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OLD ARAMAIC SCRIPT IN GEORGIA

Introduction

Aramaic is mostly important for Georgia. All the three historical phases of this language: Old, Middle and Modern are well represented in the Georgian cultural tradition.

On the territory of contemporary Georgia, mainly in its Eastern part—Kartli being historically Iberian kingdom (IV c BC–IV c AD) a number of original Aramaic inscriptions were found.

They were made on different objects: steles (an epitaph and a victory stele), bone plates, wine-pitchers, silver bowls, and household items, stones of sanctuary buildings and sarcophagi, jewels. For the present, the whole corpus of inscriptions comprises nearly 100 units dated by III–II cc BC – III c AD and is kept at different funds of the National Museum of Georgia. These ancient Aramaic inscriptions were discovered in Mtskheta, the capital of Iberia as well as its outskirts – Armazi, Bagineti and other different locations in Central Georgia – Uplistsikhe, Urnisi, Zguderi, Bori, Dedoplist Gora (Mindori), Dzalisa.

The Aramaic inscriptions of Georgia are distinguished by their form and content. Some of them are quite extensive, such as Armazi steles and a number of dedicational inscriptions dated by III c AD, found on golden bracelets from Armazi burials. The rest of inscriptions are rather short, consisting only of one or two words, denoting a proper name, or a title, they also frequently have an attributive meaning of weight, size and function of an object.

The Old Aramaic was one of chief written languages of Iberia before adoption the Christianity (IV century AD).

Later Aramaic epigraphic monuments (IV–V cc AD), also revealed in Mtskheta belong to particular category. They were created by the Jewish community of Mtskheta, and are written in Hebrew characters, while their language is Middle Aramaic (Jewish-Palestinian dialect).

Origins of spreading the Aramaic language in Georgia and, generally, in the South Caucasus are to be traced in the Achaemenid epoch (VI–IV cc BC) of the Persian Empire, when firm foundations of Iranian statehood and national culture were laid, and it was widely used as the official language (*lingua franca*) of the Empire.

Iberian kingdom and Kartvelian tribes are not mentioned in the extant Old Persian inscriptions; however, rich historical-archaeological materials and linguistic-philological evidences testify the strong Iranian cultural impact on this region.

The introduction in the South Caucasus of administrative, social, political and legal institutions evolved in the Achaemenid Empire was of great significance. These institutions and socio-economic processes taking place in the Achaemenid period played an important role in the emergence and development of the Iberian and Armenian kingdoms.

Georgian medieval chronicles (XI c) preserve particularly valuable data on this subject. One of them, *The Life of Kartli* (consisting of multiple sources several of which are of remarkable antiquity) narrates that the first Georgian king Parnavaz (Pharnabazos), who was a representative of a powerful

aristocratic family from Mtskheta and coronated about 280 BC., created his state “like the kingdom of the Persians”.

One of the chapters of “*The Life of Kartli*” dealing with the life and deeds of the Georgian kings mentions Aramaic among languages widespread in pre-Christian Georgia: “Six languages were spoken in Kartli: Armenian, Georgian, Khazar, Assyrian (i.e. Aramaic), Hebrew and Greek. And all the kings of Kartli and all the men and women, knew these languages”.

The Georgian historiography ascribes to the first legendary king Pharnavaz creation of the Georgian writing (“Georgian literacy”).
(Photo 1)

According to Professor Thomas Gamkrelidze’s theory (Th. Gamkrelidze, *Alphabetic Writing and the Old Georgian Script. A Typology and Provenance of Alphabetic Writing Systems*, Caravan Books, Delmar-New York, 1994), the “Georgian literacy” might have meant its introduction in the form of the so-called “Alloglottography” or “writing-in-another-language” widely used in the Achaemenid chancelleries, i. e. reading a text written in some widespread foreign language in this case Aramaic, on the basis of the local language (the Georgian), before introducing the national script.

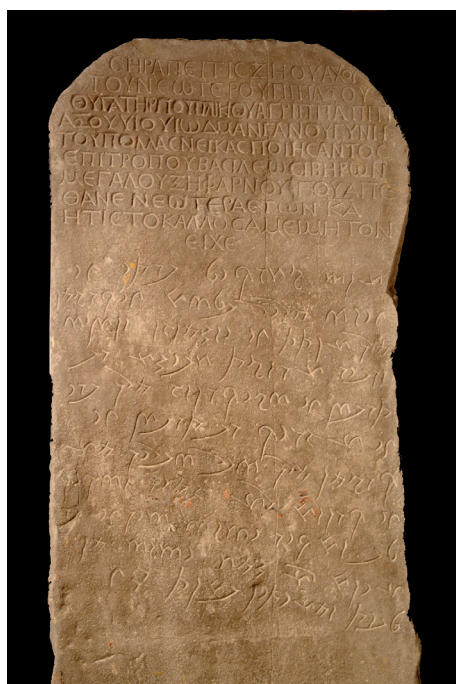


Photo 1

The existence of “literary traditions” in the pre-Christian Georgian World where widely were used Old Aramaic alongside with Greek should be assumed in the form of oral tradition and folk-lore. The introduction of national writing when Christianity was proclaimed as the state religion only served to record such tradition, and further strengthen and develop the literary language.

The most ancient Georgian literary monuments are dated only by V c AD, the period when the written translation of the Scripture into Georgian has already been realized and recorded in the Old Georgian original script, Asomtavruli.

The Aramaic script used in Iberia passed a long way of development. It was one of the outgrowths of the Imperial (Official) Aramaic writing, widely used in Achaemenid Empire, which displayed a remarkable uniformity. No regional forms of the script could be discerned although ethnic groups of varied cultural background throughout the vast expanse of the realm used it, the same script was used from Central Asia to Egypt, from the Caucasus to North Arabia.



But after fall of the Empire in III-II cc BC local varieties of the Old Aramaic script were developed in different cultural-geographic regions of the East, including Syria, North Mesopotamia, Georgia and Armenia. Most forms of local Aramaic scripts began to crystallize in the I c BC. Old Aramaic inscriptions of the South Caucasus clearly reflect this process.

Studies on Old Aramaic Epigraphy of Georgia

The tradition of linguistic-paleographic studies of Old Aramaic epigraphy in Georgia is related to the name of outstanding orientalist, Academic George Tsereteli (1904-1973), who made a significant contribution to the decipherment and analysis of the Aramaic inscriptions discovered as a result of archaeological excavations at Armazi, near Mtskheta. To these inscriptions were devoted G. Tsereteli’s two important works:

Photo 2

“The Bilingual Inscription from Armazi” (1941) and “The Armazi Inscription of the Period of Mithridate the Iberian” (1962).

As a result of paleographic studies of Mtskheta-Armazi inscriptions (11 lines Abilingual (Greek-Aramaic) epitaphy, dated by II c AD (**Photo 2**) and 14 line Aramaic monolingual inscription dated by I c AD) (**Photo 3**) G. Tsereteli identified hitherto unknown type of Aramaic script as “independent branch of Semitic writing” and named it “Armazi Aramaic” according to the place of its finding.

The bilingual Aramaic-Greek inscription was an epitaph of “Serapetis, the daughter of Zevakh the viceroy of the king of Iberia Parsman, wife of Iodmangan the victorious and winner of many battles, master of the court (epitropos) of the king Xefarnug, son of Agrippa, the master of the court of the king Parsman.”

The second stele discovered near Mtskheta called Armazi Monolingual is known as the stele of victory of Sharagas, the viceroy of the great king Mithridate II (75 AD).

The story in the text is told by Sharagas, who performed military operations, after the successful ending of which he reported to the Great king Mihradt: “I gained this victory to you, my King”.

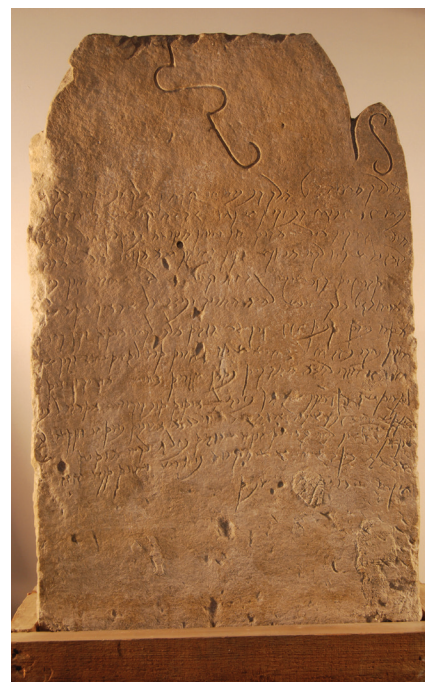


Photo 3

These extensive Aramaic inscriptions were of great historical and cultural significance. Administrative titles, personal names, political events attested in them present the most valuable material for pre-Christian Georgian history.

G. Tsereteli distinguished a number of linguistic and paleographic peculiarities of the Armazian script conditioned by close cultural links with Ancient Arameo-Iranian commonwealth one the one hand and with Hellenic cultural world on the another hand. Thus, while considering texts of bilingual and monolingual inscriptions, G. Tsereteli defined several similarities with contemporary Middle Iranian (Parthian, Middle Persian) and Semitic (Palmyrene) scripts. At the same time, Greek influence was also evident. For example, in Bilingual inscription using *ayin* for expressing *ē* in the proper name *Serapitis* is the early exemple of *mater lectionis*, Iranian name Xšēfarnūy was rendered by Greek form (*Hsyprnwg*), in Mithridate’s inscription alongside with Aramaic *mlk* are attested Greek forms *bzys*, *bzls* and probably, Latin form *kysr* (Caesar).

It is noteworthy, that local (Georgian) writing tradition was significantly reflected in the language and script of the Armazian inscriptions, namely in similar outlines of several Armazian and Georgian letters, also transliteration and transcription of a number of Oriental terms, for exemple, Middle Iranian administrative name *bthš* “a viceroy” presented in Armazian writings differently: *bthš* (the Bilingual), *byty’xš* (the Bori inscription), *pyty’xš* (the Monolingua), which is clearly reflecting the impact of the Georgian orthography.

G. Tsereteli outlined several distinctive grammatical characteristics as well as irregularities of the bilingual text (the lack of a definite article, misuse of genders, the absence of the determinative state, the use of archaic prounoun *zy*), which is certainly a result of the local Aramaic writing tradition.

In Armazian writing Eastern and Western elements were transformed on the ground of the native culture, creating most original linguistic and paleographical material. G. Tsereteli also named Armazian script as “Georgian-Aramaic” or “Iberian-Aramaic”.

Studies of the Aramaic inscriptions from Armazi were of special significance not only as a new source for the research of Eastern Aramaic writing and its ramification but, they also shed light on a number of cultural-historical problems of pre-Christian Iberia and its interrelations with Ancient Iran .

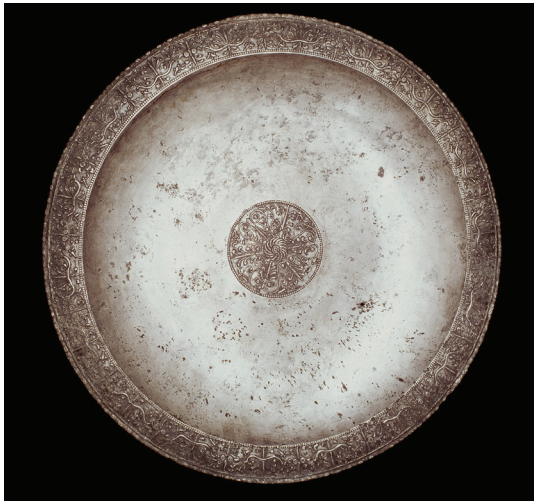
Tradition of using the Aramaic script in pre-Christian Georgia is closely connected to the problem of

the origins of the Georgian alphabet. G. Tsereteli considered it in genetic relation with the Aramaic script.

Apart of Serapitis and the king Mithridate's steles in Armazi script were made inscriptions on different objects found during excavations at Mtskheta-Armazi.

In this respect, items found in Armazi necropolis, notably golden plaques (II c AD), silver plate of the viceroy Bersuma, golden rings and brasselets (III cc AD) are of a special interest due to their epigraphical value, as well as artistic quality (**Photo 4, 5**).

Photo 4,5



G. Tsereteli has shown in his researches that the inscriptions found in Mtsheta-Armazi as well as some other epigraphical monuments of Eastern Georgia – Bori (II-III cc AD) (**Photo 6,7**), Urbnisi (II c AD) (**Photo 8**), are done in the same ("Armazian") script, being distinguished with common paleographic features.

Photo 6



Photo 7

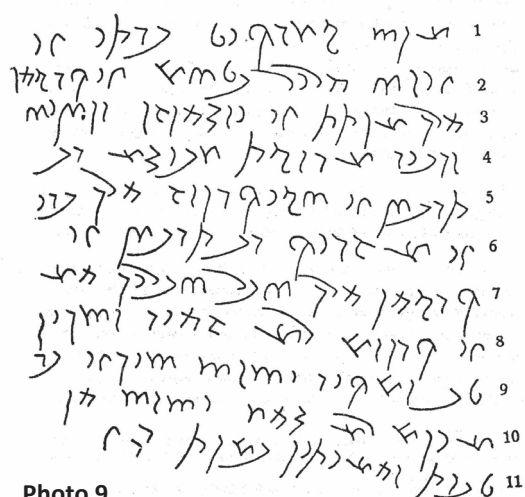


Photo 8

The inscriptions of Bori as stated G. Tsereteli, showed a certain tendency to mannerism and stylization, "the lines are broken and in the break places sharp angles are formed", which could be due to (metal)material on which the inscription was made.

The oldest one is the monolingual inscription (I c AD) made in cursive, where letters have little (if any) distinction from each other, cf. identical are *k* and *n* letters; *r* and *b*; ' and *š*; *t* and *y* etc. The script of the

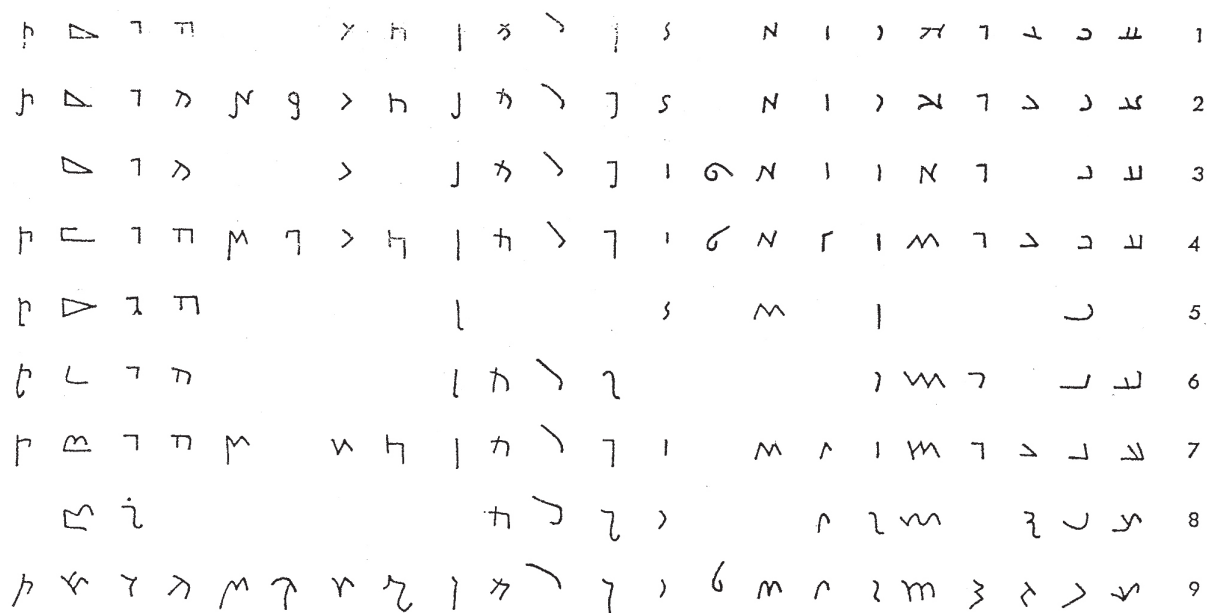




bilingual text is more formal (**Photo 9**), in which all letters have clearly outlined forms. Letters of the monolingual inscription are distinguished by more variations compared to letters of the bilingual text. A number of letters in the bilingual inscription, as of the later monument, are significantly different from the monolingual's (for example, letters *s* and *p* and some others) (**Photo 10**)

Here it should also be noted that the writing of each mentioned monuments (I-III cc AD) is characterized by certain specific paleographic features. We cannot come across absolutely identical writing of one and the same letters not only in different “Armazi” texts, but sometimes they cannot be attested within the same texts either. Certain variations of identical letters in the “Armazi” script monuments are quite acceptable, but they are very rare and fall within the general limits of the script.

Armazian Script (According to Sisian, Armazi, Garni and Bori Inscriptions)					
Transcription	Early Armazian	Armazian			
	Sisian	Monolingual Inscription	Bilingual Inscription	Garni	Bori
ɔ	Ⲛ	ⲕ ⲕ ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ
ɒ	ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ	ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ
g		ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ	
d		ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ		
h	ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ	ⲛ	ⲛ
w		ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ	ⲓ
z	ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ
b	ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ		ⲛ
t	ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ		ⲕ ⲕ
y	•	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ
κ	ⲕ ⲕ	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ	
l	ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ	ⲛ ⲛ	ⲛ	
m	ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ	ⲕ	ⲕ
n	ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ ⲓ		ⲓ
s	ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ	
c		ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ		
p	ⲓ	ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ		
ś		ⲕ	ⲕ		
q	ⲛ	ⲛ	ⲛ		
r	ⲕ	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ	ⲓ ⲓ
š		ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ		ⲕ
t	ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ ⲕ	ⲕ ⲕ		



A Comparative Script Chart:

Line 1. Hatra, No. 214	Line 5. 'Abrat al-Şaghira
Line 2. Hatra, No. 35	Line 6. Sari
Line 3. The Dura Europos bilingual inscription	Line 7. Hassan-Kef
Line 4. Assur	Line 8. Garni
	Line 9. Armazi

Photo 12

the Armazi stelae, on the bowl of Bori as well as the Garni inscription were written in the same script.

Aspects of comparative-historical development of the Armazian script were considered later by Joseph Naveh in the work "The North Mesopotamian Aramaic Script-Type in the Late Parthian Period", *Israel Oriental Studies*, II, Jerusalem, 1972, pp. 293-304, where paleographic analysis of Armazian letters and close to them (but not identical) Garni inscription's letters was dealt in the common evolutionary typological scheme of Eastern Aramaic inscriptions of that period (such as Hatra, Dura-Europos, Hassan-Kef and others). There were shown several deviations of the Armazian script from other writings and outlined the main tendencies of its evolution as an original type of the North-Mesopotamian Aramaic writing branch (**Photo 12**).



Photo 13-14

The tradition of Epigraphic Aramaic studies in Georgia was continued by another outstanding scholar, the late Professor Konstantin Tsereteli (1921-2002), who offered several works to newly-discovered Aramaic inscriptions (Uplistsikhe, III-II cc BC) (**Photo 13-14**), Dedoplis Mindori (I c BC) (**Photo 15**).

In K. Tsereteli's works were presented innovative theoretical assumptions about the Aramaic script

type of Georgia, by distinguishing three stages in its development: Pre-Armazian (Uplistsikhe inscriptions, this script was very close to Official Aramaic and was considered as the predecessor of the Armazian), Early Armazian (Dedoplist Mindori inscriptions, which displayed more archaic features than later monuments), Armazian itself (Armazi steles, Urnisi inscription, Bori silver bowl inscription, etc.).

By considering rich factological material, K. Tsereteli defined common tendencies of the Armazian script type development in the South Caucasus: in III-II cc BC local variety of the Old Aramaic script begins to be formed in this region and took its final shape in the I st c BC. In Georgia developed "Armazian" type of Aramaic writing (I-III cc AD), typologically similar to the Aramaic script of Armenia but not wholly its identical. In both countries this type of writing was used before adoption of Christianity.



Photo 15

Future Prospects

Modern level of Old Aramaic Studies, new epigraphic findings and scientific publications essentially require a complex and systematic research of the Old Aramaic inscriptions of Georgia. The research will comprise two stages: 1) making a catalogue of edited inscriptions with their chronological distribution, photo material, fascimiles, texts, new linguistic interpretations and comments together with a bibliographic index; 2) theoretical studies: a systematic linguistic-paleographic examination of published as well as unpublished material: their comparative analysis with Aramaic script of Armenia and other types of contemporary Eastern Aramaic writings; revealing paleographic peculiarities and evolutionary regularities of the South Caucasian Aramaic script.

The research will be essentially interdisciplinary, presenting for the first time the main tendencies of the Old Aramaic script's development in the light of Near Eastern – South Caucasian cultural-linguistic interference.

Additional References:

1. George Tsereteli, *The Bilingual Inscription from Armazi*, Tbilisi, 1941, the Georgian Academy of Sciences (in Russian)
2. George Tsereteli, Armazian Inscription of the Period of Mithridates the Iberian. *Works of the 25th Congress of Orientalists*, v.I, Moscow, 1962, pp.374-378 (in Russian)
3. Konstantin Tsereteli, *Semitological and Kartvelological Studies*, Tbilisi, 2001, I. Javakhishvili State University Press, Program Logos.