</i> < <i>marz</i> , “frontier, border, district, march” + suffix <i>-bān</i> , “keeper, guard”; Arm. <i>marzpan</i> ⁵⁵ |

⁴⁹ Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušanik* (1963/1964: 12₂₆), cap. 2, a Georgian *hapax*. The Armenian witness uses the expected form *atrušan*: the Armenian *Vita Šušanik*, cap. 2 = Hakob C’urtawec’i (1938: 5₁₂). See also Andronikašvili (1966: 225), Russell (1987: 482-483), and Garsoïan in *The Epic Histories* (1989: 511), “Atrušan.”

⁵⁰ Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušanik* (1963/1964: 27₂₅), cap. 17. See also Andronikašvili (1966: 288-289), MacKenzie (1986: 14), and Bedrossian (1875-1879, repr. 1985: 5).

⁵¹ *Vita Evstat’i* (1963/1964: 35₃₂ and 36₁), cap. 4. For the term, see Andronikašvili (1966: 225-226), MacKenzie (1986: 17), and Garsoïan in *The Epic Histories* (1989: 513-514), “Bagin.” According to Garsoïan, the Armenian renders a “[p]agan altar or shrine bearing a cult image, as opposed to a fire altar or *atrušan* or the Christian altar...”

⁵² Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušanik* (1963/1964: 12₁₃ [*sadiaspanoy*]), cap. 2. See also Bielmeier (2011), MacKenzie (1986: 17), and Andronikašvili (1966: 231).

⁵³ Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušanik* (1963/1964: 19₁₈), cap. 8, and *Vita Evstat’i* (1963/1964: 33₁₅ and 40_{9,12,14-15}), caps. 3 and 6. See also Andronikašvili (1966: 315-317), MacKenzie (1986: 94), and Bielmeier (1985: 34-35).

⁵⁴ *Vita Evstat’i* (1963/1964: 38₆), cap. 5, of the Israelites, and *Vita Children of Kolay* (1963/1964: 185₅), a vague allusion to local idols. See also MacKenzie (1986: 51), Andronikašvili (1966: 334-335), Schmitt (1986: 452), and Bielmeier (1990: 39-40).

⁵⁵ E.g., *Vita Evstat’i* (1963/1964: 30₁₋₂, 32_{9,23,27}, 33_{13,19-20,21,25,33}, and 34₁), caps. 1, 2, and 3. See also MacKenzie (1986: 54), Andronikašvili (1966: 340-341), Schmitt (1986: 451), and Garsoïan in *The Epic Histories* (1989: 544), “Marzpan.”

| | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|--|
| MOGWI | (mogÂi) | “mowbed, magus, Mazdean/Zoroastrian priest,” and the derivative < MPers. <i>maγūg</i> , an uncertain form; Arm. <i>mog</i> ⁵⁶ |
| NETARI | (netari) | “blessed” < MPers. <i>nēttar</i> , “better, best” ⁵⁷ |
| PITIAXŠI | (pitiaxSi) | “toparch, marcher-lord, viceroy”; MPers. <i>bidaxš</i> ; Arm. <i>bdeašx</i> ⁵⁸ |
| SPASPETI | (spaspeti) | “general, commander” < Parth. <i>spāδpat</i> , MPers. <i>spāhbed</i> ; Arm. <i>sparapet</i> ⁵⁹ |
| TOMI | (tomi) | “family, tribe, people” < MPers. <i>tōhm</i> , “seed, family,” Parth. <i>tōxm</i> > Arm. <i>tohm</i> ⁶⁰ |

Hundreds of such loans and adaptations occur in Old Georgian and Classical Armenian. Almost all pre-Islamic examples involve Parthian, Middle Persian, and more broadly, Middle Iranian languages. Currently we have no *direct* proof of earlier linguistic ties. But I have no doubt that associations with Old Persian and the like will someday be exposed. After all, Caucasia entertained close relations with Iran already in the Iron Age.⁶¹ Recent research has shown, for instance, the incorporation of southern Caucasia into the system of Achaemenid satrapies.⁶² Striking Achaemenid-like halls, perhaps palaces, have been found in all three

⁵⁶ Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušānik* (1963/1964: 23₁), cap. 11; and *Vita Evstat’i* (1963/1964: 30₃, 31₂₅, and 35₂₅), caps. 1, 2, and 4. For *mogobay/moguebay*, see Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušānik* (1963/1964: 23₃), cap. 11, *Vita Evstat’i* (1963/1964: 31₂₆, and 35_{26,29}), caps. 2 and 4. See also Gignoux (1972: 57), Bielmeier (1990: 34), Schmitt (1986: 448), and Andronikašvili (1966: 341-342).

⁵⁷ See, e.g. Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušānik* (1963/1964), caps. 2, 3, 4, *et sqq.*, and *Vita Evstat’i* (1963/1964: 30_{14,15}, 31_{8,19,21}, 32_{6,13}, 33_{4,17,22}, and 34₁₂), caps. 2 and 3. See also Andronikašvili (1966: 355-358).

⁵⁸ Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušānik* (1963/1964), caps. 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 16, and *Vita Evstat’i* (1963/1964: 34₃), cap. 3. See also MacKenzie (1986: 18), Andronikašvili (1966: 362-364), Schmitt (1986: 450), and Garsoïan in *The Epic Histories* (1989: 516-517), “Bdeašx.”

⁵⁹ Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušānik* (1963/1964: 11₈), cap. 1. See also MacKenzie (1986: 75), Bielmeier (1990: 433), Andronikašvili (1966: 371-372), Garsoïan in *The Epic Histories* (1989: 560-561), “Sparapet/Sparapetut’iwn,” and Schmitt (1986: 449).

⁶⁰ Iakob C’urtaveli, *Vita Šušānik* (1963/1964: 17₁₄), cap. 6. See also MacKenzie (1986: 83), Andronikašvili (1966: 379-380), Schmitt (1986: 452), and Garsoïan in *The Epic Histories* (1989: 565), “Tohm.”

⁶¹ For an overview, see Tsetschladze (2003).

⁶² Jacobs (1994) and Jacobs (2000).

Caucasian republics, including an impressive building at Gumbat'i in Kaxet'i. Remarkably, the architectural scheme of Gumbat'i's hall resembles structures in Persepolis itself.⁶³ Given its striking similarity to official buildings in the core of the empire, we must wonder whether Gumbat'i's hall was associated with an Achaemenid satrap. Or might Gumbat'i have been the residence of Achaemenid exiles following Alexander's conquest? Either explanation may help account for the enigmatic Aryan K'art'li, "Iranian K'art'li," attested in the medieval ecclesiastical corpus *Mok'c'evay k'art'lisay*.⁶⁴ For now, however, the prospect of the linkage of Achaemenid expatriates to Aryan K'art'li remains speculative. But Gumbat'i, at least, helps to establish the antiquity of Irano-Caucasian interplay.

Now that we have explored how received texts were written, with their mimicking of Iranian traditions and incorporation of Iranian vocabulary, we should turn to the second and more conventional technique of assessing Georgian narratives: an interrogation of what they literally say. There is, as we have seen, a pronounced divergence in the contents and interests of early Georgian saints' lives, on the one hand, and historiographical works, on the other. The former tend to treat Iran and all things Iranian with ambivalence, though they sometimes censure particular Sasanian officials headquartered in Caucasia for actions against specific Christians. Foremost among these imperial administrators are *marzbāns* and commandants of major fortresses (called *c'ixist'avis* in Georgian).⁶⁵ Surviving Georgian hagiographies deriving from the Sasanian age do not convey any systematized Zoroastrian persecutions against Christians in Caucasia.⁶⁶

The oldest surviving Georgian historiographies, three narratives composed at the turn of the eighth/ninth century, project a rather different picture—or, rather, they fill a different space of the canvas.⁶⁷ *The Life of the Kings*, *The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali*, and its continuation credited to Juanšer Juanšeriani (though there is good reason to dismiss this authorship)⁶⁸ were written just ahead of the revival of the K'art'velian monarchy by the Bagratid dynasty at the end of the ninth century. These literary monuments situate the experience of Caucasia squarely within that of Iran and not Rome/Byzantium. This is not simply an issue of imperial hegemony. Rather, the three compositions describe the structure of K'art'velian society as *fundamentally* Iranian. Even more conspicuous is the portrayal of K'art'velian kingship in Iranian-like terms over an extended period of time, from its Hellenistic-era establishment to the Christianization of the crown beginning in the early fourth century and *for at least half a millennium more*.

⁶³ Knauß (2000) and Knauss (2001).

⁶⁴ Rapp (2003: 250-252), including a translation of the relevant sources (pp. 258-259).

⁶⁵ On *marzbāns*, see Gignoux (1984).

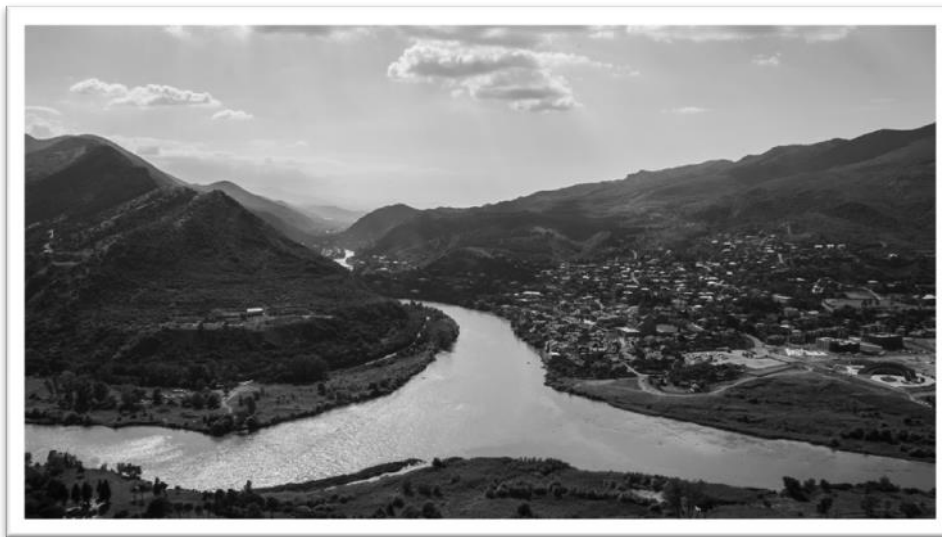
⁶⁶ Cf. very occasional allusions to religious persecution in historiographical texts, e.g., at the start of *The Life of Vaxtang*.

⁶⁷ Though it has some important historiographical features, the short, seventh-century *Conversion of K'art'li* is fundamentally a religious composition in structure and purpose. For the text, see Rapp and Crego (2006).

⁶⁸ Rapp (2003: 197-242).

Whereas these descriptions are infused with historical realities stretching back to Hellenistic if not late Achaemenid times, the particular images reaching us show signs of having been shaped in the late Sasanian era and reflect contemporaneous Iranian values.

Early Georgian historiographical literature clearly attests the close structural parallel of K'art'velian and Iranian society under the Parthian Arsacids and Sasanians. It implies, moreover, that the whole of southern Caucasia—the kingdoms of K'art'li, Armenia Major, and Albania—shared an Iranian social pattern. Like Iran itself, Caucasia's social landscape was dominated by strongly dynastic aristocratic families commanding great estates.⁶⁹ The most powerful houses marshaled considerable human and material resources. Over these families stood three dynastic monarchs. In Late Antiquity, the eastern Georgian king, *mep'e*, was headquartered at the city of Mc'xet'a just upriver on the Kura from the later capital Tp'ilisi. In Armenia Major prominent court positions were held hereditarily by powerful *naxarar* houses;⁷⁰ the same situation surely prevailed among the eastern Georgian *erist'avis*, although the received Georgian sources—with their strict royalist perspective—tend to be disappointingly vague on this point. But beyond any doubt is the porousness of Caucasia's royal “borders.” Kingly and noble families were never confined neatly to the area of each of the three Caucasian realms. Acculturated Parthians played an important role in this regard, with assimilated Arsacids and Mihrānids thriving in all three kingdoms. Also consider the unusual case of the dynastic borderlords of the bicultural Armeno-Georgian frontier. Adorned with the title *pitiaxši* in Georgian and *bdeašx* in Armenian (both obviously paralleling Middle Persian *bidaxš*), these largely autonomous figures were of mixed Armenian, K'art'velian, and Parthian ancestry. Starting in the fourth century, a dynasty of *pitiaxšis* nominally owing its allegiance to Mc'xet'a was derived from the Mihrānids.



Mc'xet'a, the ancient and late antique capital of K'art'li, at the confluence of the Kura and Aragvi Rivers.

⁶⁹ See esp. the publications of Cyril Toumanoff (e.g., 1963 and 1990).

⁷⁰ See, e.g., Adontz (1970), Toumanoff (1963), and the collected essays in Garsoïan (1985 and 1999).

Indeed, a number of prominent Caucasian families had a Parthian provenance. Some Parthians, like the Mihrānids, migrated directly from Iran in Late Antiquity. In Caucasia such Parthian émigrés acculturated to the local environment while strengthening and adding to its Iranian and syncretic Iranic dimensions. At various times acculturated branches of the Parthian Arsacids and Mihrānids occupied the thrones of all three Caucasian realms. Frequently intermarrying with one another, these Partho-Caucasians maintained political power for centuries after the consolidation of the Sasanians in Iran. But their experiences could differ drastically. Whereas the ruling Arsacids of Armenia Major were expelled from the throne by the Sasanians by 428, eastern Georgia's Chosroids (local ruling Mihrānids who had Christianized and intermarried with the previous P'arnavaziani royal dynasty, which itself was biologically linked to Caucasian Arsacids) retained power until their suppression by the Sasanians ca. 580.

The Parthian presence in Caucasia injected new potency to the Irano-Caucasian interface which, as noted, may be legitimately traced to Achaemenid times. It would therefore be incorrect to brand all Iranian and Iranic features of Caucasian society as introductions by Parthian newcomers.⁷¹ There can be no doubt, however, of the strengthening and broadening of the cultural interplay between Caucasia and Iran as a result of the waves of Parthians taking up residence in late antique Caucasia.

Parthian expatriates also influenced regional models of royal authority and attendant conceptions of history. According to *The Life of the Kings*, a ca. 800 text built squarely upon traditions emanating from the end of Late Antiquity, the eastern Georgian monarchy was inaugurated by a young K'art'velian aristocrat named P'arnavaz following the destruction of Achaemenid Persia by Alexander.⁷² P'arnavaz's received description is saturated with legend, to be sure, but the manner in which P'arnavaz is depicted is of enormous historical importance. First of all, the name P'arnavaz—which is a very old one in the K'art'velian royal onomasticon—demonstrates a claim by the early K'art'velian monarchy upon *xwarrah*, the divine radiance and glory marking legitimate kings in the Iranian world. Early Georgian historiographies preserve several royal names predicated upon the anlaut *p'ar-*, including P'arnavaz, P'arsman, and P'arnajob. These sources sometimes report a king's possession or loss of *didebay*, “greatness, glory,” the Old Georgian equivalent of *xwarrah*.

Given their association with the origins of K'art'velian political life, it is hardly surprising that *The Life of the Kings* affords special treatment to its initial eastern Georgian king P'arnavaz and the pillars of his political legitimacy. In a divinely-inspired dream P'arnavaz is supposed to have anointed himself with the essence of the Sun.⁷³ More broadly, P'arnavaz is presented as a foundational king in the style of the Iranian epic: he is credited *inter alia* with the creation of the Georgian script (an assertion lacking historical basis) and with establishing the social pattern predicated upon noble *erist'avi* houses. The anonymous historian openly acknowledges:

⁷¹ Cf. Burney and Lang (1972: 204).

⁷² See esp. *The Life of the Kings* (1955: 20-26), English trans. by Thomson in *Rewriting Caucasian History* (1996: 28-38).

⁷³ *The Life of the Kings* (1955: 21), English trans. by Thomson in *Rewriting Caucasian History* (1996: 29-30).



In this fashion did P'arnavaz order everything, imitating the kingdom of the Iranians."⁷⁴

This portrayal of P'arnavaz sets the historiographical tone for subsequent pre-Bagratid kings even beyond the Christianization of the monarchy.

By the time Vaxtang Gorgasali ascended the throne in the mid-fifth century, the eastern Georgian crown had been Christian for some twelve decades. Vaxtang's depiction demonstrates, however, that Christianization had not obliterated the entrenched Iranic model of K'art'velian kingship. Of all the K'art'velian monarchs since P'arnavaz, early Georgian historiography clothes Vaxtang in the boldest Iranic colors. As presented, Vaxtang's devotion to Christianity is wholly compatible with the Iranic dimensions of his authority. What's more, the two were combined in creative ways as we see in the elaboration of Vaxtang's supposed ancestry: he is made to be the direct descendant of the biblical Nimrod (Nebrot'i) who, in early Georgian literature, was imagined to be the first king upon the Earth *and an Iranian*. Since the early fourth century, eastern Georgian kingship had been a Christian one. And yet early Christian conceptions of K'art'velian royal authority had nothing to do with the fourth-century paradigm of Christian monarchy articulated by the Roman bishop Eusebius. The Eusebian Theory had broad appeal and formed the basis of kingship not only in the later Roman and then Byzantine empires but throughout medieval Europe. However, ruling élites of Christian eastern Georgia—like Armenia Major and, it is worth noting, Axum in the Horn of Africa—blazed their own syncretic political and ideological paths.

A pervasive element of late antique K'art'velian kingship is the Iranic notion of the royal hero. As had been the case with his predecessors, under Vaxtang's command was a corps of heroic champions. These *bumberazis*, as they are called in Old Georgian, were the most distinguished warriors in the king's service. Their image, like the monarch's, is magnified and extended in surviving literary accounts. First and foremost, *bumberazis* engaged in hand-to-hand combat with rival champions ahead of all-out conflict on the battlefield. Vaxtang not only commanded numerous valiant *bumberazis* but he is represented as the *bumberazi par excellence* by virtue of his kingly status. Several of Vaxtang's one-on-one contests with enemy *bumberazis* are afforded special treatment in his royal biography. Significantly, the received literary image of the *bumberazis* is reminiscent of the *aswārān* under Xusrō I (r. 531-579).⁷⁵ Among the honorifics accumulated by the *aswārān* was precisely *mumbāriz*, a word mimicked by the earliest attested Old Georgian form of *bumberazi*: *mumbarezi*.⁷⁶ Thus, the received image of the K'art'velian hero-king took final shape in the late Sasanian epoch.

As our discussion comes to a close, let us return to the deathbed scene of the great Vaxtang. It will be recalled that the dying king is made to say: "You, inhabitants of K'art'li, remember my good deeds because from my house you received eternal light, and I honored

⁷⁴ *The Life of the Kings* (1955: 25), English trans. by Thomson in *Rewriting Caucasian History* (1996: 35).

⁷⁵ Zakeri (1993: 68-87, 113-114, *et sqq*). See also Zakeri (1995).

⁷⁶ Anaseuli ("Queen Anne") redaction of *K'art'lis c'xovreba*: Georgian National Centre of Manuscripts Q-795, T'bilisi, pp. 10, 149, *et sqq*.



you, my kin, *with temporal glory* [ÃorcielebriTa didebiTa, q'orc'ielebri'ta didebit'a]..." (emphasis added). As a monarch who entertained a complex—and not always pleasant—relationship with the Christian Roman emperor, it was appropriate for the Iranic *and* Christian Vaxtang to make some distinction, in certain cases, between his inherent glory as an Iranic king and the glory imparted by the Christian God. The words put into Vaxtang's mouth include the qualification "temporal," an unmistakable signal of the divinely-bestowed *xwarrah* enshrouding Vaxtang.

Bolstered with the legitimacy of two great traditions, the K'art'velian monarch was in a unique position to shower his nobility with a Christianized Iranic glory. It would be incorrect to say only that Vaxtang was caught in an interstitial chasm between two rival worlds or that he merely had a foot in each. While these sentiments proceed from a kernel of truth, Vaxtang *actively and simultaneously* engaged and belonged to both worlds in a dynamic, cross-cultural space where these worlds intersected, mingled, and were mediated: the cosmopolitan Caucasian crossroads.⁷⁷ Ultimately, the Iranic threads of Vaxtang's identity proved far more dense, abundant, and durable. Centuries of Roman intervention and the lasting Christianization of Caucasia were not enough to thrust Caucasia decisively and exclusively into the Romano-Byzantine sphere. And so, for hundreds of years after their royal conversions, and for the duration of Late Antiquity, eastern Georgia's membership in the diverse Iranian Commonwealth was nourished and maintained.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ For Vaxtang as the mediator between Iran and Rome/Byzantium, see Rapp (1997: 421-423).

⁷⁸ Rapp (2012.a-b). This observation may be extended to the whole of Caucasia.

GEORGIAN TRANSLITERATION

| | | | |
|----------|--------|----------|----------|
| a | a | s | s |
| b | b | t | t |
| g | g | Â | w |
| d | d | u | u |
| e | e | f | p' |
| v | v | q | k' |
| z | z | R | † (gh) |
| À | ē | y | q |
| T | t' | S | š (sh) |
| i | i | C | č' (ch') |
| k | k | c | c' (ts') |
| l | l | Z | ž (dz) |
| m | m | w | c (ts) |
| n | n | W | č (ch) |
| Á | y | x | x |
| o | o | Ã | q' |
| p | p | j | j |
| J | ž (zh) | h | h |
| r | r | | |

TABLE OF LATE ANTIQUE GEORGIAN NARRATIVE SOURCES FOR SASANIAN HISTORY

Fifth century

Iakob C'urtaveli, *Vita Šušānik = The Passion of Šušānik*

Fifth/sixth century

Vita Children Kolay = The Passion of the Nine Children of Kolay

Seventh century

Vita Evstat'i = The Martyrdom of Evstat'i

*The Conversion of K'art'li***

*The Primary History of K'art'li*** (date uncertain)

Eighth/ninth century (especially ca. 790-813)

*The Life of the K'art'velian Kings**

*The Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali**

Continuation by Pseudo-Juanšer Juanšeriani*

Ninth/tenth century

Vita Nino/** = The Life of Nino*

*Royal Lists I-III*** (dates uncertain)

Eleventh century(?)

*The Life of the Successors of Mirian**

* Texts incorporated into the medieval historiographical corpus *K'art'lis c'xovreba*.

** Texts incorporated into the medieval ecclesiastical corpus *Mok'c'evay k'art'lisay*. For an overview and translation, see Lerner (2004); cf. Rapp (2003).

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