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THE HERALDIC HERITAGE OF THE LAST GEORGIAN KINGDOMS

GEORGE LOBZHANIDZE, Ph.D.

Abstract
In the final century of the existence of the two remaining Kingdoms of Georgia the ruling Houses of Bagrationi displayed their personal emblems in heraldic form in books published by the royal printing houses. The nature of these arms and their unique symbolism is explored.

Figure 1: twelfth century monastery of Gelati, near Kutaisi. Photograph by the author.

Introduction

By then already of an ancient lineage, the House of Bagrationi became kings of Georgia in the late eighth century, and from an early stage claimed to be descended from the biblical King David.[1] This made them the ultimate God-anointed royal line. At the end of the fifteenth century the kingdom became divided into three: Kartli, Kakheti and Imereti. Solomon II, King of West Georgia (Imereti) was the grandson through his mother of Heraclius II, a very celebrated king of East Georgia (Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti) who acted as a patron of all Georgia at least from 1790, as it is stated in a Treatise on Iberian [Georgian] Kings and Chiefs. The East Georgian kingdom was conquered by the Russian Empire earlier in 1801, and the West Georgian kingdom of Solomon II in 1810.

The Printing House

Highly valuable sources for studying the royal heraldic heritage of the last Georgian kingdom, the kingdom of Imereti, are the printed books produced by the royal printing

1 With the rise of the Bagrationi dynasty, this legend took on an increasingly sophisticated form, which was well reflected in the eleventh-century Georgian chronicle of Sumbat Davitis-Dze, *The Life and Tale of the Bagrati*oni

Figure 2: the royal coat of arms from the book published by Vakhtang VI in 1710 at the Tbilisi Printing House.

house in Kutaisi, the capital of the kingdom.[2] The Printing House was established during the reign of King Solomon II Bagrationi (1772 - 1815) in 1800, and operated until the Russian conquest of the Kingdom in 1810. There had been an earlier Royal Printing House in Tbilisi, the capital of East Georgia. It was founded in 1709, and ceased to function in around 1802.

2 Kutaisi is a very ancient place dating to the sixth century BC, and is stated by Apollonius of Rhodes to have been the final destination of the Argonauts.

Figure 3: the royal coat of arms from *The Gospel of Passion Sunday* published at the Kutaisi Print House in 1803.

Between 1800 and 1810 the Kutaisi Printing House produced a number of books, mainly of religious content (new testaments, gospels, prayers, etc.), which are distinguished by their high polygraphic quality and stylistic decorations typical to the Georgian printed editions of the time. All available books printed at the Kutaisi Printing House have been thoroughly researched, with heraldic materials of interest being found in the following editions: *The Book of Psalms*, 1800; *The Gospel of Passion Sunday*, 1803; *Blessings*, 1803; *The Book of Psalms*, 1807; *The Book of Hours*, 1808; and *Prayers*, 1810. Access to these books was through the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia, and all the images in this article are also taken from those copies unless stated otherwise.

The Royal Arms

The royal coats of arms depicted in these books closely follow earlier heraldic examples from East Georgia (the kingdom of Kartli, later the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti). Specifically, the coat of arms of the King of Imereti, printed on the second page of the *Gospels* published in 1803 (which first appeared in *The Book of Psalms,*1800), is strikingly similar to the 1710 version ascribed to Vakhtang Bagrationi, governor of Kartli, who went on to rule from 1716 to 1724 as King Vakhtang VI of Kartli (**Figures 2 and 3**).[3] Here is a shield charged with the most sacred religious object in Georgia, the Seamless Robe of Christ or Holy Tunic, said to have been the very garment for which the Roman soldiers drew lots at the Crucifixion. The royal arms can be taken back a further century and more, with a design almost identical to that employed by Vakhtang in 1710 having been carved on the tomb of Tinatin Gurieli (d. 1591) at Shuamta.[4] She was the queen consort of Kakheti.

The Holy Tunic

The history of depicting the Holy Tunic in Georgian heraldry has been well studied by Georgian scholars, who see it as a symbol of the nation's distinctiveness and of the country's great sanctity. It has long been linked with the Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli at Mtskheta in East Georgia, and might be regarded as a territorial symbol, indeed the very symbol of Georgian Christianity, officially adopted in the fourth century. There is a well-founded belief that the depiction of the Holy Tunic on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century coats of arms was prompted by rumours of its theft by the Persians from Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, from the place where it had been kept since the first century, according to legend.[5] It is noteworthy that in addition to the image of Holy Tunic, the leading place in eighteenth-century East Georgian heraldry was held by the image of St. George, something we do not see in the West Georgian heraldry discussed in this article.[6]

The Davidian symbols

Above the shield are the two quintessential symbols of the Biblical king David, his harp and his sling, a reminder that the Georgian Bagrationi (or Bagratids) claimed a direct

3 During this period (1709-1711) the king of Kartli was Kaikhosro.

4 Although some Georgian scholars believe that this carving is a result of the later restoration.

5 D. Kldiashvili,'History of the depiction of the Holy Tunic in the royal coat of arms of Georgia', *Herold*, (Tbilisi, 2016). In Georgian.

6 The image of St. George in Georgia has an older heraldic tradition than the Holy Tunic - it was already used as a heraldic symbol during the reign of King Kvirike the Great of Kakheti (ruled 1010-1036/38) and King George III of Georgia (ruled 1156-1184).The last coats of arms of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti included both the Holy Tunic and the image of St. George.

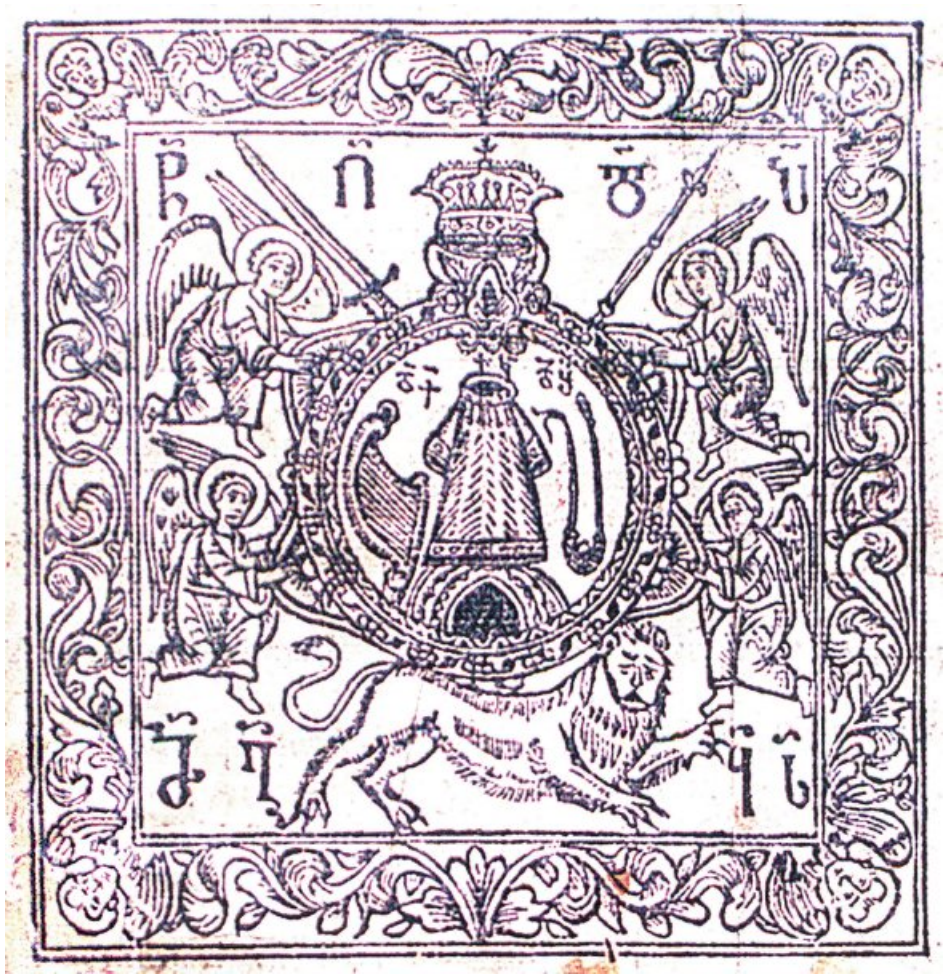

Figure 4: the single lion version of the royal arms first published in the *Books of the Apostles* in 1709, Tbilisi Printing House.

biological descent from him. David used a sling to kill Goliath, and played his harp while singing psalms to God.The lion supporters as Lions of Judah are also Davidian symbols, representing both his nation, and the fact of him having slain a lion in defence of his sheep. The combination of the Holy tunic and the Davidian symbols are collectively referred to by Georgian scholars as the Kvartian-Davitiani emblems, Kvarti being the name of the Holy Tunic in Georgian.

The arms also contain Georgian religious scripts (Psalms 131:11;John 19:23) and the royal insignia of the crown, the sword and sceptre, the orb and the scales of justice, common to European heraldry.The only difference between the two coats of arms, nearly a century apart, is the replacement of floral ornamentson the arms of VakhtangVI with the cherubim on the Imeretian coat of arms. The cherubs are not specific to Solomon II,

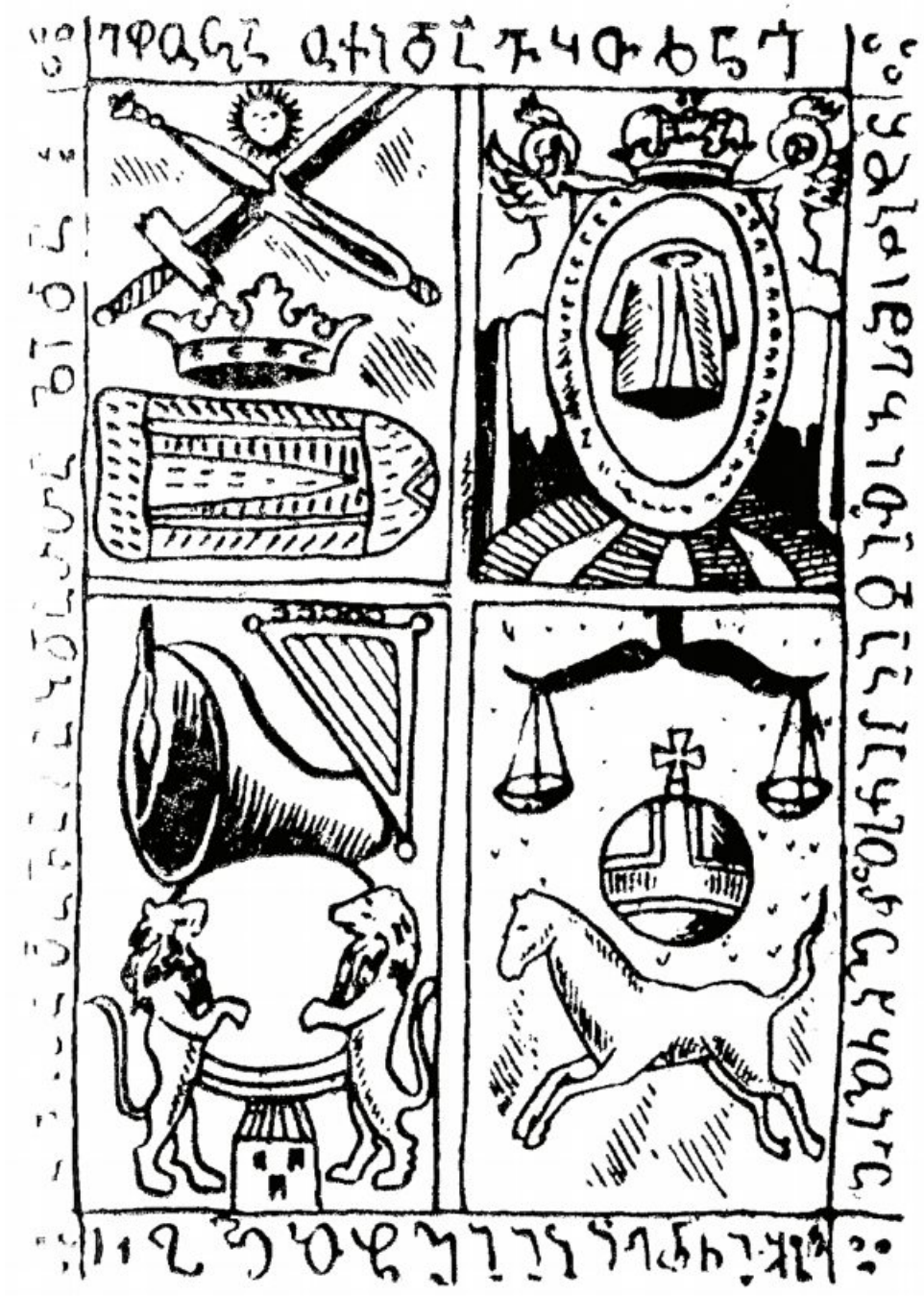

Figure 5: The Large seal of Heraclius II (imprint), according to M. Vadbolski.[7]

7 M.Vadbolski, *Heraldic symbolism of Georgia* (Tbilisi, 1980). In Georgian.

Figure 6: the royal coat of arms from a book published in the Kutaisi print house in 1803.

and can be found on similar coats of arms from East Georgia from the reigns of Teimuraz II, Heraclius II and George XII.[8] There is another version of the arms which has been noted in books printed in Tbilisi in 1709 and 1713 which has only a single lion. In this version the shield is charged with the Holy Tunic together with the Davidian symbols, the whole being supported by four angels (**Figure 4**).[9]

Examples of the same style of arms, which belonged to the ruling royal dynasty but were also a state symbol, are to be found throughout the eighteenth century, with additional examples attributable to the following rulers of East Georgia: George XI (1703-1709), Kaikhosro I (1709-1711), Bakar (1716-1719), Teimuraz II (1732-1762) and George XII (1798-1800).

Figure 7: Bagration arms 1735 from the *Georgian Atlas of Prince Vikushti Bagrationi*.

Alternative quartered arms

Another variety of the Kvartian-Davitiani emblem, one which appears in an 1803 book and again with some modifications in 1808 and 1810, shows an obvious affinity with the quartered royal arms of East Georgian King Heraclius II[10] (**Figures 5 and 6**). Although the quarterings of the two kingdoms are effectively the same, one is the mirror image of the other. Taking the order of the quarterings of Solomon II, in the first quarter there is an

8 *Kontakion*, (Tbilisi, 1751); *Gospels*, (Tbilisi, 1786); David Bagrationi, *Essays*, (1800).

9 In 1709 in the *Aprakos* printed in Vakhtang's printing house (the Tbilisi Printing House), and in 1713 in *the Liturgies.*

10 M. Vadbolski, *Heraldic symbolism of Georgia* (Tbilisi, 1980). In Georgian.

oval shield, circumscribed by the Georgian text: “the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece”(John 19, 23), as on the 1710 coat of arms. The second quarter features the royal regalia - the crossed sceptre and sword, above them the sun and below them the mantle and crown. The third quarter depicts the symbol of the highest judicial authority - the scales, and the symbol of royal blessing and power, the orb; but where Heraclius II had a horse, the seal of Solomon II has a unicorn in this quarter, of which more presently.[11] The fourth quarter has the two Davidian emblems. Surrounding the whole is the legend in Georgian “The Lord hath sworn truth to David, and he will not make it void: of the fruit of thy womb I will set upon thy throne” (*Psalms* 131, 11), as is found on the coat of arms of 1710.

A unique quartered version is to be found in the manuscript *Georgian Atlas* created in 1735 by Prince Vakhushti Bagrationi (1696 – 1757), where it is described as the coat of arms of the *Royal Kvartian-Davitiani of Georgia* (**Figure 7**).

Figure 8: unicorn supporters on the coat of arms of Archimandrite Zakaria from *The Book of Prayers* published in Kutaisi Print House in 1810.

11 G. Lobzhanidze, Georgian coats of arms according to Henry Chatelain’s ‘Historical Atlas’. *Herold*, (Tbilisi, 2014). In Georgian.

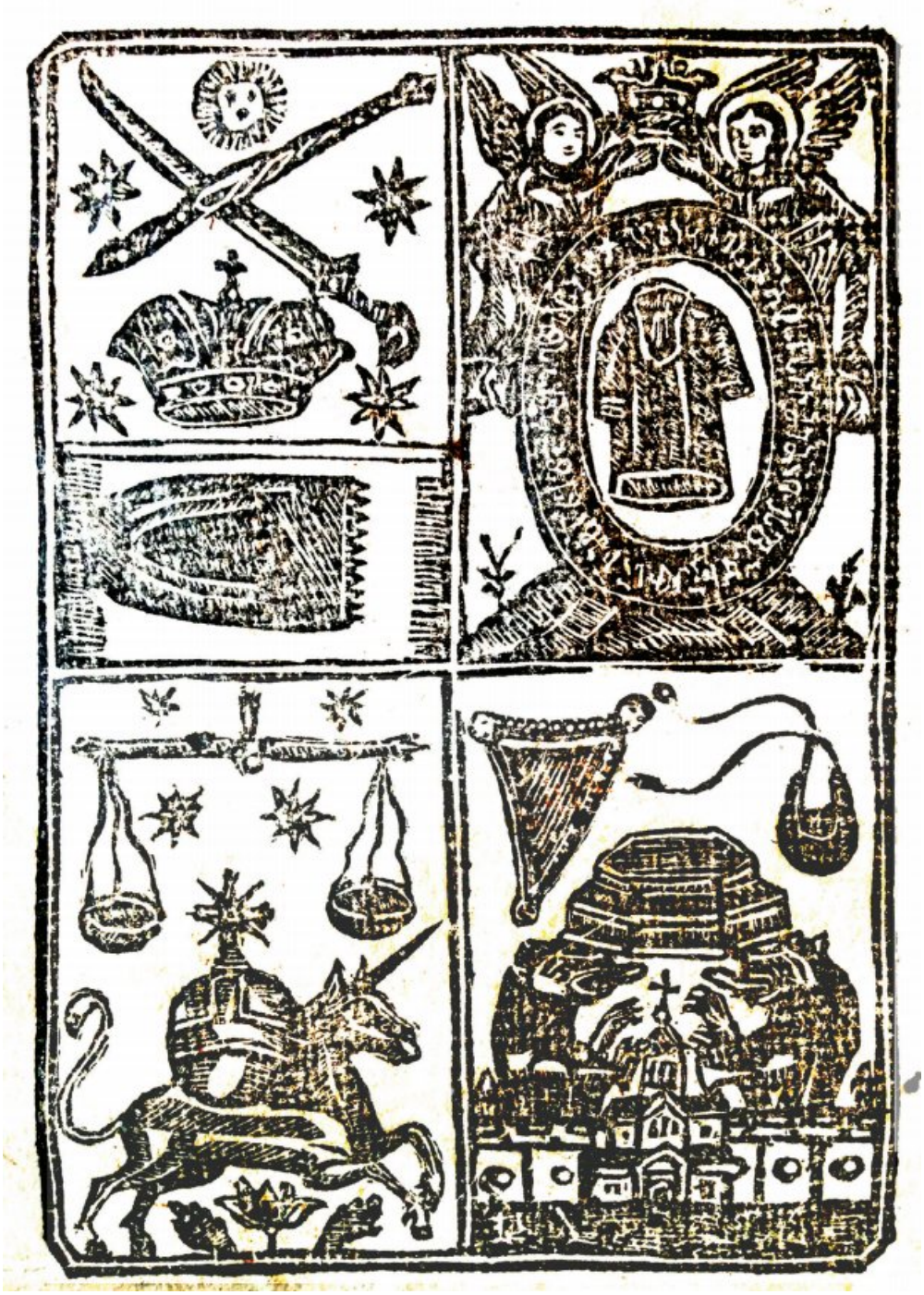

Figure 9: the royal arms from *The Book of Hours* published in 1808 in the Kutaisi Print House.

The unicorn of Solomon II

Why was the image of a horse replaced by a unicorn? This is not the only heraldic instance from this period where a unicorn is portrayed. The coat of arms of Archimandrite Zacharias has unicorn supporters, as depicted in the *Book of Prayers* published in Kutaisi in 1810 (**Figure 8**). The prelate's arms have been drawn in accordance with the customs of Georgian ecclesiastical heraldry.[12] The oval shield bears a crucifixion scene and two saints, and rests on a mantle with a mitre above. The Georgian Asomtavruli legend reads "the humble Archimandrite Zechariah is praying for us".

Older than Archimandrite Zakarias's coat of arms is that of the Metropolitan Athanasius Tbileli (Amilakhvari), as depicted in *Apostolic* published by him in 1765 in Moscow.[13] Here too, unicorns are acting as supporters.[14] The unicorn is also to be found on the family coats of arms of the Georgian nobility in the following four families: Gurieli, Loris-Melikishvili, Orbelini, and Rusishvili, all dating from the second half of the nineteenth century.[15]

In medieval Europe the unicorn embodied purity. Ancient Greek sources link the natural habitat of unicorns to India,[16] but Strabo points out that unicorn-like animals are also found in the Caucasus.[17] The image of the unicorn is found in a fifteenth-century Georgian manuscript of *Jrutchi*, where it has more goat-like appearance.[18] According to myth the unicorn was the emblem of the most venerated king of Georgia - David IV the Builder (1073-1125), as is mentioned in Ione Batonishvili's encyclopedic work *Kalmasoba*, which states:"the image of unicorn was added to his coat of arms, as the king captured this animal himself on his way from Tbilisi to Kutaisi." Ione Bagrationi (Batonishvili) completed this work in 1828, athough it might be that he relied on earlier sources unknown to us today. Based on this we can reasonably assume that King Solomon II had placed a unicorn on his seal in order to claim King David IV's heritage. David IV was from Kutaisi, and was a direct ancestor of Solomon II, as well as of the East Georgian kings. His grave is near Kutaisi in Gelati Monastery (**Figure 1 and 11**), founded by him in the twelfth century. The semantics and depiction of unicorns has been studied by Kldiashvili, who discusses the image of unicorn in the context of Christian symbolism, and links it to theVirgin Mary.[19]

A different variant (**Figure 9**) of the 1803 quartered arms is featured in *The Book of Hours*, published at the Kutaisi Printing House in 1808 and in *The Prayer book* from 1810 already mentioned by us. The arms lack the inscription around the shield of the earlier version, while the first and second quarters have been transposed, with four stars added

12 I. Batonishvili, Kalmasoba. *Georgian Prose*, vol. 6, (Tbilisi, 1984). In Georgian.

13 National Parliamentary Library of Georgia. *Old printed Georgian editions*, volume 2, (Tbilisi, 2013). In Georgian.

14 This coat of arms is a very interesting example of Georgian ecclesiastic heraldry. Along with other symbols, its heraldic shield depicts a flag with the image of St. George.

15 V.Tsikhinsky, Caucasian coat of arms. *High Nobles* (Manuscript). (Petrograd, 1922), p. 71. In Russian; S. Dumin, P.Grebelsky, *Noble families of the Russian Empire*. Likominvest, vol. 4 (Moscow, 1998), p. 194. In Russian.

16 Aristotle (c.343 BC), *Historia Animalium* (Περίζώωνιστορίας) book 2, chapter 1, trans. D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson.

17 Strabo, *Geography*. Book 15. Chapter 1. Section 56. (Before 24 AD).

18 D. Kldiashvili, *History of Georgian Heraldry - Symbols of Georgian Statehood*, Book I, Flag *Sviani* (Tbilisi, 2003). In Georgian.

19 Ibid.

to the quarter of the royal regalia; and in the fourth quarter the image of a house has been replaced with that of a Georgian style cathedral. This is the last heraldic example from an independent Georgian feudal state. It features on the wall in a contemporary portrait of Solomon II which we must assume was painted between 1803 and 1808 (**Figure 10a**).

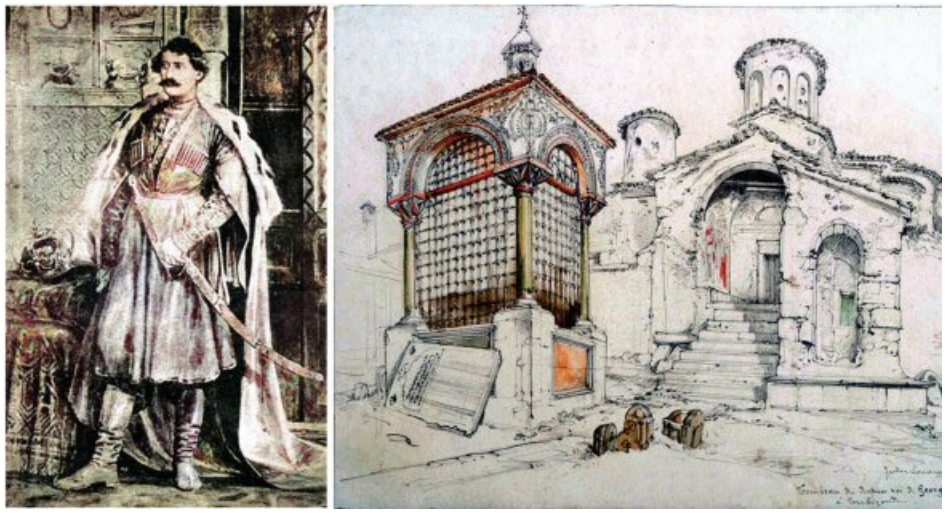

Figure 10, left, 10a: portrait of King Solomon II with the royal coat of arms in the background, similar to figure 4 of this article, early nineteenth century, unknown artist; right 10b, his tomb, adjacent to the church of St Gregory of Nyssa in Trebizond, as drawn by Jules Laurens in 1847. Both images: Wikimedia Commons.

Aftermath

The same arms were employed by all three branches of the Bagrationi dynasty in all three Georgian kingdoms, and over a long period of time. Arms which were only slightly derivative (**Figure 12**) were used by members of the Bagrationi royal family who lived as exiles in the Russian Empire, and in the books printed by Joseph Samebeli in Moscow.

Figure 11: monastery of Gelati, near Kutaisi. Photograph by the author.

Figure 12: Bagrationi exile in Russia top, arms of the Russian Bagrationi princes, as drawn by Nadezhda Abashvili; bottom, funeral plaque of Prince Vakhtang of East Georgia (1761-1814) in Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, St Petersburg.
Both from Wikimedia Commons.