

# The Lost Pages in the History of Sixth-Century Georgia

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## ABSTRACT

The chronicle *The Life of Vakhtang Gorgasali* by Juansher Juansheriani relates that after the death of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, his eldest son, Dachi, ascended the throne. Little information about Dachi Ujarmeli (Dachi of Ujarma), also known as King Darchil, has survived. Until recently, even the years of his reign had not been determined. This article reviews Professor Manana Sanadze's monograph *The King of Kartli of the Sixth Century, Darchil (the Son of Vakhtang Gorgasali), and the Chronicles Describing His Life* (Tbilisi, 2020).

*Keywords:* Dachi of Ujarma, Vakhtang Gorgasali, Kartli of the 6<sup>th</sup> c., Manana Sanadze

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## INTRODUCTION

The famous chronicle *The Life of Vakhtang Gorgasali* by Juansher Juansheriani relates that after the death of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, his eldest son, Dachi, ascended the throne: “And his son Dachi sat on his throne” ([The Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955, p. 204](#)). According to the same work, Vakhtang Gorgasali and his wife, Queen Balendukht, the daughter of the king of Persia, had twins – a son and a daughter. The queen “passed away during childbirth”. Vakhtang “named his son Darchil in Persian and Dachi in Georgian” ([The Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955, p. 178](#)). Little information about Dachi of Ujarma, also known as King Darchil, has survived to the present day. Until recent times, even the years of his reign had not been determined. Scholarly and reference literature refer to him as Dachi of Ujarma, king of Kartli in the early sixth century. He was brought up in Ujarma and is therefore known by this epithet. According to Juansher’s account, King Dachi completed the construction of Tbilisi’s city walls, a project initiated during his father’s reign, Vakhtang Gorgasali. Following his father’s will, he also relocated the capital from Mtskheta to Tbilisi ([Georgian Soviet Encyclopedia, 1978, p. 410](#); [Encyclopedia Saqartvelo, 2012, p. 342](#)).

Professor Manana Sanadze has dedicated a monographic study to the life and deeds of Dachi of Ujarma, entitled *The King of Kartli of the Sixth Century, Darchil (the Son of Vakhtang Gorgasali), and the Chronicles Describing His Life* ([Sanadze, 2020](#)). In this review, we aim to highlight the significance of Prof. M. Sanadze’s research in the field of history.

Recently, M. Sanadze has been actively researching issues related to the history of ancient and early medieval Georgia, particularly the reign of Vakhtang Gorgasali and his successors, as well as the composition of the opening part of *The Kartlis Tskhovreba* (A History of Georgia). Notably, the researcher proposes a new dating for the reign of Vakhtang Gorgasali.

Refining the period of Vakhtang Gorgasali’s reign is essential for accurately determining the year of his death. Ivane Javakhishvili (1876–1940) proposed that Vakhtang Gorgasali died in 502. This date is based on Juan’s accounts, which indicate that Vakhtang’s death occurred at the onset of the Byzantine–Persian War. Javakhishvili identified this conflict as the war between Byzantium and Persia from 502 to 506, thereby dating Vakhtang’s death to the autumn of 502 ([Javakhishvili, 1979, p. 329](#)).

Historian and literary critic Sergi Gorgadze (1876–1929) proposed a slightly later date, placing this event in 503 ([Gorgadze, 1913, pp. 64–67](#)). The date of Vakhtang Gorgasali’s death is usually regarded in Georgian historiography as 502/503, or the end of the fifth and the start of the sixth centuries ([Berdzenishvili, 1958, p. 97](#); [Janashia, 1979, p. 336](#); [Lordkipanidze, 1979, pp. 87–88](#); [Alasania, 2008, pp. 34–45](#); [Silogava & Shengelia, 2007, pp. 49–50](#)). Nonetheless, alternative interpretations have been imposed. For example, researcher Vakhtang Goiladze suggests an earlier date of 491 ([Goiladze, 1991, pp. 70–76](#)).

Some scholars initially believed that Vakhtang’s death occurred after the late 5th or early 6th century. Historian Mose Janashvili (1855–1934) dated the event initially to 499 ([Janashvili, 1894, p. 43](#)). However, in his later work, *History of Georgia* (1906), he re-

vised his position, dating Vakhtang's death to 532 and associating it with the battle against Khosrow I Anushirvan ([Janashvili, 1906, p. 225](#)). The distinguished medieval Caucasian historian Cyril Toumanoff (1913–1997) estimated Vakhtang Gorgasali's death around 523 ([Toumanoff, 1963, pp. 369-370](#)). Manana Sanadze has also drawn attention to Janashvili's dating of Vakhtang's death to 532.

According to Manana Sanadze, Vakhtang Gorgasali's reign, instead of the traditionally accepted second half of the 5th century, covers the end of the 5th century and the first third of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. She links his death 531 to his battle with the Persian Shah, Khosrow Anushirvan (531–579).

Scant information about King Dachi (Darchil) is preserved in noted works by Juansher and other chronicles, as well as in *Moktsevai Kartlisai* (The Conversion of Kartli). However, as M. Sanadze has found, the chronicles, which supposedly recount the lives of the Princes of Kartli – Mihr and Archil, actually describe the life and deeds of Dachi (Darchil) and his half-brother, Mihrdat (Mihr). This is because Leonti Mroveli (11<sup>th</sup> century) mistakenly identified Darchil and his brother Mihrdat as the sons of King Stephanos III of Kartli, Mihr and Archil.

After the death of Vakhtang Gorgasali and following the Persian occupation of the big parties of Kartli, Dachi (Darchil) moved to Western Georgia and sought help from the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (527–565). Meanwhile, in 532, a peace treaty was signed between the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanid Persia, known as the Treaty of Eternal Peace.

Based on various sources, earlier, a researcher, Tamaz Beradze, assumed that the provisions of the 532 Byzantine-Persian Treaty of Eternal Peace were reflected in Vakhtang Gorgasali's will. Still, he believed that Juansher had synthesized the events of Vakhtang Gorgasali's period with those of the Great Persian-Byzantine War of 542-562 ([Beradze, 2023, pp. 342-343](#)). New dating of Vakhtang Gorgasali's reign by Sanadze has clarified that the provisions of the Treaty of Eternal Peace were indeed reflected in his will.

According to Vakhtang Gorgasali's will, Dachi (Darchil), as his heir, succeeded to the royal throne, while his half-brothers received the benefice. The principalities of Tsunda, Klarjeti, and Odzrkhe (Saeristavo) are equivalent to those of Samtskhe, Klarjeti, and Javakheti. They also received the region between Egristskali and Klisura rivers as their inheritance from their mother. According to the terms of the Treaty of 532, Vakhtang Gorgasali's second wife, Queen Elena, along with her children, inherited three principalities located in the southwestern region of the Kingdom of Kartli – Tsunda, Klarjeti, and Odzrkhe. This territory came under the Byzantine protectorate. The ruler of this part of Kartli, holding the title of Patricius (Byzantine governor), was Vakhtang Gorgasali's son, Mihrdat (Mihr).

According to Sanadze's interpretation, Dachi was in Egrisi (western Georgia) between 532 and 542, before the start of military hostilities between the Byzantines and Persians in Georgia. At that time, Kartli was governed by a Persian official, a Marzpan, appointed by the Shah, who was stationed in Tfilisi. During the treaty period, Dachi of Ujarma asked his brother, Mihrdat, to yield control of the territory between the Egristskali and Klisura rivers in exchange for receiving the northern part of Javakheti, from the Mtkvari (Kura) River to

Lake Paravani. For Dachi, who was stationed in Egrisi, the territory between Egristskali (the Enguri River) and Klisura (Kelasuri) was more important than the northern part of Javakheti, which lay between the Mtkvari River and Lake Paravani; for Mihrdat, however, the region between the Mtkvari River and Paravani Lake was of greater significance. Therefore, their interests aligned, and the territories were exchanged.

## **METHODS**

This review is based on established research methods in historical source studies and historiography. We employed methods of corroborating various written sources and critically analyzing primary sources and scholarly literature, which enabled us to present historical facts and events comprehensively and to assess the scholarly value of the work.

## **RESULTS**

In our review, we noted that M. Sanadze's work is a fascinating monographic study that presents much scientific news. The author argues that the chronicles, which supposedly recount the lives of the princes of Kartli, Mihr and Archil, in fact describe the life and deeds of Dachi (Darchil) and his half-brother, Mihrdat (Mihr). This is because Leonti Mroveli (11<sup>th</sup> century) mistakenly identified Darchil and his brother Mihrdat as the sons of King Stephanos III of Kartli, Mihr and Archil. The work studies the activities of Dachi (Darchil) in Egrisi, his subsequent settlement in Kakheti, his state activities, and his tragic end. The hagiographer used the era of the Arabs as a historical backdrop when rewriting the events described in the 6th-century historical chronicle. This resulted in the narrative being placed two centuries later than its actual historical timeframe. Based on relevant excerpts from *The Martyrdom of David and Constantine*, *The Kartlis Tskhovreba*, and *The Martyrdom of Archil* by Leonti Mroveli, our researcher has restored the lost pages of the 6th-century history of Georgia. M. Sanadze also observes that Leonti Mroveli did not always adhere to the chronology of the original source when working with the chronicle at his disposal. She suggests that the hagiographer placed the events against the backdrop of the rule of Mervan ibn Muhammad and the Arab period, which caused a disconnection between the story's actual timeline and its presentation. Moreover, Leonti Mroveli didn't seem particularly concerned with preserving the chronology of the source. Leonti Mroveli placed Archil's reconstruction activities in Egrisi after the Arab invasion had ended. Furthermore, M. Sanadze reasonably suggests that the fortress being constructed on the border between Guria and Greece, as described in the text by Leonti Mroveli, is the one built by Dachi (Darchil) upon his arrival in Egrisi, with the permission and support of the Byzantine emperor. This fortress-city was situated in the far southwestern region of the country, near the sea, at the border between Guria and the Byzantine Empire. The border of the Byzantine Empire was a day's journey away from this fortress. M. Sanadze also writes that the one goal of the Persian campaign during the Great War was not only to capture Byzantine fortresses but also to capture the sons of Vakhtang Gorgasali – Dachi (Darchil) and his younger brother, Patricius Mihrdat (Mihr). In the final part of the monograph, the Georgian

Historian discusses Dachi of Ujarma's activities in Kakheti. According to the researcher, the king's martyrdom occurred between 558 and 564. The martyred king's body was buried in the church he had built in Notkori (Nodokra).

In conclusion, we are presented with a fascinating monographic study offering numerous new insights into the life and deeds of Dachi (Darchil), son of King Vakhtang I Gorgasali, a heroic and martyred king. Some of the arguments presented in the monograph will undoubtedly provoke debate, and certain theses will require further clarification and substantiation in the future, but this is perfectly natural for a scientific work that addresses a relatively less studied and distant historical period. It can confidently be said that the monograph is a valuable contribution to historical science and will undoubtedly benefit further development of the field.

## **DISCUSSION**

M. Sanadze correctly emphasizes that the cause of the military conflict between the Byzantine Empire and Persia in the mid-6th century was control over the Great Silk Road and associated trade routes. The Byzantine Empire sought to maintain control over the northern branch of the Silk Road, which passed from China and Sogdiana through the North Caucasus, Egrisi, and the Black Sea to Byzantine territory. Persia, on the other hand, sought to seize control of this route. Both empires needed to gain control over Egrisi to achieve this goal, but for Persia, it first required subduing Kartli. The researcher correctly notes that the best way for Persia to subdue Kartli would be to sever its spiritual ties with the Byzantine Empire and eradicate Christianity. This would break Kartli's spiritual, cultural, and ultimately political ties with the Byzantine Empire, which could be achieved only by converting the Royal Court of Kartli to Zoroastrianism or by abolishing the monarchy. Therefore, Vakhtang Gorgasali addressed Patriarch Peter with the following words: "You should be aware, for it is not the payment of tribute that they demand, but the abandonment of Christ" ([The Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955, p. 201](#)).

According to M. Sanadze, the reign of Vakhtang Gorgasali and his successors became unacceptable to Persia because the King of Kartli had offered the Byzantine Empire the right to pass through his kingdom along the northern branch of the Silk Road. To facilitate this, Vakhtang Gorgasali conquered and subdued the historical regions of Khunzeti and Tsukheti in southern Dagestan and built or strengthened a chain of fortresses: Khornabuji, Cheremi, Ujarma, Mtskheta, and Artanuji, in the territory from the sources of the River Samur to the Black Sea. The latter – Artanuji – was connected to the Black Sea through the Nigali Gorge. Earlier, researcher Manana Gabashvili studied the circumstances surrounding the founding of Artanuji. Through Artanuji and the Pontic city of Trapezus, the Kingdom of Kartli was involved in international trade between the East and West, particularly Levantine trade, with Tbilisi, the northern key point of this network, also founded by Vakhtang Gorgasali ([Gabashvili, 2009, pp. 144-145](#)).

The Prince Dachi (Darchil) played a crucial role in implementing his father's foreign political agenda. As a co-regent, he was entrusted with the governance of the principality of

Hereti. It was Dachi who, together with his father, and sometimes on his own, subdued Khunzeti, Tsuketi, and “the mountainous region of Kakheti“ as described in *The Kartlis Tskhovreba* (The Life of Kartli).

Under the Treaty of 532, Persia, which had established control over Kartli, blocked the Silk Road leading from the sources of the River Samur toward Kartli. Following this, Persia’s primary objectives were to reach the Black Sea, directly subjugate Egrisi (also known as Lazica in Byzantine sources), and close the northern route through the Caucasus Mountains, which led from western Georgia to the Byzantine Empire.

In 541, hostilities resumed between Persia and the Byzantine Empire in the historical region of Mesopotamia. In this situation, the ruler of Egrisi, King Gubaz I, invited the Persians to Egrisi to free himself from the domination of Vakhtang Gorgasali and his ally, the Byzantine Empire. As a result, in 542, the Persian army entered Georgia. Due to the campaign’s significance, it was led by the Persian Shah, Khosrow Anushirvan himself. According to M. Sanadze, the battle between Dachi (Darchil) and his younger brother Mihrdat (Mihr) against the Persians invading Egrisi and the subsequent events are reflected in Georgian chronicles. One of these, likely written in Greek, formed the basis for an unknown author’s 11th-century hagiographical work, *The Martyrdom of David and Constantine*. In 2013, M. Sanadze and Goneli Arakhamia published the reconstructed text and relevant research on this 6th-century historical chronicle (Sanadze, Arakhamia, 2013).

It appears that, while rephrasing the story described in the sixth-century historical chronicle, the hagiographer used the Arab period as the historical background. In doing so, he distanced the story narrated in the newly created hagiographic work from the real time by two centuries. M. Sanadze, based on the relevant excerpts from *The Martyrdom of David and Constantine*, *The Kartlis Tskhovreba*, and *The Martyrdom of Archil* by Leonti Mroveli, has restored the lost pages of the 6<sup>th</sup>-century history of Georgia.

M. Sanadze also notes that Leonti Mroveli, when working with the chronicle at his disposal, did not always adhere to the original source’s chronology. She suggests that the hagiographer placed the events against the backdrop of the rule of Mervan ibn Muhammad and the Arab period, which caused a disconnection between the story’s actual timeline and its presentation. Moreover, Leonti Mroveli did not appear to be particularly concerned with preserving the chronology of the source. For example, if Archil had fled from the Arab general to Egrisi, who is believed to have chased after him, as accounted by Leonti Mroveli, he would not have had time to carry out peaceful reconstruction activities in Egrisi. Therefore, Leonti Mroveli placed Archil’s reconstruction activities in Egrisi after the Arab invasion had ended. Furthermore, M. Sanadze reasonably suggests that the fortress being constructed on the border between Guria and Greece, as described in the text by Leonti Mroveli, is the one built by Dachi (Darchil) upon his arrival in Egrisi, with the permission and support of the Emperor of Byzantium. This fortress might be Petra, referenced in Byzantine sources. This fortress-city was located in the extreme southwestern part of the country, on the border between Guria and the Byzantine Empire, near the sea. The border of the Byzantine Empire was a day’s journey away from this fortress.

It is noteworthy that, during the time of Vakhtang Gorgasali and his successor, Egrisi, as part of the Kingdom of Kartli, consisted of two significant areas: Egrisi (comprising Inner Egrisi and Svaneti) and the principalities of Argveti. The latter region was located on the left bank of the Rioni River and encompassed Guria and Takveri (Lechkhumi). Based on the accounts of Procopius of Caesarea and the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Georgian chronicles, M. Sanadze has reconstructed the route by which the Persians invaded Egrisi. The old Georgian chronicle, which served as the basis for *The Martyrdom of David and Constantine*, states: “And when the ungodly took the rule of the Persians ... and they attacked the Christians ... they came to Samtskhe and camped near the strongholds”. Then it continues: “The pagans rose in Samtskhe and moved toward the country of Argveti”.

Thus, the Persians advanced from Samtskhe, crossing the foothills of the Odzrkhe and the ridge of Meskheti-Imerti (Persati), and entered Egrisi through the mountain pass of Rkinisjvari. The Persian army that crossed into Egrisi from Samtskhe headed left through the Khanistskali River gorge, toward Petra. At the same time, Khosrow Anushirvan decided to attack Sebastopolis (modern-day Sokhumi) and Pitiunt (modern-day Bichvinta) and sent part of his army in that direction. According to M. Sanadze, the goal of the Persian campaign was not only to capture Byzantine fortresses but also to capture the sons of Vakhtang Gorgasali – Dachi (Darchil) and his younger brother, Patricius Mihrdat (Mihr) - who had taken refuge there. It was against this Persian army that the rulers of Argveti, David and Constantine, confronted.

According to *The Martyrdom of David and Constantine*, the Georgians defeated the vanguard of the Persian army advancing toward Sebastopolis. It was only after the main Persian army arrived that the resistance of the Argveti princes was overcome. In the unequal battle, the army of the Argveti princes was defeated, and the Persians captured David and his brother Constantine. The Persian commander demanded that they renounce Christianity, but after they refused, the Persians tortured and executed them. The political centre of the Argveti principality – the fortress-city of Tskaltsitela – was plundered and burnt to ashes. Afterward, the Persian army advanced to seize Sebastopolis and Pitiunt. The Byzantines, to prevent these fortresses from falling into enemy hands, burned Sebastopolis and Pitiunt, tore down the walls of their fortifications, and withdrew by sea. The Persian army raided the areas around Sebastopolis and Pitiunt but was unable to establish a foothold there due to the Byzantines’ destruction of the fortifications.

This episode from *The Martyrdom of David and Constantine* is recounted as follows: “And the sons of the great King Vakhtang Gorgasali, Archil (Mihr, – B. Kh.) and Darchil, went to the fortress called Anakopia, because they were terrified of the Persians. However, they managed to repel the pagans after a battle with them, with their modest army”.

According to Procopius of Caesarea, many Persians perished during the retreat from Anakopia due to the difficult terrain, a plague, and a food shortage. Meanwhile, Khosrow Anushirvan took the fortress of Petra, but due to Byzantine successes in Mesopotamia, he was forced to abandon Egrisi. The Persian army, while retreating from Anakopia, crossed the Rioni and Khanistskali rivers and, passing through Guria, joined the main Persian force at Petra. From there, together with Khosrow, they left Egrisi via the Speri route.

Subsequently, a temporary peace agreement was reached between the Byzantine Empire and Persia in 545, and Persia began to strengthen its control over Egrisi. Soon after, the ruler of Inner Egrisi and Svaneti, Gubaz, sided with the Byzantines and sought assistance from the Emperor in expelling the Persians from the region. Fearing that the Byzantines would capture Petra, the Shah sent a large army in 550, led by the renowned commander Mermeroes. From this point onward, the Persians firmly controlled all of Egrisi until 554.

In the final part of her monograph, Manana Sanadze discusses Dachi's activities in Kakheti, recounting that after the Persians had taken complete control of Egrisi, Dachi's presence in the region became unsafe, and therefore, he moved to Kakheti. The researcher argued that this event occurred during the signing of the peace treaty between Byzantium and Persia in 545.

Dachi (Darchil) rule extended over Kakhet-Kukheti and Hereti, where he worked to strengthen and develop the left bank of the Alazani River in Hereti. He built the fortresses of Kasri and Lakuasti and converted the population of Nukhpati (Nukha, Shaki) to Christianity. He also attempted to restore influence over Khundzeti and Tsuketi, which had been subdued earlier by Vakhtang Gorgasali. In this context, a Persian army invaded Kakheti to capture him.

King Dachi decided to approach the Persian commander and request peace, protection of the churches, and the "non-requirement of renouncing the faith" ([The Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955, p. 245](#)). Thus, Dachi requested that the Persian commander not punish them for renouncing the faith. This reference suggests that the kings of Kartli were of Sassanian descent, having abandoned Zoroastrianism and adopted Christianity. In the past, King Vakhtang himself had addressed the Persian ruler, saying: "If you fight us for having renounced the faith..." ([The Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955, p. 181](#)). The Persian commander, upon hearing that the king of Kartli had refused to renounce Christianity and return to Zoroastrianism, ordered his execution on March 20. According to the researcher, the king's martyrdom occurred sometime between 558 and 564. The martyred king's body was buried in the church he had built in Notkori (Nodokra).

The work includes excerpts from *The Moktsevai Kartlisai*, *The Kartlis Tskhovreba*, and *The Martyrdom of David and Constantine*, which describe the life and deeds of King Dachi (Darchil), as well as relevant passages from Procopius of Caesarea, allowing the reader to access the primary sources directly. The monograph is well-illustrated with appropriate maps, making the content more comprehensible.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, we are presented with a fascinating monographic study offering numerous new insights into the life and deeds of Dachi (Darchil), son of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, a heroic and martyred king. Some of the arguments presented in the monograph will undoubtedly provoke debate, and certain theses will require further clarification and substantiation in the future, but this is perfectly natural for a scientific work that addresses a relatively less stud-

ied and distant historical period. It can confidently be said that the monograph is a valuable contribution to historical science and will undoubtedly benefit further development of the field.

### **Ethics Approval and Conflict of Interest**

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards. The authors declare that there are no financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the design, conduct, interpretation, or publication of this work.

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### **Declaration of competing interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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