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Georgia, Georgians, until 1300

Georgia resides in the Caucasus isthmus, a crucible of cross-cultural encounter linking the Eurasian steppe and the Middle East. Across the pre-modern epoch, the area named for the Caucasus Mountains was diverse and cosmopolitan: “[i]t would be hard to place such peoples as Georgians and Armenian unequivocally within any one major ‘civilization’” (Hodgson, 33). While Hodgson astutely perceived Caucasia’s cross-cultural condition, subsequent research has exposed the region’s long-term participation in the Iranian and wider Persianate world. This multifaceted association began in the Iron Age, survived the intensive Christianization of Caucasia, and continued until the annexation of Caucasian lands by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century.

1. TOPONYMS, POLITIES, AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

A distinctive Georgian history begins not with *Homo erectus georgicus*, the 1.8-million-year-old hominid remains at Dmanisi, or with the Bronze Age Kura-Araxes culture, but with the formation of two sets of polities in the mid-first

millennium B.C.E. Egrisi, the Colchis of Greek sources, was located along the Black Sea littoral, while the inland realm of K’art’li—called Wirčān/Wrwčān/Varjan in Middle Iranian and Iberia in Greek—lay east of the Surami mountains. Concentrated along the basin of the Kura/Kūr (Geor. Mtkuari/Mtkvari) river, K’art’li was the epicentre of the Georgian ethnē in late antiquity and lent its name to the “Georgian” (*k’art’uli*) language and people (*k’art’veli*). The present self-designation for Georgia, Sak’art’velo (lit., where the K’art’velians dwell), originally encompassed lands southwest of K’art’li where displaced K’art’velians had taken up residence after the Arab conquest of the capital Tp’ilisi/Arab. Tifis (modern T’bilisi/Tbilisi). The exonym “Georgia” and related Indo-European forms, including Russian Gruziiā, are ultimately related to Persian Gurj (as in Gurjistān) and Arabic Jurzān.

By the eleventh century C.E., the toponym Sak’art’velo was extended to all domains claimed by the Georgian crown. At its zenith, the mediaeval Georgian polity was a formidable empire stretching from the Black Sea to the Caspian and from the Caucasian highlands to Iranian