

A general survey of coinage in Georgia in AD 221-626 (based on the Georgian State Museum collection)

Time is passing and we have entered the new millenium. This fact gives rise to a special feeling of commitment to the course of history. Events of the past appear not so much in their local significance as in the rhythm of perpetual time. Today many people direct their attention to Georgia. The country has grown in line with laws of ancient civilization, has endured various cataclysms, ups and downs, but the country preserved its neverfading vitality. A meeting-ground of East and West, a centre of science and education, Georgia has not exhausted its creative potential despite its respectable age.

It is only 10 years since Georgia appeared on the modern political map as an independent state and a member of the community of nations. However, this fact does not imply that history of Georgian statehood is only 10 years long; in fact, it is centuries old, in 2000 year the 3000th anniversary of the country's statehood was celebrated.

Different nations and ethnic groups, confessions and religions co-existed in Georgia for several thousand years. The country regains its history and I want to believe that after overcoming all the trials and tribulations of our controversial time, we will witness the reconstruction of Georgia.

The past lives on in all of us. What is most important not to lose our history in an ocean of times and at the junction of the past and the future.

Like other countries Georgia also passed through all stages of historical development processes. The first millenium BC saw the formation of two Georgian states on its territory: the Kingdom of Lazica or Colchis and Kingdom of Iberia, both regions being places of origin of the world civilization.

Georgian archaeologists excavated a number of sites and found lots of artifacts that shed light upon political, economic, commercial and cultural relations of those two kingdoms with the Romans, the Parthians, the Sasanians

and the Byzantines. The existence of the main trade route passing through territory of Georgia (the northern branch of the Silk Road entered Asia Minor and the Black Sea basin) favoured penetration of foreign coins into the country. Historical-geographic and numismatic studies relating to the countries, which historically have been placed within the sphere of contact zones of eastern and western civilizations show that Georgia played an important role in the West-East economic relations that was greatly stimulated by Georgia's geographical position and by stability of Georgian political state system (based on kingship and on might of the country's defensive forces, economic potential, rich natural resources and spiritual community). The strategic significance of Georgia was due to the historically formed territorial integrity and control of important junctions of the great trade routes from Asia to Europe.

The history of money emission in Georgia has centuries-long tradition. The dawn of money circulation dates back to the period when Colchian tetri was minted in the 6th c. BC. From that time on up today money circulation in Georgia continues with more or less intensity.

The history of coinage and money circulation in Georgia reflected its political history. Shape, weight, size, imprints on coins and inscriptions on them, composition of metal in coins changed according to political and economic situation in Georgia.

Coins retain specific features of the economic and cultural development of states that have existed on the territory of Georgia. Coins are one of the valuable sources of information on many obscure points of history providing almost unparalleled series of historical events.

In the 3rd c. monetary market of Colchis and Iberian Kingdoms was similar –Roman and Parthian coins became the basic means of payment as two Georgian kingdoms were under the Roman and Parthian influence.

Parthian silver drachms appear in the monetary market of Iberia at the end of the 2nd c. BC and they were found in great number. Roman denarii circulated in Iberia until the end of the 3rd c. AD together with Parthian drachms of Gotarzes which were rather popular. Actually coins of nearly all Roman emperors of the 1st-3rd cc. have been discovered in Georgia in great numbers. Large commercial operations were paid by Roman gold money –aurei. As a result of the political and economic crisis in Rome, that broke out in the second half of the 3rd c. AD, the penetration of Roman money into Iberia was diminished. The lack of money in the Georgian market caused the issue of local imitations of Roman coins in the country. The first samples were worthy of the originals, bearing only spelling mistakes and pointing to their origin. Imitations of Roman silver denarii and gold coins were struck in Iberia in the 3rd c. AD systematically.

In the mountain regions of Georgia, rough barbarian imitations of Augustus's denarii were found, evidently minted by local masters.

In the 3rd c. AD Iberia entered a new stage of commodity-monetary relations. The changes and upheavals of the 3rd c. AD had their impact in Iberia, as elsewhere. A new Persian state –the Sasanians came to power. The coinage of the Sasanians marked a new phase of the development of mintage.

New types of coins came into circulation with symbols reflecting a new ideology of Zoroastrianism –an atashdan (fire altar) with a flaming fire.

Gold coins were issued in a small quantity and not regularly by the Sasanian kings. Gold coins were minted for some special events and not for circulation. Only 4 golden Sasanian coins have been found on the territory of Georgia, those are coins of Ardashir I, Shapur I, Narseh and Shapur II.

Sasanian copper coins are found in a small number on the territory of Georgia. They were issued rarely and they did not play an essential role in commodity-monetary circulation.

Sasanian coin finds in Georgia can be divided into some categories –single finds, accidental finds, hoards and samples that have been found archaeologically.

All Sasanian hoards found on the territory of Georgia consist of silver coins –drachms that were the main unit of money circulation in Sasanian Iran. Drachm was an international currency, face value of goods, the means of wealth saving.

Frequent finds of Sasanian coins in East Georgia made it possible to extend limits of the known area of their distribution. Most of find spots are located in Iberia/Kartli Kingdom. The large majority of coins came to light in Mtskheta –the capital of Iberia and its environments in the course of archaeological works carried on during 55 years.

Sasanian coin finds help to understand when Sasanian coins have been imported to Kartli, when they were put into circulation, how they were used in West and East Georgia at those days, when there were two independent kingdoms on the territory of modern Georgia.

Sasanian coin findings of recent years have helped us in many ways to get clearer idea of chronology of various Sasanian coin findings. Thanks to the numismatic findings, we are able to reconstruct the history and extent of the influence of Sasanian Kingdom on Georgia.

All finds are good examples of coming of Sasanian silver coins of the 5th - beginning of the 7th cc.

Judging from the local finds it was in the 3rd c. A.D. that Sasanian coins made their first appearance on the territory of Georgia. They were found together with Roman and Parthian coins.

The rich burials of Iberian kings at Mtskheta contained Sasanian coins. The earliest was struck in the name of Ardashir I. The coin was found in 1980 in a stone grave No. 25 together with rich woman's burial objects dated from the late antique period. The coin is the only recorded specimen of Ardashir I's coin discovered on the territory of Georgia and the first and the only golden coin of this shah. This type of the coin (III/2) was minted at the end of his reign (233-240) being in circulation until his death.

Archaeological findings testify that Sasanian coins of the 3rd c. are rare. They are represented only by isolated samples and were found in rather few quantities. Those were drachms of Shapur I (4), Varahran I (2), Varahran II (4), Narseh (1 golden coin and 3 drachms), the golden coin of Shapur II found in a rich woman's burial in Akhlagori.

Penetration of coinage of the first Sasanian kings into the territory of Iberia did not change the structure of commodity money circulation of the country. Local market of the country was served mainly by Roman and Parthian coins that were means of payment in the 3rd c. Iberia.

First Sasanian coins might have been received as diplomatic gifts to Iberian nobles. It might be that the first Sasanian kings bestowed not only silver plates but gold and silver coins upon the rulers of Iberia.

If in the 3rd - 4th cc Sasanian coins arrived into Iberia incidentally, later, after the lapse of 150 years, from the 5th c onward a great number of isolated and scattered finds and hoards have been circulated and found in an unbroken succession. Sasanian silver drachms of high silver quality filled the monetary market of Georgia. Sasanian drachms flowed into Kartli being predominant in the monetary market of that time. Without chronological gap Sasanian coinage is represented from the reign of Peroz (459-484), the fact is confirmed by many coin hoards.

The hoards are mainly composed of coins of Sasanian rulers known elsewhere: Peroz (459-484), Valash (484-488), Kavad (488-531), Husro I (531-579), Hormizd IV (579-590), Husro II (590-628).

Most hoards were composed during the Byzantine-Iranian wars and have to be linked with the invasion of the Sasanian armies in East Georgia.

In the hoards all principal varieties of drachms of Sasanian kings are present.

The composition of some hoards belong to different chronological periods throwing considerable light on the history of East Georgia.

30 hoards of Sasanian coins have been recorded as found in Georgia as well as about 40 other finds of Sasanian coins which may have been hoards.

The coin hoards break up into 2 groups: hoards that are composed of drachms and mixed hoards composed of Byzantine and Omayyad dirhems.

The Byzantine coins also participated in money circulation of East Georgia, but they were not so popular as Sasanian drachms in the monetary circulation of the 5th-7th centuries Kartli.

Occurrence and findings of Byzantine and Sasanian hoards on the territory of Kartli is the reflection of the fight of two powerful empires for hegemony in Transcaucasia.

Mixed hoards can be chronologically divided into early –containing Byzantine coins (Tbilisi, Marganeti and Tsitelitskaro hoards)– and late hoards where Cuphic dirhems of Moslem rulers are found with a few number of Sasanian coins (Mtisdziri, Leliani, Kavshiri, Apeni, Pshaveli hoards).

Most hoards belong to the shahan-shahs of the 6th - beginning of the 7th cc., they are closely similar in general style and of fine constitution. Coins are struck in silver and are in good state of preservation with well-read Pahlavi legends. Drachms that circulated on the territory of Kartli were in fabric, weight, execution and legends the same compared to the most known coins of Sasanian kings.

All Sasanian rulers known to have struck coins, the principal denomination being the silver drachm. Gold, obols and bronze issues are found only on some specimens and they were less in circulation.

The earliest Sasanian coin found in Georgia dates back to Ardashir I, the latest refers to Yazdgerd III (628-630). The earliest dated coin in the hoards is the drachm of Peroz, marked with the 6th year of his reign and minted at Abarshahr (No. 659).

Frequent finds of Sasanian coins made it possible to extend the limits of the known area of their distribution. All find spots are located in or near trade centres of Iberia/Kartli.

Though Sasanian drachms were obviously intended to pass as the same denomination, some series in hoards suffer a slight but nevertheless reduction in its weight standard. The weights of the specimens show a focus around 4.05 grams. Coins of Hormizd IV have the high weight standard compared to those of Husro I's and Husro II's some issues in the same hoards. The fact can be explained by that the coins of the former were in circulation for a lesser period of time and suffered a lesser degree of wear.

The characteristic feature of every standard Sasanian coin issue is the readable legend. Several handwritings of different scribes are seen on the coins of Hormizd IV, Husro I and Husro II.

Some Sasanian drachms of the 6th - beginning of the 7th cc. have distinct types, legends, certain stylistic features and provenances justifying their assignation to local Caucasian mints with the weights-reduced version of the weight standard. Those coins are less in size bearing crude, stylized portraits of the kings, sometimes legends consisting only of several letters or they are illegible.

There was a supposition among scientists about a possibility of existence of mints in Transcaucasia.

Striking of drachms of local mints, if such took place, was a subject to a high degree of central control. Drachms might have been struck locally at mints, but it is not clear whether the dies were also cut locally or instead were cut centrally or regionally and sent to the local mints for use in striking.

The majority of Sasanian coin findings in Georgia come from the hoard discovered in 1977 in Tsitelitskaro. The hoard is dispersed, but fortunately 1395 drachms and 10 Byzantine hexagrams have been collected. The hoard has the following sequence of kings: Husro I, Hormizd IV, Varahran VI, Husro II, Heraclius with Heraclius Constantine (615-630) and Heraclius with Heraclius Constantine and Heraclonas (632-41). The hoard follows the typical pattern of late Sasanian hoards being largely composed of issues of Hormizd IV. Though represented in the hoard Sasanian kings have left extensive coinage (except the usurper Varahran VI (590/1), the only coins of his so far recorded as found in Georgia were in this hoard), the majority of coins (839) belong to Hormizd IV, who ruled only for 12 years. All his coins were struck according to one iconographical type but minted in different mint towns of the Sasanian Empire.

Number of issued drachms in Sasanian period directly depended on extent of controlled territories and on duration of king's rule. Though in all big museum collections coins of Husro II are predominant, it is evident from the Tsitelitskaro hoard that Hormizd IV minted coins in great numbers and frequency.

The earliest coin of the hoard dates back to the reign of Husro I. It is a drachm of regnal year 21 (A.D. 552). The latest (youngest) coins being Byzantine hexagrams issued by Heraclius and his sons. Thus, the maximum date range of the hoard covers 89 years. The hoard gives 23 mint towns. Coins of Varahran VI

bear 4 different mint places (Meshan, Lower Veh-Kavad, Hamadan and Rayy) indicating to activity of coin issue of this king during his one year reign.

The hoard can be considered unique according to its quantity and quality as well. Very few hoards with a significant proportion of drachms of the 6th - beginning of the 7th cc have been recorded. None with such a large number of Sasanian drachms has been published so far as can be ascertained.

Analysis of coins found on the territory of Georgia brought to light different mint towns.

One of the difficult problems of later Sasanian coinage is the identification and attribution of mint monograms. The 50 different mint signatures were found on Sasanian coin findings in Georgia. It is a reflection of the large number of mints existing in Sasanian Iran and the wide circulation of Sasanian coinage itself in Iran and in neighbouring countries as well.

All the major mints known for Sasanian kings appear to be represented in single finds and hoards.

The main component of Sasanian currency come from south-western mints. There are quite a few emissions of the most numerous for Iran of the time being south-eastern mint issues. Coins issued in towns bordering with Transcaucasia are missing.

For most hoards DYNAN, LD (Rayy), BYŠ (Bshapur), AS (Aspahan), ST (Stahr), AB (Abarshahr), DA (Darabgerd), AYLAN (Eran-Hvarrah-Shapur/=Susa), AH (Hamadan), WH (Weh-Ardashir), HL (Herat), WYH-Č (Lower Veh Kavad) have the highest percentage.

Other mints of Sasanian Iran made smaller contributions. Drachms with GW (Gurgan) and GWGWN? have their own distinctive style.

Many, if not most, of Sasanian coin hoards of the 5th - beginning of the 7th cc A.D. contained no coins from Eastern mints.

From the reign of Varahran V (420-438) onwards the mint of MY (Meshan) entered on an uninterrupted career as a major source of coinage.

After analysis of different details in the pictures represented on some Sasanian drachms (of Kavad, Husro I, Hormizd IV, Husro II) the following conclusion was reached: coins were minted in several issues, showing differences not only in details of type and inscription, but also of weight. The fact pointing to a long period of minting.

The royal portraits on some late Sasanian coins of Hormizd IV, Husro I, Husro II, bearing different mints are relatively good workmanship.

The presence of hoards from the late Sasanian period in East Georgia shows that this was a circulation of an enormous amount of coins in that period.

The end of the 6th c is distinguished by an important event in Georgian numismatics. Local silver coins issued by erismtavars (local noble governors) came to light. The mint of so-called Georgian-Sasanian drachms began. Their mint started in the 80's of the 6th c. they were derivations of drachms of the Sasanian shah Hormizd IV. The coins show a steadily increasing tendency towards independence. First Georgian-Sasanian coins carried only Georgian letters and Georgian erismtavars monograms (Gurgen, Juansher, Stephanoz) on the obverse, later the Christian symbol, image of the cross appeared instead of the flames of fire over the atashdan on the reverse.

The next issues of Georgian-Sasanian drachms were struck according to coins of Husro II. The name of erismtavari Stephanoz is written in monogram, later it is spelled out in Georgian letters.

On anonymous Georgian-Sasanian coins the image of cross appears first on the obverse, near the bust of the king and later –on the reverse, where the cross is placed upon the atashdan.

Minting of Georgian-Sasanian coins was an important act, it might be considered as the effort of Kartli eristavs to show their political independence and getting more rights and faithfulness of Georgian governors.

Having studied the numismatic material from the historical point of view, it became clear that the old form of political relationship of Kartli with the Sasanian Iran came to an end in the 30's of the 7th c. A.D.

Until the second half of the 6th c. the coins that prevailed in the economy within population of East Georgia were silver Sasanian drachms, later in the course of political and economic decline, the Byzantine coins were in use in addition to Sasanian drachms.

During the 7th c., even after conquering the capital of Kartli Tbilisi and East Georgia by the Arabs, Sasanian drachms still circulated in all regions of the Arabic Caliphate and in Kartli alongside with Byzantine coins.

As for money circulation of West Georgia, where on the ruins of ancient Colchis a new Kingdom of Egrisi or Lazica has been formed, there Roman coins had priority in the 4th c. as West Georgia was traditionally under the influence of Rome and later Byzantium. Lazian kings got their royal regalias from Constantinople and were considered to be vassals of Byzantine emperors.

In the 4th c. late Roman provincial copper coins have been found on the Black Sea coast territory of West Georgia in Sebastopolis (modern Sukhumi), Gudava, Pitiunt where according to written sources, Roman garrisons were located.

In the 4th c. AD a coastal zone of West Georgia differed from the internal regions of the country by numismatic findings –there solidi struck by Constantine I and his sons were in circulation. Those coins were found in burial grounds.

According to numismatic findings coins found in Egrisi were issued in the mints of Asia Minor (Constantinople, Nicomedia, Cyzicus) and Antioch.

It is difficult to speak about development of money trade in the 4th c. West Georgia, as numismatic findings are represented only by copper coins that were used for circulation in home markets. As for gold and silver coins, they do not occur in the 4th c. West Georgia (only 6 gold coins have been found) in spite of the fact that solid was the main mean of coin circulation in eastern part of the Roman Empire. The situation might have been determined by issuing a law in the year 354 forbidding with a view of trade, taking out coins from one province into another.

Small number of the 5th c. findings of Byzantine coins in West Georgia point to the fact that in the 5th c. there were no Byzantine garrisons on the territory of West Georgia as the coins have been brought there by armies. As for

spreading of Byzantine coins in East Georgia, the situation was quite different. From the beginning of the 5th c. solidi started to penetrate there. Solidi of Theodosius II (408-450), Pulcheria (450-457), Leo I (457-474) were redeemed in different spots of Kartli Kingdom testifying spread of Byzantine coins in East Georgia.

According to numismatic material, interrelations between Egrisi and Byzantium were revived in the 30's of the 6th c. Special activity of the Byzantine Empire in West Georgia was observed during the rule of Justin I (518-527). The territory of Egrisi became a base of military activity against the Persians. 7 silver, 38 gold and many copper coins of the 6th c. were found in West Georgia. The 6th c. Byzantine copper coins were intended for daily settlements, they were change coins found in town-fortresses, where Byzantine garrisons were located.

Silver coins of Justin I (518-528) and Justinian I (527-565) were intended for foreign trade.

Penetration of copper Byzantine coins into the territory of West Georgia from the second half of the 6th c. declined. The same situation has been noted in other provinces of the East Roman Empire (in Bulgaria, the Crimea). Reduction of quantity of copper Byzantine coins in coastal towns of West Georgia cannot be explained by local reasons. The fact has to be connected with rather political-economic situation in the Byzantine Empire itself.

Copper Byzantine coins of the 6th c. were minted carelessly. Coins with one and the same face value differ from each other by size, weight, invoice and details of crowns and clothes of depicted on coins persons. The features were typical for additional emissions of coins, the issue of which was connected with expansion policy of the Byzantine Empire.

Purpose of copper coins, small number of silver coins, scantiness of gold coins and trade monopoly that the Byzantines had in their hands do not give sufficient ground to speak about development of foreign trade in the 6th c. Egrisi.

The 7th c. was the most hard period in the history of the Byzantine state. Heraclius made military and financial reforms in order to get his empire out of difficulty. As a result, silver coins had function of gold coins and large-scale settlements were made by them in foreign markets, where gold Byzantine bezants were international currency.

From the year 615 a new type of coins - hexagrams came into circulation, in contrast to the 5th c. silver coins. Findings of hexagrams and gold coins of the 7th c. on the territory of West Georgia are connected with emperor Heraclius's army. According to written sources, Byzantine forces were located there during wars between Heraclius (610-641) and the Sasanian king Husro II (590-628).

Studying of gold and silver Byzantine coins of the first half of the 7th c. shows that increase of Byzantine coins in West Georgia was connected with campaigns of Heraclius, who made his way towards Iberia via Egrisi Kingdom. This campaign ended by seizing Tbilisi –the capital of Kartli in 628.

Most of Byzantine gold coin hoards of West Georgia have been gathered during a short period of time; they had been minted with the same die. The exact dating of hexagrams of Heraclius from hoards showed that they were struck between 626 and 630 years. The date coincides with the information of Byzantine written sources about Heraclius's march into Georgia.

Receipt of gold coins into West Georgia in the second half of the 7th c. was cut down, as issuing of Byzantine coins for the close of the 7th c. was reduced. As for copper coins found in West Georgia, some were re-struck, having less weight (7.59 gr). Diminution of coin weight of follis might be caused by copper crisis that started from the first half of the 7th c. It was the time when provincial mints stopped their existence –Antioch in 610, Nicomedia in 627, Cyzicus in 629.

Thus, decrease of the number of Byzantine coins in the second half of the 7th c. was characteristic not only for West Georgia, but for other regions as well.

Income and penetration of Byzantine coins of the 7th c. into East Georgia was different. Hexagrams of Heraclius have been found together with Sasanian drachms of Hormizd IV, Husro I and Husro II in the hoards of Marganeti, Tbilisi, Tsitelitskaro.

After victories of Heraclius over the Persians Byzantine silver coins penetrated into Transcaucasia and Sasanian drachms circulated simultaneously with Byzantine coins. This fact is well confirmed by hoards of the first half of the 7th c. found in Armenia (Dvin, Leninakan) as well.

Studying of topography and contents of the 4th-7th cc. Byzantine coin hoards point to the fact that circulation of gold, silver and copper coins in West and East Georgia prominently differed. Increase or decrease of number of Byzantine coins was connected with political-economic situation of the Byzantine Empire.

Report of both findings of Sasanian and Byzantine coins on the territory of Georgia would repay further consideration. Income and penetration of foreign currency in Georgia is still in progress and will continue to be so till Roman, Sasanian and Byzantine coins go on to be found in Georgia.