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Topography of Early Medieval Fortifications of Sakartvelo[1]: Ujarma, Dariali, Samshvilde and their Importance in the Regional Scale (Historical and Archaeological Review)

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Abstract

Sakartvelo is a central country in the South Caucasus region, which has held great regional significance since ancient times. This importance can be attributed to its unique geographical position. On one hand, Sakartvelo's proximity to the Black Sea played a significant role, while on the other hand, its direct land connections with the ancient civilizations of the South explain its strategic value.This positioning allowed Sakartvelo to play a crucial role in trade and cultural exchanges between different parts of the world, serving as a bridge between diverse civilizations throughout history.The economic and political importance of the "Silk Road" increased even more during the Middle Ages, especially after the demand for products coming from the Far East grew significantly in European countries. Clearly, in such a situation, Sakartvelo's role as one of the main economic corridors became even more crucial and along with other factors, this situation served as one of the key contributing factors to the country's powerful cultural and economic renaissance in the 12th century, which is known as the "Sakartvelo's Renaissance".Archaeological activities demonstrated we would like to emphasize that Ujarma, Dariali, and Samshvile are the three exceptional fortresses among the early medieval fortifications of Sakartvelo that provide a general understanding of the cultural heritage of this significant region of South Caucasia and the great potential for further research on it.

Key Words: Sakartvelo, Georgia, South Caucasus, Byzantine, Sassanians, Early Medieval, Medieval Forts, Ujarma, Dariali, Samshvilde, Medieval Archaeology, Kartli, Iberia Kingdom, Vakhtang Gorgasali.

[1] Sakartvelo is an ancient country located on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, with a rich cultural heritage, known in the West as „Georgia" and in the East as „Gurjistan". The people living in this country call themselves,, Kartvelebi or Karvelians'' and refer to their homeland as „Sakartvelo'' i.e. „The place where Kartvelian leave''.

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Introduction

Sakartvelo is a central country in the South Caucasus region, which has held great regional significance since ancient times. This importance can be attributed to its unique geographical position. On one hand, Sakartvelo's proximity to the Black Sea played a significant role, while on the other hand, its direct land connections with the ancient civilizations of the South explain its strategic value.

In addition, it was of great importance that Sakartvelo was situated on the northern section of the so-called "Silk Road," which was a major trade route. This route connected the countries of the Far East with the Western world, and the nations to the south with the regions located to the north of the main ridge of the Caucasus Mountains (Knutson, 2021. 625-626; Williams, 2015. 1-42) (Fig. 1).

This positioning allowed Sakartvelo to play a crucial role in trade and cultural exchanges between different parts of the world, serving as a bridge between diverse civilizations throughout history.

The economic and political importance of the "Silk Road" increased even more during the Middle Ages, especially after the demand for products coming from the Far East grew significantly in European countries. Clearly, in such a situation, Sakartvelo's role as one of the main economic corridors became even more crucial (Avdaliani, 2024. 11-21; Avdaliani, Dundua, 2021. 1-6) and along with other factors, this situation served as one of the key contributing factors to the country's powerful cultural and economic renaissance in the 12th century, which is known as the "Sakartvelo's Renaissance" (Rayfield, 2012. 117).

However, historical and archaeological research conducted over the past few decades clearly proves that Sakartvelo, as a country located at a significant crossroads in Eurasia, had strategic importance not only during the Middle Ages but also in much earlier periods, particularly in the Antic Period (Lordkipanidze, 1995; Odisheli, 2013. 148-165), as well as in the Bronze Age (Sagona, 2018. 213-281). This is clearly reflected in the remains of settlements, fortresses, villages, and various types of archaeological sites from these periods.

However, despite all of this, it must still be said that the early Middle Ages was one of the most remarkable periods during which Sakartvelo played a particularly significant role in both local and regional political and economic processes, and was considered a major power in the entire South Caucasus. This was the time when major empires, such as Byzantium and Sassanid Iran, were attempting to pursue their own interests in the region. Clearly, Sakartvelo, which controlled the access routes to the Black Sea, as well as the passes and bridges leading to Northern Caucasus, was considered a desirable ally by both of these empires (Fig. 2).

Starting from the 4th century, both Byzantium and Iran sought to establish friendly relations with the rulers of Iberia (East Sakartvelo), and these efforts sometimes took the form of peaceful diplomacy, while at other times, they resulted in military confrontations. The historical twists and turns of this period are vividly reflected in Sakartvelo's cultural heritage, including its historical and archaeological sites, written sources, and chronicles.

At the same time, it is important to consider the epochal event associated with the declaration of Christianity as the state religion in Sakartvelo (Rayfield, 2012. 38-55), which, for the entire following centuries, fundamentally shaped the country's political course and development. Naturally, after Christianity became the state religion, representatives of Sakartvelo's royal family actively sought to maintain close ties with the Christian countries of the West. However, due to the country's geographical position, it was inevitable that they had to take into account the non-Christian, powerful states of the East and often had to consider their political interests as well.

At the same time, the early Middle Ages is the period when one of the most powerful kings of the Kingdom of Iberia, Vakhtang Gorgasali (470/1-531 AD) (Sanadze, 2019. 402; Sanadze, 2016. 308-350), strengthened his influence, laid the foundation for the state infrastructure, and built fortresses, churches, roads, and bridges, the remnants of which can still be found throughout Sakartvelo today.

Indeed, the historical and archaeological review of three notable Stronghols from the era of Vakhtang Gorgasali - the Ujarma Fortress, the Darial Fortress, and the Samshvilde City-Fortress constitutes the purpose of the present work, which clearly demonstrates not only their significance but also the importance of the Kingdom of Iberia in the 5th-6th centuries in a regional context (Fig. 3).

Ujarma - „The Royal Fortress''

Sakartvelo's historical tradition associates the construction of the Ujarma Fortress with the name of King Aspagur of Kartli (363/4–370 AD, according to M. Sanadze) ("The Life of Kartli," 1955, p. 59)[1]. During the reign of his successors, this location became known as a city-fortress, and it served as the residence of the royal family ("The Life of Kartli," 1955, pp. 70-71)[2].

The city-fortress was situated on the right bank of the River Iori and represented a strategic stronghold controlling a critical pass in the valley. At the same time, it controlled an important trade, economic, and military route that connected the eastern part of the country, historical Kakheti, with the capital, Tbilisi.

The significance of Ujarma grew even further after Christianity was declared the state religion of Sakartvelo. At that time, St. Nino, a woman from Cappadocia who had come to Christianize the Kartvelians, erected one of the oldest crosses at the site of the fortress: *"... give to Salome (the cross), the servant of Christ, to raise it in the city of Ujarma, for the people of the land of Kukh will not oppose the city of the kings..."* ("The Life of Kartli," 1955, p. 121).

As the source cited here shows, the Ujarma Fortress, from the very beginning of its functioning, had not only a military-strategic role but also served as one of the earliest Christian sites, a function that was further strengthened and expanded during the reign of King Vakhtang Gorgasali of Kartli.

King Vakhtang Gorgasali (5th century) is associated with many significant reforms and construction activities carried out in Sakartvelo, particularly in the eastern part of the country. These activities involved the creation of a strong fortification network and, in particular, the renovation and construction of fortresses. Vakhtang Gorgasali is also connected with the further strengthening of the Ujarma Fortress and its transformation into a royal residence. As reported by the historian of Vakhtang Gorgasali, the king himself made Ujarma his residence and lived there until his death: *"... Vakhtang himself settled in Ujarma, and he constructed it with vast buildings..."* ("The Life of Kartli," 1955, p. 199) (Fig. 4).

During the long wars between Sassanid Persia and Byzantium, the Ujarma Fortress, like other military-strategic points of Sakartvelo, was of great importance. These fortresses periodically came under the control of different rulers, which led to the discovery of a large number of items characteristic of various cultures in their territories. A similar phenomenon occurred in Ujarma as well. However, as a result of the peace treaty signed between Persia and Byzantium in 591, Ujarma came fully under the influence of Persia (Atanelishvili, 1959, pp. 11-19).

However, this situation did not last long, and soon the Arabs replaced the Byzantines and Persians, who had been weakened by prolonged wars, in the South Caucasus. The influence of the Arabs quickly spread throughout Sakartvelo, and naturally, all significant fortresses came under their control. Ujarma was no exception, and it was not overlooked by the rising Caliphate. Under the leadership of the Amir of Azerbaijan, Yusuf ibn Abu al-Saj (Abu Qasim), the Arabs first brought the fortress under their control in 914, and then almost completely destroyed its walls ("The Chronicle of Kartli," 1955, p. 263; Lordkipanidze, 1958).

After this, the Ujarma Fortress regained its former strength once again, specifically in the 12th century, when it was restored, strengthened, and brought under the control of the central government of Sakartvelo by King George III (1156–1184). The special significance of the Ujarma

[1] For the dates of Aspagur and the Kings of Kartli, see Sanadze, M. "The Chronology of the Kings and Patrikioses of Kartli: From Pharnavaz to Ashot Kurapalate." *The Lives of the Georgians*. Volume III, 2016

[2] There is another view regarding the foundation of Ujarma, according to which the fortress was established not by King Aspagur, but by King Saurmag. See Vakhushti Bagrationi, 1973, p. 530.

Fortress is also indicated by the fact that, in the 12th century, the royal treasure of the Sakartvelo's kings was kept there, and the fortress was considered an especially secure location. A historical source preserved this fact, stating: *"... King George increased the utensils and placed both his own treasures and those taken from his enemies in the fortress of Ujarma, which had been built by Vakhtang Gorgasali..."* ("The Life of Kartli," 1959, p. 17).

The stability in Ujarma did not last long. Soon, in the 13th century, a new force from the steppes of Central Asia—the Mongols—invaded and destroyed the Ujarma Fortress. They weakened it to such an extent that, by the beginning of the 15th century, this ancient fortress-town had become a small and abandoned site. Its restoration and transformation back into a military-strategic point never took place thereafter.

Although everything mentioned above clearly indicates the great significance of Ujarma Fortress, especially in the study of the late antique and early medieval history of Sakartvelo and the South Caucasus, its full-scale archaeological research has not yet been conducted. The first, somewhat systematic, archaeological excavations at Ujarma were carried out between 1950 and 1952, during which archaeologist Giorgi Lomtatidze identified three distinct construction phases and archaeological material from the medieval period on the fortress's territory. These phases included the first and earliest from the 5th century, the second from the 11th-12th centuries, and the third from the later medieval period (Lomtatidze, 1989, p. 187)[1].

The archaeological material from the later medieval period is primarily represented by ceramic items (clay bowls, pitchers, wine jars) and metal objects (iron scales, a bowl, and others). Although these materials are fragmentary and belong to disturbed cultural layers, their discovery is still significant from a stratigraphic perspective, as they correspond to the final phase of the fortress-town's functioning (Lomtatidze, 1989, pp. 126-128).

The relatively earlier archaeological material, specifically from the 11th-12th centuries, found during the excavations of Ujarma Fortress consists of many fired bowls and cups, as well as various types of clay and metal items characteristic of that period. This archaeological evidence belongs to the time when Ujarma was an important fortress-town of unified feudal Sakartvelo and was under the control of the Sakartvelo's royal family. This period also includes certain structures found on the fortress-town's territory, which are based on the walls of earlier buildings, specifically from the 5th century (Lomtatidze, 1989, pp. 123-124).

The archaeological excavations have clearly revealed the archaeological materials from the first and earliest stages of Ujarma Fortress's functioning, among which a notable find is a jeweled dagger adorned with lapis lazuli, a type of artifact known from various sites in eastern Sakartvelo of the 5th-6th centuries (such as the Samtavro and Armaz burial mounds). Also, particularly significant was the discovery of a coin from the reign of Peroz I of the Sassanian dynasty (458-499 AD) in the lower archaeological layers of the royal palace located on the fortress's territory (Fig. 5), which unequivocally confirms Ujarma's close economic ties with the Iranian world during the late antique and early medieval periods (Lomtatidze, 1989, pp. 121-122).

Despite its centuries-old history and significance, many important issues regarding the Ujarma fortress-town remain unanswered to this day. Finding answers to these questions is one of the main tasks of future historical and archaeological research (Fig. 6).

Dariali Fortress - „The Caspian Gate''

The Darial Fortress was the northernmost stronghold among the historical fortresses of Sakartvelo. It was built near a rocky pass that connected the Kingdom of Ancient Sakartvelo (Iberia-Kartli) with the regions of the North Caucasus (Fig. 7). The first references to this strategic route appear as early as the 1st century in Strabo, who notes: *"... (In Iberia) the road comes from the north,*

[1] Archaeological work was carried out at Ujarma between 1950 and 1952 by the Archaeological Center of the Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography of the Georgian SSR Academy of Sciences. The expedition was led by the archaeologist Giorgi Lomtatidze.

where people who follow cattle live... The road is very difficult... It is so narrow that two men cannot pass through together... The traveler will eventually reach an inaccessible fortress that guards this road..." (Strabo, XI, 3, 5; Bell, G. & Sons, 1903).

Another author from the 1st century, the Roman historian Pliny, refers to the fortress near the Darial Gorge as "Cumania" (Plinius, VI, 40). This "Cumania" is the same fortress that some scholars equate with the Darial Fortress mentioned in historical sources (Dolidze, Shmerling, 1956: 74; Tsitlanadze, 1977: 93). This fortress is also referred to as "Tamari's Fortress" in Kartvelian folk speech (Itonishvili, 1971: 145).

There are numerous references to the Darial Gorge and the fortress located there in Kartvelian historical sources, where it is mentioned as "Aragvi's Gate, Darialani" (Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955, p. 12.5), "Gate of Ossetia, Darialani" (Ioane Sabanisdze), and others. It is also important to note that, due to its strategic location, it was referred to as the "Caspian Gate" (Alizadeh, 2014, pp. 93-115; Lawrence and Wilkinson, 2017, pp. 99-125; Payne, 2017, pp. 179-217; Breeze, 2011).

The frequent references to the Darial Fortress and Gorge in various sources clearly indicate the strategic importance and purpose of this location. This not only involved the protection of the Kingdom of Kartli and Eastern Sakartvelo, but also the defense against the nomadic tribes of the north, including the Roman/Byzantine and Sassanian Empires. As a result, the Kingdom of Kartli, which controlled the Darial Gorge, became an important and significant partner for all the major empires aiming to exert their influence and strengthen their hegemony in the Caucasus from the dawn of the Common Era.

The Darial Fortress, built at the turn of the old and new calendars, underwent its first significant fortification and reconstruction in the 5th century, during the reign of Vakhtang Gorgasali. As the chronicle states, Vakhtang Gorgasali "…*subjugated the Ossetians and Kipchaks, created the Karn of Ossetia, built its upper towers, and stationed guards nearby, calling it the Karn of Darialani*…" ("The Life of Kartli," 1955, p. 156.20) (Fig. 8).

This is precisely the era when the northern Caucasian nomadic tribes (Ossetians, Kipchaks) began to strengthen their incursions into the south, and it seems that one of the main purposes of Vakhtang Gorgasali's fortification of the Darial Fortress was to curb the nomads and protect the northern borders of the Kingdom of Kartli from them. However, as recent research confirms, even before the fortress was built in this location, the gorge was protected by a powerful fortification structure—a defensive wall— which served as an insurmountable obstacle for the nomadic tribes moving from the north to the south (Mindorashvili, 1991: 3; 2005: 107-109; Sauer et al., 2020, pp. 19-46). This wall, the remnants of which are only partially visible in the gorge today, must have been a similar type of defensive system to the Gorgan Wall, whose function was to protect the northern borders of the Sassanian Empire from the nomadic tribes (Sauer et al., 2013, pp. 178-234).

During the reign of Vakhtang Gorgasali's successors, specifically from the first half of the 6th century, the Sassanid Persia began to exert military and political influence over the Darial Gorge, as well as the entire eastern part of Sakartvelo. From then on, all strategic roads, bridges, and gorges, including Darial, came under Sassanian control and were governed by them. The archaeological layers and contexts from this period were studied as part of an archaeological project conducted from 2013 to 2016, and the participants of this project uncovered some of the most significant moments in the history of the Darial Fortress[1].

Even at the earliest stage of its construction (at the turn of the old and new calendars), the fortress was built on a very difficult-to-access rocky mountain peak, fully controlling the road that

[1] Significant contributions to the archaeological research of the Darial Fortress and its surrounding areas have been made by various expeditions conducted over time: Bayern, F. (1885: 41-51); Kruglov, A.R. (1937: 245-250); Tsitlanadze, L. Gobejishvili, G. (1964: 23-25); Ramishvili, R. (1972: 43-50; 1973: 85-87); Mindorashvili, D. (1991; 2014: 148-150). From 2013 to 2016, an archaeological and multidisciplinary research project on the Darial Fortress was carried out as part of a collaboration between Tbilisi Iv. Javakhishvili State University, the University of Edinburgh, Durham University, Bradford University, and the CNRS of Paris. See: Sauer, E. et al. (2020).

passed through the narrow Darial Gorge. The fact that the remnants of the original fortress have not been revealed through archaeological excavations to this day can be explained by the fact that the intense construction activities of the 5th-6th centuries completely destroyed their traces. This is understandable, as new builders always sought to start the construction of new walls from the rocky foundation, which often resulted in the complete destruction of the traces of older buildings.

The best-preserved fortification remnants and walls of the Dariali Fort, which were studied by the aforementioned archaeological teams in recent years, date back to the period of strong Sassanian Empire influence in the region (Fig. 9). This period also coincides with the dating of the Gveleti burial site, which was discovered near the fortress, at the confluence of the Tergi and Devdoraki rivers, where 16 tombs were excavated (Mindorashvili, 2014. 237-239; Mindorashvili, 2005. 19-101; Sauer, et al., 2020. 185-229).

The proximity of the burial site to the fortress, as well as the materials recovered from the graves (iron spears, daggers, clothing accessories, and pottery), provides further evidence that this narrow pass in the Darial Gorge was constantly under control and a garrison was stationed there, whose members are likely the individuals buried in the aforementioned tombs. It is noteworthy that, with the exception of one case[1], no currency or coins were found in the graves, which is a rare occurrence. However, this can be explained by the fact that the soldiers, stationed at a fortress built in the remote northern border of the Kingdom of Kartli, had no means to acquire daily necessities or currency from the local population. Their food and other essentials were supplied by the central government.

At the same time, it should be noted that due to its location and special climatic conditions, the number of soldiers stationed at the fortress would not have been large. It seems that their number was limited to a few dozen warriors, who, with well-organized defense, could have successfully repelled a much larger enemy force and reliably protected the path leading through the gorge.

The upper chronological boundary of the Gveleti burial site is defined by the 8th century (Mindorashvili, 2014. 239; Mindorashvili, 2005. 100). This marks the period when the Sassanian Empire lost its influence over the Darial Fortress, and the gorge came entirely under Arab control.

Indeed, from the first half of the 7th century, the geopolitical situation across the neighboring East dramatically changed, primarily due to the rising political and military strength of the newly formed Arab Caliphate. Naturally, this strengthening of the Caliphate was reflected in the South Caucasus as well, where the centuries-old influences of Rome/Byzantium and the Sassanid Empire rapidly weakened and were replaced by the Arabs. According to the 10th-century Arab historian al-Mas'udi, the Arabs captured the Darial Fortress in 727 under the command of General Maslama (Mas'udi), and they held it under their control until nearly the middle of the 8th century. However, starting from 770, the southern entrances to the Darial Gorge, and presumably the fortress as well, came under the control of the ancient Kartvelian tribe of the Tsanari (Rayfield, 2012. 59), which is associated with the significant rise of the Kingdom of Kakheti.

Throughout the subsequent centuries, due to its strategic location, the Darial Fortress frequently came under the influence of various military or political powers. These changes were so intense that archaeological excavations often fail to provide definitive evidence of the precise situation. Instead, written sources and archival materials offer insight into how the situation unfolded from the 10th century onward, up to modern times, revealing how fluid the history of the Darial Fortress must have been over the last few centuries. For example, according to the 10th-century Armenian historian, John of Draskhanakert, King Sumbat I of Armenia (890-914) extended his kingdom's borders to the gates of the Alans (Darial), capturing the fortress (Yovhannes of Draskhanakert). A late 10th-century Persian geographical work also describes the "Gates of the Alans" (Darial Fortress) as a "city" located on the mountaintop, guarded by the Alans (Hudud al-Alam).

[1] The only coin found at the cemetery is a silver one, belonging to the Persian king Kavadh (488-531), minted in Khorasan in 529 (Mindorashvili, 2014. Tab.VI 6a; Mindorashvili, 2005. Tab. IX.73).

Under the united Sakartvelo's kingdom, during the reign of David IV the Builder, when the entire country was centralized under royal authority, the Darial Gorge and the fortress came under his control in 1118 ("The Life of Kartli," 1955, 336, M535; Metreveli, 2011, 149). From the 13th century onward, with the rise of the Mongol Empire, the Caucasus fell under the influence of the Ilkhanate and the Golden Horde (Rayfield, 2012, 118-146). Naturally, during this period, Darial remained a key strategic military point, firmly within the Mongol sphere of interest.

In the later Middle Ages, from the 15th century until the early 19th century, the region was mainly fortified by local populations through a network of signaling towers, with archaeological evidence from this period being minimal. However, by the late 19th century, when Russia's interests in the South Caucasus significantly intensified and its influence extended almost up to the Darial Gorge, the fortress regained its strategic importance, reinforcing its role once again.

Indeed, since 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Sakartvelo's independence, the centuries-old and historically significant Darial Fortress, often referred to as the "Caucasian Gate," once again became an integral part of Sakartvelo's national heritage and borders. The fortress, with its strategic location on Sakartvelo's extreme northern frontier, continues to hold immense historical, cultural, and military significance for the country. Its continued presence within Sakartvelo's territorial boundaries is a testament to the fortress's lasting importance through the centuries, not only as a military stronghold but also as a symbol of Sakartvelos' resilience and sovereignty (Fig. 10).

Samshvilde - „The Vulture's Fortress''

Unlike of Ujarma and Dariali, the history of the Samshvilde dates back to the prehistoric era and covers a much broader chronological span. As recent archaeological excavations confirm, the development of the Samshvilde promontory began as early as the Bronze Age (Berikashvili, 2025. Fig.3; Shanshashvili, 2022. 390-406), and since then, humans have never abandoned the area (Fig. 11).

In the 3rd-2nd millennia BCE, Samshvilde, like the entire southern Sakartvelo, was part of the area of distribution of the early and middle Bronze Age archaeological cultures of the Mtkvari-Araks and Trialeti regions, as evidenced by the archaeological materials found here (Mirtskhulava, 1975; Berikashvili, Coupal, 2018, 31-50; Kvakhadze, 2024, 113-126; Gabelaia, 2019, 53-58).

A little later, specifically at the turn of the 2nd-1st millennium BCE, which corresponds to the Late Bronze-Early Iron Age according to the archaeological periodization of Sakartvelo, the first megalithic fortification structure – the "Cyclopean Fortress" – was built on the Samshvilde promontory, further confirming the special attention given to this location by humans. The remains of this megalithic fortress are now only fragmentarily preserved, and they are revealed beneath the medieval structures of the Samshvilde citadel with varying intensity (Fig. 12). This period also corresponds to the burial complex that was found here, beneath the medieval archaeological contexts of Samshvilde, dating back to the 9th century BCE (Berikashvili, Coupal, 2019, 120-135).

The Samshvilde fortress does not lose its significance even in ancient times and continues to remain one of the major strategic points in the region. This period includes the archaeological materials from the ancient era found here (Chilashvili, 1970. 119), and what is especially noteworthy are the Hellenistic period graves (Berikashvili, 2024. 111-128; Berikashvili, Tvaladze et al. 2023-2024). In one of the graves discovered in 2023, along with various types of archaeological materials, a silver coin of the Parthian king, Phraates IV (57-37 BCE), was found, which indicates active economic relations between Samshvilde and, more broadly, this historical region of Sakartvelo with the Iranian world from the 1st century BCE (Berikashvili, 2024. 111-128).

However, despite such a long history, as recent archaeological and historical studies confirm, the transformation of Samshvilde into a major political, economic, and military center occurred in the 5th-6th centuries AD. This event is associated with King Vakhtang Gorgasali and his parents

– King Mirian and Queen Sagdukht (Kartlis Tskhovreba, 1955. 142), which clearly implies the presence of a royal residence and a powerful infrastructure.

At the same time, no less significant was the fact that after the Christianization, Queen Sagdukht built one of the earliest Christian churches in Samshvilde – the Sioni Church: "…*Then, Sagdukht thought and understood the truth, abandoned the service of fire, received baptism, became a believer, and built Sioni in Samshvile..."* as the source informs us („The Life of Kartli'', 1955. 142). From this point on, Samshvilde, alongside its political and economic role, gained the status of an episcopal center, and its significance grew even further.

It is clear that the reliable defense of the royal residence, the cathedral church, and the city's infrastructure would have been one of the main concerns of the city's rulers. This is likely the reason for the construction of a powerful fortification in the early medieval period, dating back to the 5th-6th centuries, which was built on the site of the previously mentioned megalithic fortress (Fig. 13).

The early medieval fortress was built at the most constricted point of the Samshvile promontory, in its central part, and it utilized the widely spread so-called isodomic construction technique of that time. This technique, which involves the horizontal laying of stone blocks of equal size to build walls, is often referred to as "Ujarma" in Sakartvelo's historiography. However, it is clear that this technique has much older traditions compared to the Ujarma fortress and was successfully used in both the Sassanian and Roman/Byzantine worlds. Excellent examples of fortifications, secular, and hydrological structures built using the "isodomic" technique are known from 3rd-4th century sites, such as the city of Bishapur (Fars Province, Iran), Qal'eh Dokhtar (Fars Province, Iran), Ardashir I Palace, and others. It is highly likely that this stone laying technique spread to Sakartvelo and the South Caucasus from the Iranian world, and it is clearly seen in the earlier construction horizons of Samshvile's medieval fortress, dating to the 5th century AD (Fig. 14).

The active involvement of the Samshvile fortress-town in the political-economic and cultural relations with the Iranian world during the late antique and early medieval period is confirmed not only by the construction traditions but also by the discovery of an Iranian-origin bitumen seal found here (Berikashvili, 2018. 129-136). It is known that during this period, such seals were used to stamp official documents or special gifts, and they were affixed to items sent as special gifts or documents from Iran to neighboring countries. Often, the images on these seals represented the unique insignia of royal courts or other high-ranking individuals and carried the significance of an official seal.

The Samshvile seal, on which a horseman armed with a spear is depicted, likely had the same official significance and was probably intended for an individual of high social status in Samshvile, as the horseman image was widely used during the Sassanian period (Fig. 15).

Samshvile did not lose its importance even in the developed Middle Ages, when it successfully maintained its status as one of the region's main fortress-towns. In the 11th-12th centuries, it was under the rule of the Sakartvelo's royal dynasty, the Bagrationi family, and stood out as one of the most prominent fortresses in the southern part of Sakartvelo. The rise of Samshvile during this period was facilitated not only by the political unification of the country but also by its strategic geographic location, which was close to the so-called "Silk Road."

However, stability in southern Sakartvelo, as well as in the entire Caucasus, began to break down at the dawn of the 13th century, when the Mongols launched their prolonged invasions in the region. The Mongol presence in the Caucasus completely disrupted not only the economy of the "Silk Road" but also weakened and, in some cases, completely destroyed the cities along this route. Samshvile experienced a similar fate, beginning to decline and diminish from the middle of the 13th century, and this decline continued in the following centuries without recovery.

The late Middle Ages in the history of Samshvile Fortress-Town is marked by internal feudal conflicts, Ottoman rule, and battles between various Georgian noble families. All of this is clearly reflected in the archaeological layers and architecture of this unique fortress-town, the study of which will take many more years. However, at the present stage of research, we already have

enough archaeological findings that provide a clear picture of the military conflicts and warfare that took place in Samshvile. These findings often include bronze and iron weapons, such as arrowheads, spears, battle axes, swords, and projectiles, which are vivid proof of different combat tactics and belong to various historical periods (Fig. 16, 17).

Archaeological, historical, and multidisciplinary studies are currently actively ongoing in Samshvile. There is an expectation that, as a result, many more interesting archaeological, paleographical, epigraphic, numismatic materials, and architectural monuments will be revealed, shedding light not only on the history of this centuries-old town but also on the history and significance of medieval Georgian fortresses in the broader Caucasian context.

Summary

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that Ujarma, Dariali, and Samshvile are the three exceptional fortresses among the early medieval fortifications of Sakartvelo that provide a general understanding of the cultural heritage of this significant region of South Caucasia and the great potential for further research on it.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that Sakartvelo is home to even earlier structures, such as the so-called "Cyclopean Fortresses" from the Bronze Age, fortifications from the ancient period, as well as secular and religious buildings from the medieval era. All of this together forms the diverse cultural heritage for which Sakartvelo is known.

Regarding the three monuments presented in our study, it is clear from their historical and archaeological review how significant they were in the historical context of Sakartvelo, the Caucasus, and the broader Eastern Mediterranean region, and at the same time, what roles they played in the foreign policies of powerful empires such as Byzantium and the Sassanian Iran.

Considering that Sakartvelo was located at the crossroads of Western and Eastern civilizations, near the "Silk Road," it is clear that the archaeological layers found at the sites of Ujarma, Dariali, and Samshvile contain abundant materials characteristic of various cultures. These materials, particularly, clearly indicate that all three fortresses were frequently under the influence of various major political powers. However, due to the flexible policy of the rulers of Kartli, these sites ultimately remained under the control of the Sakartvelo's royal authority.

From the early Middle Ages, especially from the 5th century onward, the influence of Sassanian Iran's political and cultural presence is clearly visible at all three sites, which is later replaced by the influence of the Arab Caliphate from the 7th century. These influences are represented at Ujarma, Dariali, and Samshvile with varying intensity, but the general context of all three sites is quite similar. From the 10th century onward, when the feudal kingdoms of Sakartvelo begin to unite and form a unified state, Ujarma, Dariali, and particularly Samshvile play an extremely important role in the country's history. This role grows even more significant in the 11th and 12th centuries, when Sakartvelo experiences its "Golden Age," known as the "Sakarttvelo's Renaissance."

This is the period when Sakartvelo's art, architecture, literature, goldsmithing, and all other sectors of the state reach their peak, and Sakartvelo becomes the strongest state in the Near East.

From the 13th century onward, after the Mongols begin to appear in the Caucasus, the situation changes dramatically, and all aspects of social life deteriorate significantly. As a result, all three fortresses gradually lose their regional importance and acquire only local functions. By this time, Ujarma Fortress is almost completely ruined and nonfunctional, and Dariali Fortress, which was once referred to as the "Gate of the Caucasus," is now merely a refuge point for the local population. Samshvile, on the other hand, retains its strategic importance, though its "Golden Age" is now a thing of the past.

It should be noted that the Mongol invasions left an irreversible mark not only on these fortress-cities but also on the entire country. As a result, during the late Middle Ages, Sakartvelo was unable to reach the political and economic heights it had achieved in the 12th century. Instead, it

constantly became the target of the Ottoman and Iranian empires, as well as raiding forces from Northern Caucasus, and was continually engaged in defensive struggles.

Since the 18th century, the Russian Empire has gradually asserted its influence over the entire region, and historical fortresses, including cities, slowly came under its control. For example, in the mid-19th century, near the 5th-century fortress of Dariali, a border crossing point and a fortification were constructed under the authority of the Russian Empire, and its significance remained relevant until the most recent times.

However, despite such a long and changing history, which the fortresses of Dariali, Ujarma, and the historic town of Samshvilde have endured, all three are currently under the full control of the independent state of Sakartvelo and are classified as national heritage sites. The Kartvelian scientific community pays great attention to the historical and archaeological research of these sites and, in collaboration with partner scientific institutions, continues to study their unique past. This is equally important for presenting the full historical picture of both Sakartvelo and the wider Near East.

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