

**ARCHEOLOGICAL MONUMENTS WITH KUFIC INSCRIPTIONS FOUND  
IN GEORGIA (THE 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES)****Evgeni Tchanishvili**

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**Abstract:** From the first appearance of Arab armies in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century the progressive installation of political control over the Georgian lands was started by the Umayyad Caliphate. After the formation of the Emirate of Tbilisi in the early Abbasid period, the city grew into a center of trade between the Islamic world and Europe. Tbilisi functioned as a key Arab outpost and a buffer province facing the Byzantine Empire and Khazar dominions.

During the Umayyad and Abbasid Periods in Georgia Islamic administration was established with its law, art, currency and also the Arabic (Kufic) script, which was the main language of the Caliphate.

During the reign of Caliph abd al-Malik, Arabs began to expand the Islamic domains. From the beginning of VIII century Arabs had a continuous struggle for Transcaucasia with the Khazars who acted either independently or together with the Byzantines. During that period the commander Jarah, who was sent after the Khazars defeat, entered Kartli and renewed the “Certificate of Protection”<sup>1</sup>. He burdened local population with taxes.

Around 730 two factors led to a change in Umayyad policy towards Georgia. First in that year the Khazars managed to invade Northwest Iran and went all the way to Mosul before being defeated. The tributary buffer states of the Caucasus had not been able to prevent that invasion. Furthermore local Christian rulers, such as Guaram III of Iberia still kept contact with Byzantium and hoped for its intervention. The Empire however was weak and Arab raids could reach Constantinople making Byzantines less of a menace than the Khazars. In 732 – 733 Caliph Hisham Ibn al-Malik (724-743) appointed

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<sup>1</sup> A document issued by Arab military commander Habib bin Maslama in 654 or in 655, which determined the relationship between the Arab Caliphate and the population of Kartli. The Arabs gave the “Certificate of Protection” to the willingly subjugated population. Stephanoz Erismtavari (Head of the country), who marched to conquer Kartli welcomed the ambassador with a gift and promises him obedience. The Arabs entered Tbilisi, Habib bin Maslama counted the received gifts in the calculation of the future tribute and gave the country a “Certificate of Protection”. After that the population assumed by the “Certificate”. In 724-725 the Arab military commander Jarah marched in Kartli, who renewed the “Certificate of Protection” with some changes and additions. The population was also charged with a local payment – Kharaa. The “Certificate of Protection” has not reached us in material form. Its text is preserved in the writings of Arab historians Tabari, Baladzuri and Yakut.

Marwan Ibn Muhammad governor of Armenia and Azerbaijan with the task of waging war against the Khazars and subduing Georgia.

The campaign that followed was devastating for Georgia. Marwan did not only invade Kartli as his predecessors had done, but also led his armies after the retreating Georgian princes into the western half of the country from Samtskhe to Abkhazia where they were eventually stopped.

After the final conquering of Kartli, the Arabs put their governors – Amirs at the head of the country. The residence of Amir was in Tbilisi. Amir was a military, the rulers of the country and the supreme judge.

Amir had a large staff of Arab officials: Shurta (chief of police), Muhtasib (observance of religious and household rules, market surveillance and public welfare) etc. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century the Muslim population increased in Tbilisi which created its own mosques in the city. And the state of Amir was maintained by the local population.

The arrival of the Abbasids in the country was reflected accordingly. They increased the tax both on their own Muslims and non Muslims in the conquered territory. The tribute of the Arabs was imposed on all layers of the population, although it was most acutely reflected in the lower layer. Georgians had no respite from the Khazars either. In 764 they invaded Transcaucasia from through Derbent and conquered Kartli.

From 833 the emirate regained power over Georgian lands, imposing its authority over many princes and forcing the Bagrationi to pay tribute. Emboldened by those successes the emirs stopped recognizing the higher authority of the Caliphate. In 853 Caliph Al-Mutawakkil (847-861) sent the Turkish general Bugha al-Kabir with an army against the Caucasian rebels. The Abbasid army sacked and burned Tbilisi and executed the emir<sup>1</sup>. Many Georgian nobles were captured during the invasion. The decision the Abbasids took of not rebuilding the city extensively would considerably weaken their economic and cultural influence in Georgia and allowed the Bagrationi to become the major power in the country facilitating its further unification.

After the 853 expedition the Arab rule over Georgia was never again as strong. The emirate of Tbilisi had not been abolished but the Caliphs would not allow its power to grow again. Another vassal of the Caliphate Yusuf Ibn Abi'l – Saj, emir of Azerbaijan led in 914 the last Arab attempt to restore their domination over the Caucasus. The Sajid invasion of Georgia as it is known was however a failure although it devastated Georgian lands and allowed the Bagratids to restore the alliance with Byzantium, which they had earlier neglected in favour of Caliphs.

From that moment the Arabs stopped playing a significant role in the history of Georgia and the progressive unification of the country under the Bagrationi proceeded without any interference on their part. Only Tbilisi and its surrounding was still ruled by an emir whose relations with the Caliphate were now tenuous at best.

During the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the wealthy citizens of the city gained much power as a council of elders and kept the emirate alive mostly as a way to avoid taxation from the Georgian kings. The Georgian king Barat IV (1027-1072) took the city three times (in 1046, in 1049 and in 1062), but could not keep it under his rule. By the 1060s the Great

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<sup>1</sup> Ishaq b. Isma'il b. shuab al-Tiflisi also known as Sahak in Georgian sources was the emir of Tbilisi between 833 and 853.

Seljuk Empire, led by Alp Arslan (1063-1072) a Turk lad replaced the Arabs as the main Muslim menace facing Georgia. The Seljuks appointed a new emir in Tbilisi but after his death in 1080 the city was again ruled by its local elders. In 1121 David IV the Builder (1089-1125) king of Georgia defeated the Seljuks at the battle of Didgori<sup>1</sup>. Allowing him to enter Tbilisi next year and putting an end to almost 500 years of Arab presence in Georgia. Tbilisi lost its autonomy and became the royal capital, but its inhabitants long remained predominantly Muslim.

Our goal is to describe those archeological artifacts with Kufic inscriptions that people used in their daily life. Also, some important conclusions can be drawn from those artifacts and writings. The establishment of the Arab administration in the territory of Eastern Georgia led to the establishment of a new trade system, which implied the introduction of a new currency and new trade weight standards.

Also, active trade included such items for daily use as jewelry, writing materials, items for commercial purpose... many of them have Arabic inscriptions, the study of which provides us with additional historical and economic information about daily life during Arab rule in Georgia.

**Keywords:** Umayyads, Abbasids, Tbilisi, Caucasus, Dirham, Kufic inscriptions, Trade

## INTRODUCTION

The Arab conquest of Georgia affected on all aspects of the whole region's life. The new archeological discoveries and findings made in the last two decades provide us additional information about the daily life of the people who lived there. Along with the establishment of the Arab administration, the official administrative language and accordingly the Arabic-Kufic scripts were gradually established in the conquered territories.

The mentioned historical events first of all made affects on one of the most important areas of the staleness – the economy. The Arab tax system was temporary established, the Arab coinage system came into circulation and later Tbilisi Mint began striking Arab dirhams to satisfy the local economy and market requirements. [Dundua (2018): 182-85]

In the first half of the VIII century, the final establishment of Arab governance in Caucasus [Janashia (1936):30] and the migration of the Arab population into the Region had a great impact on the cultural and social life of local population. Arabic style daily items such as jewelry slowly came into use, as well as other daily using items (Amulets, Plates for decoration...) on which inscriptions are already found in Kufic script.

In our letter, we would like to describe the above mentioned Kufic artefacts, which we divide into four main categories. Those are – Epigraphy; Numismatic materials; Jewelry; Other objects with Kufic scripts.

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<sup>1</sup> The battle of Didgori was the culmination of the entire Georgian – Seljuk wars and to Georgians reconquest of Tbilisi in 1122. Soon after that David IV the Builder moved the capital from Kutaisi to Tbilisi. The victory at Didgori inaugurated the medieval Georgian Golden Age.

## Epigraphy

Early Kufic monumental epigraphic monuments found on the territory of Georgia are very few. Only a few archeological monuments have been discovered. One of the notable of that was discovered in recent years is Tbilisi city wall stone. (Fig.1)

In 2012 during the rehabilitation works it was discovered parts of Tbilisi city wall fortification and an elongated rectangular sand stone with Kufic scripts into the wall. That monument of Kufic epigraphy is one of the earliest in the region of Caucasus.

The first scientific article was published by Dr. shebl Ebaid and Dr. Al-Arabi Emara. They read the inscription as follows: [Ebaid; Emara (2015):272]

- 1- And (his palace?), (his fortress), his garrison, his locality and its borders
- 2- It was written by Salaam bin (Huan?) month
- 3- Sha'aban, year one hundred and seventy seven

The authors mentioned that the importance of the inscription is determined by the fact of being the oldest monumental inscription in the entire eastern world and the date is 177 AH / 793 AD. [Ebaid; Emara (2015): 273]

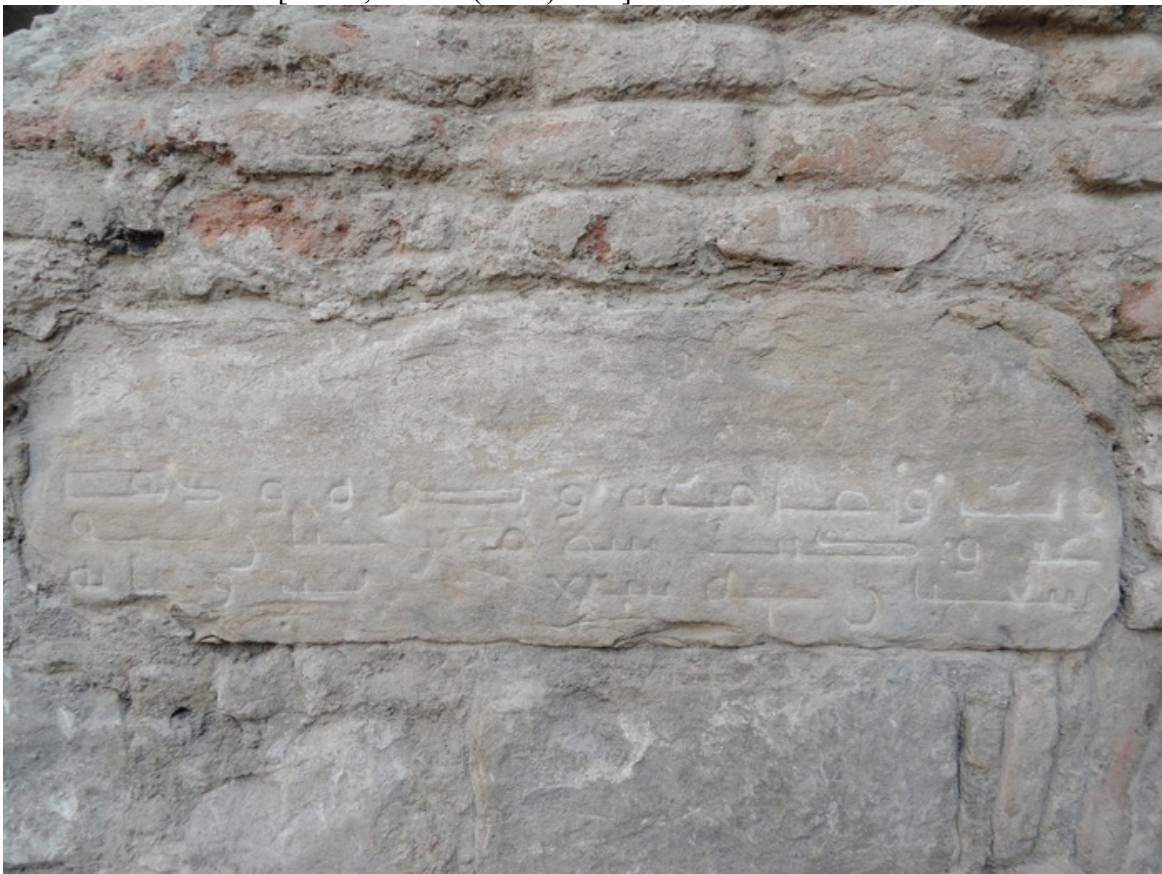


Fig.1

After the above-mentioned article was published, Georgian scholars researched the inscription once again and after a close visual inspection<sup>1</sup>, they proposed the newly reading of the inscription: [Paghava, Dzelaze, Topuridze (2022)]

- 1- His [garrison ???] and his victory and his protector
- 2- And wrote Salam ibn Hayyan/habban/habbab in
- 3- Sha'ban year seven and forty and one-hundred

Scholars concluded that, discovery of the sha'ban AH 147 Arabic inscription from Tiflis confirms one more time the continuous Arab military and administrative presence in Tiflis before the 770s. The Arab presence in Tiflis in October 764 (sha'ban, 147 AH), along with other discoveries demonstrates yet one more time that the Arab administration was established in Georgia earlier than in the 770s. The emergence of the Arab administrative institutions like mint and marking the roads with mile stones (perhaps indicating the functioning of the Caliphal postal service), as well as ordering the lapidary inscriptions, demonstrates clearly enough that the Tiflis Emirate, as an administrative unit of the Caliphate, was established already by the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. [Paghava, Dzelaze, Topuridze (2022)]

### Numismatic materials

Silver dirhams of the Umayyad period minted in Tbilisi mint are the best examples of the permanent establishment of the Arab administration. The first such Umayyad dirham belongs to the year 85 AH (704/05 AD). (Fig. 2) [Dundua (2018):182-85]



Fig.2

The largest number of coins issued at the Tbilisi Mint was recorded during the Abbasid period. First as Tbilisi emirate under the jurisdiction of the Caliphate and later as an independent political state.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Shebl Ebaid and Dr. Al-Arabi Emara guided only by the photographic materials.

Among the coins minted in the Tiflis mint during the Umayyad era, the Fels minted in the name of Marwan bin Muhammad<sup>1</sup> occupies a special place of that historical period. (Fig.3)



Fig.3

Marwan bin Muhammad's coin is Umayyad period fels. That coin is kept in the Islamic Numismatic Research Center of the University of Tubingen. It was first published and described in Georgia by I. Paghava [Chanishvili 2018, 138-146].

Marwan bin Muhammad's coin is Umayyad period fels.

Obverse: لا اله الا الله  
There is no God  
But Allah Alone

بسم الله ضرب هذا الفلّس بتفليس  
In the name of God, that Fels struck in Tiflis

Reverse: محمد رسول الله  
Muhammad  
is the messenger  
of Allah

هذا الفلّس مما امر به الامير مروان بن محمد  
That Fels is what Amir Marwan bin Muhammad ordered.

There is no information about the date of the coin. Most probably it was struck near the years of 735-744. Marwan conquered Georgia in 735 and became caliph in 744.

Among the coins issued during the Abbasid period, the one with the most historical importance is an Arabic gold dinar that appeared in April 2017 in Morton and Eden Ltd auction (Auction N 85, 26 April 2017, Lot 40). It belongs to the date of 248 AH (862/63) in the name of the Caliph Al-Musta'in Billah (248-251 / 862-866). (Fig.4) [Paghava (2016-2017): 374]

<sup>1</sup> At that time he was not yet the Caliph.



Fig.4

Minting of a gold coin by the Tbilisi Mint emphasizes not only the importance of Tbilisi as a large urban city in the region, but in our opinion it also indicates that at that time in the city of Tbilisi there probably existed an administrative office similar to “Muhtasib” office.

The Muhtasib was a supervisor of bazaars and trade, the inspector of public places and behavior in towns in the medieval Islamic countries. The duties of the Muhtasib also included the regulation of weights, money and prices. Of course, in the case of the emission of gold coins, the city administration should take care of the quality control of the money in order to avoid the falsification of coins or reducing their nominal weight which may subsequently lead to the collapse of the local market.

A coin minted in the name of Bagrat the Third, the first king of unified Georgia, is a good example of the synthesis of Kufic and Georgian (Mtavruli) scripts (Fig.4). Bagrat III son of Gurgen (980-1008) and grandson of Bagrat II was adopted by David III Kurapalati. By the patronage of David III he became the king of Kartli and after king of Abkhazia.

After the death of Bagrat II the head of Bagrationi dynasty became Gurgen, with the royal title - King of the Kings, but the rule of David and Bagrat III extends over most of the territory of Georgia.

David III Kurapalati died in 1001, after that deid Gurgen in 1008 and as a result, Bagrat III inherited the Kingdoms of Abkhazia and Kartli. The coins of Bagrat III are extremely rare and it is officially known as only one specie.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Another new the second example of that specie was discovered several years ago, today it is preserved in private collection in Georgia, but its provenance is unknown for me.



Fig.4

Silver, Half Drama, weight:1.78 gr. [online catalogue of Georgian Numismatics]

Ob.: Central Arabic legend in three lines -

There is no god  
But Allah alone  
He has no associate

لا اله الا  
الله وحده  
لا شريك له

Around: Distorted Arabic legend

Rv.: Central Arabic legend –

Muhammad  
Is the messenger  
Of Allah

محمد  
رسول  
الله

Around Georgian Asomtavruli legend in abbreviation – Christ, exalt Bagrat, King of the Abkhazians.

In 975 Bagrat became king in Shida Kartli (east Georgia). In 978 he is also king of the Abkhazians (west Georgia). Bagrat left his mother, Gurandukgt in Kartli and himself moved to west Georgia. But when the king decided to return back, the local nobles tried to resist him. Bagrat III restored his rights in Kartli. It happened in 980, perhaps in the same year he issued his coin at his residence in Kartli - Uplistsikhe<sup>1</sup>. If Bagrat struck the coin later, then he had to have the titles like Kuropalates<sup>2</sup>, king of the Kartvelians, Ranians and Kakhetians<sup>3</sup>. The synthesis of the type<sup>4</sup> and legal attests to political unity with Bagrat III as a king.

## Jewelery

<sup>1</sup> An ancient rock-hewn town in eastern Georgia. Identified as one of the oldest urban settlements in Georgia. Strategically located in the heartland of ancient kingdom of Kartli.

<sup>2</sup> Was a Byzantine court title, one of the highest from the time of Emperor Justinian I to the Komnenian period in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Rani and Kakheti are very eastern provinces of Georgia.

<sup>4</sup> Arabic dirhem, popular in east Georgia.



Jewelry would probably be one of the first products that the Arab economy would spread on the territory of Georgia. In our article we will describe only the rings.

Islamic rings with Kufic inscriptions could be divided into two categories. First are the rings which also contained the function of the seal and the second, the basic ordinary rings only with Kufic inscriptions. Those rings carry historical significance and symbolism pertinent to the Islamic faith. They served as a mark of legitimization for state documents, they assumed an educational role with engraving of religious texts and acted as talismans carrying protective inscriptions. Islamic rings are not just accessories they serve as a constant reminder of spiritual commitment.

The type of seal that we would like to describe is the most common style of sealing ring which could be found in Georgia. It is a bronze ring, on top of the seal a horizontal line divides two identical words - "wealth". (Fig.6)



Fig.6

Another type of the non-sealing rings are also very common in Georgia. As we mentioned above, very often those rings are with engraving of religious texts. Below we are giving the description one of the examples. (Fig.7)



Fig.7

It is a silver ring with religious inscription – "Lillah", For Allah.

### Other objects with Kufic scripts

We would like to describe several objects with Kufic scripts, which could not be separated into other groups. However, the mentioned items played an important role in daily life. Very often they contained religious texts or may be owner's name. The object is very damaged and we could not determine its exact size. Only a few separate words is readable, however based on that few information, it is possible to say, that plate contained religious inscriptions. (Fig. 8)



Fig. 8

Another object we would like to describe is a lead seal. (Fig. 9) Those objects are small leaden discs that were crimped onto bags or bales of goods or were attached to textiles. Those seals first of all indicate the existence of trade routes between the regions. On the territory of Georgia, finding such seals with Kufic scripts are rare, but there are some species found in eastern Georgia and now they are kept in private collections.



محمد الله امير  
المومنين      الناين  
انيا حار  
مليه

Fig. 9

## CONCLUSION

Due to its location, the Caucasus region historically resented an important trade hub. The region has not lost its importance even under the Arab administration rule. In Georgia the best example is the big number of Arabic Kufic coins minted in Tbilisi<sup>1</sup>. In addition to numismatic materials, we have an equally large number of Jewelry products, especially the rings with Kufic scripts.

In contrary to numismatic materials and rings we have less species of epigraphic and other metal objects with Kufic scripts. Unfortunately all the above-mentioned categories of artifacts found in the territory of Georgia is researching only as separate independent scientific field. And in many cases during the research they are not historically connected. Today there is no research where all the archaeological monuments made with Kufic scripts found in the territory of Georgia will be analyzed in one scientific work. We hope that this article will make a small contribution in researching that scientific field.

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