

Silver Coins of Queen Rusudan from Samshilde

(Discovery of 2019)

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On July 24, 2019, a pit burial was discovered near the ruins of Samshilde Sioni Cathedral on the territory of the former settlement of Samshilde (Kvemo Kartli region, South Georgia). Even though it was damaged by the occupation of the later periods, the artifacts uncovered there have helped determine the burial's chronology and cultural context. Along with disarticulated human remains, a completely corroded iron ring, pottery fragments, ten well-preserved 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 numismatic finds into scientific circulation as new data for an understanding of the history of Samshilde and medieval Georgia in general.¹

Keywords: Samshilde Kvemo Kartli, South Georgia

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

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

It is not clear when precisely the Cathedral was ruined, but following the tradition, this should happen after an 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 of Sioni Cathedral, are re-used.



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

In order to investigate these and other aspects, geophysical and archaeological works were planned and carried out around Sioni Cathedral in 2015-2016 (Berikashvili, Gabunia, Gagoshidze, Odilavadze, Ivanishvili & Lomidze, 2015, pp. 115-125). During these two years, 18 graves of the high medieval period were discovered to the North and North-East of the Cathedral. 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 archaeological research on this part of Samshvilde indicates, it was a 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 as a cemetery, and a certain number of graves must have been located here during this period.

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



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 an important person was buried there in a Christian manner. However, the archaeological material discovered in the grave helps us to determine its chronological frames and cultural belonging.

Archaeological finds

The corroded ring, a tall, an ovoid jug, a yellowish, middle-sized pot, and ten well-preserved silver coins were discovered in *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 assumed that the ring had a simple, circular shape.



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

Similar circular iron rings are well-known from the 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.

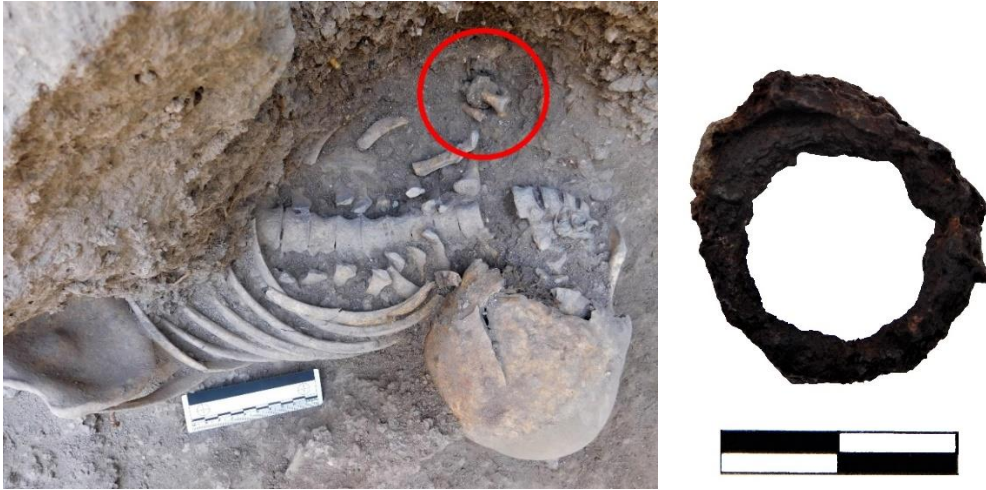


FIGURE 4. Corroded Iron Ring from the Grave No.4. (Photo by D. Berikashvili)

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

The pot is 26 cm high, the diameter of the mouth is 21 cm, and the diameter of the flat base is 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 is 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.



Figure 5. 2. The ovoid Jug from Grave No. 4. Samshvilde Sioni Area. 12th-13th cc.

(Restored 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. The diameter of the shoulders 23.5 cm and the diameter of the base is 12 cm. Even though some parts are missing, it was still possible to reconstruct its shape and determine the date. Based on similar 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) Samshvlde jug also belongs to 11th to 13th centuries.

Based on the typology and chronology of the pottery, the date of the *Grave No 4* can be determined to be between the 11th and 13th centuries. Moreover, this date is 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).



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 the 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 the central frame decorated with four circles alternating with five- and six-pointed stars.

Conclusions

As 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 usage of copper alloy for minting the coins was associated with the so-called "Silver Crisis." However, from the beginning of the 13th century, when the "Crisis" ended, the minting of the regular shaped silver coins began in Georgia during Queen Rusudan's reign (Dundua, 2006, p. 223).

Although Rusudan's drama is one of the most impressive silver coins in Georgian numismatics, many questions remain unclear, particularly the place of its minting. The main reason why there is still no clear answer to this question is the 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. Therefore, it can be said that all opinions expressed today regarding this question remain at the level of assumptions.

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

Unlike Pakhomov, David M. Lang, the Professor of Caucasian studies at the University of London supported the hypothesis that 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 time (Lang, 1955, p. 31).

There is also a hypothesis proposed by Georgian numismatists Giorgi and Tedo Dundua, who conclude that Rusudan's drama were minted in "Tskhumi," present-day Sokhumi in Abkhazia. This idea is not, however, supported by archaeological evidence and therefore needs more support (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 the geographical area where Rusudan's silver drama were minted, we consider that the most realistic assumption is that of David M. Lang, who assumed Tbilisi to be the leading centre for the minting of these coins. Furthermore, the geographical area of distribution and discovery of Rusudan's drama, confined mainly to Eastern Georgia, also supports this hypothesis.

Another problematic issue related to 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. One rare exception is the 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 the 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 also has 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 a summary of work on these issues appeared 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. Of particular importance is alloy composition, as there is still a significant 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 any interested parties. As for complex studies, this direction is still theoretical and as already mentioned, a separate article will be dedicated to these issues.

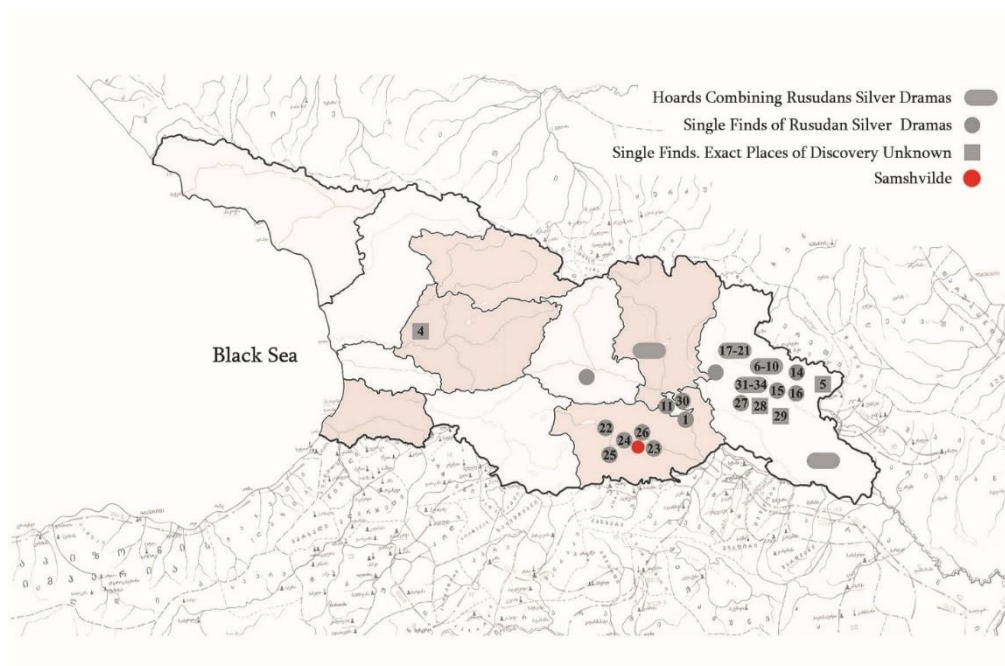
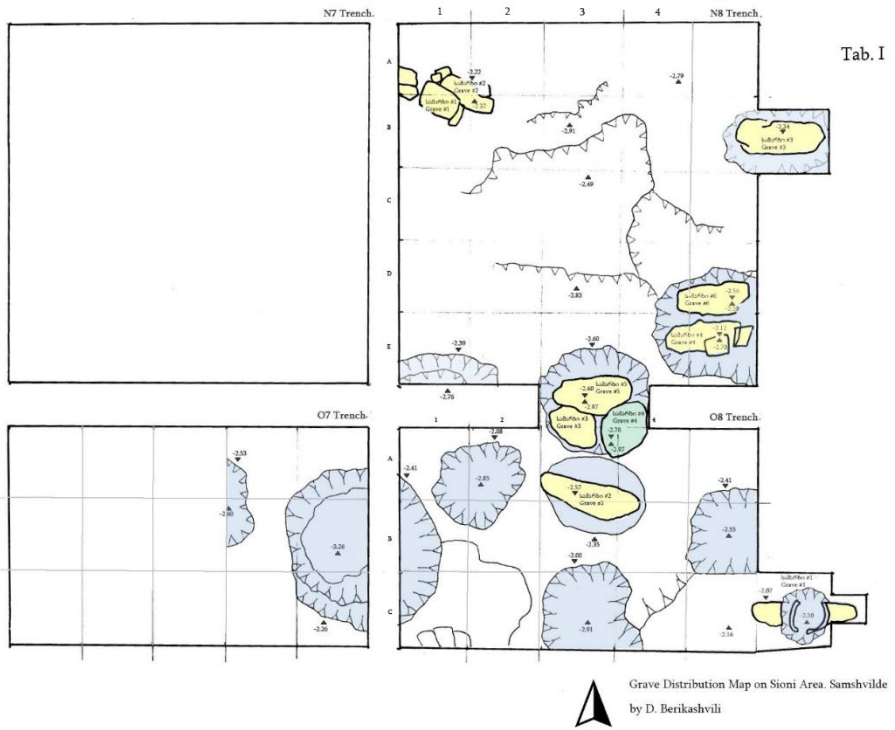


FIGURE 7. The locations where silver coins of Rusudan were discovered:

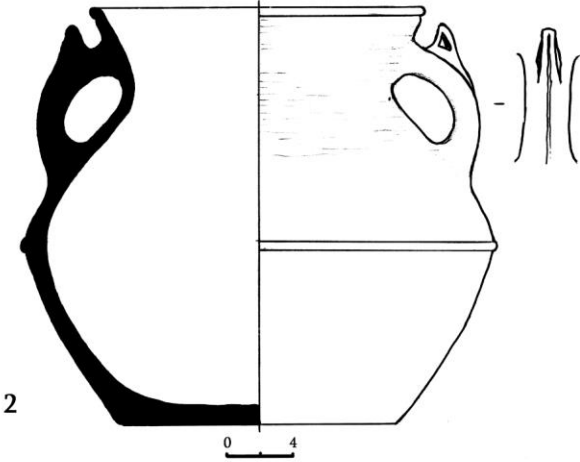
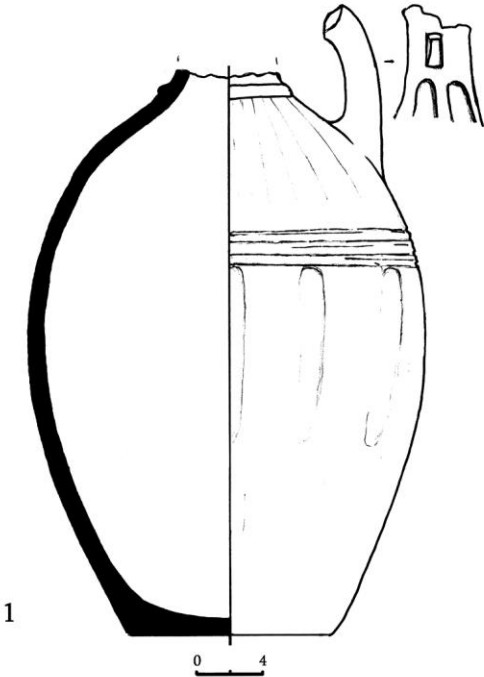
1. Tbilisi surroundings; 4. West Georgia. Exact location unknown; 5. Kakheti; 6-10. Telavi surroundings. "Telavi Hoard"; 11. Tbilisi. The gorge of Riv. Mtkvari; 14. Akhalsopeli, Kakheti; 15-16. Kvareli, Kakheti; 17-21. Akhmeta Region (?), Kakheti; 22-25. Kvemo Kartli; 26. Village Arakhlo. Bolnisi Region;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

Table 1



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.