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SHORT ARAMAIC INSCRIPTIONS FROM ANCIENT SOUTHERN CAUCASIA

■ Abstract

This article presents an exhaustive corpus of brief Aramaic inscriptions from ancient Southern Caucasia. Three major types of Aramaic scripts were in use during the period from the 7th century BCE to the 3rd century CE: Imperial Aramaic, Parthian, and Armazic. The economic, social, political and religious aspects of the life in the ancient kingdoms of Armenia and Caucasian Iberia appear through attestations on wall stones, ostraca, bone plates, silver dishes and everyday utensils.

Keywords: Aramaic epigraphy, South Caucasia, Armenia, Caucasian Iberia, Aristocracy, Elites, Classical and Late Antiquity.

If it goes without saying that Aramaic in its various written and oral forms occupied a central place as a language of communication in the ancient societies of the Near and Middle East from the Achaemenid period, epigraphic evidence suggests that its importance with regard to the territories of Southern Caucasia deserves some additional clarifications. While Greek, Armenian and Georgian inscriptions from this region of Eurasia have already been published in epigraphic corpora, this is not yet the case for Aramaic attestations, whose place in the field of caucasology is more discreet¹. Because of disciplinary barriers, few scholars in Semitic languages are interested in studying Caucasian inscriptions, while few Caucasologists have been trained to interpret these materials. This paper, dealing with the brief Aramaic inscriptions of Southern Caucasia, is an attempt to bridge the gap between Semitic and Caucasian studies and to provide the necessary information for an exhaustive review of ancient epigraphic documents. This article is primarily concerned with

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¹ T. GREENWOOD, *A Corpus of Early Medieval Armenian Inscriptions*, «Dumbarton Oaks Papers», 58 (2004), pp. 27-91. T. GREENWOOD, *Armenian Epigraphy*, in *Armenian Philology in the Modern Era, From Manuscript to Digital Text*, edited by V. Calzolari, Leiden-Boston 2014, pp. 101-121. A. HOENEN, L. SAMUSHIA, *Gepi: An Epigraphic Corpus for Old Georgian and a Tool Sketch for Aiding Reconstruction*, «Journal for Language Technology and Computational Linguistics», 31, 2 (2016), pp. 25-38. However, a digital project of database led by Ilia State University, Georgia, includes Aramaic inscriptions.

materials which have not yet been studied and does not provide an in-depth analysis of inscriptions that have already been addressed by substantial works, namely the Boundary Stones of King Artasēs from Zangezur in Lake Sevan region², the stele of Šargas³ and the tombstone of Sērapeitis from Armazi⁴, as well as the amulet of Abraham from Mc'xet'a⁵.

During the Arshakid period (3rd BCE – 3rd c. CE), several types of Aramaic scripts were observed on epigraphy from Southern Caucasia (tables 1 & 2)⁶. Seven of them were written on silver plates, five concern steles or land markers, seven deal with fragments of pottery, three are graffiti or very short inscriptions on stone, eight are engraved on bone plates, one on a ring, one on a bracelet, one on a gold amulet and one on a spoon. Most of these attestations regard the territory of former Caucasian Iberia (nowadays Eastern Georgia)⁷, and to a lesser extent Armenia and Abkhazia (Fig. 26). Thirty-four Aramaic inscriptions have been recorded in South Caucasia so far, including twenty-nine in Iberia. Apart from royal titles on Iranian coins, no evidence of Aramaic epigraphy has been found in Caucasian Albania⁸. Three or four groups of inscriptions can be distinguished according to the type of writing.

- First, the Imperial Aramaic that spread during the Achaemenid and Seleucid times in Asia Minor. It is possible to classify in this category the inscription of the silver dish with the swans from Kazbek, the boundary stones of King Artasēs in Armenia, and some short epigraphs on pottery from Up'lisc'ixe and Dedop'lis Gora in Iberia.
- Then, the Parthian script, adopting the heterographic framework of Aramaic, which developed in Southern Caucasia between the 2nd century BCE and the 3rd century CE. This category is represented by Tiridatēs's dish from the necropolis of Samt'avro in Mc'xet'a.
- Third, coexisting with Parthian is Armazic, a Caucasian form of Aramaic writing related to the North-Mesopotamian type, whose status and specificities

² A. DUPONT-SOMMER, *Deux inscriptions araméennes trouvées près du lac de Sevan (Arménie)*, «Syria», 25, 1 (1946), pp. 53-66. X. TREMBLAY, J.-P. MAHÉ, *Les inscriptions araméennes d'Arménie*, in *Arménie, la magie de l'écrit*, edited by C. Mutafian, Marseille 2007, pp. 23-25.

³ N. PREUD'HOMME, *La stèle des victoires du pitahš Šargas et la réaffirmation de la domination royale en Ibérie du Caucase*, «Camenulae», 22 (2019), pp. 1-20.

⁴ G.V. CERET'ELI, *The Bilingual Inscription from Armazi near Mcheta in Georgia*, «Bulletin de l'Institut Marr de Langues, d'Histoire et de Culture Matérielle», XIII (1942), pp. 49-83. J. OELSNER, *Bemerkungen zur schriftgeschichtlichen Einordnung der Inschriften aus Armazi*, «Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich Schiller Universität Jena, Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe», 22.3 (1973), pp. 429-438.

⁵ K. CERET'ELI, *An Aramaic Amulet from Mtskheta*, in *D. Baazov Museum of History and Ethnography of Jews of Georgia. Works*, vol. IV, edited by G. Gambashidze, Tbilisi 2006, pp. 225-247.

⁶ K. CERET'ELI, *სემიტოლოგიური და ქართველოლოგიური სტუდიები*, Tbilisi 2001, p. 343.

⁷ F. SCHLEICHER, *Iberia Caucasia, ein kleinkönigreich im Spannungsfeld grosser Imperien*, Stuttgart 2021.

⁸ About this Eastern Caucasian kingdom contemporary to Iberia and Ancient Armenia, see M. BAIS, *Albania Caucasia. Ethnos, storia, territorio attraverso le fonti greche, latine e armene*, Milan 2001. A.K. ALIKBEROV, M.S. Gadjev (eds.), *Albania Caucasia I*, Moscow 2015. R. HOYLAND (ed.), *From Caucasian Albania to Arran (300 BC - AD 1300). People, country and history*, Piscataway 2020.

have been debated⁹. The Armazic script was established by Giorgi Ceret'eli with his studies about the steles of Šargas and Šērapeitis found in tomb n. 4 from Armazisxevi cemetery, which are the most extensive accounts of this writing to date¹⁰. Other inscriptions found in the acropolis of Armazi, Bori, Dedop'lis Gora (bone plates), Garni and Sisian (with peculiarities), Urbnisi and Zğuderi were made with Armazic or a strongly related script¹¹. The term 'Armazic' does not necessarily mean that this writing would have been invented in Armazi or that it would be specific to the Iberians.

- The Aramaic partial alphabet from Abkhazia¹², which seems to have been written in a novice hand, could relate to a local form of Late Aramaic, with some doubts.

These different types of Aramaic scripts were used between the Hellenistic period and the 4th century CE in Armenia and Caucasian Iberia as the epigraphic expression of the aristocratic elites. The inscriptions on the steles of Šērapeitis and Šargas as well as on the silver dishes used as princely gifts are the best known since they were already the subjects of dedicated studies¹³. Other brief inscriptions, which appear on the walls of Armazi, the bone plates of Dedop'lis Gora and several utensils and dishes, provide important information deserving further analysis. As the present paper synthesizes the contributions of previous researchers, in particular Giorgi Ceret'eli, Konstantin Ceret'eli, Iulon Gagošize, Helen Giunašvili and Anahit Perikhanian, I also propose new interpretations on the basis of photographs and facsimiles.

The silver phialē from the Treasure of Kazbek

The site of Kazbek or Step'ancminda is located 35 kilometres south of Vladikavkaz, along the road to Tbilisi, Georgia. It was the place of a treasure discovered by Georgii D. Filimonov during the 1870s and related to the religious cult of the ancient Caucasian nations¹⁴. The Treasure of Kazbek notably includes a silver *phialē*, dated from the 6th or 5th century BCE, now on display at the State Historical Museum of

⁹ K. CERET'ELI, *Les inscriptions araméennes de Géorgie*, «Semitica», 48 (1998), pp. 75-88.

¹⁰ G. CERET'ELI, *Эпиграфические находки в Мцхета – древней столице Грузии*, «Вестник древней истории», 2 (1948), p. 49-57. G. CERET'ELI, *Армазское письмо и проблема происхождения грузинского алфавита*, «Эпиграфика Востока», 2 (1948), pp. 90-101 & 3 (1949), pp. 59-71.

¹¹ CERET'ELI, *სტუდოვბო* cit., pp. 343-344.

¹² A.V. AKOPYAN, A.Yu. SKAKOV, A.I. DZHOPUA, *Новая находка арамейской надписи на территории Абхазии*, in *Archaeological Heritage of the Caucasus: Topical Problems of Study and Preservation. The XXXIst Krupnov's Readings*, Makhachkala 2020, pp. 290-292.

¹³ G.V. CERET'ELI, *The Bilingual Inscription from Armazi near Mcheta in Georgia*, «Bulletin de l'Institut Marr de Langues, d'Histoire et de Culture Matérielle», XIII (1942), pp. 49-83, reprinted in «Iberia-Colchis», 8 (2012), pp. 146-182. F. ALTHEIM, R. STIEHL, *Die zweite (aramäische) Inschrift von Mchet'a*, «Forschungen und Fortschritte», 35, 6 (1961), pp. 172-178.

¹⁴ Y.I. SMIRNOV, *Восточное серебро. Атлас древней серебряной и золотой посуды восточного происхождения, найденной преимущественно в пределах Российской империи*, St Petersburg 1909, p. 12. A.M. TALLGREN, *Caucasian monuments. The Kazbek Treasure*, in *Eurasia septentrionalis antiqua*, 5 (1930), pp. 109-182. Š. AMIRANAŠVILI, *История Грузинского Искусства*, Vol. 1, Moscow 1950, p. 73.

Moscow (Figg. 1 & 2)¹⁵. A photograph of the cup and the handwritten illustration of the inscription were published for the first time by Konstantin Schlottmann in 1879¹⁶, later appearing in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* (CIS)¹⁷. Even later Yakov Smirnov published two photographs of the cup¹⁸; he also specified the parameters of the dish (height 18.5 cm; diameter 5.5 cm), and precised the Aramaic nature of the inscription as well as the Iranian origin of the object¹⁹. The main image of the *phiale* associates six pairs of swans with a floral motif. Such a representation can also be found on a large cup in hard yellow stone presented by Roman Ghirshman, who considers it as a symbol of Achaemenid kingship²⁰. Šalva Amiranašvili confirms that “the oriental character of the decorative distribution indicates more than an Achaemenid work of art – albeit already with the characteristics of a Greek influence”²¹. A similar view was taken in the CIS, where it is argued that most of the dishes found in Kazbek were made by the local population, even if the silver cup can also have an Iranian or Assyrian origin²².

Following the CIS, Konstantin Ceret'eli interpreted the short inscription on the cup from Kazbek as a proper name, and distinguished its Imperial Aramaic writing from Parthian and Armazic forms of later inscriptions found in Georgia²³. The similarity between the letters *dālath* and *rēsh* in this Aramaic script complicates the reading²⁴. In contrast, reading the third sign as a *bēth* does not present a problem because of the other epigraphic and papyrological evidence²⁵. With a little more caution due to its particular shape, the fourth letter is interpreted as a *yodh*²⁶. The reading retained as *ddbyd* (Dadbeid) or *drbyr* (Darbir) cannot be compared with other sources. It is very likely that this name would have an Iranian origin, since the first component *dad* could be related to Old Persian and translated as “good according to the law”²⁷. Concerning the second component, a point of comparison can be found in the Palmyrenean proper name *byd'* (Beuda) given in the CIS²⁸.

¹⁵ TALLGREN, *Caucasian monuments* cit., p. 118, dates it from 550 BCE.

¹⁶ K. SCHLOTTMANN, *Zur semitischen Epigraphik*, «Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft», 33, 2 (1879), pp. 252-293, p. 292, pl. II.

¹⁷ CIS II, 1, 1889, n. 110, p. 103.

¹⁸ SMIRNOV, *Восточное серебро* cit., pl. III, 13.

¹⁹ CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., pp. 385-386.

²⁰ R. GHIRSHMAN, *L'art animalier aulique achéménide*, «Monuments et mémoires de la Fondation Eugène Piot», 60 (1976), pp. 11-28, pp. 13-14, Fig. 2.

²¹ AMIRANAŠVILI, *История* cit., pp. 74-75.

²² CIS II, 1, 1889, n. 110, p. 103. CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 385.

²³ CERET'ELI, *Эпиграфические находки в Мухема* cit., p. 52. CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 389.

²⁴ J. NAVEH, *Early History of the Alphabet. An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Palaeography*, Jerusalem-Leiden 1982, pp. 133, 142, 146. CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., pp. 386-387.

²⁵ J. NAVEH, *The Development of the Aramaic Script*, Jerusalem 1970, p. 19, pl. 4, 8. NAVEH, *Early History of the Alphabet* cit., pp. 91-92. CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 387.

²⁶ NAVEH, *The Development* cit., pl. 10, 2-3, 11. CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 388.

²⁷ F. JUSTI, *Iranisches Namenbuch*, Marburg 1895, p. 75. P. GIGNOUX, *Noms propres sassanides en moyen-perse épigraphique*, Vienne 1986, II/68-II/70.

²⁸ CIS II, 1, 1889, n. 110, p. 103. CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., pp. 388-389. J.K. STARK, *Personal Names in Palmyrene Inscriptions*, Oxford 1971, p. 9.

The Aramaic inscription from Oč'amč'ire in Abkhazia

In 2019, a joint Russian-Abkhaz archaeological expedition resumed excavations of the ancient city of Gienos (or Gyenos) on the outskirts of the modern city of Oč'amč'ire in Eastern Abkhazia. The ancient city, which arose in the first half of the 6th century BCE, was destroyed several times, then experienced a phase of decline during the 1st centuries BCE and CE, before a new flourishing during the Roman imperial period. During these excavations, three pits (5 x 5 m) were laid on the eastern hill near a temple. A fragment of a plinth from the ruins of this temple was discovered with an inscription on the upper bed. The inscription was drawn on the raw plinth, which has a schematic subtriangular pattern drawn on the dried clay (length 17.2 cm, height of letters from 4.5 cm at the beginning to 2.5 cm at the end), and consists of seven characters executed in a peculiar variant of Aramaic script: ' b g d h w z, that would imply the beginning of an alphabet (Fig. 3). According to A. V. Akopyan, A. Skakov and A. Dzhopua, the alphabet would approach late Aramaic (3rd-4th century CE), Palmyrenean and to a lesser extent Parthian on numismatic inscriptions and Hebrew square writing, from the 2nd century BCE²⁹. The presence of errors growing towards the end of the text suggests that the author of the text would have been a pupil beginning to learn the Aramaic letters. However, despite the modest nature of the text, this inscription attests the development of a local Aramaic writing in Western Caucasia³⁰.

Inscriptions from Garni and Sisian in Armenia

The Aramaic inscriptions found in Armenia are divided into two groups which come from two different script traditions. The first group includes the series of boundary stones of King Artasēs from Zangezur (2nd century BCE), and seems to continue the tradition formed under the early Achaemenids³¹. The letter forms in the inscriptions of this group hardly differ from the Aramaic epigraphy from Asia Minor, especially from Cappadocia. The second group consists of the inscription of Garni (Fig. 4)³² and the cup of Sisian.

During excavations in 1961 in Garni, the ancient summer residence of the Armenian Arshakids, an inscription in Aramaic script was found. A stone with the inscription was excavated at a depth of 1.7 metres on the territory of the palace complex (35 metres north-west of the pagan temple and 15 metres south of the bathhouse). This stone, reused in medieval masonry, is whitish in colour (coarse-grained limestone), with upper and left parts broken off, with 25 centimetres height, 36-31 cm width, and

²⁹ AKOPYAN *et al.*, *Новая находка арамейской надписи на территории Абхазии* cit., pp. 290-291.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

³¹ A. PERIKHANIAN, *Арамейская надпись из Зангезура (Некоторые вопросы среднеиранской диалектологии)*, «Историко-Филологический Журнал АН Армянской ССР», 4 (1965), pp. 107-128.

³² D. SHAPIRA, *A Note on the Garni Inscription*, «Iran & the Caucasus», 3/4 (1999/2000), pp. 193-196. A.C. KLUGKIST, *Midden-Aramese Schriften in Syrië, Mesopotamië, Perzië, en aangrenzende gebieden*, Groningen 1982, pp. 125-126.

23 cm thickness; the inscription is framed by a relief frame 3 centimetres high and 4 wide. In different parts of the fortress, fragments of stones from the same rock with traces of red paint and with embossed decoration were found, possibly fragments of the structure to which this inscription belonged. Since the surviving part of it contains only the title of the king and the name of his father, the absence of the beginning of the inscription does not enable to clarify its purpose: it could have been either a dedication of a construction, or an honorary inscription paying homage to an image of the king, even if other assumptions are also possible³³. This Aramaic inscription found in 1961 at Garni, was published by Anahit Perikhanian³⁴, who read it as follows:

[...] *mlk rb zy 'rm[yn]*

brh zy wlgš

mlk

“[...] the Great King of Armenia,
son of Vologases
the King.”

The first point of discussion concerns the identity of this king Vologases mentioned here. For the 2nd century CE, Cyril Toumanoff identifies two Armenian rulers named Vologases or Vafarš – the first reigned from 117 to 140, and the second from 180 to 191³⁵. If this idea has been taken up by most specialists, this is not the case about the dating of the reign of these two sovereigns, which remains uncertain. David Braund and Giusto Traina consider that the first ruled from 116 to 144 and the second between 186 and 198³⁶. Martin Schottky believes that only one Vologases ruled Armenia in the second century CE. According to this hypothesis, Movsēs Xorenac'i would have committed a chronological error by moving the reign of Vologases I to the time of Antoninus and Marcus Aurelius³⁷. At the end of his demonstration, he defends the idea that only the first Vologases is historical and that his reign dates from the time of Hadrian³⁸.

Resuming the examination of the documents, the account of Cassius Dio asserts that a first Vologases, son of Sanatrukēs, was appointed by Hadrian at the beginning of his reign to ascend the throne of Armenia, after a brief experience of provincializa-

³³ A. PERIKHANIAN, *Арамейская надпись из Гарни*, «Историко-Филологический Журнал АН Армянской ССР», 3, 26 (1964), pp. 123-137, p. 123.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ C. TOUMANOFF, *Les Dynasties de la Caucasic chrétienne de l'Antiquité jusqu'au XIX^e siècle. Tables généalogiques et chronologiques*, Rome 1990, pp. 85, 97.

³⁶ D. BRAUND, *Anagranes the ΤΡΟΦΕΥΣ: The Court of Caucasian Iberia in the Second-Third Centuries AD*, in *Autour de la mer Noire. Hommage à Otar Lordkipanidzé*, edited by D. Kacharava, M. Faudot, É. Gen, Besançon 2002, pp. 23-34, p. 30. G. TRAINA, *Un dayeak armeno nell'Iberia precristiana*, in *Dall'Italia e dall'Armenia. Studi in onore di Gabriella Ulubogian*, edited by V. Calzolari, A. Sirinian, B.L. Zekiyan, Bologna 2004, pp. 255-262, p. 256. G. TRAINA, *Dynastic Connections in Armenia and Iberia. Further Reflections on the Greek inscriptions from Bagineti* (SEG 52, n° 1509-1510), in *Iberien zwischen Rom und Iran. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Kultur Transkaukasiens in der Antike*, edited by F. Schleicher, T. Stickler, U. Hartmann, Stuttgart 2019, pp. 123-128, p. 124.

³⁷ M. SCHOTTKY, *Armenische Arsakiden zur Zeit der Antonine. Ein Beitrag zur Korrektur der armenischen Königsliste*, «Anabasis. Studia Classica et Orientalia», 1, 2010, pp. 208-225, pp. 218-220.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

tion on this territory³⁹. This Vologases is probably the one that dispatched an emissary to the emperor to complain about the policy of the Iberian King Pharasmanēs II during the Alan invasion of 135-136 CE⁴⁰. This memory of the Armenian-Alan war has been preserved in the account of Movsēs Xorenac'i, which narrates how Vałarš was confronted with the northern invaders who had crossed the Derbent⁴¹. Based on numismatics, Marie-Louise Chaumont considers that the end of Vologases I's reign occurred shortly after the accession of Antoninus, between 140 and 144⁴².

Attestations concerning the second Vologases are more questionable. Following the victorious expedition conducted to Armenia by Marcus Statius Priscus in 163, which led to the downfall of the pro-Parthian king Pacorus, the Romans had to choose a new Armenian ruler capable of defending their interests. A letter from Fronto mentions an Arshakid pretender by the name of Vologases, whose aptitudes made him worthy of the throne, but to whom another candidate, Sohaemus, was preferred – his crowning is attested by coins of Lucius Verus minted in 164⁴³. The last mention of King Sohaemus in our sources concerns his restoration to the Armenian throne in 172, after the troubles caused by Prince Tiridatēs⁴⁴. Herodian mentions an Armenian king who was contemporaneous with the civil war of 193, however, without naming him⁴⁵. As the Roman sources do not give the name of Sohaemus's successor, Marie-Louise Chaumont remains cautious in her analysis, contenting herself with arguing that he must have belonged to the Arshakid lineage⁴⁶. Cassius Dio reports that during the reign of Caracalla, an anonymous king of Armenia, about whom it is not known whether he was the same ruler that had reigned in Septimus Severus's time, was confronted with a discord within his family, then invited by the emperor under the pretext of a reconciliation, but he fell into a trap and was held captive with his wife and children, with the exception of Tiridatēs II, who led a revolt and imposed

³⁹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, edited by E. Cary, H.B. Foster, LXXV, 9, 6.

⁴⁰ M.-L. CHAUMONT, *L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran*, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase, II, 9, 1, Berlin 1976, pp. 71-194, pp. 145-146.

⁴¹ Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of Armenia*, transl. by A. and J.-P. Mahé, Paris 1993, II, 65. The Armenian historian argues that Vałarš died in combat, but CHAUMONT, *L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran* cit., p. 146, refuses to take this assertion as true.

⁴² *Ibid.* A *rex Armeniis datus* is mentioned on a Roman coin depicting a scene of royal investiture: H. MATTINGLY, E.A. SYDENHAM, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*. Vol. III, *Antoninus Pius to Commodus*, London 1962, n. 619 p. 510.

⁴³ Fronto, *Correspondance, Ad Verum imperatorem*, edited by M.P.J. Van den Hout, Lugduni Batavorum 1954, II, 18: "uel quod Sobaemo potius quam Vologaeso regnum Armeniae dedisset aut quod Pacorum regno priuasset". MATTINGLY, SYDENHAM, *The Roman Imperial Coinage* cit., n. 511-513 p. 255 and n. 1370-1375 p. 322. CHAUMONT, *L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran* cit., p. 149, thinks that this pretendant named Vologases could perhaps be a son of the Armenian king Vologases I.

⁴⁴ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXI, 2, 3. CHAUMONT, *L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran* cit., pp. 150-152.

⁴⁵ Herodian, *Roman History*, edited by D. Roques, Paris 1990, III, 1, 2-3; III, 9, 2. CHAUMONT, *L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran* cit., pp. 152-153.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 152. Some authors chose to place after Sohaemus the reign of a certain Sanatruk: K.V. TREVER, *Очерки по истории и культуре древней Армении (II в. до н. э. – IV в. н. э.)*, Moscow 1953, pp. 262-263 (Sanatruk II, r. 185-197); N. ADONTZ (†), *Armenia in the Period of Justinian: the Political Conditions Based on the Naxarar System*, Lisbon 1970, p. 501 (Sanatruk, r. 190-197). This is probably confusion with the father of Vologases I, Sanatrukēs.

himself as the new king of Armenia⁴⁷. Roman sources therefore do not explicitly state a Vologases II having reigned at the end of the Antonine period or at the beginning of Severian times, but they leave open the possibility of it. Perhaps the Vologases claiming to the throne evoked by Fronto could have carried out his project of reaching the Armenian throne after the death of Sohaemus.

The Armenian tradition gives a different version of this period. Movsēs Xorenac'i only mentions one King Vałarš, who is presented as the son of the "last Tigranēs", and would have started his reign "the thirty-second year of his namesake, Vałarš, king of Persia"⁴⁸. For Jean-Pierre Mahé, this Tigranēs would theoretically designate Tigranēs II the Great (r. 95-c. 55 BCE), successor of Tigranēs I (Tirān), even if the last Armenian king to bear this name was Tigranēs VI (r. c. 60-63 CE)⁴⁹. The five decades which separate this reign from the first Vologases (r. 116 / 117-140 / 144) mean that this filiation has very little chance of being true. In contrast, the synchronization of Vałarš's reign with an Iranian namesake is quite plausible. In fact, Vologases I of Armenia reigned concomitantly with the Parthian king Vologases III (r. c. 105-147)⁵⁰. However, the thirty-second year of the reign of Vologases III, which Movsēs considers the beginning of Vałarš's reign, would be in 137, which is towards the end of the reign of this Armenian king.

Considering now the hypothesis of a Vologases II reigning at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, the choice is at first sight embarrassing, because the chronology reveals three rulers named Vologases who each reigned over Parthia: Vologases IV (r. c. 147-191), Vologases V (r. c. 191-208) and Vologases VI (r. c. 208-228). The last two Vologases did not reign for enough time and shortly preceded the Sasanian rise to power, an event which is synchronized by Agat'angelos and Movsēs Xorenac'i with the reign of the Armenian king Xosrov (Chosroēs), whom Movsēs considers to be the son and supposed successor of Vałarš⁵¹. This leaves the year 179 or 180 CE, the thirty-second after the beginning of the reign of Vologases IV. Accordingly, if we consider that Movsēs Xorenac'i did retain the name and dated the advent of an Armenian king around the end of the 2nd century CE, it turns out that a Vologases II of Armenia may have reigned towards the end of the Antonine era, despite the many anachronisms of the Armenian narrative⁵². This Vologases II could be that Arshakid contender rival of Sohaemus whom Fronto had identified. Movsēs Xorenac'i could therefore have

⁴⁷ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXXVII, 12, 2; 12, 12; LXVIII, 2, 1; 27, 4. CHAUMONT, *L'Arménie entre Rome et l'Iran* cit., pp. 154-157. A. MARICQ, *Classica et Orientalia. 2. Les dernières années de Hatra: l'alliance romaine*, «Syria», 34, 3-4 (1957), pp. 288-305, pp. 297-305, dates from the year 214 the beginning of the captivity of the father of Tiridatēs II and his family. This same Tiridatēs II was recognized king of Armenia by Macrinus (r. 217-218).

⁴⁸ Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of the Armenians* cit., II, 65, p. 218.

⁴⁹ A., J.-P. MAHÉ (transl.), *Histoire de l'Arménie. Moïse de Khorène*, Paris 1993, pp. 370-371.

⁵⁰ U. ELLERBROCK, S. WINKELMANN, *Die Parther. Die vergessene Großmacht*, Darmstadt 2015, pp. 51-52.

⁵¹ Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, edited by R.W. Thomson, §18-19, does not mention the name of Xosrov's father. Movsēs Xorenac'i, *History of the Armenians* cit., II, 67.

⁵² A., J.-P. MAHÉ (transl.), *Histoire de l'Arménie* cit., note 1 p. 370 *ad loc.*, considered thus that this Vałarš II would have reached the throne in 180 CE. However, the account of the foundation of the city of Vałaršapat would rather relate to the reign of Vologases I.

merged the reigns of Vologases I and Vologases II into one single notice. Certainly, the hypothesis of the existence of a Vologases II remains fragile in the absence of more explicit attestations which would be more reliable in contemporary sources during this period. Unlike Martin Schottky, however, I do not believe that such a possibility should be ruled out⁵³.

The major problem is that it cannot be determined whether this king Vologases was a sovereign over the Parthians or over Armenia. Insofar as the two dynasties belonged to the same line of Arshakids established on a condominium of kingdoms, the “great king of Armenia son of King Vologases” could therefore be either the son of the Armenian king Vologases I or (uncertain) Vologases II, or a son of one among the homonymous Parthian kings. As Vologases I reigned from 51 to 78 and the last Vologases VI from 208 to 228, we can only assume that the King of Armenia designated by this inscription from Garni would have reigned at some point between the end of the 1st century CE and the middle of the 3rd century CE. This option agrees with the prudent opinion of Anahit Perikhanian⁵⁴. Regarding the formal aspect of epigraphic writing, this inscription from Garni stylistically relates to the Armazic writing used in Caucasian Iberia between the end of the Hellenistic period and the 3rd century CE, therefore differing from the Aramaic script developed in Asia Minor between the 5th and 2nd centuries BCE, which characterized the boundary stones of King Artāšēs I⁵⁵.

On November 29, 1970, during construction work on the outskirts of the city of Sissian, a hewn block vault containing a terracotta coffin was discovered. This burial contained various metallic objects, as well as coins dating from the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE, the most recent of which were those of Parthian King Orodēs II (r. 57-37 BCE). Among these objects was a hemispherical silver cup of 16 cm of diameter and 6.3 cm of height (Fig. 5). Its 0.4 cm edges are a little thicker than the sides, which are mutilated with breaches. At the bottom of the cup is a hollow in the circular frame. Its current weight is 340 grams⁵⁶.

The inscription, which is very clear, is engraved in dotted lines on the outside of the bowl, along its border. The Aramaic script belongs to the Syro-Mesopotamian type. The inscription is preceded by a sign in the shape of an inverted T which cannot be identified as a letter of the Aramaic alphabet: located well above the line, this diacritical mark is used to identify the beginning of the inscription. The ālaph here has the same shape as on the inscriptions of Hatra, the bēth coincides with the same letter in Armazic inscriptions. The ʔēth finds its closest analogue in the inscription on the cup of Bori. The hē and hēth are less cursive than their homologues in the epigraphy from Armazi and Garni. The yodh is shaped like a dot, just like in the Manichean script and in the inscriptions on the magic cups of Nippur. The lāmadh is similar

⁵³ SCHOTTKY, *Armenische Arsakiden zur Zeit der Antonine* cit., pp. 217-224. M. SCHOTTKY, *Vorarbeiten zu einer Königsliste Kaukasisch-Iberiens. 4. Von den Arsakiden zu den Sasaniden*, «Anabasis», 6 (2015), pp. 157-173, pp. 160-163.

⁵⁴ PERIKHANIAN, *Арамейская надпись из Гарни*, cit.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ A. PERIKHANIAN, *Inscription araméenne sur une coupe d'argent trouvée à Sissian (Arménie)*, «Revue des Études Arméniennes», VIII, 1971, pp. 5-11, p. 8.

to those of Hatra, Garni and Armazi, insofar as it does not land on the line. The pē coincides with their counterparts the inscriptions of Hatra, Assur and Sari. The kāph and the rēsh are identical, the head of the letter forming an alveolus, the shaft curved in its lower part. Unlike the inscription from Garni, the ligatures are missing as well as the diacritical point above the rēš⁵⁷. Since the inscription does not include indications allowing an exact dating, and since the most recent coins accompanying the cup are those of Orodēs (r. 57-37 BCE), Anahit Perikhanian considers that the inscription dates from the end of the 1st century BCE at the latest⁵⁸. The inscription is transcribed and translated as follows.

rmbk znh zy 'rḥszṯ mtql ksp m('b) z(wzyn)

“This cup belongs to Araxszāt. The silver weight is o(ne hundred) d(rachmas).”

The first term is certainly of Iranian origin. Its meaning ‘cup’ is ensured by the context where the word designates the object on which the inscription is engraved. This term *rmbk* is a Middle Iranian form, probably Parthian, continuing an older form **ram-baka-* or **rampaka-*, related to Farsi *na'lbakī*⁵⁹ and to Georgian *lambak'i* (ლამბაკი), ‘saucer’. The ‘ayn added in Farsi is said to be a recent spelling, insofar as the ancient spelling without ‘ayn is found in modern Iranian literature. Anahit Perikhanian considers an evolution of the word which would have passed through a formation of the diminutive suffix **rambakīk* in Middle Iranian, culminating in a later Iranian form **r/lambakī*, giving the Georgian form *lambak'i*, then **r/lanbakī*. After this step, in Farsi, a metathesis would have reversed the first consonants to give *na'lbakī*⁶⁰.

The first name Araxszāt designating the owner of the cup is also of Iranian origin and was not attested until the discovery of this inscription. It is based upon the participle of the verb *zā(y)* – ‘to be born’, which appears in many Iranian names. The first element of the composition could result from a formation of the inchoative base in -s- (i. e. **-sk-*), in the intransitive-passive sense of this base in Iranian, from the root **rag-* ‘to protect, guarantee’. This root is also the origin of the Greek terms ἄλῆξω, ἀκλή, Sanskrit *rakṣati*, Armenian *erašxi-k'*, ‘guarantee’, from Parthian **raxši*. The Old Iranian form **raxszāta* thus reconstructed would mean: “born protected (by the gods)”⁶¹.

The cup of Sisian thus testifies both to the Iranian culture of the ruling elites in ancient Armenia, and to the obvious links with the kingdom of Iberia in terms of epigraphy.

Inscriptions on pottery from Caucasian Iberia

During archaeological excavations in Up'lisc'ixe lead in 1963 by Davit' Xaxutaišvili, two fragments from the mouths of wine jars (*k'vevri*) with Aramaic inscrip-

⁵⁷ KLUGKIST, *Midden-Aramese Schriften* cit., pp. 127-131, 274-275.

⁵⁸ PERIKHANIAN, *Inscription araméenne sur une coupe d'argent trouvée à Sissian (Arménie)* cit., pp. 8-9.

⁵⁹ S. HAYYIM (†), *New Persian-English Dictionary*, Vol. 2, New York 2002, p. 1093.

⁶⁰ APERIKHANIAN, *Inscription araméenne sur une coupe d'argent trouvée à Sissian (Arménie)* cit., p. 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

tions were found among fragments of pottery. The inscriptions engraved on different pitchers are written in the same script, which, according to Konstantin Ceret'eli, is different from the Armazic and Parthian writings⁶². Some letters (hēth, zain, bēth, waw, nun) feature analogies with inscriptions from Sevan (2nd c. BCE), while others (ālah, nun, kāph) look like the inscriptions from Sisian in Armenia (1st c. BCE). The ālah is similar to its corresponding sign in the inscriptions from Nisa (1st c. BCE) and with the Armazic stele of Šargas (1st c. CE).

One piece of the mouth of the pitcher must contain five or six letters – some of which are joined, as is sometimes observed in other Aramaic inscriptions (Fig. 6). The second inscription consists of five letters which all stand separately. The letters on the pitcher fragments are well expressed. However, the fragments of the mouth of these pitchers, which may have had similar inscriptions, are not visible in full⁶³. This short inscription is read by Konstantin Ceret'eli as *r hzyn l*, with a proper name Hazyan of Semitic origin, cognate to verb *hzy* 'to see, to prophesy', and two uninterpreted letters: first a rēš and last a lāmadh⁶⁴. After the first two signs, this epigraphist saw a combination of three letters comprising a zain, a yodh and a nun in Old Aramaic. I propose two alternative readings. One possibility would be to read three words: *rh zy nl*, with *rh*₁ as Old Aramaic substantive 'wind', 'breath', 'spirit', 'soul'⁶⁵; *zy* as the preposition 'of' and *nl* as a proper name: "the soul of N'", which would imply a funeral context for this jar which perhaps contained an offering. The second option would be to consider this inscription as Armazic and read five letters: a pē, a qoph, a nun, a zain and a lāmadh. This short inscription would then contain two words: the Official Aramaic substantive *pq* 'tray'⁶⁶ and *nzl*, an Aramaic verbal form meaning 'to lead'⁶⁷. Perhaps it could be an order for the delivery of this pitcher and its contents, or an indication of a ritual nature on how the container was brought to banquet ceremonies. The general meaning of this epigraphic document is rather obscure, especially since it is not excluded that this fragment could be the end of an incompletely preserved inscription.

The second short inscription on the edge of a jar from Up'lisc'ixe is much less difficult to interpret, since it takes the form of a five-letter word clearly incised and visible (Fig. 7). Konstantin Ceret'eli saw similarities between this script and the inscriptions of Nisa, Parthian coins from 1st century CE, Aramaic inscriptions of Hatra⁶⁸, Dura-Europos and Assyria⁶⁹, as well as Armazic inscriptions from Armazisxevi and Sisian. The same scholar read this short inscription as *bzūk'* and interpreted it as the proper name Bazuk, from Old Iranian *bāzūka*, 'hand'⁷⁰. This interpretation is interesting insofar as it is reminiscent of the two legendary Ossetian brothers Bazok and Abazuk, who

⁶² CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 344.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

⁶⁵ J. HOFTIJZER, K. JONGELING, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, Leiden 1995, 2, pp. 1065-1066.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 931.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 239, s.v. *dbr*.

⁶⁸ NAVEH, *Early History of the Alphabet* cit., p. 142, Figures 125/1-2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125, Figures 3-4.

⁷⁰ CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., pp. 343-363

fought alongside the Iberians according to the Georgian chronicle *Life of the Kings*⁷¹. Another Caucasian character, yet historical, a chief named Ambazoukēs who controlled Darial around 500 CE, is attested in the work of Procopius⁷².

Although Konstantin Ceret'eli's interpretation is very satisfactory, I wish to propose an alternative reading based on an Armazic alphabet for the last four letters. With this reading, we would obtain the following signs: a bēth, a waw, a rēš, a kāph, and an ālaph, spelling *burk'*, a proper name related to Iranian names Borgāw, Bor-kāw, and Pourugā⁷³. There could be a resemblance with the first component of the Sarmatian name Phorgabakos, attested around the Cimmerian Bosphorus during the 3rd century CE⁷⁴. In Ossetian, the substantive *burku* means 'witcher'⁷⁵. Moreover, a funerary Greek inscription from Syria mentions two men named Boukeros and Bourkeos⁷⁶. However, the main limitation to my alternative interpretation remains the archaic form of the letter bēth, which suggests an alphabet closer to Imperial Aramaic. The reading *Bazukā* defended by Konstantin Ceret'eli may therefore be preferred. These inscriptions from Up'lisc'ixe would represent an intermediate stage between the Official Aramaic script and the Armazic script, respectively dated from the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE⁷⁷.

Archaeological excavations on Dedop'lis Gora and Dedop'lis Mindori in 1989 have uncovered fragments of four jars with inscriptions (Figg. 8, 9, 10 & 11). The script features similarities to the Parthian (for the ālaph and the taw) and Armazic types (for the gāmal and the nun). An identical sequence of three letters is also found on the inscriptions of jars 1 and 2 from Dedop'lis Gora. The third inscription consists of one single letter. Considering the sequence common to jars 1 and 2 from Dedop'lis Gora, the first letter is read by Konstantin Ceret'eli as a nun, although its form also leaves open the possibility of a kāph. The measure of capacity corresponding to Official Aramaic substantive *k'*⁷⁸ constitutes an interesting hypothesis. It would therefore be necessary to explain the presence of the last letter, a taw – either a letter with a numeric value (perhaps 22 *kā*: about 107 L)⁷⁹, or, less probably, an abbreviation to signify the nature or the value of the content⁸⁰.

⁷¹ *Life of the Kings* in *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, edited by S. Qauxč'išvili, §46, transl. by R.W. Thomson, 55.

⁷² Procopius, *History of the Wars*, edited by H.B. Dewing (†), A. Kaldellis, I, 10, 9-12.

⁷³ F. JUSTI, *Iranisches Namenbuch* cit., pp. 70, 254, argues that the name has the etymological meaning: 'Owner of a lot of freshness' (*Besitzer der vielen Kühle*).

⁷⁴ CIRB 1245, 1246, 1248, 1250, 1252, 1277, 1278.

⁷⁵ V.I. АБАЕВ, *Историко-этимологический словарь осетинского языка; указатель*. I-V. Moscow, Leningrad, 1958-1995, I, p. 273.

⁷⁶ IGLSyr 6 2973, Βουκερου; Βουρκεου. These names are possibly related to the Semitic root *brk*₁, 'to bless', frequently used in onomastics. HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., pp. 198-202.

⁷⁷ CERET'ELI, სტუდია cit., pp. 343-363.

⁷⁸ HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., I, p. 483: 1 *k'* = 12 logs possibly (about 4,896 litres, since 1 log = 0,408 L for liquids). J.-A. DECOURDEMANCHE, *Note sur les mesures hébraïques*, «Revue des études juives», 58, 116 (1909), pp. 161-182, p. 165.

⁷⁹ The number 400, by analogy with the Greek numeral system, seems improbable because of its too great importance (400 *k'* = 1 958,4 L). As the taw is the 22nd letter of the Aramaic alphabet, 22 *k'* would mean 107,712 L, which would correspond to the capacity of a big *k'vevri*.

⁸⁰ Thus, *t₄* is an abbreviation for *tr(w)mb* 'heave-offering' or 'contribution for the sanctuary' on wine and oil amphoras from Masada, according to HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 2, p. 1201. Another

Regarding the sequence common to jar 1 from Dedop'lis Gora and the *k'vevri* from Dedop'lis Mindori⁸¹, Konstantin Ceret'eli sees a single word – the Aramaic substantive *'gny* with the final yodh representing first singular personal pronoun. I accept the reading, with a slight disagreement about his translation “my wine pitcher”, since the North-West Semitic substantive *'gn₁* has the meanings of ‘crater’, ‘open bowl’, ‘basin’⁸², especially since these jars could be used to contain liquids or goods other than wine only.

The reading of this solitary letter on jar 3, a *dālath* whose form is specific to the Armazic script⁸³, is beyond doubt, even if its meaning remains uncertain. It does not seem relevant to Konstantin Ceret'eli to see a numeral value there⁸⁴. In numismatics, the letter *dālath* alone represents an abbreviation of *dnr*, ‘denarius’ or ‘dinar’⁸⁵. Perhaps this sign could be a craftsman's mark or an abbreviation describing the content of the jar, something like *dbš* ‘honey’; *dg* ‘fish’; *dgn* ‘grain’⁸⁶ and many other possibilities.

As he notes their similarities with the Aramaic inscriptions from Sisian and Nisa, Konstantin Ceret'eli considers the inscriptions of Dedop'lis Mindori and Dedop'lis Gora to be the most ancient attestations of the Armazic script found in Georgia and dates them from the 1st century BCE⁸⁷. These short inscriptions provide information on the culture of writing and the administration of storage commodities in Caucasian Iberia.

Over the course of archaeological excavations led by Levan Čilašvili around an ancient cemetery of Urbnisi, a small building was found, with pieces of half-burnt bricks as well as fragments of jars belonging to a layer dated from 2nd-4th centuries CE. Among them, special attention was drawn to the fragment of a small pitcher, on which is engraved a word consisting of four letters (Fig. 12). The formal script can be easily attributed to the Armazic type⁸⁸. Assisted by the epigraphist Giorgi Ceret'eli, Levan Čilašvili proposed the reading *dyry* meaning ‘altar’ or ‘sacrifice’, and identified the building as the chapel of a pagan deity of Urbnisi⁸⁹.

Konstantin Ceret'eli disputes this reading and presents two possibilities: *dwrn* ‘sacrifice’, ‘present to the god’, borrowed from Greek *dōron*, and, on the other hand, *dwkn* ‘place for the sacrifice’⁹⁰. The same author recognizes the fact that the letters

possible abbreviation is *t₃* for *tmr₂*, an Official Aramaic substantive meaning ‘date’ (from a date-palm), in HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 2, p. 1222.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² K. CERET'ELI, *The Oldest Armazian Inscription in Georgia*, «Die Welt des Orients», 24 (1993), pp. 85-88. CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 392. HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 1, s. v. *'gn₁*, pp. 9-10.

⁸³ CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 382.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 1, p. 237, s. v. *d₄* and p. 256, s. v. *dnr*.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 240-241.

⁸⁷ CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., pp. 381-382.

⁸⁸ CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 339.

⁸⁹ L. ČILAŠVILI, ნაქალაქარი ურბნისი, თბილისი, ისტორიულ-არქეოლოგიური გამოკლევა, 1, 1964, p. 54.

⁹⁰ CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., pp. 340-341. G. DALMAN, *Aramäisch-neuhebräisches Handwörter-*

are very similar to the Armazic steles of Šargas and Šērapeitis, and confirms that they date from the 2nd century CE. I in turn disagree with these two readings, since the third letter clearly appears as a rēšh, and the second as well as the fourth are very clearly identical, their curved shape probably resembling a waw. The word shall be read *dwrw*, corresponding to Palmyrenean *dwr*, 'enclosed space'⁹¹ with a suffix of abstraction *-w*⁹². The word probably refers to the storage space of this jar, without any explicit religious connotation, even if its fragmentary nature makes it impossible to know whether additional information could have been engraved on a missing part. Another explanation would be to interpret this fragment as an ostrakon serving an educational purpose, thus disconnecting the word from its material support.

Wall inscriptions from Armazis-c'ixe

The reserve of Simon Janašia Museum in Tbilisi keeps the ancient monumental steles and short inscriptions from the ancient citadel of Armazi, also called Armazis-c'ixe. Two attestations were apparently taken from a wall of the ancient Iberian royal acropolis on Baginet'i Hill. In 1948, Giorgi Ceret'eli published photographs of both inscriptions, without proposing any translation or accurate description⁹³. Unfortunately, the archaeologists gave very few details about the context of the discovery. It was reported to me by Salome Bočorišvili, curator at the National Museum of Georgia Simon Janašia, that the first short inscription had been found in the foundations of a building. Apart from the fact that they would come from a wall of Armazi, no other information is available in current publications to my knowledge. Since they have not been published in any epigraphic corpus, these two short inscriptions have no reference number. Therefore I propose the provisional name "Short Armazic Wall Inscriptions N. 1 and 2", following the order of presentation of the photographs published by Giorgi Ceret'eli in 1948.

I.

In a former paper published in the journal *Iberia-Colchis*, I proposed a first interpretation of this first Aramaic short inscription from Armazi (Fig. 15)⁹⁴. A re-examination of this epigraphic document made me review my reading. If the first letter still seems a qoph to me, the following letters are slightly more ambiguous. The second sign seems to be a rēš rather than a yodh based on the form of these two letters in the other

buch zu Targum, Talmud und Midrasch, Göttingen 1938, p. 38, with an optional waw and the meanings of 'Tribüne', 'Plattform'.

⁹¹ HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 1, pp. 243-244.

⁹² M. VAN PELT, *Basics of Biblical Aramaic*, Grand Rapids 2011, p. 23. DALMAN, *Aramäisch-neuhebräisches Handwörterbuch* cit., p. 93, *dwr* and *dwr'*.

⁹³ G. CERET'ELI, *Эпиграфические находки в Мцхета – древней столице Грузии*, «Вестник древней истории», 2, 1948, pp. 49-57, Figure 2.

⁹⁴ N. PREUD'HOMME, *On the Origin of the Name K'art'li: Pitiaxēs Ousas' Intaglio and Karchēdoi Iberians*, «Iberia-Colchis», 14 (2018), pp. 212-222: *qrḥ(h) p(hnt)* or *qrḥ p (?)*: 'the store of the citadel' or 'here, the citadel' (?).

Armazic inscriptions. I had interpreted the end of the inscription as two letters joined together, because the short space visible on the left side of the stone could have been a reason for the lapidary to write a fourth letter on a lower level, below the third. Thus, I thought that the inscription had a pē inscribed in the extension of the left leg of a hēth. However, the almond shape that is supposed to form the hat of this pē is intriguing. The lapidary would have been expected to distinguish the foot of the pē with the branch of the letter hēth, and not to close the hat of the pē on itself by this double curve in the shape of an almond. This type of almond seems to be seen on the Armazic stele of Šargas, inside the first word of the seventh line (Fig. 17). This letter was interpreted as a taw by Franz Altheim and Ruth Stiehl⁹⁵, but the specific curve prolonged to the left side of the vertical stem can perhaps distinguish it from the standard Armazic taw. The long ending of this letter descending on its left side is indeed characteristic of this form. Such almonds engraved on two inscriptions from Iberia can suggest that this sign would not be an isolated accident. The meaning to be given to this almond attached to two different letters is, on the other hand, very hypothetical: diacritic mark indicating a particular meaning or a special pronunciation of certain letters, punctuation sign... Consequently, my new interpretation is to consider that there is no fourth letter, since the last sign of this brief inscription would be a šade. This brief inscription hence comprises three letters composing a single word which can be read *qyš*.

Three translations are possible due to homonymy: an adjective *qš*, meaning 'deficient, imperfect' in Official Aramaic – a very inconclusive reading in this context; a verb meaning 'to collect the summer fruit' derived from the name *qš₁* meaning 'summer' or 'summer fruit', equally unlikely here, unless we consider the hypothesis of a food warehouse or a market stand; the third hypothesis, which seems to be the least unlikely, would advance a possible Caucasian variant of the feminine noun *qšb* meaning 'border' or 'limit' in Phoenician, Hebrew and in the Palmyrenean language⁹⁶. If this last translation proved to be accurate, the stone would rather designate a milestone marking an administrative or religious limit within the capital of the Iberian kingdom, without any explicit reference to the citadel, contrary to my former interpretation. An additional argument invalidating the first hypothetical reading of the name *qrh* as 'citadel' lies in the fact that this term is not found in the other Armazic documents of Iberia, since the stele of Šargas uses the synonyms *byrt* and *tqn* to designate the fortresses⁹⁷.

II.

The second short Armazic wall inscription is engraved on a stone of dimensions 13 x 25 x 19 centimetres (Fig. 16). Six Armazic letters can be read. As their spacing is regular, it is possible to say that the inscription has been preserved in its entirety, although the upper left corner of the stone was damaged. Clearly, the lapidary centred the inscription on the elongated side of the cut stone. If the transcription can be made quite easily, the translation presents several difficulties.

⁹⁵ ALTHEIM, STIEHL, *Die zweite (aramäische) Inschrift von Mchet'a* cit., p. 173.

⁹⁶ HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 2, pp. 1009, 1020-1021, s.v. *qyš*, *qš₁*, *qš₂*, *qš₃* and *qšb*.

⁹⁷ Stele of Šargas, l. 7, 9, 10 et 11. HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 1, 1995, s.v. *byrb*, pp. 155-156. HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 2, s.v. *tqn*, p. 1229.

šwy zy m

The first word *šwy* can be understood either as a verb meaning 'to command' or as a corresponding noun 'chief, commander'⁹⁸. The second word unambiguously corresponds to the preposition *zy* marking a genitive relation with the following noun. The last word consists of a single letter, a mem which can be interpreted as an abbreviation with numerous possible readings in different Aramaic dialects⁹⁹. If one takes the context into account, the number of possible translations is reduced to a few: 'king's commander'; 'lord's commander'; 'centurion' (literally 'chief of one hundred (men)'), or, more interestingly, 'chief of the people'. The last translation is an Armazic equivalent of the Georgian official title *erist'avi*¹⁰⁰. The form '*m*', meaning 'people' is attested in several ancient Semitic languages: Phoenician, Hebrew, the Aramaic dialect from Hatra, Judeo-Aramaic and Official Aramaic.

The Georgian chronicle *Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali*, which is a part of *K'art'lis C'xovreba*, mentions "chiefs of hundreds" (*asist'avni*) gathered with "chiefs of thousands" (*at'asist'avni*), high-ranking princes *erist'avni*, bishops and the general commander *spaspeti* Juanšer, around King Vaxtang Gorgasali holding a solemn audience in Mc'xet'a¹⁰¹. This brief inscription, which merely indicates the title of a dignitary in the royal citadel of Armazi, either a high-ranking prince or a garrison commander, could be understood in the context of a mark of property inscribed on a private residence or an official building. It would be the oldest attestation of such a title to have been identified in Georgia at this date. Due to the shape of the letters, it is reasonable to attribute these two short inscriptions to the 2nd or 3rd century CE.

Armazic inscriptions on a ring and a bracelet from Armazi-Mc'xet'a

Together with the two short inscriptions from the walls of Armazi, Giorgi Ceret'eli presented two other small texts made of Armazic letters, found on a gold ring and bracelet (Fig. 13 & 14)¹⁰². On the ring are four letters that I read 'ē, gāmal, 'ē and

⁹⁸ HOFTHIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., p. 965, s.v. *šwy*; Hebrew Pi'el verb 'command'; *šwy*₂ and *šw'*: singular absolute state noun, 'commander'.

⁹⁹ HOFTHIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., II, p. 586: *m*₁ abbreviating *m'h*₂, cardinal number 'one hundred' (*ibid.*, pp. 586-587); *m*₂ abbreviating *mlk*₃, substantive indicating probably 'some kind of liquid measure' (*ibid.*, p. 624); *m*₃ abbreviating *mlk*₃: 'king', (*ibid.*, p. 603); *m*₄ abbreviating *mmlkh*, 'prince, king' (*ibid.*, pp. 646-647); *m*₅ abbreviating *mnh*₂: 'certain weight, coin, mine' (*ibid.*, p. 658); *m*₆: *m'h*: 'certain coin, obolos' (*ibid.*, pp. 667-668); *m*₇ abbreviating *mqdš*: 'sanctuary' (*ibid.*, pp. 678-679); *m*₈ abbreviating *mr*: 'lord, master, lady, mistress' (*ibid.*, pp. 682-689); *m*₉ abbreviating *mry*: substantive indicating a 'liquid measure' (*ibid.*, p. 693); *m*₁₀ abbreviating *mzh*: 'liturgical procession' (*ibid.*, p. 609) or *mšh*₃: 'oil' (*ibid.*, pp. 699-700); *m*₁₁ abbreviating *mb*, *nš*₁ – *mb*₂ interrogative pronoun 'what' (*ibid.*, pp. 599-600); *nš*₁: 'oath' (*ibid.*, p. 750); *m*₁₂ abbreviating *mn*₃, preposition of place indicating the origin, 'from' (*ibid.*, pp. 649-656); *m*₁₃ abbreviating *m*₁, 'people' (*ibid.*, pp. 864-866); *m*₁₄ abbreviating Greek word μίλιον, Roman mile (*ibid.*, p. 586); *m*₁₅: abbreviation with unknown meaning in *CIS* II, 53, 1 (*ibid.*, p. 586).

¹⁰⁰ SARDSHWELADSE, FÄHNRIKH, *Altgeorgisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch* cit., p. 434.

¹⁰¹ *Life of Vaxtang Gorgasali* (*K'art'lis C'xovreba*), edited by S. Qauxč'išvili, 147_{2,7}, transl. by R.W. Thomson, 1996, p. 162.

¹⁰² CERET'ELI, Армазское письмо и проблема происхождения грузинского алфавита cit., p. 94.

dālath. The gāmal vaguely resembles that on the inscription from Garni. Both 'ēs and the dālath, on the other hand, are consistent with their counterparts in the other Armazic inscriptions from Caucasian Iberia. The interpretation of this inscription is quite tricky. The hypothesis of a proper name belonging to the owner of the ring cannot be ruled out, but this form does not inspire much on that side. Another questionable possibility would be to read two common Aramaic words bound to Phoenician substantive of unknown meaning 'g and to Hebrew substantive 'd₂, 'witness' or 'notary'¹⁰³.

On the facsimile of the golden bracelet, five letters can be read: 'ē (or less probably ālaph), šādhē, šādhē, semkath, semkath. A major problem is that this sequence is unusual since the meaning is very difficult to guess, insofar as the division of words is unclear. The Official Aramaic substantive 'š means 'wood', 'piece of wood', 'plank', 'tree'¹⁰⁴, while šš₂ designates a 'bird of prey', differing from šš₁ and šš₃ with no certain meaning¹⁰⁵. Finally, the substantive ss can refer to an animal, either a horse (ss₁), or a moth (ss₂), or a swift (ss₃)¹⁰⁶. The proposed reading is, of course, unsatisfactory and would require a revision when other comparable epigraphic testimonies will make it possible to refine the decipherment. The shape of the letters leads me to date these two inscriptions around the 2nd or 3rd century CE.

Armazic inscriptions on Bone Plates from the Palace of Dedop'lis Gora

The excavations carried out on the hill of Dedop'lis Gora, which is located on the left bank of a tributary of the Kura river, the western P'ronē flowing in Šida K'art'li, have provided abundant material susceptible to clarify our knowledge of palatial cultures. Several bone plates used for a game of chance and for telling fortune were also found in the midst of the ruins, along with sheep astragalus and pork knuckles used as game accessories. Among the various artifacts that were found, fifty-five small bone or deer antler plates¹⁰⁷ dating from the 1st century CE were identified among the remains of four rooms (n. 1, 3, 12 and 13) in the palace of Dedop'lis Gora. About twenty-five of them feature images of horsemen hunting at a gallop and armed with bow or spear. Among these fifty-five plates, thirty-nine of them feature engraved figures, and seven also bear inscriptions. In each case, the plates were accompanied by phalanges of ungulate animals, mainly pigs, sheep or goats, or bears in rarer cases. In rooms 12 and 13, they appeared with phalanges, astragalus and several bone dice. In the same rooms, the plates were found in the debris of the wall on the upper floor, which means that they were originally intended to be kept on a shelf. A stack of eight plates along

¹⁰³ HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 2, p. 824, s.v. 'g and p. 825, s.v. 'd₂. The option of 'g' as the singular absolute of Punic substantive 'gb, 'cake' (*ibid.*, p. 824) does not seem probable.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 879-880.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 973-974.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 795.

¹⁰⁷ I.M. GAGOSHIDZE, *Bone Objects in Iberia and Rome. The Excavations at the Palace of Dedoplis Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*, edited by A. Furtwängler, I. Gagoshidze, H. Löhner, N. Ludwig, Langenweißbach 2008, pp. 87-116, p. 91.

with forty-two phalanges were found on the floor of the south-eastern part of room 1 which were probably kept in a wooden box. Furthermore, at the western gate of the palace (room 3), at least twenty plates and 165 phalanges were kept in a wooden box, sealed with four clay bubbles. Among the nearly 260 phalanges found, only some of them feature at least one inscribed mark, in the shape of oblique crosses or of one or two holes¹⁰⁸.

These plates were stacked vertically like a pack of cards¹⁰⁹. Considering the circumstances of the discovery of these plates, their size, their subject matter and the style of the engraved representations, we are likely dealing with five different decks of cards. Only the first game that was found in a sealed box in room 3 must be more or less complete. The most likely interpretation would be to identify these plates with playing card games or cartomancy. It is not excluded that the plates of Dedop'lis Gora were used as a game of *ganjapa*, which was very popular in the medieval Georgian world¹¹⁰. If it is not possible to define the exact number of plates and phalanges that should be included in this set¹¹¹, even less to reconstruct the precise rules, in any case these cards had playful and divinatory functions in a game of luck whose purpose was to entertain as well as to predict the destiny of the gamers. Telling fortune through divination was a part of everyday life in ancient societies¹¹². The use of magic plates was quite common in ancient K'art'li during the first centuries BCE and CE, as shown by attestations from Mc'xet'a¹¹³, Nastagisi¹¹⁴ and Up'lisc'ixe¹¹⁵. Other documents can be found outside of Caucasia, such as in the kingdom of the Cimmerian Bosphorus¹¹⁶ and in Uzbekistan¹¹⁷. If three of the six artifacts found in the territory of K'art'li are related to a funeral context, the bone plates of Dedop'lis Gora ended up visibly buried under the rubble following the sudden destruction of the palace by fire in the late 1st century CE¹¹⁸. Various dating techniques, including one using radiocarbon, enable to assert that the palace of Dedop'lis Gora would have been destroyed during a period between the end of the 1st century BCE and the first decades of the 2nd century CE, most likely the second half of the 1st century CE¹¹⁹. The discovery of arrowheads in the ruins suggests that the palace could have been besieged and burnt to the ground. The

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, note 605 p. 91 and pl. 34-37.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

¹¹² Tacitus, *Germany*, edited by A.-M. Ozanam, Paris 1997, X, 1, relates that the Germans predicted the future with engraved wooden plates.

¹¹³ M.M. IVASHCHENKO, მცხეთა, არქეოლოგიური კვლევა-ძიების შედეგები, ტომი III: სამთავროს სამარხები წ. შ. I-III საუკუნეებისა / Мцхета, результаты археологических исследований, том III: Самтаврские погребения первых трех веков н. э., Tbilisi 1980, p. 145.

¹¹⁴ GAGOSHIDZE, *Bone Objects* cit., pp. 92-93.

¹¹⁵ D. KHAKHUTAIŠVILI, უფლისციხე, II, Tbilisi 1970, pp. 32-40, pl. 7.9, 11, 14, 16-17. GAGOSHIDZE, *Bone Objects* cit., pp. 92-93.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, note 615 p. 93.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹¹⁸ A. FURTWÄNGLER, I. GAGOSHIDZE, H. LÖHR, N. LUDWIG (eds.), *Iberia and Rome: The Excavations at the Palace of Dedoplis Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia*, Langen-weißbach 2008, note 371 p. 42.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

siege seems to have taken place under such circumstances that the occupants of the palace were unable to move or take their belongings. The fire spread to such an extent that the besiegers were also unable to clear the destroyed palace once they had taken possession of the place. However, in a more recent article, Iulon Gagošize reconsidered this interpretation, arguing that the palace of Dedop'lis Gora was destroyed by an earthquake¹²⁰.

In addition to plates depicting mythological fights or legendary animals, the other major category of engraved images contains scenes of hunt involving horsemen. These hunting subjects were particularly prized in the iconography of the Iranian world¹²¹. The narrative aspect of the illustrations enhances the impression of speed as it simultaneously shows the start and the end of the hunt, representing both the moment when the rider strikes and the moment when the prey is struck. In Avesta, the attribute of fast horses occurs in relation to a deity honoured in the *Hymn to the Aməša Spənta*, called Apam Napāt¹²². In the hunting scenes of Dedop'lis Gora, the animal is placed below a galloping horse, with the front legs tucked under the belly and the hind legs outstretched. Hunted animals are often depicted on these plates with an arrow or javelin stuck in their back. All the horses are shown flying gallop, with a short mane and a spiky tail, and all are of the same species: rather small in stature, with a strong, resilient body, and slightly larger than expected. Hunters ride their horses quite easily, their chests close to the neck of their mount, with the feet extended under the sides of the horse, without a stirrup¹²³. Riders armed with javelins sit upright, holding a rein in their left hand, in the direction of the horse's movement. Some of the plates from Dedop'lis Gora feature inscriptions engraved in Armazic script (Fig. 18)¹²⁴.

Iulon Gagošize and Medea Tsotselia tried to provide a translation for seven inscriptions from these plates, with partial success due to the multiple difficulties in decryption, the brevity of the texts and their sometimes playful or esoteric meaning¹²⁵. I tried to continue their decryption effort based on the drawings published in the catalogue of the volume *Iberia and Rome* by the Editions Beier & Beran in 2008¹²⁶.

Plate n. 21 – One single word can be read, possibly *dkwt*. The dālath and the taw are uncertain owing to their stylized form. If this reading is correct, it could be a variant of *dkb*, a Palmyrenian and Hatran substantive for 'place'¹²⁷. Unfortunately, the interpretation remains unclear.

¹²⁰ I.M. GAGOŠIZE, S. MARGIŠVILI (†), მეფე ფლავიუს დადეს ვინაობისთვის, «Iberia-Colchis», 9 (2013), pp. 68-87, p. 68 and English summary p. 241.

¹²¹ Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, edited by J. Fontaine, Paris 2002, XXIV, 6, 1, on frescoes representing the Sasanian king hunting wild animals. P.O. HARPER, *The Royal Hunter. Art of the Sasanian Empire*, New York 1978. P. BRIANT, *Histoire de l'Empire perse de Cyrus à Alexandre*, Paris 1996, p. 221.

¹²² Avesta, *Yāsts*, 2, 9, transl. by P. Lecoq, p. 333.

¹²³ GAGOSHIDZE, *Bone Objects* cit., p. 96.

¹²⁴ These are plates n°21, 24, 31-32, 37, 41, 44 from the catalog. *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ I.M. GAGOŠIZE, M. TSOTSELIA, არამეულწარწერიანი ფირფიტები დედოფლის გორიდან cit., pp. 47-78. GAGOSHIDZE, *Bone Objects* cit., p. 97.

¹²⁶ Furtwängler *et al* (eds.), 2008, pl. 35.

¹²⁷ HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 1, pp. 247-248.

Plate n. 24 – A crack makes the reading of the first word fragile. First, one could read the substantive *zwy* as a possible but uncertain variant of *zwyb* ‘corner’¹²⁸. Other possible readings are *zwn*₁, an Official Aramaic Qal verb meaning ‘to feed’, ‘to present’, ‘to adorn’, ‘to decorate’, and *zwn*₂, and Official Aramaic substantive meaning ‘provisions’¹²⁹. In the case where the first sign would be a pē, it could be *pn* ‘returned’, the Palmyrenean Qal singular masculine passive participle of the Old Aramaic and Palmyrenean verb *pny* ‘return’¹³⁰. The second word *bq* is hardly understandable since *bq*₁ ‘jar’, is attested in one single occurrence and *bq*₂ is indexed as a word of unknown meaning¹³¹. As *ybyq* and *rbq* do not exist, there remains the possibility of *w* + ‘*bq*₁’ and hasten’ (Official Aramaic Qal imperative verb) or ‘*bq*₂’ ‘haste’ (Official Aramaic substantive)¹³². The last word could be read as *hlh*, an Official Aramaic contraction of the particle *hn*₃¹³³ and the adverb of negation *l*₁ or *lh*₁¹³⁴. However, its position at the end of the sentence excludes its reading as a conjunction introducing a subordinate clause. It might be read as an elliptic conditional sentence to be understood as a threat: ‘if not’, ‘otherwise’... Therefore, the least improbable translation would be: “Turn around and hurry, otherwise...”

Plate n. 31 – One can read five words spread over two lines of text: *ypd yn rq swsy y*. The dālath has an archaic shape that is reminiscent of the inscription on the cup from the treasure of Kazbek. The verb *ypd* is attested in Phoenician as the 3rd person singular masculine Qal Passive Imperfect of the verb *pwd*, ‘to suffer’¹³⁵ or ‘to be on one’s guard’¹³⁶. Another possibility would be a form of 3rd person singular masculine Qal Imperfect of the intransitive verb *pyd* ‘to come to grief’¹³⁷. Regarding the second word *yn*, this noun is probably a variant of the Official Aramaic substantive *yyn* ‘wine’¹³⁸. The third word can be interpreted in different ways¹³⁹: *rq*₁ as related to the verb *zrq*₁ ‘to sprinkle’, or its past participle ‘sprinkled’, with the derived meaning ‘ruins’; or *rq*₂ as a variant of Official Aramaic *ryq*₂ ‘void’, ‘invalid’¹⁴⁰. The fourth word is clearly the substantive *swsy* ‘horse’ or, more likely here, ‘horseman’¹⁴¹. The fifth and last word can be read as *y*₂, a variant of the exclamation *y*₁ “Oh!”¹⁴². Consequently, I propose to retain the following translation: “The invalid horseman was suffering from wine, oh!” (or: “the invalid horseman was coming to grief about wine, oh!”). This

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, 1995, p. 307, s.v. *zwy* and *zwyb*.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 1995, p. 308, s.v. *zwn*₁ and *zwn*₂.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 1995, p. 920.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 1, 1995, p. 186. É. MASSON, *Recherches sur les plus anciens emprunts sémitiques en grec*, Paris 1967, p. 78.

¹³² HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 2, p. 821.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 1995, p. 280, pp. 285-286.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1, 1995, pp. 559, 566.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 464, s.v. *ypd*.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 285, s.v. *hn*₃.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 902-903, s.v. *pwd* with different interpretations; *ibid.*, 2, p. 909, s.v. *pyd*.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1, s.v. *yyn*, pp. 455-456; s.v. *yn*, p. 461.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 1082.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 1075.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 780, s.v. *swsy*₁ and *swsy*₂; p. 795, s.v. *ssb*.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 430-431.

inscription would mock a drunk and helpless rider and illustrate the Iberian sense of humour. Several uncertainties remain however on many words of this inscription, and to stick to the only certain word of 'horseman' could be more prudent.

Plate n. 32 – The text of this plate is spread over four lines. It seems that the first letter nun cannot be interpreted in isolation, insofar as the options of n_1 (bn_1), n_2 (weight nsp)¹⁴³ and n_3 (Phoenician particle n' with a deprecative function) are irrelevant in this context. We are left with two interesting options: on the one hand, the substantives nkl_1 and nkl_2 'deception, trick'¹⁴⁴; on the other hand, the Official Aramaic verb npl_1 'to fall'¹⁴⁵. The last sign on the second line is unusually shaped: perhaps it should be interpreted as an unfinished ālaph marking the determined state of the preceding noun. On the third line, three signs could be distinguished, the last two of which feature irregular shapes: ālaph, lāmādh and pē, either $'lp_1$, Official Aramaic verb Pa'el 'to instruct', 'to compose', 'to draw up (an inscription) for oneself, on one's behalf', or, more probably, $'lp_5$, the cardinal number 'thousand'. The last word, by' or b' , does not lend itself to a clear reading. According to the context of the sentence, the hypothesis of a truncated Official Aramaic substantivized adjective $b's$ 'bad', 'evil', is the most convincing reading¹⁴⁶. In conclusion, there would be two possible readings: "Deception, a thousand evils" or "A thousand evils fall".

Plate n. 36 – This document contains four lines of text. Its reading is made difficult by the small size and the entanglement of the signs. On the second line, the second sign has an unusual shape and looks like an inverted hē or hēth. The word mhq is the singular masculine yiphiil participle of hqq_1 , a Qal verb meaning 'to engrave', 'to prescribe', or 'to order'¹⁴⁷. The second word is $m'lb$, a variant of the adjective ml' ¹⁴⁸ 'full'¹⁴⁸. The third line, which is probably damaged, cannot be restored satisfactorily in the current state of observations. On the last line, four letters can be read: $shys$. Unfortunately, the closest word listed – sh , is an Old Aramaic word "of unknown meaning", possibly related to swh 'to sink into the ground', or shy 'to be generous'¹⁴⁹.

Plate n. 41 – Iulon Gagošize and Medea Tsotselia proposed a complete but questionable reading of this inscription, which is the longest in this file of bone plates¹⁵⁰. According to my revision, six Aramaic words can be distinguished: $b trq whbl znh swsyn hd$. The hē in the first line would be a variant form of the interjection b'_2 underlining the next word¹⁵¹. Iulon Gagošize and Medea Tsotselia read trq as the adjective 'dark', but this meaning cannot be found in the dictionary of Jacob Hoftijzer and Karel Jongeling, which considered it as the verb Qal or Pi'el 'to strike', 'to smash', 'to

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 754.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 731.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 741.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 142.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 615.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 588, 628.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, p. 401; 2, p. 781.

¹⁵⁰ GAGOŠIZE, TSOTSELIA, არამეულწარწერიანი ფირფიტები დედოფლის გორიდან cit., pp. 66-67. GAGOSHIDZE, *Bone Objects* cit., p. 92.

¹⁵¹ HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 1, p. 265, s.v. b_3 .

break', or 'to shatter' attested in Phoenician, Judeo-Aramaic and Syriac documents¹⁵². Whereas the same Georgian authors read *hbln* as the adjective 'destroying' or 'fatal', I recognize the verb Pa'el *hbl* 'to damage, ruin'¹⁵³. The demonstrative pronoun *znh*¹⁵⁴ is followed by the plural substantive *swsyn* 'horses' or 'horsemen'¹⁵⁵. The last word seems to consist of two letters arranged one above the other: a *hēth* surmounts a *dālath* lying horizontally. This *hd* might be an imperative form of the verb *hdy*₁ 'to rejoice', or *hdy*₂ 'to see'¹⁵⁶. The full translation of this inscription would be: "There are horsemen striking and ruining, look! (or: rejoice!)"

Plate n. 44 – I read a single word of three letters: *qn*'. It is probably the verb *qn*'₃, a variant form of *qny* 'acquire' or 'possess'¹⁵⁷. It would refer to an action in the game to be performed by the owner of this plate.

Plate n. 60 – *qmy mn*': "count first". The first word can be interpreted as an adverb, either *qmy*₁, a variant of *qdm*₁ 'first', 'earlier', or *qmy*₂, a variant of *qdm*₃ 'before'¹⁵⁸. The final *ā*alph seems to be reduced to a horizontal line. The word *mn*' can be interpreted as a masculine singular Qal imperative form of the Official Aramaic verb *mny* 'to count'¹⁵⁹. The sentence is easily understood in a game context. Another hypothesis consists in reading the second sign as a semkath: *qsym* is an Official Aramaic word of unknown meaning and interpretation, attested in Persepolis fortification tablets¹⁶⁰, perhaps related to the Palmyrenean substantive *qsm*₁ 'divination'.¹⁶¹

The writing is in a type of simplified Armazic which can be explained by the very small size of the bone plate format. The longest and least obscure inscription is on Plate 41, which depicts a horseman piercing a boar with his throwing weapon. It cannot be ruled out that such inscriptions were invested with a magical value intended to ensure their owners and their horses strength in combat and success through an abundant booty provided by the good dispositions of fate. The apotropaic value of these objects must also have resided in the bone or deer antler material, which undoubtedly came from hunting catches, so that the plates themselves served as trophy figures.

Hence, this iconographic documentation combines hunting princes, real or fantastic animals and Mazdean fighting deities. As attested in Classical Georgian through the nouns *nadirobay* and *nadirebay*, hunting was a decisive activity of the Caucasian elites influenced by Iranians, whose epics are replete with cynegetic episodes¹⁶². Combining the arts of horsemanship, archery and javelin throwing, hunting proved the

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 1233-1234.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 344-345.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 333-337.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 780.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 34, 349.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 1014-1016.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 988-992.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2, p. 660. VAN PELT, *Basics of Biblical Aramaic* cit., p. 102.

¹⁶⁰ R.T. HALLOCK, *Persepolis Fortification tablets*, Chicago 1969, p. 695.

¹⁶¹ HOFTIJZER, K. JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 2, p. 1018.

¹⁶² SARDSHWELADSE, H. FÄHNICH, *Altgeorgisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch* cit., p. 889. J.T. WALKER, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh. Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq*, Berkeley 2006, pp. 134-135. S.H. RAPP JR., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes. Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature*, Farnham-Burlington 2014, p. 117.

warlike valor of the princes. Hunting was closely associated with military valour and involved the deployment of a large number of noble servants and companions, as it allowed the master of the hunt to display his might. In Caucasian and Iranian literature, hunt is a decisive moment in which the destiny of the individual is played out: the stories about P'arnavaz, Mirian and Tiridatēs of Armenia contain hunting episodes which are important turning points in the existence of these three Caucasian kings during a hunt¹⁶³. It was also during a hunt that an Iberian king, to whom tradition has given the name of Mirian, converted for the first time to Christianity¹⁶⁴. The practice of hunting has also left traces in toponymy: the *Life of the Kings of K'art'li* evokes a town called Sanadiro ('hunting place'), which also bears the name of Gač'iani¹⁶⁵.

The abundance of hunting iconography among the elites of the Caucasian world continued well beyond Classical Antiquity. The wall of the church of Ateni Sioni, built in the 7th century, features a representation of an archer mounted on a galloping horse and slaughtering three deers. A similar hunting scene is depicted on the facade of the Nikorcminda Cathedral, which is dated from 11th century¹⁶⁶. The same observation can be drawn from the deer-shaped pendants found in Nažixi¹⁶⁷, a silver flask discovered at Aragvispiri depicting an archer mounted on horseback and dating from the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE¹⁶⁸. These two groups of objects combine Roman influence with Sasanian-inspired imagery¹⁶⁹. In the Iranian world, the image of hunting princes mounted on horseback is particularly evident in a didactic dialogue written in Middle Persian, the *Husraw ī Kawādān ud rēdag-ē* (*Khosrow son of Kawād and a servant*). This text is a fictional dialogue between the Sasanian King Xusrō I and a fallen, orphaned young nobleman serving as a page at the royal court and seeking to regain his rank. This young man praises his various qualities in front of the sovereign, including his combat and hunting skills: "As a rider and as an archer, I am such that the wild animal must be considered lucky, which is able to stick out of my horse's head."¹⁷⁰ The coincidence of this literary description with the motifs engraved on the plates of Dedop'lis Gora is striking, as the hunting imagery of the Iberians illustrates the liveliness of the race between hunters and wild beasts.

¹⁶³ S.H. RAPP JR., *Iranian Heritage of Georgia: Breathing New Life into the Pre-Bagratid Historiographical Tradition*, «Iranica Antiqua» XLIV (2009), pp. 645-692, pp. 671-672. *The Life of the Kings* (in *K'art'lis C'xovreba*), edited by S. Qauxč'išvili, pp. 21-22. The legendary king Tigran is therefore supposed to be the father of the god Vahagn; this association could be interpreted as the idea that after the death of Tigran II, he was honoured as a god under the name of Vahagn. Agat'angelos, *History of the Armenians*, §211, edited by R. W. Thomson, p. 217, on the hunting party led by King Tiridatēs IV of Armenia in the plain of P'afakan Šemak after the martyrdom of Hrip'simē.

¹⁶⁴ F. THELAMON, *Histoire et structure mythique: la conversion des Ibères*, «Revue Historique», vol. 247, fasc. 1, 501 (1972), pp. 5-28.

¹⁶⁵ *Life of the Kings of K'art'li* (in *K'art'lis C'xovreba*), edited by S. Qauxč'išvili, 9, transl. by R.W. Thomson, p. 10.

¹⁶⁶ D. BRAUND, *Georgia in Antiquity. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC-AD 562*, Oxford 1994, p. 255.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁶⁸ R.M. RAMISHVILI, *Новые открытия на новостройках Арагвского ущелья*, «Краткие Сообщения Института Археологии», 151 (1977), pp. 114-122, p. 121.

¹⁶⁹ BRAUND, *Georgia in Antiquity* cit., p. 253.

¹⁷⁰ *Husraw ī Kawādān ud rēdag-ē* §11, edited by S. Azarnouche, p. 45.

The Inscriptions on silver dishes and aristocratic objects

A silver dish with a Parthian inscription was found in 1985 in a tomb from the necropolis of Samt'avro in Mc'xet'a (Fig. 19). This epigraphic document contains four words: *tyrydt br byt' npšh*, that Konstantin Ceret'eli curiously translated as "Tiridatēs the Prince, his own dish"¹⁷¹. I prefer to read *br*₁ as the substantive 'son'¹⁷², *npšh* as the Official Aramaic substantive *npš*, 'life', 'person', 'soul', with the suffix 3rd person singular masculine¹⁷³. The substantive *byt'* can be interpreted as *byt*₃, variant of *bwt*₃, 'dish', 'charger', with the pronominal suffix first common singular, but this meaning remains uncommon if not uncertain, given the considerable number of attestations of *byt*₂, 'house'¹⁷⁴. We would then have the choice for several possible translations: "Tiridatēs, son (of) my house, his soul (or: his life, his person)".

Konstantin Ceret'eli identifies this Tiridatēs with the grandson of King Phraatēs IV of Parthia (r. 38-2 BCE). This dignitary sent as a hostage to Rome was appointed by Tiberius to support a rebellion of Iranian nobles against Artabanēs II, but he could only reign briefly (r. c. 35-36)¹⁷⁵. Admittedly there is a chronological coincidence, but the name of Tiridatēs was very widespread in the Iranian world and no details in the inscription are available to specify the identity of this character. We must therefore remain sceptical about this identification hypothesis and favour the option of a Parthian aristocrat who would have been buried in Iberia. The clear Parthian nature of this form of Aramaic writing engraved in dotted lines suggests that the Iranian elites had familiar relations with the societies of Southern Caucasia, insofar as their epigraphic culture featured specificities that were not shared despite a substantial influence.

Archaeology provides substantial information on the Iberian society through a number of material attestations on daily life and the management of resources, particularly food. The excavations carried out in Zğuderi have thus been able to reveal the names of aristocrats who lived in this locality of Central Iberia during the second and third centuries CE: the couple Kabrias and Matrōna, a certain Gellos or Geminos, whose portrait follows the conventional representations of the Greek philosopher, Euphratēs¹⁷⁶, Atropatēs¹⁷⁷, and a character whose truncated name is written on a spoon¹⁷⁸. The latter represents the beginning of a name of three letters in its Greek (XHΔ) and Aramaic (*khd*) variants (Fig. 20). A possibly corresponding Iranian name

¹⁷¹ CERET'ELI, *Les inscriptions araméennes de Géorgie* cit., p. 82: "Tiridate le prince. (Ce plat) est le sien"; or "Tiridate le prince, son propre (plat)".

¹⁷² HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 1, pp. 188-195.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2, pp. 744-749.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 156-163.

¹⁷⁵ E. DABROWA, *La politique de l'État parthe à l'égard de Rome d'Artaban II à Vologèse I, ca 11-ca 79 de n.è., et les facteurs qui la conditionnaient*, Kraków 1983, pp. 73-130. A. VERSTANDIG, *Histoire de l'Empire parthe (-250 à 227)*, Bruxelles 2001, pp. 245-246.

¹⁷⁶ Euphratēs's dish is engraved with a bilingual inscription consisting of the owner's name in Greek and a weight indication in Armazic letters. D. BRAUND, K. JAVAKHISHVILI, G. NEMSADZE, *The Treasures of Zğuderi (Georgia): Elite Burials of Caucasian Iberia in the Roman Period (c. AD 200-250)*, Tbilisi 2009, pp. 76-77.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-81, 87, 120.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-79.

could be Xedenik, borne in 11th century by an Armenian nobleman from the House of Arcrūnī¹⁷⁹. As several centuries separate the spoon from the time of this Xedenik, it is possible that Khēd[...] would be a hapax for another name.

Three silver dishes from Zğuderi feature Aramaic inscriptions. First, a silver dish on a low base ring is ornate with a very simple decoration (Inv. 190-65-55). Inside the base ring is inscribed the Greek name Euphratēs (Fig. 21). T'inat'in Qauxč'išvili asserts that the form of the letters used in the Greek inscription suggests a date in the first century CE. Inside the name is an Armazic inscription indicating the weight of the vessel (160 g)¹⁸⁰. Second, a flat silver dish with a broad flanged outer edge and a plain surface (apart from groove circles ornating flange) is engraved with an Armazic inscription indicating the name of the owner: 'trpts, which corresponds to Greek Atropatēs (diameter: 12.5 cm. Inv. 190-65-56) (Fig. 22)¹⁸¹. Third, a plain dish of 19 cm of diameter ornate with concentric circles contains an inscription of five Armazic letters meaning "my dish" (Inv. 190-65-57) (Fig. 23)¹⁸². Unfortunately the photograph available is unclear, the epigraphic notice incomplete, and I did not manage to get a better image of the inscription to verify this reading.

The last inscription of this corpus was found in Bori, located in the region of Imeret'i, on the northern foothills of the Mesket'i mountain range in Western Georgia. Occupied since the Bronze Age, this place became an urban centre belonging to or under the influence of the Iberian kingdom during the Hellenistic period. A silver cup dating from the 3rd century CE found in a vineyard in 1902 depicts a horse standing in front of the altar engraved in the central medallion. Unfortunately, the context of discovery is very poorly understood due to the fact that the owner of the land, Mr. Machavariani, dug without precaution to find other treasures, sold most of his finds and is thought to have melted some gold items. The archaeologist Yakov I. Smirnov, who visited this site in 1909, noted the damage of these informal excavations¹⁸³. According to him, the burial ground covered neighbouring plots, so that some of the items sold by Mr. Machavariani could have been bought to him by his neighbours. In 1914, a few years after the collection from Bori appeared in the Hermitage, it was summarized in an article written by E. M. Pridik, which contains a short register of most of the items with a few illustrations¹⁸⁴. The author dated the entire complex of finds from the 1st centuries BCE and CE, earlier than they later proved to be. Excavations carried out in 1963 revealed another necropolis dating from the 1st to the 3rd century CE. Gold jewellery, silver, bronze and glassware were found in the tombs and burial pits. The archaeological items from Bori are now preserved in the Hermitage, the Simon Jānašia Georgian State Museum and the Georgian State Mu-

¹⁷⁹ JUSTI, *Iranisches Namenbuch*, cit., p. 171.

¹⁸⁰ BRAUND, JAVAKHISHVILI, NEMSADZE, *The Treasures of Zğuderi* cit., pp. 76-77.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁸³ Архив ИИМК РАН. Дело Императорской Археологической Комиссии н. 35 (1908). ОАК за 1909-1910, p. 110.

¹⁸⁴ E.M. PRIDIK, *Новые кавказские клады*, «Материалы по археологии России», 34 (1914), pp. 94-110.

seum of Art¹⁸⁵. The dish of Buzmihr was deposited in the Hermitage by the Imperial Archaeological Commission under the inventory number KZ 5267.

Other burial items were found near the silver cup – they notably include a fragment of a thin gold leaf inlaid in the upper part with two small garnets (inventory number Z-32237), and a massive gold bead inlaid with garnets (inventory number Z-332). They attest to the tradition of burying insignia of power in the tombs of ruling princes. Hence, the mode of burial of the *bidaxš* Buzmihr shows striking similarities with the tombs of the princely cemetery of Armazisxevi, which were more or less contemporaneous with it. Another item from the Bori collection preserved in the Hermitage sheds light on the nature of the burial structure where Buzmihr was buried: an iron pendant of a lamp on three chains, registered under the inventory number KZ 5571, ill. 5, in the shape of a flat bowl of 15 cm in diameter, with a sharpened crutch attached to the chains for hammering into the thickness of the wall on the top. This find clearly suggests that the burial structure was conceived in the form of a crypt or a vault with a gable or flat ceiling, made of thick, massive slabs; a crutch was driven inside the wall and a lamp hung on it¹⁸⁶.

This dish of Buzmihr from Bori is perfectly preserved, since it is only slightly dented in some places with individual scratches and small depressions, apparently made during its removal from the grave. The cup is shallow, as its greatest depth is less than 5 cm, with a considerable diameter (26.3 cm), and a hemispherical shape. It was made of a fairly massive plate of high-grade silver (0.2 cm thick, 733 g heavy) on a lathe: from the outside, characteristic traces of processing on the rotating device were preserved in the shape of concentric circles and a central recess from the pin. The side of the dish is thickened by bending the edge of the sheet inward, followed by soldering and grinding. A short ring pallet is soldered from below (dm 10 cm, h. 2 cm)¹⁸⁷. The inner surface of the dish is decorated with a skilfully engraved, partially gilded image, placed in a medallion of 12.3 cm of diameter (Fig. 24). In the centre of the figure, a trace from the leg of a compass can be seen. Two concentric circles frame a lush laurel wreath (1.2 cm wide) intertwined with ribbons. The leaves of the wreath are lightly engraved and gilded – there are only traces of gilding left. In the centre of the medallion, which is framed by a wreath, a horse is standing in a calm position, facing left. Its figure of impeccable proportions was executed by bold deep engraving and is completely gilded. In front of the horse is an altar made by the same engraving, but less carefully and without gilding. On the altar lie a pine cone, symbol of resurrection¹⁸⁸, and two round gilded fruits, perhaps apples. The image of a

¹⁸⁵ ქართული საბჭოთა ენციკლოპედია, 2, Tbilisi 1977, p. 470.

¹⁸⁶ A.A. IERUSALIMSKAYA, *О серебряном блюде "с конем" из Бори (Грузия)*, in *Уходя, оставить свет... Памяти Еврения Владиславовича Зеймаля*, St-Petersburg 2004, pp. 50-63, pp. 50-52.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁸⁸ As the fruit of an evergreen tree, the pine was used as a symbol of immortality and rebirth in several religious traditions, like the Dionysian religion, as the mysteries of Cybele and Attis or as an attribute of the lunar god Mēn, particularly widespread in Anatolia. This symbol also appears on a temple-shaped censor. A. VAN HAEPEREN-POURBAIX, *Recherche sur les origines, la nature et les attributs du dieu Mēn*, in *Archéologie et religions de l'Anatolie ancienne. Mélanges en l'honneur du professeur Paul Naster*, edited by R. Donceel, R. Lebrun, Louvain-la-Neuve 1984, pp. 221-257, p. 224-225. BRAUND, *Georgia in Antiquity*

horse facing a fire altar was found on several silver dishes from Caucasian Iberia¹⁸⁹. Kiti Mac'abeli interpreted this picture as the mark of a cult to the solar god Mithra¹⁹⁰. According to Anna Ierusalimskaya, the three rectangular protuberances above the horse's head must be interpreted not as solar rays, but as a particular cut on the mane which reminds of the steeds of the Iranian princes of the Sasanian era¹⁹¹. In the hymn to Tištrya of the Avestan corpus, this god is featured in the shape of a white horse¹⁹². This benevolent deity was involved in a cosmic fight against the deva Apaoša, in which the supreme god of Mazdaism, Ahura Mazda, had to intervene by offering a sacrifice to Tištrya, so that the latter can restore fertility in the world¹⁹³.

On the other face, the epigraphic document consists of two inscriptions (Fig. 25). One of them presents the name and title of the character, incised in continuous lines. The other, which concerns spiritual considerations, is engraved in dotted lines. Both are written in the Armazic script and appear easy to read: *bwzmyhr byty'hš tḅ'* – “Buzmihr the good *bidaxš*”¹⁹⁴, and *rwn dhr* “long (living) soul”¹⁹⁵. The theophoric name Buzmihr includes the name of the Mazdean god Mihr or Mithra, which was particularly appreciated in Iberian onomastics, as two kings living in the 1st century CE were named Mithridatēs¹⁹⁶. Buzmihr shares his name with Bosmarios, father of Peter the Iberian mentioned in the Syriac version of his hagiography, but the times of their attestations diverge too much to conclude to one single character¹⁹⁷.

The title of *bidaxš* is of Iranian etymology and can designate a viceroy or second ruler of the Iberian kingdom, but also a governor ruling over a border territory¹⁹⁸. Compared to the form *pythš* of the stele of Šargas, the initial consonant of *byty'hš* is voiced, like the form *bḥš* on the the gravestone of Sērapeitis, which therefore testifies to a later stage in the evolution of this phoneme. The *matres lectionis* ālaph and yodh also attest to a pronunciation of the vowels partly conforming to the Greek form *pitiāxēs*. The function of the second ruler after the king can thus be considered an

cit., p. 255. BRAUND, JAVAKHISHVILI, NEMSADZE, *The Treasures of Zghuderi* cit., pp. 58-60. G. GAMKRELIDZE, *Archaeology of the Roman Period of Georgia (Essay and Catalog)*, Tbilisi 2014, p. 51.

¹⁸⁹ Š. AMIRANAŠVILI, *Две серебряные чаши из раскопок в Армази (Грузия)*, «Вестник древней истории», 1 (1950), pp. 91-101, pp. 89-91.

¹⁹⁰ K. MAC'ABELI, *Позднеантичная монетика Грузии*, Tbilisi 1976, pp. 71, 77, 80, 94.

¹⁹¹ IERUSALIMSKAYA, *О серебряном блюде “с конем” из Бори (Грузия)*, cit., pp. 57-59.

¹⁹² Avesta, Yašt 8, §18.

¹⁹³ Avesta, Yašt 8, §20-29.

¹⁹⁴ HOFTIJZER, JONGELING, *Dictionary* cit., 1, pp. 415-417, s.v. *tḅ'*, Official Aramaic substantive meaning ‘goodness’, ‘benevolence’, ‘prosperity’, ‘abundance’, ‘alliance’. Variant form of *tḅy*, adjective ‘good’.

¹⁹⁵ D.N. MACKENZIE, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, London 1971, p. 26, s.v. *dēr*, synonym of *dagr*, ‘long’, p. 23; *ibid.*, p. 73, s.v. *ruwān*, ‘soul’. KLUGKIST, *Midden-Aramese Schriften* cit., p. 132.

¹⁹⁶ A. BORISOV, *Надписи на серебряной чаше из Бори (Грузия)*, «Сообщения Государственного Эрмитажа», 4 (1947), pp. 8-11. «SEG» XX, 112. «IG» XIV, 1374. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LVIII, 26, 1-4.

¹⁹⁷ C. TOUMANOFF, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, Washington 1963, pp. 260-261. About the plate of Gori, see IERUSALIMSKAYA, *О серебряном блюде “с конем” из Бори (Грузия)* cit., pp. 50-63. RAPP JR., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes* cit., p. 75.

¹⁹⁸ W. HINZ, R. BORGER, G. GROPP, *Altiranische Funde und Forschungen*, Berlin 1969, pp. 149-153. O. SZEMERÉNYI, *Iranica*, in *Monumentum H. S. Nyberg*, vol. II, *Acta Iranica* 5, Tehran-Liège 1975, pp. 313-394, pp. 361-366. I do not retain the etymology adopted by N. GARSOÏAN, *The Epic Histories Attributed to P'awstos Buzand (Buzandaran Patmut'wnk')*, Cambridge 1989, p. 516, which derives the Middle-Persian term *bitaxš* from the Old Iranian *axš*, ‘to observe’, and from *paiti*, ‘chief’.

institution of Iranian origin attested in Achaemenid, Arsacid and Sasanian Iran as well as in Caucasian Iberia, while the Armenian *bdeaxš* recovers the office of a governor in marchland¹⁹⁹. It is, however, unclear whether the prince Buzmihr mentioned on this dish from Bori was the Iberian *pitiāxēs* established in Armazi, a *bidaxš* from the Armenian-K'art'velian borderland or another Caucasian dynast.

The dish of Buzmihr clearly testifies to the cultural affiliation of the Iberian elite to the Iranian world and to Mazdaism, the religion favoured by these rulers before the decisive progress of Christianity beginning from the 4th century CE. It also remains one of the last attestations of the Armazic script in Southern Caucasia.

Conclusion

All the Aramaic inscriptions studied in this paper testify to the evolution of epigraphic practices in ancient Caucasian territories through the Achaemenid period, the Hellenistic times, and the first centuries of the Christian era. The distribution of Imperial Aramaic, Parthian, Armazic and other North-Mesopotamian scripts proposed by Konstantin Ceret'eli is largely valid and convenient for dating and classification. However, this taxonomy of scripts should not obscure the fact that some short inscriptions seem to combine these different script patterns. By their content, these inscribed attestations provide information on the largely Iranian onomastics of the Caucasian elites, as well as on certain economic, political, diplomatic, religious or even esoteric realities of Southern Caucasia during the Antiquity. A comprehensive analysis of these inscriptions in perspective with literary and archaeological sources sheds light on certain points that were still poorly understood. These epigraphic attestations alone are hardly sufficient to prove any theory on the heterography of Aramaic in relation to an Iranian or Caucasian language, or, on the other side, on the widespread oral practice of the Semitic languages in Southern Caucasia. These two propositions are often opposed one to another, but in fact they are not incompatible if we accept that there could have been an Aramaic-speaking fringe among the elite of leaders and communities of merchants and craftsmen from the Fertile Crescent. Furthermore, fossilized words could have been interpreted orally into another language by non-Aramaic speakers, at least during the Sasanian era. After all, it is not the role of ancient documents to prove preconceived theories about a distant and largely inaccessible past. While remaining cautious, it is possible to advance that the brief Aramaic inscriptions testify to the ability of Southern Caucasian societies to appropriate a flexible and evolving type of writing, in coexistence with Greek and, to a lesser extent, Latin, with a view to asserting their inclusion into the exchange networks of the ancient world.

¹⁹⁹ É. BENVENISTE, *Titres et noms propres en iranien ancien*, Paris 1966, pp. 50-65; D. BRAUND, *Georgia in Antiquity. A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia 550 BC-AD 562*, Oxford 1994, pp. 211-214. J. LINDERSKI, *How Did King Flavius Dades and Pitaxes Publicius Agrippa Acquire Their Roman Names?*, «Roman Questions», II (2007), pp. 262-276, n. 4 p. 263.



Fig. 1 – The silver *phialē* from the Treasure of Kazbek²⁰⁰



Fig. 2 – Inscription on the silver *phialē* from the Treasure of Kazbek²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Photograph courtesy of Anna Kadieva.

²⁰¹ GIM 75942 op. B-442/1. Diameter 80 cm, height 5,5 cm. TALLGREN, *Caucasian monuments* cit., p. 117. SMIRNOV, *Восточное серебро* cit., pl. III.

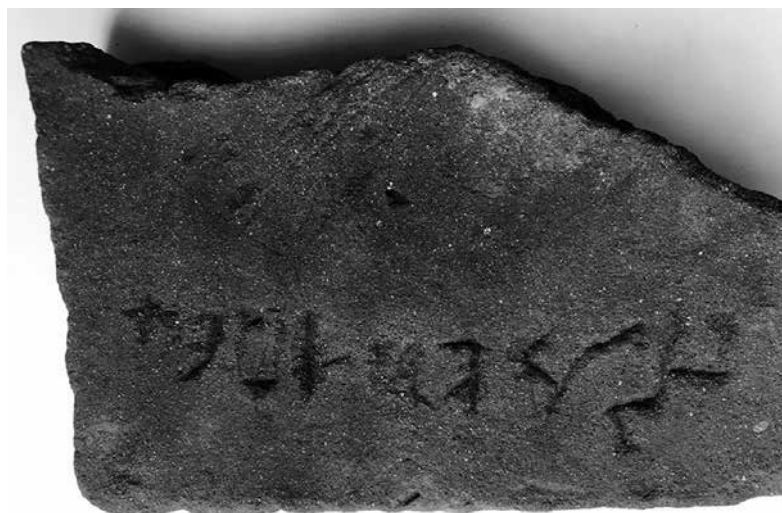


Fig. 3 – Inscription from Oč'amč'ire²⁰²

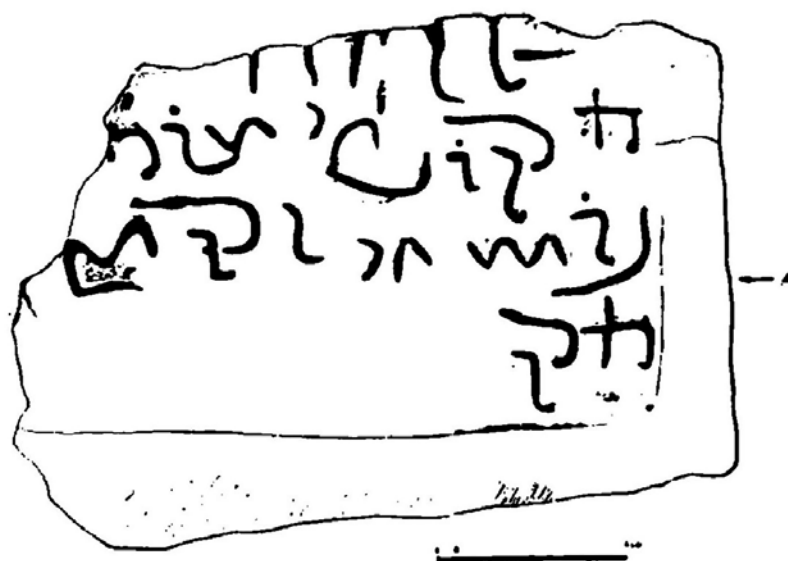


Fig. 4 – The Aramaic inscription from Garni²⁰³

²⁰² Photograph courtesy of Viacheslav Chirikba.

²⁰³ PERIKHANIAN, *Арамейская надпись из Гарни* cit., p. 124.

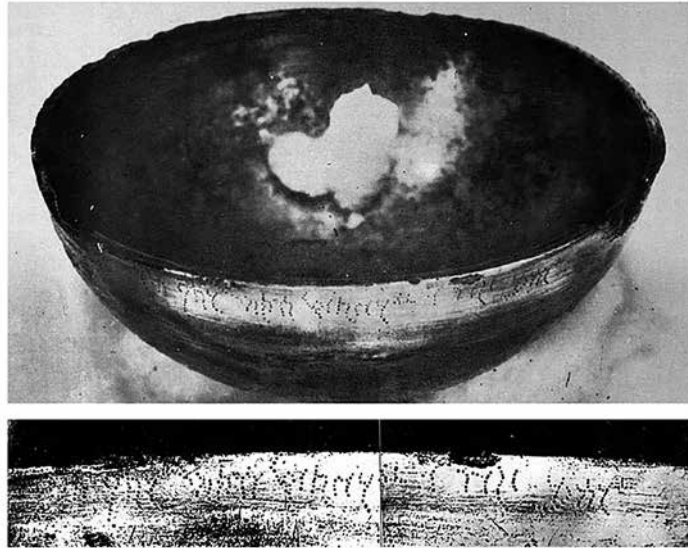


Fig. 5 – The Cup of Sisian²⁰⁴

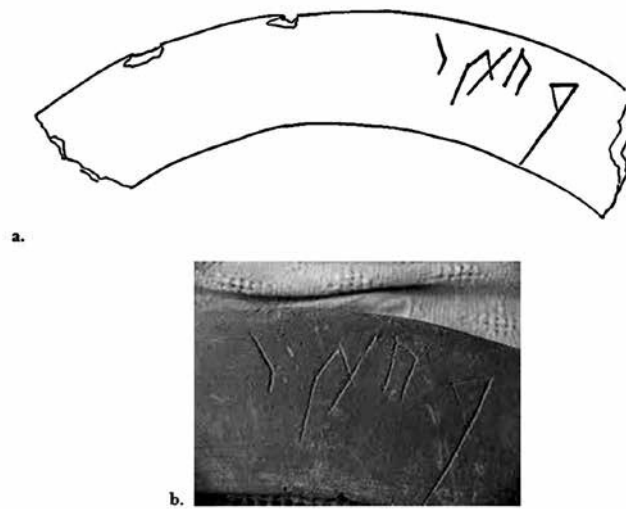


Fig. 6 – Facsimile and photograph of an Imperial Aramaic inscription on a pitcher from Up'lisc'ixe (3rd-1st c. BCE)²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ PERIKHANIAN, *Inscription araméenne sur une coupe d'argent trouvée à Sissian (Arménie)* cit., pl. I & II.

²⁰⁵ CERET'ELI, *Les inscriptions araméennes de Géorgie* cit., fig. 5 p. 84.



Fig. 7 – Inscription on a fragment of *ke'vri* from Up'lisc'ixe²⁰⁶



Fig. 8 – Facsimile of a short Aramaic inscription from Dedop'lis Mindori²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ H. GIUNASHVILI, *Studies on the Ancient Aramaic Epigraphy of Georgia*, «Iran Namag», 4, 3-4 (2019), pp. 51-63, p. 57.

²⁰⁷ CERET'ELI, *The Oldest Armazian Inscription in Georgia* cit., pp. 85-88. CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 392.



Fig. 9 – Facsimile of inscriptions on *k'vevri* n. 1 from Dedop'lis Gora²⁰⁸

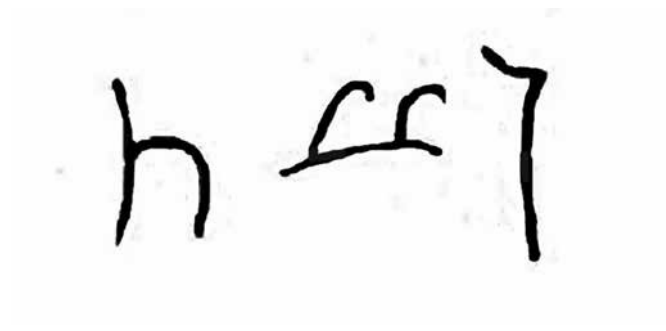


Fig. 10 – Facsimile of an Aramaic inscription on *k'vevri* n. 2 from Dedop'lis Gora²⁰⁹



Fig. 11 – A single letter engraved on pitcher n. 3 from Dedop'lis Gora²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ CERET'ELI, სტუდიები cit., p. 381.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*



Fig. 12 – Inscription on a fragment of *k'evri* from Urbnisi²¹¹

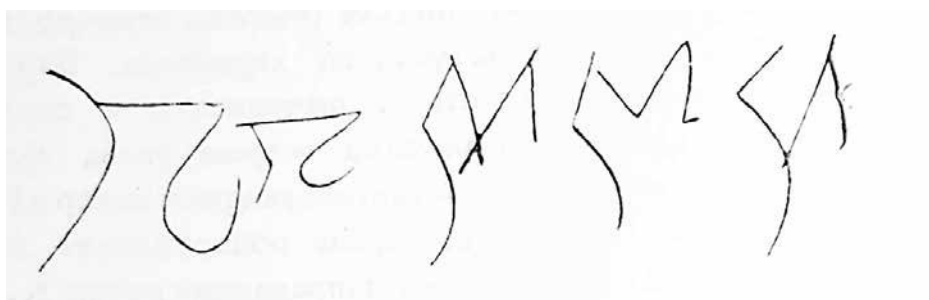


Fig. 13 – Armazic letters on a golden bracelet from Armazi-Mc'xet'a²¹²

²¹¹ GIUNASHVILI, *Studies on the Ancient Aramaic Epigraphy of Georgia* cit., p. 57.

²¹² CERET'ELI, *Армазское письмо и проблема происхождения грузинского алфавита* cit., fig. 3, p.



Fig. 14 – Armazic inscription on a ring from Armazi-Mc'xet'a²¹³



Fig. 15 – Photograph and facsimile of Short Armazic Wall Inscription n. 1²¹⁴

²¹³ *Ibid.*, Fig. 4 on plate.

²¹⁴ G. CERET'ELI, *Эпиграфические находки в Мцхета – древней столице Грузии*, «Вестник древней истории», 2 (1948), pp. 49-57, Fig. 1 on plate.

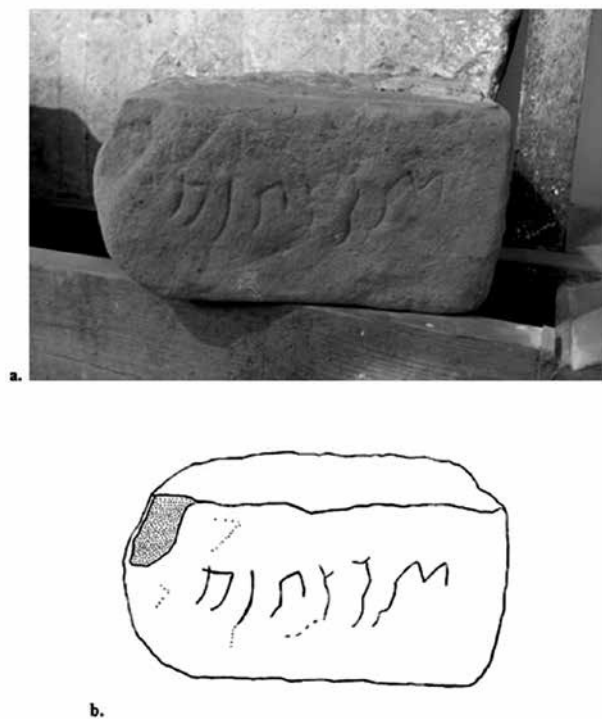


Fig. 16 – Photograph and facsimile of Short Armazic Wall Inscription n. 2²¹⁵

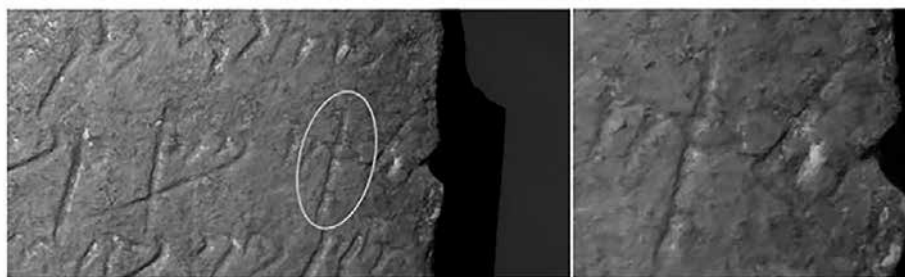


Fig. 17 – Almond curving on a letter from the seventh line on the stele of Šargas²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Photograph by Nicolas J. Preud'homme. Credit: Simon Jānašia National Museum of Georgia.

²¹⁶ Photographs by Nicolas J. Preud'homme.

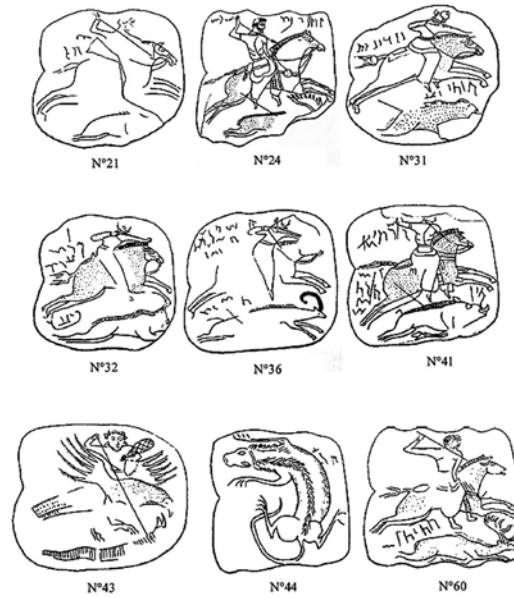


Fig. 18 – Hunting and mythical combat scenes on deer antler plates from the palace of Dedop'lis Gora (1st century BCE – 1st century CE)²¹⁷



Fig. 19 – Photograph of the Parthian inscription on Tiridatēs's dish²¹⁸

²¹⁷ The numbering follows that of the catalog of FURTWÄNGLER *et al.* (eds.) cit., 2008, pl. 34 (21, 24, 31 and 32), pl. 35 (6, 41, 43 et 44), pl. 37 (60), with the authorization of Hans-Jürgen Beier. See also G.R. TSETSKHLADZE, *Archaeological Investigations in Georgia in the Last Ten Years and Some Problems of the Ancient History of the Eastern Black Sea Region*, «Revue des Études Anciennes», 96, 3-4 (1994), pp. 385-414, p. 413.

²¹⁸ CERET'ELI, *Les inscriptions araméennes de Géorgie* cit., p. 83.

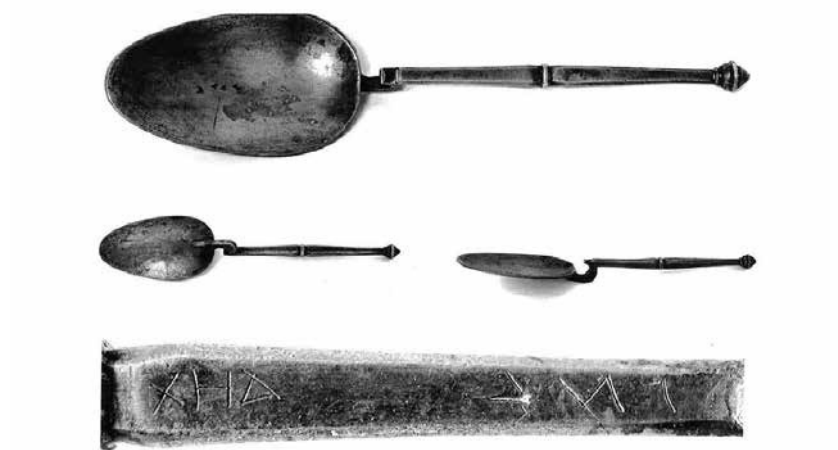


Fig. 20 – Engraved spoon from Zğuderi (2nd-3rd century CE)²¹⁹



Fig. 21 – Silver bowl of Euphratēs from Zğuderi (Inv. 190-65-55)²²⁰

²¹⁹ GIUNASHVILI, *Studies on the Ancient Aramaic Epigraphy of Georgia* cit., p. 12.

²²⁰ BRAUND, JAVAKHISHVILI, NEMSADZE, *The Treasures of Zğuderi* cit., pp. 76-77. Copyright: Georgian National Museum.



Fig. 22 – Silver plate of Atropatēs from Zğuderi (Inv. 190-65-56)²²¹



Fig. 23 – Silver bowl from Zğuderi with an Armazic inscription (Inv. 190-65-57)²²²

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78. Copyright: Georgian National Museum.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 79. Copyright: Georgian National Museum.

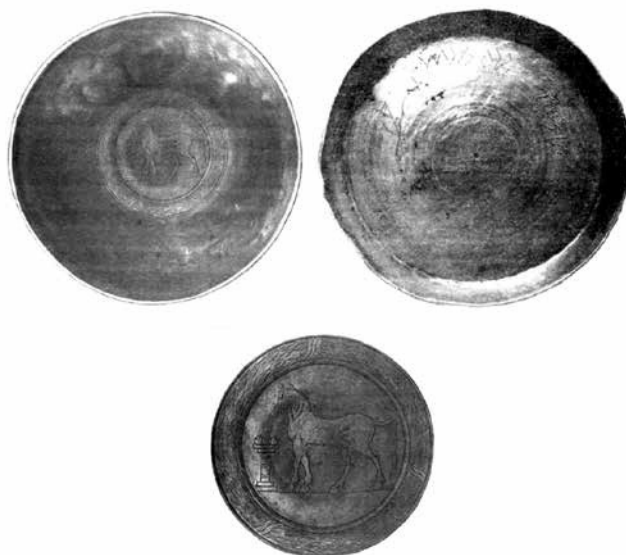


Fig. 24 – Photographs of Buzmihr's plate from Bori²²³

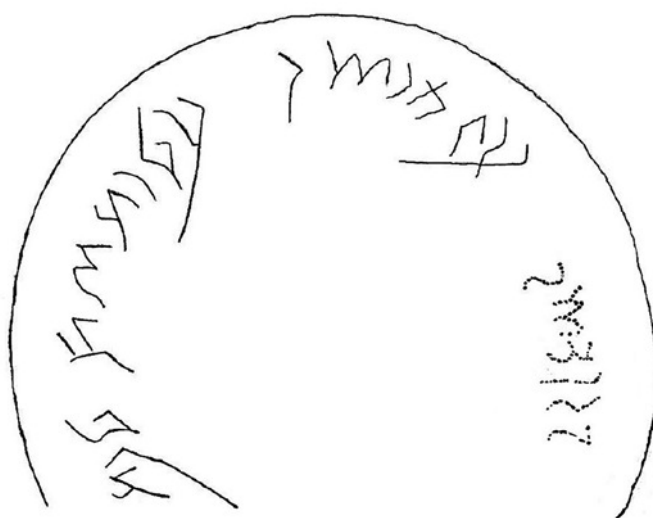


Fig. 25 – Armazic inscriptions on the plate of Buzmihr from Bori (3rd c. CE)²²⁴

²²³ IERUSALIMSKAYA, *О серебряном блюде "с конем" из Бори (Грузия)*, cit., pp. 53-55.

²²⁴ Drawing of Nicolas J. Preud'homme from R.N. FRYE, *Palevi Heterography in Ancient Georgia?*,

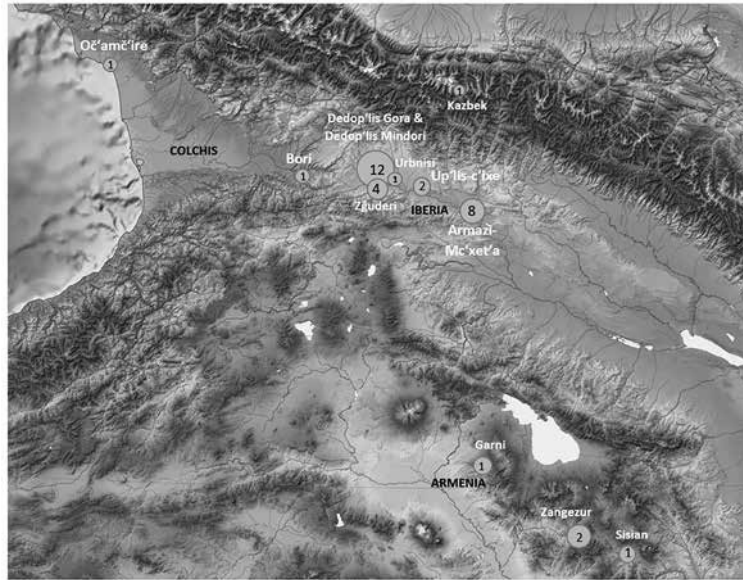


Fig. 26 – Map of ancient Aramaic inscriptions in Southern Caucasia²²⁵

in *Archaeologica orientalia in memoriam Ernst Herzfeld*, edited by G.C. Miles, Locust Valley 1952, pp. 89-101, p. 96.

²²⁵ Map of Nicolas J. Preud'homme with a base map provided by Joseph Cappelletti.

Tab.1. Comparative Table of Ancient Aramaic Inscriptions from Southern Caucasia

	Swan Cup from Kazbek (6-5 th c. BCE)	Short Inscriptions from Up'liše'ixe (3 rd -1 st c. BCE)	Steles from Zangezur (2 nd c. BCE)	Dish from Sisian (1 st c. BCE)	Pottery from Dedop'lis Mindori & Dedop'lis Gora (1 st c. BCE)	Bone Plates from Dedop'lis Gora (1 st c. BCE)
Category	<i>Imperial Aramaic</i>	<i>Imperial Aramaic</i>	<i>Imperial Aramaic</i>	<i>North- Mesopotamian</i>	<i>Armazic</i>	<i>Armazic</i>
Ālaph		𐤀	𐤀	𐤀	𐤀	𐤀 𐤀 𐤀
Bēth	𐤁	𐤁	𐤁 𐤁	𐤁		𐤁
Gāmal					𐤂	𐤂
Dālath	𐤃		𐤃 𐤃 𐤃		𐤃	𐤃 𐤃 𐤃
Hē				𐤄		𐤄 𐤄 𐤄
Waw		𐤅	𐤅			𐤅
Zain		𐤆	𐤆	𐤆		
Hēth			𐤇	𐤇		𐤇 𐤇
Tēth				𐤈		
Yodh	𐤉		𐤉 𐤉	𐤉	𐤉	𐤉
Kāp		𐤊	𐤊	𐤊	𐤊	𐤊
Lāmādh		𐤋	𐤋 𐤋	𐤋		𐤋
Mem			𐤌	𐤌		𐤌 𐤌 𐤌
Nun			𐤍	𐤍		𐤍 𐤍
Semkath			𐤎	𐤎		𐤎
ʿĒ						
Pē				𐤏		𐤏
Šādhē						
Qoph			𐤐	𐤐	𐤐	𐤐
Rēsh		𐤑	𐤑 𐤑 𐤑	𐤑		𐤑
Shin			𐤒			
Taw			𐤓	𐤓		𐤓

Tab. 2. Comparative Table of Ancient Aramaic Inscriptions from Southern Caucasia (1st c. BCE – 3rd c. CE).

	Dish of Tiridatēs (1 st c. BCE)	Stele of Šargas (1 st c. CE)	Inscription of Garni (2 nd c. CE)	Stele of Strapetis (2 nd c. CE)	Short Armazic Inscriptions (Armazi, Urbnisi) (2 nd -3 rd c. CE)	Short Armazic Inscriptions (Zğaderi) (2 nd -3 rd c. CE)	Buzmihr's Dish (3 rd c. CE)
Category	Parthian	Armazic	North- Mesopotamian	Armazic	Armazic	Armazic	Armazic
Ālaph							
Bēth							
Gāmal							
Dālath							
Hē							
Waw							
Zain							
Hēth							
Tēth							
Yodh							
Kāp							
Lāmādh							
Mem							
Nun							
Smkath							
ʾE							
Pē							
Šādhē							
Qoph							
Rēsh							
Shin							
Taw							

ABC from Abkhazia (2 nd c. BCE – 4 th c. CE)	Ālaph	Bēth	Gāmal	Dālath	Hē	Waw	Zain

