CHAPTER 3

The Mystery of the Missing Objects: Do Archaeological Artefacts and Liturgical Objects Support the Story of (As)Syrians in Kartli?

The Evidence for (As)Syrian Artefacts in Kartli and the Problem of Iberians in the Syrian Archaeological Record

One of the assertions anyone exploring the history of the (As)Syrian Fathers encounters in Georgia today is that there is a great deal of physical evidence to attest to the presence of Syrians in late antique Kartli. Given the fact that Syrian-made glass in particular is ubiquitous across the Roman Empire this statement comes as no surprise—it would be more of a shock if there were no evidence of Syrian artefacts in Kartli at the time of its evangelisation and in the centuries immediately following this event. However, when it comes to looking at these claims of Syrian objects in more detail the situation swiftly changes. In the first place there is very little material securely provenanced as Syrian on display in the National Museum collections. At first glance a visitor could attribute this to the fact that currently only a very small selection of the collection is on view to visitors and, in the case of the late antique and early medieval holdings, only the most intrinsically valuable objects are easily accessible to the public in the treasuries of Simon Janashia Museum of Georgia and the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts respectively.

Difficult as it is to gather information about Syrian artefacts in Georgia, that task seems simple when set against the difficulty of trying to find evidence of ‘Iberians’ in Syria. Since nobody had set themselves the task of quantifying Georgian material in Syrian collections before the civil war began, it is now unclear when or if such a study will be possible in the future. What we can state is that there are no Georgian inscriptions or artefacts recorded in collections in the Syrian Arab Republic today. On the other hand there is a great deal of archaeological evidence attesting to the Georgian presence in the Hatay region of Turkey, which of course was a province of Syria until 1939. Djobadze extensively surveyed the hinterland of Antioch (modern Antakya) and conducted a series of archaeological explorations that conclusively proved the presence of Georgian monks on Semandağ, at the monastery of St. Symeon Stylites the Younger and elsewhere in the vicinity, notably in the region known
as the ‘Black Mountain.’

This work has more recently been revisited by scholars from the Center for Exploration of Georgian Antiquities at the St. Andrew the First Called Patriarchal University of Georgia, who although they have primarily concentrated on research in Israel and Palestine, have also endeavoured to retrace Djobadze’s steps in an effort to update his work. However thus far this archaeological evidence is mostly dated from the eighth to the eleventh centuries and is therefore several centuries later than the period under discussion. This is in keeping with the fact that these monasteries were strongly associated with Chalcedonian Orthodoxy and, after the Georgians formally joined with Constantinople in the first decade of the seventh century, it would have been natural for monks to have travelled from Kartli to study at monasteries following the same doctrine.

Therefore all that can be said with any certainty is that we have a passing reference to Iberian pilgrims in the vita of Symeon Stylites the Elder and more extensive references to Iberians choosing to live at the monastery of Symeon Stylites the Younger in the vitae of both Symeon and his mother Martha. This suggests some interaction between the two regions in the fifth and sixth centuries respectively but, at the time for writing, there is no archaeological evidence of Georgian presence in any region of Syria except for the hinterland of Antioch. It may also be significant that this data is predominantly dated to a slightly later period than late antiquity and comes from the century after the Georgians had officially embraced Chalcedonian Orthodoxy.

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1 Djobadze, Wachtang Z. Materials for the study of Georgian monasteries in the Western environs of Antioch on the Orontes, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 372, Subsidia 48, Louvain, 1976. Djobadze, Wachtang Z., Archaeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch On-The-Orontes, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden Gmbh; Stuttgart, 1986.

2 Tamila Mgaloblishvili pers. comm.

3 XXVI, 11,13, p. 165 & p. 167, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Trans. Price, R.M., A History of the Monks of Syria, Cistercian Publications; Kalamazoo, 1985.

4 Chapters 133, 130, 131, 136 and 253 of the vita of Symeon and chapters 53, 54, 56, 57 and 65 of the vita of St. Martha concern Iberians. See Van den Ven, Paul, La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylite le Jeune (521–592), 1. Introduction et texte grec, 11. Traduction et Commentaire, Vie grecque de sainte Marie, mère de S. Syméon, Indices, Subsidia Hagiographica 32, Société des Bollandistes; Brussels, 1962 & 1970.
Syrian Material Culture in Kartli

As discussed in chapter one, there is substantial archaeological and epigraphical material linking Kartli, particularly the two urban centres of Urbsnisi and Mtskheta, with a Jewish community of presumed Syrian or Palestinian origin. This evidence takes the form of several Aramaic inscriptions that Shaked has linked to a form of Palestinian Aramaic also in use at Dura Europos in Syria at this time.5 When we move into the Christian era there is copious evidence of Georgian presence in Jerusalem and its environs from a very early date. As mentioned before,6 the first securely dated Georgian inscriptions yet discovered were found at Bir el-Quut between Jerusalem and Bethlehem and these discoveries have since been added to with many further excavations attesting to a network of early Georgian monasteries in the Holy Land.7 This well-established contact between late antique Palestine and Georgia would logically suggest that pilgrims and clerics moving between the two locations would have passed through Syria, and therefore it seems reasonable to expect to find some trace of these journeys in the archaeological record. Confusingly this does not appear to be the case; there is evidence of Syrian material culture in Kartli, but it is extremely limited and appears to taper off almost entirely by the fifth or sixth century CE. What follows is an overview of Syrian archaeological artefacts iden-

5 Shaked, Shaul, ‘Notes on some Jewish Aramaic inscriptions from Georgia’, Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 32 (2006), pp. 503–510.
6 See chapter 1.
7 See for example: Gagoshidze, Giorgi, ‘Paleographic Study of the Georgian Tombstone from Khirbat Umm Leisun, Jerusalem’, Atiqot 83 (2015), pp. 181–184. Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, ‘An Unknown Georgian Monastery in the Holy Land’, ARAM 18–19 (2006–2007), pp. 527–539. Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, ‘The Inscription from Khirbat Umm Leisun, and the Georgian Presence in the Holy Land’, Atiqot 83 (2015), pp. 185–193. Peradze, Gregory, ‘An Account of the Georgian Monks and Monasteries in Palestine’, Georgica 4 & 5 (1937), pp. 181–246. Seligman, Jon, ‘A Georgian Monastery from the Byzantine Period at Khirbat Umm Leisun, Jerusalem’, Atiqot 83 (2015), pp. 145–179. Tchekhanovets, Yana, ‘Early Georgian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land’, Liber Annuus 61 (2011), pp. 453–471. Tchekhanovets, Yana, ‘Georgian inscriptions from Horvat Burgin’ in Chrupcala, D., (ed.), Christ is here! Studies in Biblical and Christian archaeology in memory of Michele Piccirillo, ofm. Studium biblicum franciscanum; Milano, 2013, pp. 159–166. Tinatin Tseradze & David Tskhadadze, The Four Golden Gospels. A Georgian Manuscript Preserved in the Holy Sepulchre Church in Jerusalem, Centre for the Exploration of Georgian Antiquities; Tbilisi, 2013. This is just a brief list of some of the most recent publications in English concerning the Georgian presence in the Holy Land, particularly Jerusalem. Peradze’s account was the first significant work in this field and has recently been published in Georgian for the first time.
tified in Kartli towards the end of the classical period and into the late antique period before the chapter concentrates on an in-depth discussion of several artefacts that are central to this question.

The Ubiquity of Syrian Glass and the Case of the Missing Coins

The picture of precisely how many Syrian ceramics have been discovered in Kartli remains unclear and there is no way to currently quantify these artefacts accurately. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of ceramics catalogued from the classical and late antique periods are believed to have been produced locally in Kartli, but naturally there are some wares from further afield present. Chanishvili identified a number of vessels at Dedopolis Gora that were very similar to objects discovered at Dura Europos which largely dated to the turn of the first century BCE/CE. In fact this period appears to have marked a high point in Syrian-Iberian relations as many items linked to Syria excavated at Urbnisi and Mtskheta are also ascribed to this time.

However this presence of Syrian material is not replicated in the numismatic record where only one Syrian coin is recorded as being held in the National Museum collection. This was discovered in Dighomi, a suburb of Tbilisi, in 1937 or 1939 and was from the reign of Demetrius I Soter (150–145 BCE). This is sur-

8 See for example pp. 63–64, Chanishvili, Tinatin, ‘Pottery’, in Furtwängler, A., Gagoshidze, I., Löhr, H. & Ludwig, N. (eds.), Iberia and Rome: The Excavations of the Palace at Dedoplis Gora and the Roman Influence in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia, Beier & Beran; Langenweißbach, 2008, pp. 63–85.

9 Ibid.

10 See Saginashvili, Mariam, ‘Glass Vessels’ in Furtwängler, A. et al., Iberia and Rome, pp. 223–234 and also Mgaloblishvili, Tamila & Gagoshidze, Iulon, ‘The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia’, in Mgaloblishvili, Tamila (ed.), Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus, Curzon; Richmond, 1998, pp. 39–58.

11 There are conflicting dates in the two sources that discuss this find. See: p. 242, Sherozia, Medea, ‘Monetary Circulation in Iberia in the 1st Century B.C.–1st Century A.D.; in Furtwängler, A. et al., Iberia and Rome, pp. 235–251 and p. 145, no. 7 in Dundua, G.F., ‘Opisanie i Atributstsiia Otdeleykh Monetiikh Nakhodok Ellinisticheskoi Ėpokhi b Iberii’, Numizmatika Antichnoi Gruzii, Metsniereba; Tbilisi, 1987. This state of affairs in Kartli (Roman Iberia) should be contrasted with the situation in the west of Georgia (ancient Colchis/Egrisi/Lazica) where a significant number of Roman coins minted in Syria, namely in Antioch and Emesa (modern Homs) have been found. In his article on hoards of foreign coins found on the territory of Colchis, Dundua records 9 hoards dating from the 4th century BCE to the 4th century CE. Of this 9, he classifies 5 as being ‘late Roman’ which is to say
prising as, given later links with Antioch in particular, it would be a reasonable assumption to find coins minted in Syrian territory well represented in Georgian collections. In actual fact the numismatic data is dominated by coins of Persian and Hellenic origin, leaving an unexplained gap where we would expect to see currency coming from the south appearing. This lack of Syrian coins is intriguing and raises a number of questions as to why Syrian minted coins do not appear to have been circulating in Kartli in this period. What external events interrupted trade? Were the Syrian artefacts only being traded via merchants and middlemen? How does this tally with the obvious presence of Jews and Judaeo-Christians who used a language strongly suggesting that they had emigrated from Syria or Palestine? This issue of an unexpected absence in the archaeological record is one to which we will return throughout this book.

It is when we turn to the records of glass items discovered in archaeological contexts that the trade relationship between Kartli and Kakheti with Syria appears more substantial. Small vials of Syrian origin are widely documented in Urbnisi and Samtavro necropoleis but they also appear as grave goods further afield with a number of glass vials of fourth century Syrian origin being excavated as grave goods in Rustavi in Kvemo Kartli and another small glass vessel ascribed the same origin and date in a burial from Cheremi in Kakheti. The evidence from the graves in Urbnisi and Samtavro places most of the vials of Syrian origin to the end of the first century BCE and the first two centuries CE. However a Syrian glass flask found in burial 264 in the Samtavro cemetery has been dated to the second half of the fifth century and the same date has been ascribed to an amphoriskos buried in a grave in sector xxv of Urbnisi cemetery, which was possibly made in Sidon.

12 Chkhatarashvili, Meri, ‘Minis churcheli rustavidan’, Dziebani 4 (1999), pp. 70–77.
13 Saginashvili, Mariam, ‘Gvianromauli minis piala cheremidan’, Dziebani 2 (1998), pp. 68–71.
14 pp. 226–227, Saginashvili, Mariam, ‘Glass Vessels’ in Furtwängler, A. et al., Iberia and Rome, pp. 223–234.
Once again, as with the ceramics, there is currently no definitive corpus of Syrian glass vessels in Georgia and it is a largely a question of reading through the finds catalogues of different excavations to collate this information, although there have been moves towards collating a more comprehensive overview of the provenance of first- to fourth-century CE glass artefacts excavated in Georgia by Sakhvadze. She calculates that 48.5% of glass found in eastern Georgia in this period is of Syrian origin with 9.5% coming from a western location. In the west of the country the figures are 28.5% Syrian origin and 6.4% coming from the west and she puts 42% of glass attributed to this period as being of unknown origin. Having said that, the picture remains relatively consistent and it seems that Syrian glass remained a common commodity in Kartli throughout the classical and late antique periods. Despite this, for an unknown reason the trade appears have tailed off towards the end of the period as less artefacts from the fifth century onwards are reported in the archaeological literature. However it would be dangerous to draw a simplistic conclusion from this state of affairs given that, as discussed in the previous chapter, there has been very little excavation concentrating on late antique contexts in Georgia. It could be simply that we do not have so much glass of this era because of this comparative lack of excavation. All that can be stated with any certainty is that, unlike the non-existent numismatic evidence, when we look at the glass finds in Georgian archaeological contexts we can see clearly that Syrian glass was a regular import into the region. Whilst the vessels found as gravegoods cited above point to a prosperous urban and mercantile class buying these objects, there is one case in particular where Syrian glass appears to have been the prized possession of a wealthy noble house and it is to that example that we shall turn next.

The Khovle Glass Ewers

In the archaeological treasury of the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia a freestanding case holds two glass jugs that strike a note of contrast with the predominantly gold and silver objects in the cases around them (Fig. 5). These objects were discovered in 2004 in Khovle, in Shida Kartli province, when a large tomb was uncovered as the villagers conducted earthworks. The assemblage of grave goods dated the tomb to the second half of the third century and

15 See the table on p. 233, Sakhvadze, Ana, ‘Late Antique Form Made Imported Glass Vessel on the Territory of Georgia’, Studies in Caucasian Archaeology 1 (2012), pp. 217–233.
16 Shatherashvili, Vakhtang, ‘Two painted glass jugs from the village of Khovle (Georgia)’ in
there were a number of glass objects present. However it quickly became clear that the most important objects to be recovered from the tomb were two beautifully blown opaque white glass jugs that had been gilded and cold painted with green and red enamel decoration.\textsuperscript{17} Given the care that had been taken in the creation of these ewers and the high quality materials used for their production and decoration, it was clear that this was the tomb of a wealthy nobleman and that, as an extra mark of status, these were expensive imported luxury items.

\textsuperscript{17} Janssens, K., Degryse, P., Cosyns, P., Caen, J. & Van’t dack, L. (eds.), \textit{Annales of the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Glass, 2006 Antwerp}, Aspeditions; Antwerp, 2009, pp. 217–221.

\textsuperscript{17} p. 217, ibid.
Although both objects are painted in identical colours utilising the same methods and both bear scenes from Greek mythology, they do not appear to be an exact pair in iconographical terms. The ‘Dionysius ewer’ shows an arched arcade with five figures, in varying states of preservation, shown standing in each arched arbour. One has been clearly identified as Dionysius and this is how the jug received its name. The other is known as the ‘Bellephoron ewer’ and, although it has been more damaged than the Dionysian jug, it is still possible to see that it showed Bellephoron fighting the chimaera and parts of another scene with a female figure are still visible. Shatberashvili offers evidence to link these ewers to a small group of extant artefacts that are believed to have been made in the same workshop in the late second or early third century CE. Given the sophistication of the design and execution it has been suggested that this workshop was probably in Antioch and Shatberashvili concludes:

Notwithstanding whether the hypothesis concerning their place of production is right or wrong, it can be stated with confidence that the five vessels from Khovle, Kerch, Tanais and Dura Europos were produced at the same workshop, if not by one single master. Not only are the vessels of Bellephoron, Dionysius, Daphne, Thetis and the ewer from Tanais decorated in an identical style, their technological elaboration is similar too.\(^\text{18}\)

Therefore the Khovle glass ewers show that there was a trade in Syrian luxury goods in Kartli in in the late classical period that connected with a wider network that saw items from the same workshop reaching the northern shores of the Black Sea. That there was widespread trade across the Middle East, Caucasus, Asia Minor and across the Black Sea has been clear in the archaeological record over many millennia. All of which makes the absence of Syrian coins in Kartli and later gaps in the record all the more confusing.

*Pilgrimage and Other Stories: Searching the Archaeological Record for *eulogiae* and Other Christian Artefacts from Syria and the Holy Land*

With the clear evidence of the early acceptance of Christianity in Kartli it seems a natural assumption to expect *eulogiae* or pilgrimage souvenirs to appear in the archaeological record or, alternatively, in church treasuries. The latter are

18 p. 220, ibid.
often the source of ancient liturgical objects or unusual religious items that have been donated to the church or monastery by pious donors. Urbnisi and Mtskheta, the towns at the heart of the *vita* of St. Nino and pivotal locations in the traditional Kartvelian conversion narrative are both linked to Jerusalem, in particular Mtskheta which is, at various points, referred to as the last resting place of Christ’s cloak,$^{19}$ or later is perceived as a recreation of the holy city itself.$^{20}$

This particularly close identification with Jerusalem is one of the defining elements of Georgian Christianity. Not only were Georgians amongst the first Christians to open monasteries for their fellow-countrymen in and around the holy city, there was also an early adoption of Jerusalemite liturgical practices$^{21}$ at home in Kartli. It soon became common for the topography of Jerusalem to be replicated in Kartvelian contexts so that those who were prevented from making the real pilgrimage by financial constraints or by factors such as wars preventing travel to the Holy Sepulchre, could then recreate this journey within their own country.

The *vita* of St. David Garejeli talks of how the saint embarked on a pilgrimage from Gareja to Jerusalem, but in sight of his goal he turned back, feeling unworthy of entering the holy city. As a souvenir of this experience he took three stones from the ridge where he turned back and began his return journey. That night an angel appeared in a dream to the Patriarch of Jerusalem and told him that the grace of the holy city was being carried away, so the Patriarch despatched messengers after David to reclaim the stones and invite him to return to the city to speak with the Patriarch. The saint declined the invitation to return, but handed over two stones and kept the third, representing one third of the grace of Jerusalem. He then returned to his monastery and deposited the ‘stone of grace’ there, so that ever since that time three pilgrimages to Gareja have been held equal to one visit to Jerusalem.$^{22}$
This episode from the saint’s *vita* is often held up not only to highlight the close relationship of Georgia with the holy places of Christ’s life, but also to show that there are tangible relics from these places that were carried back by the faithful to Kartli. Indeed the original *eulogia*, the stone believed to have been carried back from Jerusalem by St. David, is now held in the storerooms of the Simon Janashia State Museum in Tbilisi.\(^\text{23}\)

This testimony of a Jerusalem-centric faith and the evidence from Israel and Palestine of Georgian monasteries or Georgian monks present in monasteries with a mixed ethnic population, makes it appear likely that there are many artefacts of Syrian or Palestinian origin in church treasuries across Georgia or that small *eulogiae* are common finds in burials or during work at ancient churches across the country. In actual fact this area is another where we are confronted with an inexplicable gap in the record that mirrors the missing numismatic evidence outlined above. Whereas pilgrimage *eulogiae* in the form of small ceramic, glass or metal flasks or terracotta and metal tokens have been found all around the eastern Mediterranean, up into the northern reaches of the Black Sea\(^\text{24}\) and over in western Europe, most notably in the treasuries of Monza and Bobbio in Italy, in Georgia we are faced with a perplexing blank when we attempt to gather data on artefacts with Christian iconography originating in Syria and Palestine.

Once again a note of caution must be added here and it is necessary to point out that this dearth of evidence could be simply because there has not yet been enough excavation of early Christian sites conducted in Georgia, but this lack of objects is still surprising. As the Italian cases highlight, such items were often gathered in the treasuries of significant churches but no such collection has been discovered in Georgia despite the fact that they boast many significant repositories of liturgical objects, icons and related ecclesiastical paraphernalia. Although many ecclesiastical collections were dispersed by the advent of communism in the twentieth century, there is at least one region of Georgia that jealously guarded their church treasures from the outside world and kept them intact; the mountainous province of Svaneti.

Recent work on the material from Svaneti shows that their holdings date back to late antiquity, something Georgians claim is due to the ancient tra-

\[^{23}\text{Pers. comm. with curatorial staff at the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi.}\]  
\[^{24}\text{See for example Zhuravlev, D.V., ‘Dve Glinianye Ampuly c Izobrazheniem Sviatogo Miny iz Kryma’, Rossiǐskaja Arkheologiia 3 (2012), pp. 91–96 for the case of two 6th–7th century clay ampullae from the shrine of Abu Menas in Egypt that were discovered in Chersonos and in the Bosphorus.}\]
dition of lowland Georgians sending precious items up to the mountains for protection over the centuries and the fact that Svaneti remained relatively autonomous throughout the Soviet era, meaning that their religious practices were less disrupted than in the lowlands (Map 3). It is in the highest and most remote corner of Svaneti where one of the most famous of the Georgian ‘Syrian’ objects was recorded in the early twentieth century and yet, as we will see below, the picture was not quite as earlier commentators may have thought.

**The ‘Syrian’ Chalice in Ushguli**

In 1941 Giorgi Chubinashvili published an article entitled *Siriĭskaĭa chasha v Ushgule* (The Syrian chalice from Ushguli) in *Vestnik Gosudarstvennogo muzeu Gruzii*. Although the article was later republished in a collection of Chubinashvili’s articles in Tbilisi in 2002, it does not seem to have generated a significant amount of later research into the object. In 1982 the chalice was discussed by Kitty Matchabeli in her book *Svanetis sagandzuridan* (Svaneti’s Treasury) but this largely involved summarising Chubinashvili’s article and ended by reproducing the Georgian resumé published after the text of the original Russian article. Accordingly there has been no substantial attempt to offer an alternate interpretation of the object to Chubinashvili’s hypothesis, fully endorsed by Matchabeli, that the artefact was a sixth-century Syrian chalice.
To partially explain this lack of research it is necessary to offer some context to the significance of the object being kept in Ushguli in the Svaneti region of Georgia. The geographical remoteness of Svaneti, with a location in the High Caucasus, meant that until relatively recently the region was difficult to access for many months each year. This relative isolation, along with the fearsome reputation of the local population, meant that it largely maintained a cultural, linguistic and social independence from the rest of Georgia even in the Soviet period. It is only now that the roads to the ‘capital’ of Svaneti, Mestia, have greatly improved and facilitated the growth of both domestic and foreign tourism that Svan have begun to become more easily assimilated into wider Georgian society.

The legendary remoteness of Svaneti and the exceptional devotion of the Svan to their Christian beliefs, albeit in a syncretistic manner, mean that the region has long been viewed by Georgians as the keeper of the religious treasures of the nation. Whilst many items of national significance elsewhere have been looted and removed to other countries up to and including Soviet era Russia, Svaneti avoided this fate by secreting its church treasuries into a network of ‘treasure houses.’ In practical terms this meant that icons, liturgical objects and any other items the local community believed to be of value, either in material terms or simply because people believed them to be rare or exotic, were placed in a Svan tower and guarded by local men with rifles. Estimates of the ages of the iconic Svan towers vary widely and the difficulty in confirming their ages is compounded by the fact that they have been heavily restored and rebuilt over time. However by the 1990s it had become increasingly clear that housing priceless objets d’art in medieval churches and towers was unsustainable in security terms and that this was insufficient in terms of protecting items from the extremities of the climate. Mestia the largest settlement in the region is at an elevation of just over 1,400 metres above sea level, and a number of the other villages are appreciably higher meaning that it was a matter of some urgency to find a solution that would protect fragile objects from theft and accidental damage and deterioration.

Complicating the picture still further are the complex social arrangements of Svan society. Whilst visitors to the region naturally assume that Mestia and Ushguli (for example) are the names of specific villages, in actual fact these are names for a ‘Community’ and each of these communities is made up of a collective of, on average, between five and eight different villages. This is significant because each church in each village had its own church treasury and, although the objects of all the churches in the village would be housed in one ‘treasure house’ that still meant that there were multiple repositories in each Community. It is necessary to underline this situation because at the
time that Chubinashvili undertook his research he would have had to have gained permission from multiple guardians in each of the twelve²⁵ Communities in Svaneti in order to view their icons and liturgical objects. The fieldwork would have been extremely arduous physically and have required a great deal of diplomacy and persuasion. Very little had changed by the time Matchabeli published her book in 1982 and these practical difficulties are almost certainly what has prevented scholars giving more attention to the Ushguli chalice and the other contents of the Svans’ treasuries.

On 1st July 2013 the new Svaneti Museum was officially opened after many years of planning and diplomacy.²⁶ Local opposition to such a plan was mitigated by a commitment that no item would ever leave Svaneti on loan. It was made clear to the Svans that although the new museum became a part of the National Museum of Georgia, there was no question of any artefact, however minor, leaving to be exhibited elsewhere in the country. In order to further reassure the Svan elders the director of this new museum was herself of Svan heritage and so could be relied upon to understand local traditions and sensitivities. Although this new institution marked a great step forward in conserving Svan cultural heritage and displaying exceptionally important archaeological and artistic artefacts to a wider audience, it did not present all the cultural patrimony of Svaneti; one Community had objected to the plan and withheld their objects from the new museum, preferring to keep their treasures safe within a traditional ‘treasure house.’

That community was Ushguli (უშგული), a group of 4 villages that are remote even by the standards of Svaneti. Ushguli stands at an altitude of between 2,200 and 2,400 metres above sea level depending on which point in the four villages that make up the Community the altitude is measured.²⁷ Their names are Zhibiani (ჟიბიანი), Chvibiani (ჩვიბიანი), Chazhashi (ჩაჟაში) and Murqmeli (მურყმელი). Today the most important objects owned by the community are all kept in a tower sign-posted ‘treasure house’ in the village of Chazhashi. Nominally designated an ‘annexe’ of Svaneti Museum it is therefore, by extension, technically part of the National Museum of Georgia.

²⁵ p. 97, Kenia, Rusudan & Aladashvili, Natela, Sakartvelos megzuri ii. Zemo Svaneti, Tbilisi, 2000.
²⁶ Pers. Comm. with staff from the National Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi.
²⁷ Travel agencies, geographical mapping sites and popular literature variously report the height of Ushguli as 2,200 metres or 2,400 metres. Since either of these can be taken as correct depending on the point where the measurement taken, both figures are mentioned here.
For scholars this continued stance of isolationism means that whereas research on Svan objects has, in most respects, become a great deal easier, there still remains more work to be done particularly with regards to recording and researching the disparate items that remain in Chazhashi. A recent project by the Project Management Department of the Georgian National Museum has embarked on photographing and cataloguing these artefacts and when this database is complete it will provide the first inventory of precisely how many artefacts are still held in Chazhashi.

This long digression into the significance of Svan ‘treasure houses’ and the relative inaccessibility of Ushguli has been necessary in explaining firstly why so little research has been undertaken on this object and, secondly why no scholar has taken Chubinashvili to task for his inaccurate description of the chalice; in short relatively few people have ever seen the object and, of those that have, even fewer have had any knowledge of Semitic languages. If they had then it would have been clear at first sight that there is one clear and compelling reason why the chalice cannot be from sixth century Syria; the inscription below the manger and above the Virgin and Joseph in the Nativity scene is written in an early form of Arabic that had not been invented in the sixth century (Fig. 6). In fact the inscription was recognised as Arabic by the historian and archaeologist Evtime Taqaishvili on his expedition to the region in 1910.

Many thanks are due to Ms. Salome Guruli of this department for providing the author with excellent images of the chalice and to Dr. Irina Koshoridze who made the introductions and obtained the images on behalf of the author.

Taqaishvili recorded the object as:

35. Silver Chalice with gold gilding, in Syrian style with Arabic inscription. Decorated with nielloed and slightly raised images. Amongst them St. George on horseback mortally wounding a man. Joseph reproaching Mary, the birth of Christ, the Baptism, the entry into Jerusalem and the Crucifixion. Compare with Uvarova, p. 140, Fig. 61.

Taqaishvili, Ekvtime, Arkeologiuri Ekspeditsia Lechkhum-Svanetshi 1910 Tsels, Paris, 1937, p. 146. (Translated by the author.)
to ignorance of the earlier, more accurate, report and in fact his interpretation of the inscription is bizarrely incorrect, as we will see below.

On the other hand at first glance it is understandable that the chalice has been for many years associated by art historians with the corpus of bronze thuribles that have been referred to as ‘Syrian censers,’ which we shall be discussing shortly. Despite the fact that the chalice is far more intrinsically valuable being made of gilded silver rather than bronze, and with the additional observation that it was made with the repoussé technique rather than being cast from a mould as is the case with the censers, on the most superficial level the chalice bears comparison with these objects because it is adorned with similar iconography; like the censers the chalice features scenes from the life of Christ, beginning with the Nativity, around its sides. However, although the number of episodes from the life of Christ included on the bronze thuribles varies, all form coherent narrative schemes with no repetition and no reference to holy personages other than those who witnessed key events in the life of the Saviour. In comparison the chalice provides several anomalies by including a military saint and repeating one event twice.

In order to explore this question in more detail it is necessary to look closely at the six scenes that adorn the sides of the chalice. Taking the Nativity as our starting point, the viewer is presented with the Christ child in the centre of the
vignette placed just above the halfway point of the image. Directly beneath the rectangular object, denoting the manger or a cradle, in which the haloed infant lies, is the afore-mentioned Arabic inscription to which we shall return later. Above the child a censer is suspended from the damaged rim of the chalice and a donkey and an ass stand to either side and lower their heads in obeisance to the infant. Beneath this scene the centre of the lower half of the tableau is largely blank with Joseph in a slumped position with his head supported by a hand to the left of the picture and the Virgin gesturing to Joseph with an open palm to the right.

The second image is the Baptism of Christ executed in a relatively conventional manner but with some unusual elements (Fig. 7). At the top of the chalice an arch is inscribed with foliate rosettes to either side and at the centre of the scene at the apex of the arch a hand descends, denoting the hand of the deity. Beneath this and seemingly falling from the sky rather than descending gracefully is a dove, which appears to be hurtling towards Christ’s head. To the left of the picture is an angel and on the right is John the Baptist with his head inclined towards Christ and his right hand laid upon His head. What is unconventional about the scene is that Christ appears to be being baptised in a hexagonal font that reaches his waist and he seems to be wearing an odd garment denoted by
two bands at wrist and shoulder level on either arm and a cross-shaped motif across his body between pectorals and waist.

The next scene is the Entrance into Jerusalem where Christ rides right to left across the picture on a donkey, which appears to be richly caparisoned. At the bottom of the panel stylised folds denote the cloak lying before Him and on the top left hand corner are the branches of a palm tree. To the right, behind the donkey are two partial figures. One waves palms and the other points a forefinger towards Christ.

This is followed by another equestrian scene, that of the martial saint who Taqaishvili referred to as St. George. This figure rides left to right so that his back is turned to the scene of Christ entering Jerusalem and his cloak flows in the air behind him. At the top right of the pictorial field the bust of an angel points towards the head of the saint, who in turn holds his lance with an extended forefinger pointing back towards the angel. The saint is nimbed and bearded and appears to have some sort of golden hood or helmet. His mount is even more richly adorned than the donkey of the previous scene and has a splayed equal-armed cross on its hindquarters. The hooves of the horse trample a figure and the lance of the saint is pointed at the neck of this creature who, although humanoid, sports two long pointed ears, not unlike those of a pig, that give him a demonic mien.

The fifth image shows the crucifixion and it seems that it is this scene that perhaps led to both Taqaishvili and Chubinashvili associating the object with Syria as, at first glance it does seem to have parallels with the sixth century Rabbula Gospels (Fig. 8). The image is dominated by the crucified Christ, who is far larger than any of the other figures in the scene. To His right is the sun, represented by a face within a circle of rays and on the other side balancing the sun is an inverted teardrop-shaped face with a crescent moon on its head appearing almost like horns. Christ appears to be dressed in a knee-length tunic and leggings, rather than the longer colobium seen in the Rabbacha Gospels, and to either side of him a soldier is piercing his flesh just beneath the armpit with a lance. It is the solar and lunar imagery, the larger figure of Christ and the fact that His body is modestly robed instead of only wearing a loincloth that all offer a superficial similarity with the Crucifixion scene of the Rabbula Gospels, but the rest of the image is very different. This is because it shows the cross appearing to spring from a forward-facing head. This is a reference to the belief that Golgotha, the place of the skull where Christ was crucified, was actually the place of the grave of Adam, the first man. The last element of the scene is more obscure and features four figures depicted from the waist up, with two each on either side of the head of Adam. Each of these male figures faces towards the centre of the scene and raises and arm with forefinger outstretched and
pointing upwards towards the foot of the cross. These mysterious figures also wear triangular helmets with winged elements, not unduly unlike the ears of the demon of the previous scene, projecting to either side of their headgear.

The sixth and final image is another baptism that is identical to the scene described above, meaning that the Nativity scene is flanked to either side by a Baptism tableau. Therefore, unlike the censer imagery which, as we will see, follows coherent Christological cycles in a linear manner from the Nativity through to the Crucifixion or the Holy Sepulchre, here the cycle is more mysterious and needs extra analysis. The first thing that strikes the viewer is that the six scenes seem to be divided into three lots of two paired images. Obviously we have the two images of the Baptism to either side of the Nativity, but we also have the two equestrian images of the Entrance in Jerusalem and the martial saint (St. George?) next to each other, with the principal figures turning in opposing directions. Finally, we are left with a final birth/death pairing with the images of the Nativity and the Crucifixion. This is such an odd juxtaposition of scenes that it seems that some deliberate reason for these choices has been made on the part of the artisan or the patron who commissioned this object, but what that reason behind these choices represents is more difficult to understand.
In fact it is the consideration of who that patron may have been that leads us back to a significant element of this object that has not yet been fully discussed; that of the early Arabic inscription below the manger/cradle of the Nativity scene. At first glance it is clear that the inscription is executed in an early form of Arabic script. The letters are elegantly executed in the Kufic script without any diacritical marks. The word itself reads simply al-ram(mal)î, which can be taken as referring to the Palestinian city of Ramallah or, more probably, to a person who was from Ramallah.\footnote{The author would like to thank Professor Adel Sidarus, Emeritus Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Evora University, Portugal for translating the inscription and for his comments on the antiquity of the script utilised. Professor Sidarus is a specialist in Early Christian Arabic Studies. Professor Siam Bhayro at the University of Exeter helpfully suggested that the inscription was referring to the owner of the object as being \textit{from} Ramallah. Thanks to owed to both colleagues for their assistance. Any errors of interpretation are, of course, solely those of the author.} Such an inscription offers us a likely place of origin for the object as it fits well with the Christian iconography originating in Palestine in the eighth or ninth centuries, which is the date of the object suggested by the palaeography of the inscription.\footnote{See previous footnote.}

Whilst it has been traditional for art historians to try and relate early Crucifixion imagery to the sixth century illustration of that scene in the famous Rabbula Gospels housed today in the Bibliotheca Laurenziana in Florence, there are in fact a number of examples of this iconography known to us with a secure provenance from the Holy Land itself or from the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai that perhaps offer a closer comparison to the scene on the Ushguli chalice. The widely known painted box from the Sancta Sanctorum of St. John Lateran in Rome, now displayed in the collections of the Vatican Museum, is believed to date from the late sixth or early seventh century and offers a fascinating glimpse into the itinerary of a late antique pilgrim.\footnote{O’Connor, Lucy, ‘The Late Antique Wooden Reliquaries from the Chapel of the Sancta Sanctorum’, \textit{Bolletino dei Monumenti Musei e Gallerie Pontificie} 31 (2013), pp. 202–229.} The labelled fragments within the box show us where this unknown pilgrim travelled on their journey and supports the belief that early pilgrims believed natural objects, like the stone of St. David Gareja mentioned above, to have been imbued with intrinsic holiness absorbed from the sanctity of their surroundings. We can also see how the tendency to depict a fully-clothed Christ seems to have been the normal manner of representation at this time and that therefore painting Christ in a \textit{colobium} or tunic and leggings conforms to the norms of late antique Crucifixion scenes. This manner of dress can be seen in two icons from the collection at Mount...
Sinai dated from the seventh to eighth\textsuperscript{33} and eighth centuries\textsuperscript{34} respectively. The earlier of the two icons includes the solar and lunar imagery that appears in both the Rabbula Gospels and in the Ushguli chalice scene and the later of the two has several small figures sat at the base of the cross in a manner that is also reminiscent of the chalice iconography. Taken together these elements support the epigraphic evidence to place this object in the eighth or ninth century.

It is more difficult to find parallels for the other scenes, not least because of variant elements such as the unusual depiction of Christ being baptised in a font-like basin, rather than in the flowing waters of the River Jordan or the nativity scene being presented almost in two tiers, with a censer suspended above the manger suggesting a liturgical dimension to the image. These deviations from conventional patterns, and the unconventional iconographical scheme employed on the chalice, which chose to replicate the baptismal event, all strengthen the impression that this was a private commission where scenes were chosen by the patron’s personal preference. What is clear is that, leaving aside the more unusual elements, both the inscription and the iconography of the object clearly support the argument that the origins of this artefact lie in eighth or ninth century Palestine.

Now we turn to Chubninashvili’s interpretation of the chalice where he places his argument for its attribution as a sixth century Syrian object by a comparison with the Rabbula Gospels, but also by comparing the chalice with a series of artefacts, including the censers we will be discussing shortly, in collections across Europe. Yet the central part of his argument hinges on the linguistic analysis of the inscription, so that it is worth quoting the relevant passage at length:\textsuperscript{35}

\begin{quote}
Wenn der erste Anblick des Uschguli-Kelches eine verblüffende Verwandtschaft mit dem Tassili-Kelche (in der Nielloart) wachrufte, so zeigt der nähere Vergleich der einzelnen Szenen und der stilistischen Art der Ausführung eine offenbare Affinität mit der bekannte Gruppe von syrisch angesprochener Kleinkunst, vornehmlich des VI. Jhs. Dasselbe könnte auch die kurze Beischrift der Darstellung der Geburt Christi bestätigen; leider lässt sie sich nach dem Photo nicht entziffern: «Das letzte Wort
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{33} “Crucifixion,” The Sinai Icon Collection, accessed March 6, 2017, http://vrc.princeton.edu/sinai/items/show/6369.

\textsuperscript{34} “Crucifixion with Two Thieves,” The Sinai Icon Collection, accessed March 6, 2017, http://vrc.princeton.edu/sinai/items/show/6366.

\textsuperscript{35} Here I am quoting from the German summary of the Russian article to make the relevant passage more accessible to the reader.
How Chubinashvili and his correspondent came to the conclusion that they were dealing with a Syriac inscription saying ‘Jesus’ is mystifying—doubly so since Taqaishvili had correctly identified the inscription as being in Arabic, even if he had not attempted to transcribe or translate what it said. This insistence of the writing being in Syriac rather than Arabic also enabled Chubinashvili to argue for a significantly earlier date and posit that the chalice was a direct contemporary with the Rabbula Gospels rather than comparing it with the later icons painted on wooden panels held in the collection in Sinai or the painted box from the Sancta Sanctorum, all of which are linked to the seventh or eighth centuries and are therefore closer in date to the eighth to ninth century paleography of the early Arabic inscription.

In short, the Ushguli chalice can be demonstrated to have been created several centuries later than originally thought and there is strong evidence to suggest that it originated in early medieval Palestine; hardly surprising given the strong Georgian presence in the region at the time. What it does not demonstrate is evidence of a link with sixth century Syria. Here we must turn to the case of the ‘Syrian’ censers in order to see if they can shed any light on the matter.

The ‘Syrian’ Bronze Censers and Another Question of Mysterious Origins

Since the late nineteenth century a series of scholarly articles have been devoted to a small group of cast bronze thuribles that are decorated with scenes from the life of Christ. These articles have ranged from studying these objects individually through to attempts to try and establish a typology and chronological evolution for artefacts of this type. The attempts to classify these objects

36 p. 18, Chubinashvili, Giorgi N., ‘Sirii skaïa chasha v Ushgule’, Vestnik Gosudarstvennogo muzeu Gruzii 11-5 (1941), pp. 1–19.
37 Articles on individual censers include Burton, Richard Francis, exhibit presented on Thursday, March 14th, 1872, Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries, (Second Series) 5
and identify their place of origin have been complicated by the fact that they appear to have been produced in a number of locations in a wide variety of

(1873), pp. 289–291 and an entry in Dalton, O.M., *Catalogue of Early Christian Antiquities and Objects from the Christian East in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography of the British Museum*, London & Oxford, 1901, both of which discuss the only bronze thurible securely provenanced to Syria. This is the object that was taken by Sir Richard Francis Burton from the Monastery of Mar Musa al-Habashi (St. Moses the Ethiopian or Abyssinian) near Nabk in Syria and later sold to the British Museum in London, where it remains today. Other censers have been discussed by: Elvira Barba, Miguel Angel, ‘Un Nuevo Incensario Palestino’, *Erytheia: Revista de estudios bizantinos y neogriegos* 7:2 (1986), pp. 253–269, Hollis, Howard C., ‘An Arabic Censer’, *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 25:7 (1938), pp. 137–138, Pétridès, S., ‘Un encensoir syro-byzantin’, *Échos d’Orient* 7 (1934), pp. 148–151, Weitzmann, Kurt, ‘An East Christian Censer’, *Record of the Museum of Historic Art, Princeton University* 32 (1944), pp. 2–4 and this list is not intended to be exhaustive. In addition there have been attempts to quantify these objects and to develop a typology based on their iconography and decorative motifs, notably by Hamilton, R.W., ‘Thuribles: Ancient or Modern?’, *Iraq* 36:1/2 (1974), pp. 53–65 and Richter-Siebels, Ilse, *Die palästinensischen Weihrauchgefäße mit Reliefsszenen aus dem Leben Christi*, Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung des Grades eies Doktors der Philosophie des Fachbereichs Geschichtswissenschaften der Freien Universität Berlin; Berlin, 1996.

These objects have also been a source of fascination in the Caucasus, where they occur in both Georgia and Armenia and there is also a series of articles on the subject in Russian and Georgian (no doubt also in Armenian as well, but for the moment that language remains beyond the linguistic capabilities of the author). See for example: Arkhipova, E.I., ‘Bronzovoe Kadilo iz Sudaka v Odesskom Arkheologicheskem Muzee’, *Bizantinskii Bremenunik* 67 (92), 2008, pp. 207–216, Chichileishvili, Maia, ‘Brinjavao satsetskhli kedis mkharemtsomdeobis muzeumidan’, *Khelovneba* 10–11–12 (1995), pp. 82–83, Krushkhova, L.G., ‘Neskol’ko predmetov bizantioskoi epokhi iz Istoricheskogo muzeia g. Sochi Krasnodarskogo kraia’, *Plichernomor’e v Srednie Veka* VIII (2011), pp. 169–197, Kiknadze, Gulnara, ‘“Sirili” satsetskhuri balaanidan (ksnis kheoba)’, *Religia* 10–11–12 (1995), pp. 82–90, Machabeli, Kiti, ‘Brinjavao satsetskhurebi sakartveloshi’, *Khelovneba* 6 (1991), pp. 43–58, Machabeli, Kiti, ‘Udzevelis liturgikuli nivtebi sakartveloshi—brinjavao satsetskhureb’, *Saertashoriso konperentsia. Religia da sazogadoeba—rtsmena chvens tskhovrebashi*, 2004, pp. 44–45. There is also an article concerning a slightly later (9th or 10th century) Georgian censer now in Moscow, but this artefact is very different from the cast bronze censers mentioned above. It is mentioned here only because of its similar Christological iconography. For more information see Gagoshidze, Giorgi, ‘Evsuki katolikosis satsetskhuri moskovis kremlis muzeumidan’, *Dzveli khelovneba dhges* 6 (2015), pp. 46–51. Many thanks are due to Professor Zaza Skhirtladze, Head of the Department of Art History, Tbilisi State University for providing me with Georgian and Russian language sources on this subject and for offering his thoughts on the issues surrounding these objects. Naturally the discussion above represents the thoughts of the author and any errors of interpretation are hers alone.
inter-related forms for over a thousand years. Certainly they were still being made by Armenian artisans as late as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, because of the continuity of the motifs used, it is often only subtle alterations in the shape and finish of the object as well as the fact that they grew larger with time, that enables us to tell the earlier and later censers apart from each other.

This collection of artefacts has long been referred to as being Syrian or Syro-Palestinian in origin, partially on the grounds of inscriptions on the objects, however much of this argument seems to have rested on assumption rather than empirical data. In his survey of the corpus of bronze censers in 1974, which he acknowledged was not exhaustive, Hamilton recorded an inscription dated 1646 in Armenian on a censer in New Julfa, Isfahan, one in Cairo with a Coptic inscription dated on paleographic grounds to the fourteenth century or later, a relatively modern Arabic inscription executed in or near Mardin in southeast Turkey, and two Syriac inscriptions of unknown date on two censers in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, both of which appear to have originated in the region of what is now southeast Turkey. Needless to say it is not possible to argue for the origin of these objects on such limited epigraphic evidence and we must therefore turn to other information in order to try and discern the origins of this group of objects. Like many writers on the subject, Siebels has concentrated on the formulation of an iconographic typology rather than comprehensively addressing the geographical distribution or dating of the censers and therefore, although now quite dated, Hamilton’s article remains the only source that has tried to quantify these artefacts. Although he acknowledges that at the time he wrote his article there were known to be 30 or 40 of these bronze censers extant, and obviously the corpus has grown in size further since the 1970s, he attempts to place twenty five of them into distinct geographical groupings:

38 There is a sixteenth century Armenian censer of this type in the Caucasian section of the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg and a collection of these objects, the latest of them being attributed to the seventeenth century in the museum of Vank Kilise (St. Saviour’s Cathedral) in New Julfa, Isfahan. Doubtless many others are still extant from this later period, but the artefacts above are mentioned to highlight the fact that, in Armenia at least, there seems to be a continuity of production that may have made these objects for as long as a thousand years.

39 p. 62, Hamilton, R.W., ‘Thuribles: Ancient or Modern?’

40 p. 63, ibid.

41 p. 63, ibid.

42 pp. 64–65, ibid.

43 Richter-Siebels, Ilse, Die palästinensischen Weihrauchgefäße.
... five came from Egypt; and eight lack all record of provenance. From these figures it seems likely that the centre of distribution lay far to the north of Jerusalem, perhaps in northern-most Syria or Mesopotamia. We cannot say that all the censers came from one region; but their broad resemblance suggests it. The reliefs, like the minor ornaments, are Near Eastern or Byzantine in character, as it seems to me, not perceptibly affected by western art.\textsuperscript{44}

Of course the obvious flaw with Hamilton's analysis is that, with the exceptions of one censer in Tbilisi and one from Odessa, he does not include in his article the data from the former Soviet Union. In Georgia there are six bronze censers in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Art in Tbilisi alone. Both Kutaisi and Mestia museums hold a number of variant forms of bronze censers, one is in Adjara Museum and another unrestored example is in the stores of the Simon Janashia State Museum. In addition to the Georgian material a similar example is known from Sochi where it is stated that:

The bronze censer is decorated with five scenes of “the pilgrimage cycle”: Annunciation, Nativity, Baptism, Crucifixion and Holy Women at the Holy Sepulchre. It is part of an extensive series (over a hundred) of similar products that follow the Palestinian iconography of the 6th–7th centuries. Many of them were made at a later time, after the earlier models. I date the Sochi censer to not earlier than the 9th–10th centuries.\textsuperscript{45}

Attempting to quantify these censers is made even more complex by the fact that a number have been sold on the open market\textsuperscript{46} and disappeared into private collections, but what we can see is that Hamilton was broadly correct in positing northern and southern concentrations of the objects. There are several censers of this type in the Biblelands Museum in Israel and at least one has been sold in Jerusalem in recent memory.\textsuperscript{47} These can be added to those known from Egypt to be added to a possible ‘southern group’. On the other hand the ‘north-

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\textsuperscript{44} p. 65, Hamilton, R.W., ‘Thuribles: Ancient or Modern?’
\textsuperscript{45} p. 170, Khrushkova, L.G., ‘Neskol’ko pledmetov bizantiǐskoǐ ėpokhi iz Istoricheskogo muzeia g. Sochi Krasnodarskogo kraia’, \textit{Plichernomor'e v Srednie Veka VIII} (2011), pp. 169–197.
\textsuperscript{46} See for example the object sold at Sotheby’s in London in October 2015 at http:/ /www.sotebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/arts-islamic-world-l5223/lot.316.html (Accessed 08.03.2017).
\textsuperscript{47} See http:/ /www.sassonancientart.com/artwork_show_73.html (Accessed 07.03.2017).
\end{flushright}
ern group’ has arguably been dragged further north by the fact that so many of these objects have been discovered in the Caucasus and around the Black Sea. So are we dealing with two distinct centres of production or is this a case of objects being imported from one location to another? Perhaps most importantly where are these objects being produced?

Perhaps the first thing to note is that, leaving aside the concentration of these censers found in the Caucasus for the moment, a significant number are clustered in the Tur ‘Abdin region of southeast Turkey and are particularly well represented in and around the town of Mardin. This is highlighted by both the written inscriptions collected by Hamilton and also supported by evidence from a variety of sources including Bell and Pétridès who report discovering and/or purchasing objects of this type in the area. The region is the historic heartland of the Syrian Orthodox Church and the name Tur ‘Abdin itself derives from the Syriac for the ‘mountains of the servants of God’. The inhabitants call themselves Suryoye in their own language and are called Syriani by the Arabs, which with minor variations is the name by which they have been known since late antiquity. This is perhaps the key to understanding how and why these bronze censers have been referred to as ‘Syrian’ censers for so long. If we suggest that ‘Syrian’ in this context is taken to denote objects made by Syrian (Orthodox) Christians rather than being interpreted to mean that the objects were

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48 In addition to the group of (later) bronze censers in New Julfa, Isfahan, others have been recorded in museum collections in Armenia. See p. 123, Nersessian, Vrej, *Treasures from the Ark. 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Art*, The J. Paul Getty Museum; Los Angeles, 2001 for details on three of these objects now in the State History Museum of Armenia, Erevan. Two of the censers were discovered in Ani and one in Artsakh and all are dated to the 13th century. Nersessian writes that these objects ‘recall the Byzantine and Coptic censers of the sixth and seventh centuries, and this suggests that such censers and lamps were known in Armenia from a very early period.’ However thus far there appears to have been little work undertaken on bronze censers in Armenian collections, and certainly there is nothing currently available for non-Armenian speakers on this subject.

49 pp. 63–65, Hamilton, R.W., ‘Thuribles: Ancient or Modern?’

50 p. 317, Bell, Gertrude Lowthian, *Amurath to Amurath*, William Heinemann; London, 1911.

51 Pétridès, S., ‘Un encensoir syro-byzantin’, *Échos d’Orient* 7 (1904), pp. 148–151.

52 ‘Suryoyo’ rather than ‘Suryaye’ is the vocalisation used by those who speak and write Turoyo, the western dialect of Syriac. However the two terms mean the same thing and for a recent discussion on the terms used by Syrian and Assyrian Christians to identify themselves see Butts, Aaron Michael, ‘Assyrian Christians’ in Frahm, Eckhart (ed.), *A Companion to Assyria*, Wiley-Blackwell online, 2017, DOI: 10.1002/9781118325216.ch32.

This offers an additional perspective on the issues discussed in chapter 1 relating to the complexities of the terms ‘Syrian’ and ‘Assyrian’.
manufactured in the country of that name, then the geographical distribution of these artefacts begins to make more sense.

We can clearly see that their distribution in areas across the region suggests a place of manufacture to the north and east of Damascus or Aleppo and, although we have a gap in our knowledge of the origins of these objects, it seems possible answers can be found by comparing what we know of these censers with what is known about the thirteenth century Mosul School of Metalwork. Although quite obviously we are dealing with objects made some four-to six-hundred years later than the earliest censers, there are a number of similarities between these two groups of objects that bear closer examination.

A map showing the dispersal of these later objects in the thirteenth century is striking in how closely it mirrors the known findspots of bronze censers, with these later objects reaching as far south as Cairo and Yemen but having a denser concentration of them around Mardin and other towns and cities in what is now southeast Turkey. What is not shown on the map is whether any of these later objects ended up in the Caucasus, but given the exceptional collection of Islamic metalwork of all eras in the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia we can at least hazard an answer based on the items known to us from the contemporary collection. In actual fact Tbilisi holds what is arguably the largest collection of Islamic metalwork in the world and a recent exhibition displaying only those items that had once been in the collection of the photographer Alexandre Roinashvili included four brass and silver ewers attributed

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53 Thanks are due to Dr. Sebastian Brock, Reader Emeritus in Syriac Studies at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford for suggesting that perhaps I should play closer attention to Mesopotamia if that appeared to be a centre for objects of this type. His comment reminded me that Mosul had been a notable centre of medieval metalwork and it was striking that the map on p. 21 of Raby’s article in many respects replicated the dispersal of the bronze censers. See Raby, Julian, ‘The Principle of Parsimony and the Problem of the ‘Mosul School of Metalwork’’, in Porter, Venetia & Rosser-Owen, Mariam, Metalwork and Material Culture in the Islamic World. Art, Craft and Text. Essays presented to James W. Allan, I.B. Tauris; London & New York, 2012, pp. 11–85.

54 At the time of writing this corpus, which numbers many hundreds of objects dating from the early Islamic era until the nineteenth century, is still in the process of being catalogued. However in the ‘Alexandre Roinashvili and His Museum’ exhibition held at the Simon Janashia State Museum in 2015–2016, four brass and silver ewers attributed 13th–14th century Mosul were displayed from Roinashvili’s collection. Since this makes up a very small proportion of the entirety of the metalwork held by the museum it is logical to expect more objects originating in medieval Mosul to be identified in the future. See Mamatsashvili, Lika, Koshoridze, Irina & Dgebuadze, Marina, The First Georgian Photographer. Alexandre Roinashvili and His Museum, Damani; Tbilisi, 2015, pp. 123–124.
to the Mosul School of the thirteenth or fourteenth century.\footnote{See note 54 above.} Therefore we can suggest that the dissemination of both groups of objects was following the same networks.

Other factors that support this argument include the fact that the thirteenth century Mosul School is known for the inclusion of Christian iconography in many of the artefacts associated with it\footnote{Katzenstein, Ranee A. & Lowry, Glenn D., ‘Christian Themes in Thirteenth-Century Islamic Metalwork’, \textit{Muqarnas} 1 (1983), pp. 53–68.} and also the argument espoused by Raby that many artisans spread out from Mosul and worked in different cities—evidenced by the number of inscriptions where the maker of an object was identified as \textit{al-Mawsili}\footnote{p. 13, Raby, Julian, ‘The Principle of Parsimony.’}—so that in effect, as time went on, ‘Mosul School’ objects were being produced in a number of locations. This hypothesis again resonates with the earlier material, where it has been argued in Georgia that whilst the first ‘Syrian’ censers in the country were originally imported, several centuries later local artisans appear to have been making their own versions of these objects.\footnote{Pers. Comm. with staff at the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Art and with members of the Center for Exploration of Georgian Antiquities at the St. Andrew the First Called Patriarchal University of Georgia.} In this case this early example of franchising—where a type of object associated with one centre spreads as artisans travel and introduce that type of object and iconography into other regions—seems to have been at the heart of the dissemination of both the censers and the ‘Mosul School’ metalwork. Given the similarities of distribution patterns there is a strong body of circumstantial evidence to support the argument that these objects originated somewhere in Mesopotamia, most likely in Mosul or its vicinity, or alternatively in Mardin or a nearby city such as Amida (modern Diyarbakir).

If that is the case then we also have an answer to the question of why these objects have always been referred to as ‘Syrian censers’ when only one\footnote{This is the censer from Deir Mar Musa al-Habashi referred to in note 34 above.} of them has ever been securely provenanced to Syria itself. Rather than being a topographical reference as widely assumed, we should take the word to be used in an ethnographic sense as referring to the people known as \textit{Syriani}; in other words the label is used to denote the Syrian Orthodox Christians of Mosul or the Tur ‘Abdin as the makers of these items. When viewed in this light we have a tangible link to Mesopotamia which could suggest that we should be looking in that region for our (As)Syrian Fathers.
A eulogia from Syria: The Symeon Stylites Medallion from Gareja

Earlier in this chapter we remarked on the surprising lack of eulogiae, or ‘blessings’, found in Georgian archaeological contexts or church treasuries. These small pilgrimage tokens were, as their name suggests, believed to confer blessings or divine protection on their owners and were popular souvenirs throughout late antiquity and beyond. Items of this nature secured at sites associated with the life of Christ were particularly sought after, but there was also great demand for objects that were linked to the most venerated and powerful Christian saints.

Two saints who were highly influential due to the extreme asceticism they practiced during their lifetimes and also because of their reputations as arbiters of community disputes, were Symeon Stylites the Elder (d. 459) and Symeon the Younger (d. 592). We know a great deal about both of them as vitae are extant not only for both men, but also for St. Martha, who was the mother of Symeon the Younger. In addition the places where they stood on their columns are still known to us and have been studied by a variety of scholars. The Georgian relationship with the stylite cult will be the subject of the next chapter but is mentioned here in passing because, aside from eulogiae from the main sites linked directly to Christ in the Holy Land, souvenirs from Qalʿat Semʿan and Semandaǧ, the sites linked respectively to Symeon the Elder and Symeon the Younger, are more plentiful than from any other pilgrimage centre with the possible exception of the shrine of St. Menas in Egypt.

The discovery of a glass bowl filled with terracotta pilgrimage tokens of varying scenes at Deir Semʿan, the village beneath the hill of Qalʿat Semʿan, also suggested that shrines disseminated tokens or ampullae with a wide variety of images on them—not simply iconography associated with the shrine itself—and that therefore not all tokens of stylites necessarily came from Qalʿat Semʿan and Semandaǧ. This hypothesis is supported by the case of a stylite ampulla excavated in Sardis in western Asia Minor that, despite bearing stylite imagery, has a shape and manufacture more typical of western Asia Minor than it is of

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60 See Brown, Peter, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity’, The Journal of Roman Studies 61 (1971), pp. 80–101 and Brown, Peter, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, 1971–1997’, Journal of Early Christian Studies 6:3 (1998), pp. 353–376.

61 See http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?place=33725 &plaA=33725-3-2 for the British Museum inventory of tokens discovered at Deir Semʿan. The 81 tokens in this collection display a variety of different subjects and, if they all originate in this location, suggest that pilgrims did not always buy their souvenirs at the site of the scene depicted on the memento.
northern Syria. Therefore we cannot say that all stylite imagery certainly originated in northern Syria or that scenes bearing the life of Christ all came from the Holy Land. Having said that it seems likely that the majority of stylite tokens were manufactured in the vicinity of Qalʿat Semʿan and Semandağ or perhaps in Antioch due to the relative uniformity of the iconography and production methods relating to the stylite tokens. On the other hand some of the ampullae and bottles bearing stylite imagery appear to have been manufactured further afield and so the origins of each of these objects should be individually examined. This would suggest that the cheapest, most easily available items—the terracotta tokens—were probably products acquired from near the shrine, but more specialised or expensive memorabilia was made elsewhere and distributed more widely across the near east.

This overview of stylite iconography will continue in the following chapter, but in the context of the discussion that follows it is important to remember that the provenance of tokens with stylite imagery has been overwhelmingly linked to the two sites where the Symeons stood on their respective pillars. This point is underlined because of a silver medallion that was discovered in a grave at Berebis Seri (‘the hill of monks’) at Gareja in Kakheti, eastern Georgia during the 1974–1976 excavations undertaken there by the State Museum of Georgia. This medallion is now in the stores of the Simon Janashia State Museum of Georgia and was published by Zaza Skhirtladze in 1995. The medallion appears to have been cast in silver from a mould and shows a scene of a stylite between two angels in the top half of the scene, with two figures with their hands raised in prayer or supplication facing towards the pillar in the lower sector on one side of the object (Fig. 9). The other side shows an equal-armed cross with triangular motifs in three of the four splayed arms and an indistinct circular motif in the fourth and lowest arm of the cross (Fig. 10). A small loop at the top of the medal shows that it was intended for use as a pendant and its modest diameter of 2 cm mean that it could easily have been suspended on a cord and worn as a discreet protective amulet.

Despite the majority of the material in the graves excavated being dated to the ninth or tenth centuries, Skhirtladze argues that the medallion is in fact later and was manufactured in the tenth or eleventh century:

62 Rautman, Marcus, ‘A Stylite Ampulla at Sardis’, *Travaux et Mémoires* 15 (2005), pp. 713–721.
63 p. 278, Skhirtladze, Zaza, ‘Silver Medallion from Gareji’, *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 45 (1995), pp. 277–282.
64 See note 63 above.
The iconographic scheme of the composition represented on the medallion is typical of pilgrim tokens bearing the image of St. Symeon Stylite. Although this standard iconography had existed since the sixth century, and continued through to the Crusades, it is clear that the date of execution of the medallion from Gareji should be the tenth or eleventh century. This was the period when life in the monastery of St. Symeon experienced a revival, after the liberation of Antioch from Arab domination and its rejoining of the Byzantine empire. It was also in this period that metal, leaden and silver medallions began widely to take the place of terracotta and glass pilgrim tokens, which had been in use in the early period.65

Whilst Skhirtladze is correct in arguing that metal medallions bearing stylite imagery are generally attributed to the Middle Byzantine period, rather than being contemporary or slightly later than the lives of the saints themselves, in

65 p. 279, Skhirtladze, Zaza, ‘Silver Medallion from Gareji.’
this case the question is more complex. The extant medals with which he compares the Gareja medallion are in many respects significantly different enough to raise questions as to whether or not it is possible to view this object as being within the same category.

The first, and most obvious, difference is in size. The Gareja pendant is only 2 cm in diameter\(^6^6\) whereas the later medals are significantly larger being between 5.5 cm\(^6^7\) and 8.4 cm\(^6^8\) in diameter. In addition all the known later pendants are definitively linked to the shrine of Symeon the Younger at Semandağ outside Antioch and have more a sophisticated iconographical composition as well as inscriptions in Greek around the outer edge of the stylite scene. One similarity with the Gareja find is the fact that a token in the Staatliche Museen

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\(^{66}\) p. 278, Skhirtladze, Zaza, ‘Silver Medallion from Gareji.’

\(^{67}\) p. 97, Evans, Helen C. & Ratcliffe, Brandi (eds.), *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition 7th to 9th Century*, Metropolitan Museum of Art & Yale University Press; New York & New Haven, 2012.

\(^{68}\) http://art.thewalters.org/detail/10400/pilgrim-token-with-saint-symeon-stylite-the-younger/ (Accessed 27.03.2017).
zu Berlin has a cross on the reverse\textsuperscript{69} but again, this cross is significantly more detailed and refined than that on the smaller object. In addition these later medallions are usually cast in lead or, in the case of the example in the Walters Art Museum, a composite metal\textsuperscript{70} rather than in the intrinsically more valuable medium of silver.

In fact there is only one other stylite artefact recorded in silver—the well-known silver votive plaque now in the Louvre dated to the 6th or 7th century and discovered as part of a church treasure in Ma’arrat an Numan in Syria.\textsuperscript{71} As with many of these stylite artefacts it is unclear whether to attribute the panel to the intervention of Symeon the Elder or to Symeon the Younger, but the inscription on the panel makes it clear that the donor credited one of them for answering his/her prayer. Given the personal nature of this ex voto it does perhaps suggest that items made in more precious metals were more likely to have been individual commissions undertaken on a small scale for private patrons and the scarcity of comparable items in this case would appear to strengthen this supposition. Certainly in the case of the Gareja medallion, the cruder casting and less detailed scene would suggest that this object was fabricated closer in time to the 6th or 7th century clay pilgrimage tokens than it was to the later and more complex Middle Byzantine lead medallions. This hypothesis is based upon the theory that the silver medallion was a copy of the more common clay tokens of the earlier period, executed for a private individual who wished to place themselves under the personal protection of Symeon Stylites by wearing the medal as an amulet.

Given the dearth of exact comparative material outlined above this discussion must remain to some extent speculative, but to this writer at least, the balance of probabilities suggests that this object was manufactured in northwest Syria at some point in the 6th or 7th centuries before ending up in a 9th or 10th century monastic burial at Davit Gareja in Kakheti. As such, at the time of writing, it represents the sole late antique Christian artefact yet discovered in Georgia that comes from a securely provenanced archaeological context.

Taking this object as our one tangible piece of material culture supporting a direct interaction between Syrian and Georgian Christianity in late antiquity,

\textsuperscript{69} pp. 97–98, Evans, Helen C. & Ratcliffe, Brandi (eds.), Byzantium and Islam.

\textsuperscript{70} Walters online catalogue, details as above in note 67.

\textsuperscript{71} p. 114, Aghion, Irène, Durand, Jannic, Gaborit-Chopin, Danielle & Germain, Marie-Odile (eds.), Byzance. L’art byzantin dans les collections publiques françaises, Exposition au Musée du Louvre du 3 novembre 1992 au 1er février 1993, Réunion des Musées Nationaux; Paris, 1992 and the online catalogue entry for this object at http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/plaque-saint-simeon (Accessed 27.03.2017).
it is time to explore the Georgian attachment to the stylite cult, in particular that of Symeon the Younger, in order to find out if this devotional tradition can furnish any evidence to illuminate cultural interactions between these regions in the fifth and sixth centuries.