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The Silk Road in Georgia

According to the Historical and Archaeological Materials

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Georgia and the region of the South Caucasus in general has been an important international trade and economic route since the ancient times. Archaeological materials prove that international trade in obsidian was already intensive in the Caucasus during the Paleolithic era¹. From the Bronze Age, obsidian trade was replaced with metal, in particular copper². Starting from the Early Bronze Age, and especially in the Middle Bronze Age (3rd-2nd millennia BC), the peoples that created the Caucasian cultures had intensive trade and cultural relations with the civilizations of the Near East of that time³. Particularly noteworthy is the appearance of lapis lazuli jewellery (mined in Central Asia, Afghanistan) in the tombs of Maykop culture (widespread in the North Caucasus from the 4th millennium BC), which can be considered as the first evidence of trade between the Caucasus region and the Central Asia⁴.

According to the ancient Greek mythology, the first contacts between the Caucasus (ancient Colchis) and the Aegean world (ancient Greece) took place as early as the second half of the 2nd millennium BC, when the legendary Argonauts' expedition to Colchis occurred to obtain the Golden Fleece⁵.

¹ Sturua K., "Obsidiani da Vachrobis Satskisebi [Obsidian and the Origins of Trade]." *Arqeologiuri Krebuli NI [Archaeological Collection NI]*. 1994, 21-35. (In Georgian).

² Shanshashvili N., Narimanishvili G., *Samkhret Kavkasiisa da Egeosuri Samkaros Urtiertobebis Dinamika da Khasiati Shua Brinjaos Khanashi [The Dynamics and Nature of Relations between the South Caucasus and the Aegean World in the Middle Bronze Age]*. Egeosuri Samkaro da Samkhret Kavkasia, Kulturuli Urtiertobebi Brinjaos Khanashi [The Aegean World and the South Caucasus, Cultural Relations in the Bronze Age]. Conference Proceedings. International Seminar, September 23-25, Tbilisi, 2016, 11-49. (In Georgian).

³ Lortkipanidze Ot., *Dzveli Kartuli Tsvilzatsiis Sataveebtan [At the Origins of Ancient Georgian Civilization]*. Tbilisi, 2002, 78, 82. (In Georgian).

⁴ Wilkinson, T. C. *Tying the threads of Eurasia, trans-regional routes and material flows in Transcaucasia, eastern Anatolia and western central Asia, c.3000-1500BC*. Leiden: Sidestone Press. 2014, 125, 13-131;

⁵ Urushadze A., *Dzveli Kolkheti Argonavtebis Tkmulebashi [Ancient Colchis in the Legend of the Argonauts]*. Tbilisi, 1964, 169-200. (In Georgian).

Based on the abovementioned facts, it is quite clear that from ancient times, even before the Classical and the Hellenistic eras, the Caucasus was an important intersection of East-West trade and economic routes⁶.

From the 6th century BC, Greek trading colonies were established on the eastern coast of the Black Sea - Phasis (now Poti), Gyenos (now Ochamchire), and Dioscuria (now Sukhumi), which obviously further strengthened trade relations between the Caucasus and the Aegean world. The Greeks exported raw materials, minerals, timber, resin, and slaves from Colchis, and imported valuable Greek goods in return (Fig. 1). It is significant that during the archaeological excavations of the ancient cemetery of Pichvnari (Pine Forest) on the eastern Black Sea coast (Kobuleti municipality, western Georgia), a sample taken from the nail of a wooden coffin in one of the graves dates back to the 5th c. BC and it revealed the oldest silk remains in the Caucasus and Europe so far (Fig. 4). The piece is considered by the scientists as an evidence of silk clothing or shroud of the person buried in the tomb⁷.

Archaeological excavations have also found silk remains from the Classical period in the Eastern Georgia, during the study of the AD 1st c. palace at the Dedoplis Gora settlement⁸.

The discovery of six 2nd century BC Bactrian coins (Central Asia) in Tbilisi⁹ and 20 Colchian tetris (Fig. 2-3) (minted in western Georgia during the Classical period) found in the Fergana Valley (Central Asia)¹⁰ should indicate intensive trade and economic relations between the Classical period Georgia and the eastern regions (Central Asia).

The trade relations between the Roman Republic and China began in the 2nd c. BC. This relationship took place along the trade route that later became known as the "Great Silk Road". Various goods were transported from China to Europe along this route, where Chinese silk held a special place. This fabric was quite expensive in Rome, and its main consumers were Roman nobles. The main section of this route passed from China through India, Parthia, and Asia Minor to Europe. Later, from the 3rd century, Parthia was replaced by Sassanid Iran, and from the 5th century, Rome was replaced by Byzantium. Parthia and Sassanid Iran played an intermediary role in silk trade with Rome and Byzantium and had a large income from this activity, as did Byzantium, from where Asian silk was exported to European countries. Although the main route of this road passed below Georgia, the South Caucasus (and therefore Georgia) still was assigned a certain function. According to ancient Greek and Roman historical and

⁶ Jamburia S., *Abreshumis gzis istoriul-Arqeologiuri Konteqsti saqartveloshi da misi perspeqtiva [The Historical-Archaeological Context of the Silk Road in Georgia and Its Perspective]*. Dissertation for obtaining the academic degree of Doctor of Archaeology (Ph.D.), Tbilisi, 2022, 30. (In Georgian).

⁷ Kvavadze E., Chichinadze M., *Palynological analysis of organic materials from Pichvnari (including the earliest silk in Georgia) - Wonders Lost and found* edited by Nicholas Sekunda, Oxford, Arceopress, 2020, 102-107; Kakhidze A., "The Antique City of Pichvnari," *Pichvnari VIII*, Batumi, 2023, 305;

⁸ Kvavadze E., Gagoshidze I., "Fibres of silk, cotton and flax in a weaving workshop from the AD 1st c. palace of Dedoplis Gora." *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 17, 2008, 211-215;

⁹ Dundua T., Dundua G., "Puli Adreantikur da Elinistur Khanashi. Samoneto Saqme da Samoneto Mimoqceva Kolkheta da Iberiashi. [Money in the Early Classical and Hellenistic Era. Coinage and Monetary Circulation in Colchis and Iberia]," *Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics (Part 1)*. Tbilisi, 2013, 115. (In Georgian).

¹⁰ Lortkipanidze, Ot., Muskhelishvili D., "Saqartvelos Udzvelesi Savachro-Satranzito Gzebi [The Ancient Trade and Transit Routes of Georgia]," *Annals*, 7, Tbilisi, 2011, 155. (In Georgian).

geographical sources, trade caravans from India via Central Asia and then the Caspian Sea entered the Kingdom of Kartli (Iberia), from there they moved to western Georgia and continued their way to Europe by the Black Sea.

The Greek historian and geographer Strabo (1st c. BC - AD 1st c.) mentions four major trade-caravan routes passing through Georgia, which went through Colchis and Iberia (Fig. 5): One route came from the east, from the Caspian region and passed through Albania and Iberia; The second was a continuation of this route westward towards Colchis, going to the city of Phasis on the Black Sea coast; The third route came from the North Caucasus and connected to Mtskheta, the capital of Iberia; The fourth route came from the south, from Armenia, and also passed through the capital.¹¹

The Roman writer Pliny the Elder (AD 1st c.) describes where and how the trade-caravan route connecting Europe and Asia passed: It was a seven-day journey from India to Bactria (Central Asia), then through the Caspian Sea and the Mtkvari River to Iberia, after that it reached Phasis, the Black Sea by land, and from there headed towards Europe.

The route from India was combined - from India to Bactria the road mainly passed on land, then after crossing the Caspian Sea, it crossed Albania and Iberia by the Mtkvari River on an east-west route, then again by land to the Black Sea coastal city of Phasis, from where it connected to the trade centres of the northern and south-eastern Black Sea coast by sea, through the Euxine Pontus (Black Sea).¹²

At different periods, especially during the wars between Rome and later Byzantium on one side, and Parthia (and later Sassanid Iran) on the other, the bypass section of the Silk Road entered the South Caucasus, including Georgia. It was due to this confrontation that an attempt was made to reroute the main section of the "Great Silk Road" in the second half of the 6th century (Fig. 6).

Due to the fact that silk from China and Sogdiana was first entering Iran, the shahs of Iran controlled the prices. They particularly determined at what price to sell silk to Byzantium. Despite this, silk trade remained profitable for the Byzantines, as they were intermediaries and sold it even more expensively in Europe. The increase in the quantity of goods and the import of more silk into Byzantium meant an increase in revenue for this country, that was the sole mediatory in silk trade for Europe. This, in turn, would allow the Byzantine Emperor to hire more troops, which, if necessary, would be used against Sassanid Persia. Considering all of the above, it was in Persia's vital interests not to allow the growth of silk trade.¹³ The Byzantines wanted to free themselves from such dependence on the Persians. In 531-532, Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (527-565) (Fig. 7) using the Ethiopian merchants tried to import silk via the Indian Ocean, bypassing Persia, through Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula into the Byzantine influenced Syria-Palestine; however, he failed in this endeavor. The influence

¹¹ Kaukhchishvili T., *Strabonis Gheografia. Tsnobebi Saqartvelos Shesakheb [Strabo's Geography. Information about Georgia]*. Tbilisi, 1957, 127-130; *Essays on the History of Georgia*, Vol. I, Tbilisi, 1970, 451-452. (In Georgian).

¹² Rtveladze E. *Viliki Indijski Puts Iz Istorii Vazhneishikh Darog Evrazii [The Great Indian Way from the History of the Most Important Routes of Eurasia]*, St. Petersburg, 2012, pp. 7-8. (In Russian) Metreveli R., "Saqaravno-Savachro Gzebi Dzevel Saqartveloshi (Shtrikhebi Sakitkhis Istoriografiistvis) [Caravan-Trade Routes in Ancient Georgia (Strokes for the Historiography of the Topic)]." *Georgian Diplomacy. Yearbook*, 18, Tbilisi, 2018, 14-15. (In Georgian).

¹³ Dil Sh. *Iustinian i Vizantiskaia Tsivilizatsia v VI v. [Justinian and Byzantine Civilization in the 6th Century]* St. Petersburg 1908, 543 (in Russian)

of the Persians in Indian ports was very strong. They interfered with the trade negotiations, and, therefore, only an insignificant amount of silk entered Byzantium through this route. In 570, the Persian Shah Khosrow I (531-579) (Fig. 8) conquered Yemen and closed this route to the Byzantines as well. But in the second half of the 6th century, a significant historical process developed that freed Byzantium from this dependence. A new player, Turkic Khaganate, appeared on the scene. The Turkish nomadic tribes in the north of China managed to conquer the Northern Chinese kingdom, and then destroyed the Hephthalites in Central Asia, who controlled one of the largest centres of silk trade, Sogdiana. As a result of these conquests, the most important part of the "Great Silk Road", which ran from northern China to Central Asia (Sogdiana), and then through Persia and Byzantium to Europe, came under Turkish control.

This state (Turkic Khaganate) imported a large amount of silk from China as a tribute. Additionally, the conquered Sogdiana was renowned for silk production and intermediary trade. It was the Sogdian merchants who urged the Turkic Khagan to send an embassy to his ally, the Shah of Iran (the Turks and Persians were natural allies in the war against the Hun-Hephthalites). It was in the best interests of Sogdians to increase the scale and quantity of silk trade. The most respected man among the Sogdians, Maniakh, was sent as an ambassador. The envoy suggested to Khosrow I not to be satisfied with just being a mediator, but to participate in this trade himself, to purchase part of the silk, that would be sold in Byzantium and Europe. This might have caused the Sogdians and Turks to lose in the price of silk, but in return, they would gain much more by increasing the quantity. Khosrow did not agree to this deal, as it would have contributed to strengthening the Byzantines. At the same time, it was not in his interest to offend the Turks. Therefore, he made a compromising decision. He bought the imported silk himself, and because he couldn't sell it in the domestic market due to the low purchasing power of the population, he burned it in front of the ambassadors. By doing so, he showed the Sogdians and Turks that there would be no changes in the silk trade.¹⁴ Upon his return, Maniakh convinced the Turkic Khagan to break relations with Persia and begin direct negotiations with Byzantium.

On the Khagan's orders, Maniakh traveled to Constantinople as an ambassador. His task was to establish not only a trade agreement with the Emperor Justin II, but also to form a political alliance against Persia. By this time, the Turks had conquered the North Caucasus and could potentially move towards the Western Georgia, the Kingdom of Egrisi (Lazica), which was under the Byzantine influence. From there, silk could be imported to Byzantium. According to the 6th-century Byzantine chronicler Menander, the Khagan's ambassador, Sogdian Maniakh, arrived in Constantinople via the North Caucasus, crossing the Caucasus Mountains (range) and Egrisi. The ambassador was received with great honour in Byzantium. Maniakh agreed with the Byzantines to bring silk through the northern route, via the Caucasus Mountains, into Lazica and then transport it by the sea to Constantinople and the other Byzantine trade centres (Fig. 9). The Turkish negotiator returned using the same route, and the Byzantines sent their own embassy with him led by Zemarchus of Cilicia. When Zemarchus returned, the Turkish Khagan sent his own ambassadors and merchants loaded with silk. They arrived at the

¹⁴ Pigulevskaia N. *Vizantiskaia Diplomatiia i Torgovlia Shelkom [Byzantine Diplomacy and Silk Trade]* 209 (in Russian).

Euxine Pontus (Black Sea), then sailed by boats to the river of Phasis, and afterwards to Trebizond. From there, they proceeded to Constantinople.¹⁵ As the account shows, one of the main routes from the North Caucasus to Lazica and then to the Byzantium passed through Svaneti.¹⁶ The existence of this route is proved by the fact that silk fabric remains have been found in these areas at the beginning of the Sancharo, Marukhi, and Klukhor passes, leading from Kabarda to the Western Georgia. It's suggested that the local population, who likely served as guides for these caravans, received a payment, probably bartering with silk.¹⁷ The Svaneti Museum (in Mestia) repositories preserve remains of the medieval silk fabrics.¹⁸

This route soon lost its function, because in the 20s of 7th century, the Byzantines and the Khazars living in the Turkic Khaganate occupied the eastern part of the South Caucasus - Kartli (Iberia) and Albania. They became neighbours and began using a more convenient route - the Darial and Derbent passes. However, this situation did not last long either, as from the middle of the same century, the Arab Caliphate destroyed Sassanid Iran, occupied Syria-Palestine and the northern coastal strip of Africa. At the beginning of the 8th century they moved into Europe and conquered the Iberian Peninsula (modern Spain). In the 7th-9th centuries, Arabs controlled the "Great Silk Road". However, after the collapse of the Caliphate, the Arabs lost their monopoly on the silk trade.

In the 10th-13th centuries, the main artery of the "Great Silk Road" moved to the south and no longer passed through the South Caucasus. Therefore, it can be said that in the 7th-13th centuries, Georgia was disconnected from transcontinental trade activity, that was largely due to the country's geography. The Caucasus Mountains presented a natural barrier, while the Lesser Caucasus range to the south of the country also limited the penetration of international trade routes into the country. However, from the 11th century, many trade routes developed near Georgian borders. Although smaller in scale than the transcontinental routes mentioned above, they still brought a significant financial profit. We can say, that these trade routes had a status of regional importance. Activation of these routes in the second half of the 11th century is associated with the appearance of the Seljuk Turks, who were interested in the functioning of the new trade arteries and, consequently, the influx of new monetary flows.¹⁹

At this time, Tbilisi became one of the important trade centres. From the second half of the 8th century, economic activity in the South Caucasus shifted from Armenian cities to the Mtkvar-Araksi [Kura-Araxes] basin, with Tbilisi representing its northernmost point.²⁰ Georgia was connected to the routes in Iran, Shirvan, and Armenia, as these routes were linked to the main trade arteries passing through the Middle East. Tbilisi was connected to the southwestern, eastern, and south-eastern

¹⁵ Menandre Protiktori [Menander Protector], *Georgika, III, [Georgica, III]* 1936, 236-237 (in Georgian).

¹⁶ Lortkipanidze B., Murghulia N., "Svaneti Byzantia-Sasanianta Sparsetis Urtiertobashi V-VI saukuneebshi." [Svaneti in Byzantine-Sassanid Persian Relations in the 5th-6th Centuries] *Saqartvelos Erovnuli Muzeumis Moambe, t. V (50-B)*, [Bulletin of the Georgian National Museum Volume V (50-B)] 2014, 95-116 (in Georgian)

¹⁷ Goiladze V., *Abreshumis Didi Savachro Gza da Saqartvelo*. [The Great Silk Trade Route and Georgia] 1997, 39 (in Georgian).

¹⁸ Bukhrashvili P., *Tsminda Giorgi Didebis Mkhedari*, [St. George the Glorious Rider] 2014, 37 (in Georgian)

¹⁹ Avdaliani E. *Sakartvelo da Abreshumis Savachro Gzebi [Georgia and the Silk Trade Routes] (VI-XIII)*, Tbilisi, 2019, 97,103 (In Georgian).

²⁰ In the same source, page 102; Muradalieva E. *Goroda Kavkaza na Velikom Shelkovom Puti*, [Cities of the Caucasus on the Great Silk Road] Baku, 2011, 36 (in Russian).

Muslim centres (Dvin, Ani, Ganja, Shirvan, etc.). Tbilisi's trade ties with the Islamic world should have caused its significant economic growth.²¹

During this time, various products from China also entered Georgia: high-quality textiles and ceramic products, including expensive ceramics such as celadon. In turn, various goods were exported from Georgia to the neighbouring countries, including local silk products.²² The importance of Tbilisi as one of the main trade centres of the South Caucasus increased even more during the reign of the King of Georgia, David IV Aghmashenebeli [the Builder] (1089-1125) and his heirs in the 12th-13th centuries. Georgia's geographical location, the existence of mainly Muslim states in its neighbourhood, and the need to develop intensive trade with them was one of the reasons why David granted a number of privileges to the Muslim population of Tbilisi. Such an attitude made the Arab chronicler al-Fariqi say that “The king showed greatest respect to the Muslims. At that time scientists, theologians, and Sufis had such a respect and honour that they lacked even among the Muslims.”²³

In the 13th-14th centuries political events in Georgia (the invasion of Tbilisi by the Khwarazmians, Mongol domination, Tamerlan's eight campaigns) caused the country's economic decline. Consequently, the trade reduced as well. However, despite the decrease in intensity, Tbilisi remained an important trade centre.²⁴ In addition, during this period, Genoese merchants reached the western Georgia by the Black Sea and exported local silk along with other goods (Fig.10). Marco Polo, a Venetian traveler of the 13th century, talks about this: “*There are many towns and castles; the necessaries of life are in abundance; the country produces a great quantity of silk, and a manufacture is carried on of silk interwoven with gold... Into the before-mentioned sea of Abakù (Caspian), which is encompassed with mountains... The Genoese merchants have recently begun to navigate it, and they bring from thence the kind of silk called ghillie.*”²⁵

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the great geographical discoveries of the 15th-16th centuries, and consequently the emergence of the new maritime-trade routes, the “Great Silk Road” lost its function. However, European states still continued land-based trade relations with Asia, the Middle East, and the South Caucasus to some extent. Georgia was also one of the centres of silk production.

From the 16th century the Kingdom of Kakheti in eastern Georgia became economically advanced. This was due to the balanced, peaceful policies of the kings of this state (Levan, Alexander II) towards the two empires (Ottoman and Safavid Iran) located to the south of Georgia. As a result, new cities, monasteries, palaces, trading houses, and fortresses were built. Among them, the cities of Gremi and Bazari, also

²¹ Avdaliani E. *Sakartvelo da Abreshumis Savachro Gzebi [Georgia and the Silk Trade Routes] (VI-XIII)* Tbilisi, 2019, 146-151,197 (in Georgian).

²² Meskhia Sh., Metreveli R. “Sotsial-Ekonomikuri Ganvitareba da Klasobrivi Brdzola [Socio-economic Development and Class Struggle].” *Sakartvelos Istoriis Narkvevebi, Tomi III, Sakartvelo XI-XV Saukuneebshi [Essays on the History of Georgia, Volume III, Georgia in the 11-15th Centuries]*. Tbilisi, 1979, 109 (in Georgian).

²³ Sikharulidze E. “Al-Phariki Sakartveloshi.” [Al-Fariki in Georgia] *Semitologiuri Dziejani, II, [Semitological Studies, II]* Tbilisi, 1985, 89 (in Georgian).

²⁴ Avdaliani E. *Sakartvelo da Abreshumis Savachro Gzebi (XIII-XIV) [Georgia and the Silk Trade Routes] Tsigni Meore [Book Two]*, Tbilisi 2022, 162-163 (in Georgian).

²⁵ Wright T. (ed.) *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian*. London: Henry G. Bohn, Yourk street, Covent garden. 1854, p. 34-36

known as Zagemi/Dzagemi (currently located in Azerbaijan, 16 km from the city of Belakani) were particularly distinguished. Gremi became the royal city, while Zagemi became the main trade center.²⁶ The main trade product at this time was silk - Armenian and Ottoman merchants bought it from peasants and then exported it abroad. Silk produced in Kakheti was also exported to the western Georgia. In 1539 Michele Membré, a Venetian ambassador, who was sent on a secret mission to Iran, passed through Georgia. He writes: *“We reached a place called Anacليا, territory of the King Dadian of Mingrelia. In this place there is a large river, on which the ships go into when they are unloaded. Then the ship stops there on the said shore and holds a market within the ship, all by barter; they give cloth and take cloth. The Mingrelians come alongside the ship in their boats and each brings a bag with his cloth. So in that way they hold their markets... In the said place of Mingrelia there comes forth much yellow wax, linen thread and canarine silk of Zagem.”*²⁷

An information about the Georgian silk is provided by Arthur Edwards, an English merchant representing the "Moscow Company" (Russia), who arrived in Persia in the second half of the 16th century. He states that it is possible to obtain a large amount of raw silk cheaply in Georgia: *“It is fine and good, little course at this time was to be had. And where course silke might be had being at **Grosin** (Georgia), we could not send thither: for that time was neglected at the first. When wee shall have lidgers here to remaine in Sommer, we may buy it at the first hand of the countrey people that bring it to sell hither, and to other places. I would to God the Companie could find the meanes to have a vent to make sales for the one halfe that we may buy here. The Companie may have for 30. or 40. thousand pounds yeerely.”*²⁸ Edwards further states that, *“There is a citie in Syria named Aleppo, wherein continually are many Venetians dwelling, besides other that come yeerely... Also the Armenians yeerly receive at the Venetians hands, karsies in barter for rawe silks, giving sometimes 60. pieces of karsies for 70. batmans of silke of this countrey, and 40. pieces for **Grosin** (Georgian) silke.”*²⁹

In the 17th century, Kakheti still remains one of the centres of the silk production. This is reported by Pietro Della Valle, an Italian merchant, traveller, and diplomat: *“Their lands... are extremely productive not only of fruits of all descriptions, but also of silk which they collect in quantities.”*³⁰ From the same century, a new centre of silk production emerges in western Georgia as well. An Italian missionary, Arcangelo Lamberti, who lived and worked in western Georgia for nineteen years (in 1630-1649), talks about Samegrelo: *“The nobility dresses quite well. They sew shirts from silk of various colors... Over the shirt, they wear an akhalukhi (Georgian traditional man's dress), which reaches down to knees. This akhalukhi is made of wool or silk and it is shorter than the shirt so as not to cover the embroidered part on the shirt... The nobility sews hats either from fine linen or silk... The socks are woven by the peasants from local*

²⁶ Chilashvili L. *Kakhetis Kalakebi [Cities of Kakheti] (XIV-XVII)*, Tbilisi, 1980, 232-265

²⁷ Papashvili M., Karchava T., Tsitlanadze T., Gogoladze A., Silagadze N., *Sakartvelo XVI Saunikis Evropul Tskarobeshi, [Georgia in the 16th Century European Sources]*, Tbilisi, 2021, 87, 429 (in Georgian)

²⁸ Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*. Available at:

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.03.0070%3Anarrative%3D124> (accessed 07.09.24)

²⁹ In the same source.

³⁰ Pietro della Valle, "An Account of Georgia," (1627) - Part 1. Available at: <https://foreigners-georgia.blogspot.com/2015/09/pietro-della-valle-account-of-georgia.html> (accessed 07.09.24)

wool or silk... *The Turks bring the following goods from Constantinople to Odishi (Samegrelo): Beautiful assorted carpets, blankets, Turkish leather, saddles, horse tack, bows and arrows, shawls and broadcloth of various prices, iron, brass, cauldrons, wool, dyed and patterned linens, salted fish, caviar, knives, incense, pepper, sugar, and salt. In return, they get honey, wax, local linen, thread, silk, ox, mare and otter skins, flax seeds, boxwood trees and skins from the Megrelians... The Mulberry trees grow so abundantly that there are whole forests of them, and there is no place where they do not grow. Previously, these trees were not used for anything. It has only been a few years since Armenians and Jews taught the Megrelians how to use them. Now they utilize the mulberry trees to feed silkworms and benefit greatly.*³¹ Pietro Della Valle also provides information about silk production in western Georgia, in Imereti, Guria, and Samegrelo: *“They have a great trade with Constantinople and all of Greece in silk and other things.”*³²

In the 17th century, sericulture reached a very high level in Iran. It spread to all parts of the country. Jean Chardin mentions Georgia among the various regions producing raw silk in Iran (Gilan, Mazandaran, Media, Karabakh). This silk from Iran was mainly exported by Armenian merchants. Besides them, only English and Dutch trading companies had the right to export silk to Europe. The English “East India Company” signed a mutually beneficial trade agreement with Iran during the reign of Shah Sefi I (1629-1642). After paying a certain annual fee (gift, bribe), the English committed to purchasing raw silk worth 60,000 pounds sterling, which they then exported to the European market.³³ During the same period, France was also trying to establish trade relations with Iran. The King of Kartli, Vakhtang V (1658-1675) attempted to take advantage of this situation. He tried to establish trade relations with European states. In the 1670s, the French traveller, jeweller, and merchant Jean Chardin was present at his court. Vakhtang sent a word to him: *“If they would come thither for Trade, he would Grant 'em all the Priviledges and Advantages they could desire. That his Territories extended to the Black-Sea, and that bearing a great sway in Persia, and being highly esteem'd in Turkey, such Europeans as design'd to the Indies, could not chuse a better Road then through his Territories; and that he was assur'd that when they had once travell'd it, they would always make choice of it for the future. I desir'd the Fathers to return my most humble Thanks to the Prince, for the Kindness which he had for our Nation; and to let him know, That I would not fail to give to the French East-India Company Notice of his good Intentions, which if he would be pleas'd to signifie in a Letter, I would certainly take care to have it sent... The 24th, the Tibillelle (for so is the Bishop of Tefflis call'd, as I have said already) came to see me. He told me, That the Prince had commanded him to acquaint me, That having consider'd upon what I had sent to him about Writing to the French Company for settling a Trade, and a Passage through Georgia, He was about to have done it, to inform 'em of the Advantage they might make of a Trade into that Country: but in regard he was no more then a Vassal to the King of Persia, he was afraid his Majesty would look upon it as a Crime to have*

³¹ Don Archanjelo Lamberti. *Samegrelos Aghtsera [Description of Samegrelo]*. Prepared for publication and foreword by Ilia Antelava, Tbilisi, 1991, 41-42, 145-146, 180 (In Georgian).

³² Mogzauris Pietro Dellavalles Mokhseneba Sakartvelozed Papi Urmanus Mervesadmi, 1627 [Report of the traveler Pietro Della Valle on Georgia to Pope Urban VIII, 1627] *Journal Iveria* 3, Tbilisi, 1879, p. 56 (in Georgian)

³³ Katsitadze D. *Iranis Istorია. [History of Iran]*. III-XVIII. 2009, 431-432, 441-442

Written without his Order to Strangers about Bu/siness. However, I might assure 'em this, That if they would send Factors into his Country, they should find many sorts of Merchandizes that were proper for Europe very cheap; besides that they should be receiv'd with all the Civility imaginable. In answer to which I desir'd the Tibillelle to assure the Prince that I would faithfully discharge my Trust."³⁴

Although this project couldn't be realized at that time, at the beginning of the 18th century, Vakhtang V's grandson, the ruler of Kartli (who was in honourable captivity at the Iranian Shah's court) and future King Vakhtang VI (1716-1724), attempted to establish trade relations with European countries. In 1713, his representative Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani travelled to Italy and France. The goal of the mission was to gain support from the Pope Clement XI and the King Louis XIV of France, so that they could mediate with the Shah of Iran for Vakhtang's release. For his part, Sulkhan-Saba tried to interest the Pope by promising to spread and strengthen Catholicism and support missionaries, while he attempted to engage the King of France in a new trade project. In January 1714, after a long journey, Sulkhan-Saba arrived in Marseille. Here, he met with the city mayor, Charles Coustant, and the Intendant of Galleys and Commerce, Pierre d'Arnoul. They discussed trade relations between France and Kartli. Before arriving in Paris, Sulkhan-Saba met two more representatives of the French royal court. Father Potier greeted him on behalf of the State Secretary, Count de Pontchartrain. After arriving in the capital, Sulkhan-Saba launched active diplomatic efforts.

On March 25th they handed over the text of a memorandum to the State Secretary for presentation to Louis XIV (presumably, this memorandum was drafted in Marseille with the participation of Sulkhan-Saba and Pierre d'Arnoul). Soon after this, Sulkhan-Saba already had his first audience with Louis XIV (Sulkhan-Saba met Louis XIV twice in April-May of 1714). This memorandum was presented to the King of France, outlining the prospects for future relations between Georgia and France. The Georgian side was ready to facilitate the spread of Catholicism in Georgia and its neighbouring countries, as well as to establish trade, economic, and political relations with France and other European countries. The memorandum extensively discussed the issue of the trade route from Europe to Asia, which was to pass through Georgian territory. This route would be the shortest and the most profitable.

At the same time, during his stay in Paris, Sulkhan-Saba received a letter from the Pope of Rome to be delivered to King Louis XIV. In this letter, Pope Clement XI urged the King of France to take the King of Kartli under his protection and facilitate his return to his homeland. The memorandum composed by Pierre d'Arnaud stated: *"We believe that his proposals and intentions, and everything that might be formulated in connection with this, should be given a place in one of the greatest projects that could be devised in the current situation, in order to spread the Roman Catholic faith... This would help the princes who have fallen into misfortune, strengthen the trade of King Louis XIV's subordinates, undermine the trade of the Dutch and thereby reduce their power; compete with them in India, from where they extracted all wealth, keep the Portuguese in reverence, force the English there to fear and respect us, and also keep the Turks and Persians in a kind of dependence... I believe that Sulkhan-Saba aims to*

³⁴ *The travels of Sir John Chardin into Persia and the East-Indies the first volume, containing the author's voyage from Paris to Ispahan: to which is added, The coronation of this present King of Persia, Solyman the Third.* London: 1686. pp. 232-233

propose another suggestion regarding the trade, which consists of routing silk through Georgia, produced in the provinces of Gilan and Shemakha. They are the only producers of silk in Persia... I assigned him to create a map, which I recently sent you. Indeed, from this map and the explanations I received on this matter, I learned that the Armenians are forced to travel by land, passing through Turkey to the Black Sea, in order to transport silk by caravans from these two Persian provinces to Smyrna, where it is almost entirely sold. The route through Georgia would be reduced by three-quarters. To the question of why Armenians, who are greedy for profit, don't use this route when it's the shortest and requires less expense, Sul Khan-Saba answers: - These people are not under our protection, and they don't dare to risk passing through a country like Georgia, as they consider its population untrustworthy. There are no caravanserais here like in Turkey... Sul Khan-Saba says that Vakhtang would initiate this trade himself and take silk to Constantinople if he could reclaim his domains (territories). According to him, it wouldn't be difficult if the King of France would be gracious enough to confirm that he is interested in the King of Georgia. Due to the fact that the Shah of Persia has deep respect for His Majesty, it could be easily explained to the Shah that he himself would be interested in this matter, to sell more silk... Mr. Sul Khan-Saba seems to know the Persian royal court well, and it appears he didn't propose this idea to Vakhtang without notification. He thinks that such a service from the King of France would be beneficial for himself as well.

We have every reason to hope that this project would be successful... Moreover, even if the Dutch industry didn't collapse, it would at least significantly decrease, which would considerably increase production in France. They themselves would be forced to receive silk from Marseille via transit to Holland, which would bring profit to the subjects of the King of France. To this may be added trade in wax, wool, lead, or madder root, which produces red dye and is said to be plentiful in Georgian markets, where it would also be advantageous for France to sell part of its broadcloth along with other goods.”³⁵

The French royal court became interested in this project and decided to send a representative to Georgia. Sul Khan-Saba was waiting for him in Constantinople (Istanbul), but in 1715 Louis XIV died and this initiative could not be implemented.

In the first half of the 18th century, Vakhushti Batonishvili, son of Vakhtang VI, a historian and geographer, informs us about silk production in Georgia: In Kakheti-Hereti, silk was most prevalent in the Alazani Valley and along the Iori River, while in Western Georgia, relatively cheaper silk was common.³⁶ It seems that silk cultivation was such a widespread phenomenon that Vakhushti specifically notes about the village of Saguramo that despite being fertile with fruits, vineyards, and the cattle, “*they do not produce silk here*”.³⁷

In the second half of the 18th century, the Georgian economy was characterized by a process that manifested in the local production of raw silk and the import of ready-made silk fabrics from abroad. During this time, silk was imported not only from

³⁵ *Sabutebi Sakartvelo-Safrangetis Urtiertobis Istoriidan (Marti, 1707-Dekemberi, 1714), Nawili I, Shesavali [Documents from the History of Georgian-French Relations (March 1707-December 1714), Part I, Introduction], translation and explanations added by Ilia Tabaghua. Tbilisi, 1975,*

³⁶ *Vakhushti Batonishvili. Aghwera Samefosa Sakartvelosa, Kartlis Tskhovreba, IV. [Description of the Kingdom of Georgia, Kartlis Tskhovreba, IV] Tbilisi. 1973, 524-525, 744*

³⁷ In the same source, page 537

neighbouring Muslim khanates (e.g., from Shamakhi), but also from major Russian markets, from which merchants brought dense silk fabric made in the French city of Tours, as well as wavy and thin transparent silk fabrics.³⁸

In the 70s and 80s of the 18th century the German traveller, doctor, and diplomat Jakob Reineggs was at the court of Erekle II (1744-1798), King of Kartli-Kakheti in Georgia. He left us a work "Historical-Topographical Description of the Caucasus," where a separate section is devoted to Georgia. Characterizing both sides of eastern Georgia, Kartli and Kakheti, he writes: "*The culture of silk is attended to with more real than in Mingrelia; and they manufacture light, good - coloured silk handkerchiefs;*" Reineggs indicates that Georgians use silk fabrics of various colors for clothing, emphasizing that sericulture in Kakheti is the best.³⁹

At the beginning of the 19th century, the kingdoms and principalities of Georgia were conquered by the Russian Empire. Consequently, the silk production and trade in Georgia fell within the framework of the general imperial economic policy.

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³⁸ Akofashvili G. "Vachrobis, Mretsvelobisa da Sakalako Tskhovrebis Ganvitareba XVIII Saunikis 40-80 Tslebi". ["The Development of Trade, Industry, and Urban Life in the 40s-80s of the 18th Century."] *Sakartvelos Istoriis Narkvevebi, Tomi IV, [Essays on the History of Georgia, Volume IV]* Tbilisi, 1973, 543-544

³⁹ Reineggs J., *A General, Historical, And Topographical Description of Mount Caucasus*, Translated from The Works of Dr. Reineggs And Marshal Bieberstein, By Charles Wilkinson, Vol. I, London, 1807, p.365

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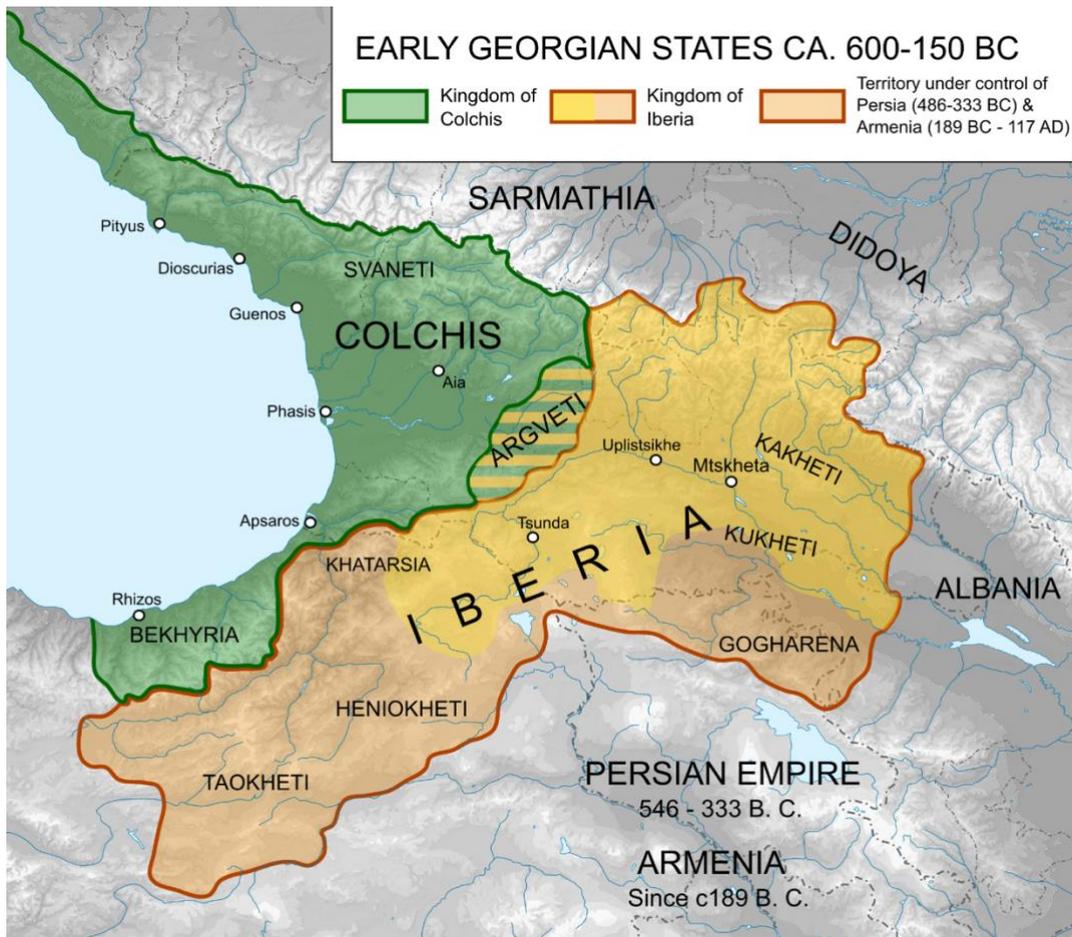
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1. Early Georgian States (CA 650-150 BC).



2. The so-called tetradrachm

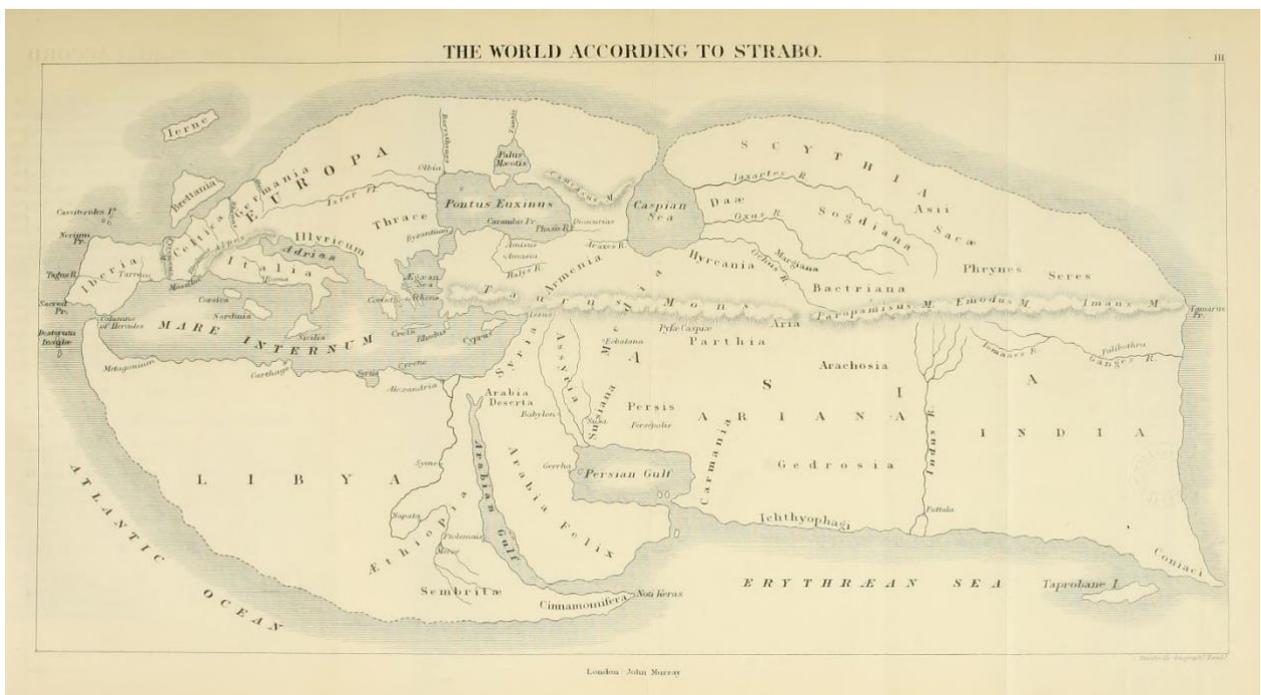
3. 1st type didrachm

Colchian 'Tetri' - Online English-Georgian Catalogue of Georgian Numismatics

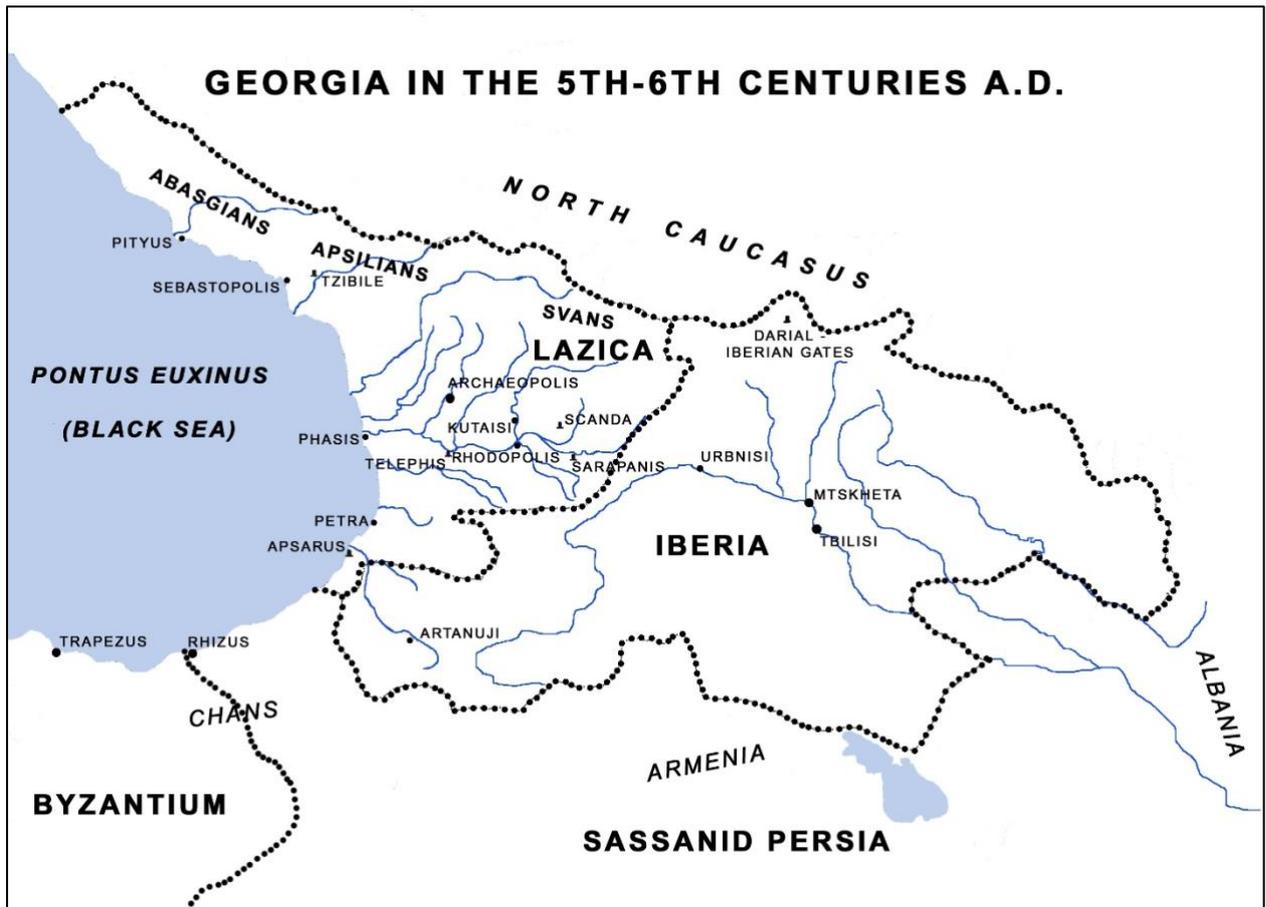
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4. Pichvnari, Tomb. 1: fibre of wool textile; 2-6: fibre of silk from the organic remains of the nail



5. The world according to Strabo, from Bunbury's *A history of ancient geography among the Greeks and Romans, from the earliest ages till the fall of the Roman Empire*. Edward Bunbury. 1879



6. Georgia in the AD 5th-6th cc.



7. Golden Coin of Justinian I (527-565). British Museum.

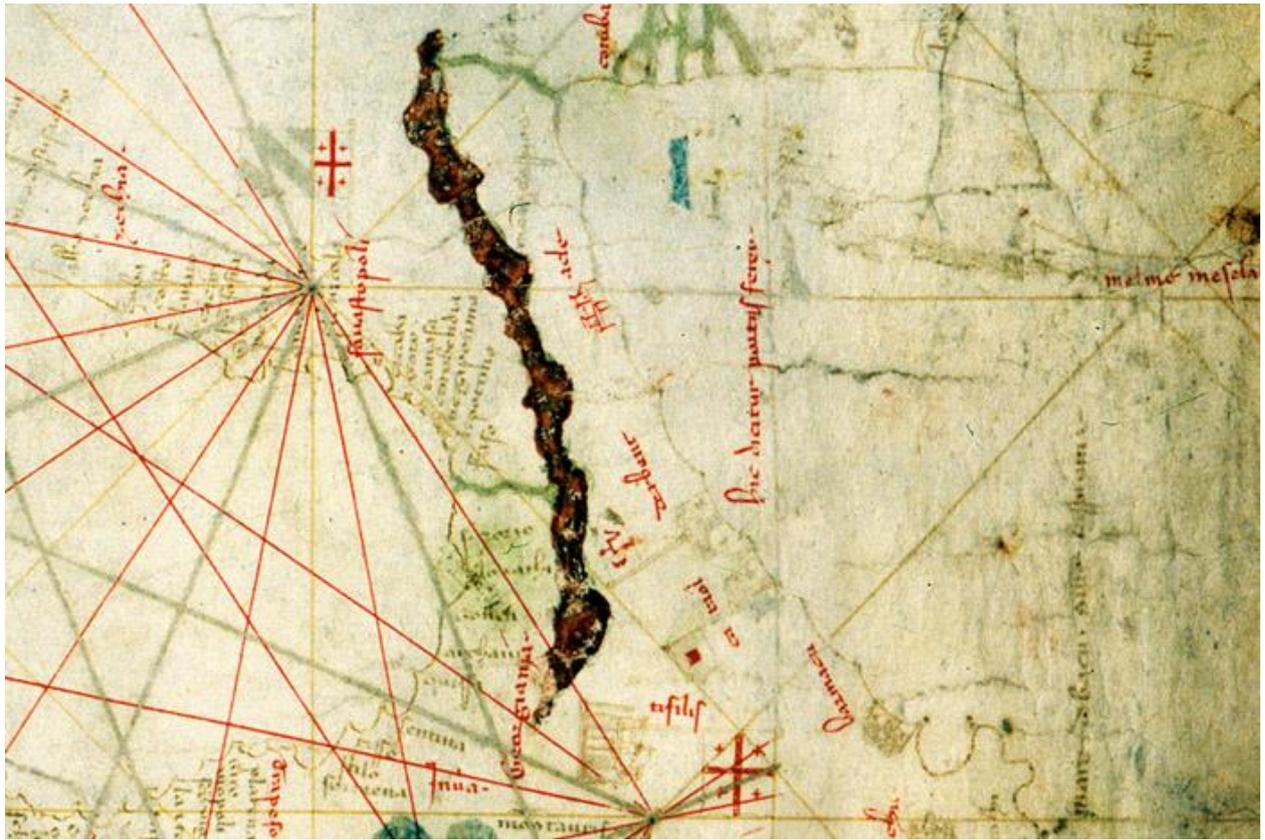
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8. Drachma of Khosrow I, minted at Gundeshapur in 558.
 Classical Numismatic Group, Inc. <http://www.cngcoins.com>



9. The Northern branch of the Silk Road in the AD 6th century.



10. Detail from the Nautical chart by Angelino Dulcert, depicting Georgian Black Sea coast and Tiflis, 1339.