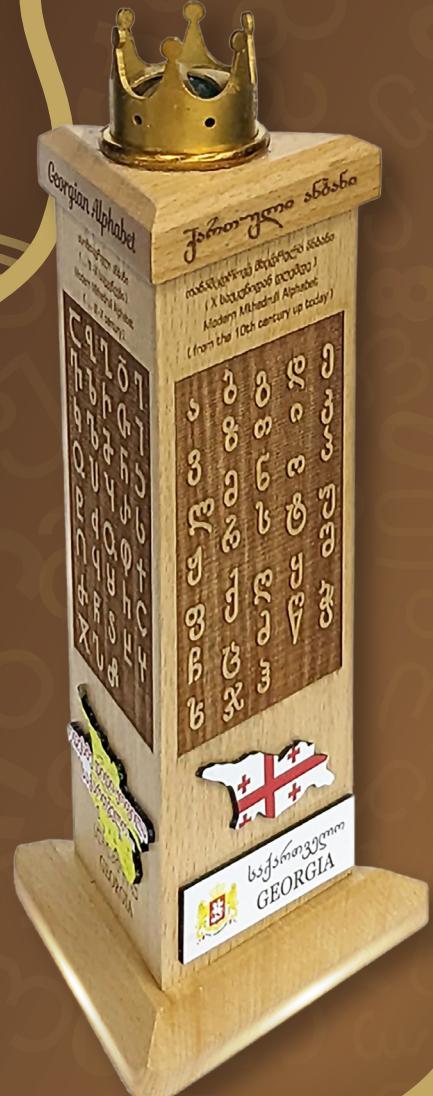


# The Sculpture of the Georgian Alphabet



# GEORGIAN ALPHABET SCULPTURE

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# The Georgian Alphabet

The principal milestone of Georgia's ancient and rich culture, national identity, and Christianity

**The Georgian language and literature, architecture and fine art, the original alphabetic writing, and science, music and choreography are principal and significant phenomena of the global civilization.**

It is common knowledge that the creation of writing has been the largest and most significant intellectual revolution in the history of the humankind. Alongside all other cultural, technical or technological achievements, the creation and development of an alphabet was a progress for society.

The Georgian civilization has a 4,000-year long history, having been closely associated with those of Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Greece, and Crete.

Human history knows hundreds of scripts. It is difficult to specify their number as far as there is no unified classification system; however, the number of original scripts presently in use are fourteen, the Georgian alphabet being one of them.

Now, it is difficult to establish whether writing emerged at a single time and place or at various periods of times and in various geographic areas.

According to a number of scholars and based on available artifacts, it can be stated that the first alphabet and writing, at large, was created within the Sumerian culture, specifically, in Mesopotamia, on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

It should be noted that the Sumerian language was spoken in Ancient Babylon. It is true that the Sumerians disappeared from history; however, **Sumerian is still a sacred language.**

Recently, scholars contemplated that the area where writing began may be assumed beyond the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates and may have comprised surroundings of the river Chorokhi, **that is, alongside Mesopotamia, writing might have also begun in the territories of Colchis and Iberia.**

And yet, where did the alphabet emerge originally? It has been established that, in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Phoenician (in present-day Lebanon) alphabet was already in use. Recent discoveries have demonstrated that origins of the Georgian alphabet are traceable in the ancient period, starting from the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. The historical tradition credits King Pharnavaz I of Kartli (Iberia) with creating the Georgian alphabet (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC), and, hence, the earliest Georgian written records (epigraphic inscriptions dating back to 490 and 494) **cannot be considered the chronologically earliest ones.**

Currently, unavailability of many artifacts has also been due to the fact that, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, **following the spread of Christianity, a great number of cultural artifacts, created by pagan priests in the pre-Christian period, were destroyed by the clergy.**

Based on *The Georgian Chronicles* ('Life of Kartli', an ancient Georgian compendium of historical texts, the principal source of Georgia's history of the feudal period), Georgian scholars maintain that the year 284 BC is a date of introduction of

the Georgian literacy and Georgian national chronology. It is clear that, prior to *The Martyrdom of the Holy Queen Shushanik* (5<sup>th</sup> century AD), a wonderful hagiographic work, there should have been a number of pieces of writing that did not reach our days. **Therefore, we may assume that the Georgian alphabet came into being several hundred years ago before our era.**

King Pharnavaz (the first king of Kartli (Iberia) and a founder of the Pharnavazid dynasty who reigned at the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC; according to *The Chronicles of Georgia*, he created the Georgian alphabet) declared Georgian a state language, and, as *The Chronicles* puts it,

***“he spread the Georgian language and there was no language but Georgian only in land of Kartli. And he created the Georgian script.”***

Most scholars believe that, what is meant in the invention of the Georgian literacy by Pharnavaz, are books written in Georgian, and, hence, **introduction of the Georgian literacy does not mean an invention of the alphabet; there is a great difference between them.**

- The Georgian script is alphabetic and is written from left to right. Alphabetic writings are rare and their true essence is still enigmatic in our days. Alphabetic writing systems have some advantages over other ones;
- The Georgian alphabet is very simple; there are no silent letters; there are no diphthongs;
- It is notable that the Georgian and Greek alphabets have individual letters for vowels, while Aramaic does not. Georgian is written from left to right, and Aramaic, conversely, from right to left;
- The three varieties of the Georgian alphabet have harmoniously co-existed throughout centuries, without hindering each other. Asomtavruli and Nuskhuri are still used in ceremonial religious texts;
- Those, who know the Georgian alphabet, can easily read all the inscriptions, manuscripts and books written in it, both *The Martyrdom of Holy Queen Shushanik* and *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, as well as contemporary Georgian literature. This is an impossible practice for a plenty of languages in the world;

- In written Georgian, the numeral system was purely decimal (base – 10). In the spoken language, it is more complicated: from 1 to 20 and over 100, numbers are formed in accordance with the decimal system, as it is in Russian, while from 20 to 100, they are formed based on the vigesimal (base – 20) system, as it is in French.
- The Georgian alphabet **was invented by pagan priests, which is proved by means of discovered artifacts**; besides, this is proved thanks to the availability of remains of ancient Georgian pagan priests' secret language. The method of gematria (a method of assigning a numerical value to words and phrases) makes it completely conspicuous. Moreover, recent investigations have shed light on close connections between the 4,000-year old ancient Georgian civilization and Mesopotamian and Minoan (Crete) cultures, as a result of identification of the artifacts discovered during the archeological excavations in these territories. **The occurrence of the alphabetic script in the territory of Georgia has been assumed for about the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.**

- Alongside Georgia itself, earliest specimina of the Georgian alphabet abound at churches and monasteries founded by Georgians outside the country: Palestine, Syria, Bulgaria, Israel, Cyprus, Turkey, Mount Sinai (Egypt), Greece, Tao-Klarjeti (former Georgian territories now belonging to Turkey), etc.
- Letters of the Georgian alphabet can render both numeric values and the Georgian chronological cycle;
- The Georgian alphabet has an excellent varied design enabling representation of high-level artistic compositions in production of books, sculptures, marketing materials; some of the specimina of its design are provided below;
- The first letter of the Georgian Asomtavruli script "ც" – *ani*, has been related to lunar days, the lunar months consisting of 28 days; hence, the Asomtavruli script is an astrological alphabet, and the letter "ვ" *doni*, symbolizes the sun.
- The Georgian alphabetic script has been based on a thorough phonological principle (an individual grapheme corresponds to an individual phoneme), consisting of 33 characters (5 vowels and 28 consonants). Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there

were 38 letters in the Georgian alphabet. In experts' opinion, it is one of the most perfect among the alphabets all over the world. Five letters of the Georgian alphabet (გ – *he*, ordinal number 8; ვ – *vie*, ord. no. 22; ჯ – *khari*, ord. no. 35; ჟ – *hoe*, where removed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- Alongside the aforementioned, there are a lot of facts indicating the spread of the Georgian alphabet before the current era, specifically, on the floor of the cult temple of the sun in the Province of Badajoz, Spain, there is an image of the Georgian letter (ვ) - *don*, dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.
- The Georgian alphabet is represented on the Web, and Unicode standards are developed for it (<https://georgianization.blogspot.com/2018/10/qartuli-ena-unicode.html>)

Four varieties of Georgian characters are presented as three individual groups:

- In the initial Georgian group of the Unicode (U+10A0 – U+10FF), created in 1991, only two Georgian scripts were included: **Asomtavruli**, also known as Mrgvlovani, and **Mkhedruli**, the currently used Georgian script. In 2005, another Georgian group was

added in the Unicode, and, hence letters of the third script – **Nuskhuri** ([U+2D00–U+2D2F](#)). In order to add the fourth group in the Unicode ([U+1C90–U+1CBF](#)), and it was meant for the aforementioned fourth script, that is, **Mkhedruli Mtavruli**, capital letterforms of the Mkhedruli script, the bicameral principle was applied.

- In the Georgian spelling, capital letters are not spelled after a period (for starting a new sentence) (see Appendix 2);
- The British online tourist recourse Culture Trip published an article about the ten most ancient languages of the world, Georgian among them. The Georgian alphabet was repeated included in the list of the top 5 most beautiful alphabets in the world, together with Burmese (Myanmar), Sinhala (Sri Lanka), Tagalog (Philippines), and Javanese (Indonesia).
- The digital version of Georgian Braille has been developed, with the electronic support of the Georgian Braille font, enabling to read a text, recorded in the Georgian Braille font, by means of either Braille display or Braille note-taker.

The problem of similarities between the Georgian Asomtavruli script and the Armenian alphabet has been noteworthy. According to some scholars, When design-

ing the Armenian alphabet, Mesrop Mashtots applied the Greek writing system as a basis, totally changing the appearance of Greek glyphs, thus creating an original graphic system for Armenian.

With the same purpose, the creator of the Georgian Asomtavruli alphabet deliberately modified the prototypic Greek graphic system. In the newly invented alphabet, he did not terminate connections with Greek glyphs. He only modified it in a systemic way, and, by means of graphical transformations, created an original national alphabet as a result of appropriate graphic changes. Thus, the Armenian and Georgian alphabets were typically new national writing systems.

Meanwhile, the inscription on the Stele of Davati (367), a dated artifact bearing an Asomtavruli inscription, precedes the invention of the Armenian alphabet by Mash-tots (405-408). Notably, some letters of the Armenian alphabet, created by Mesrop Mashtots, fully coincide with respective characters of the Ethiopian script, albeit it is not clear which of them was a recipient.

The use of Arabic numerals for writing numbers in Georgia has been evidenced since the 10<sup>th</sup> century; however, the practice gained circulation later. Up to the 18<sup>th</sup>

century, letters of the alphabet were used to write numbers (similarly to other European alphabets: Greek, Armenian, Cyrillic). Normally, the entire alphabet was used to that purpose (except the letter called *un*) (see Table 1 for their numeric values). The first nine letters encoded the numbers from 1 to 9, another nine – tens, third nine – hundreds, the fourth – thousands; as for the final letter გ, it encoded ten thousand. For example, 1852 will be recorded in the following way: ჩ ყ ნ ბ – 1 = 1000, ყ = 800, ნ = 50, ბ = 2; 1000 + 800 + 50 + 2 = 1852.

**The inscription, discovered on Grakliani Hill in 2015, totally changes the dates of the creation and use of the Georgian alphabet.**

The famous linguist Nicolas Marr noted:

*“Anything, conveyed by any language, can be rendered by means of Georgian. There is no notion in any language, spoken either in Russia or Western Europe, that cannot be perfectly pronounced by a Georgian; moreover, that cannot be molded into an artistic pattern. The Georgian language, particularly, the*

*living Georgian language renders any notion in a highly artistic way without deteriorating and degrading it; it is so rich. It can be stated that, with respect to its intrinsic properties, it is a world language.”*

Georgian pertains to the Ibero-Caucasian family of languages. It includes four branches: Kartvelian (resp. Iberian), Abkhazo-Adygean, Nakh, and Daghestanian.

**The Kartvelian languages are: Georgian, Zan (Megrelian and Laz), and Svan. They are spoken in Georgia;** however, Laz is mostly heard in the territories of present-day Turkey. The following dialects of Georgian are spoken outside Georgia: Ingiloan (present-day Azerbaijan), Fereidianian (in present-day Iran), Shavshetian-Imerkhevian (Turkey). The dialects of Georgian are: Kartlian, Kakhetian, Kiziqian, Ingiloan, (present-day Azerbaijan), Imeretian, Lechkhumian, Rachan, Gurian, Meskhetian-Javakhetian, Acharan, Imerkhevian (present-day Turkey), Fereidianian (spoken by ethnic Georgians deported to Iran by Shah Abbas).

# Three Scripts of the Georgian Alphabet

For centuries, the Georgian alphabet underwent certain transformations, and three different stages have been identified in its development. They are: **Asomtavruli**, **Nuskhuri**, and **Mkhedruli**. (It should be noted that, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were seven scripts in Georgia; however, they did not differ considerably, and, thus, could be deemed to three principal ones.)

As it has already been stated, highly educated pagan priests have been credited with the creation and development of the alphabet in Georgia. Initially, it was used in religious writings. Each glyph has been designed to include two forms: a circle and a direct line. Circles and lines are always connected with a rectangle. Except the glyph ჵ, all letters are of one and the same height. Each letter has a solid spelling,

and you have to release a hand several times when writing out an individual character (see Picture 17).

**The first of them is Asomtavruli, that is, Mrgvlovani (rounded)**, comprising the period between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Asomtavruli is the oldest among the discovered Georgian alphabets. The earliest manuscripts, written in it, date back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and it has been assumed that it was the only Georgian script by that time. The early records, written in Asomtavruli, are the following (Pictures 1-10);

Asomtavruli inscriptions: Picture 1 – The Stele of Davati (367); Picture 2 – Inscription mentioning Bakur and Gri Ormizd (Palestine; 433); Picture 3 – Construction inscription from the Bolnisi Sioni Cathedral (493-494); Picture 4 – Nekresi inscription, 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cc.; Palimpsest (a parchment manuscript from which the old text is scraped and the new one is written) manuscripts of the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries; Pictures 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 – 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries inscriptions from the Monastery of the Holy Cross at Mtskheta. As we see, the inscription of the Stele of Davati was made in Asomtavruli Mrgvlovani. Picture 10 – Inscription on the arch above the entrance door of St David Lavra (David Gareji Monastery).

In 2015, on Grakiani Hill in Kartli, an ancient inscription was discovered during the archaeological excavations (Picture 11). For the dating, the samples were sent to the Miami Beta Laboratory. The date set by the Laboratory is 11<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. The Grakiani artifact is one of the oldest specimina of the Georgian Asomtavruli inscription.

Records, made in **the Nuskha-Khutsuri script** occur since the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Up to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it was predominantly used in low-case portions of texts in combination with capitals. Since, the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there appear manuscripts written entirely in Nuskhuri. It was widely used by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to some scholars, Nuskha-Khutsuri was widespread even in the pre-Christian epoch. The Nuskha-Khutsuri script gradually developed based on the previously existed Asomtavruli, aka Mrgvlovani, alphabet. The earliest surviving specimen of the Nuskhuri script is the testament of the Sinai Polycephalion, 864, which is so perfect that it was by all means created much earlier. Specimina of the Nuskhuri-Khutsuri alphabet are: Picture 12, 13 – the oldest written monument (made in the Nuskhuri-Khutsuri alphabet) is the letter of donation by King Bagrat IV to Shiomgvime, dating back to 1058, and Opiza Charter issued by King Bagrat IV, dating back to 1060-1065. Picture 14 – Nuskhuri inscription of Ateni Sioni Church (835).

In some instances, a beginning of a paragraph was spelled with a capital letter. Picture 15 features the capital ‘გ’ in the beginning of a paragraph from the Gelati Bible (12<sup>th</sup> c.).

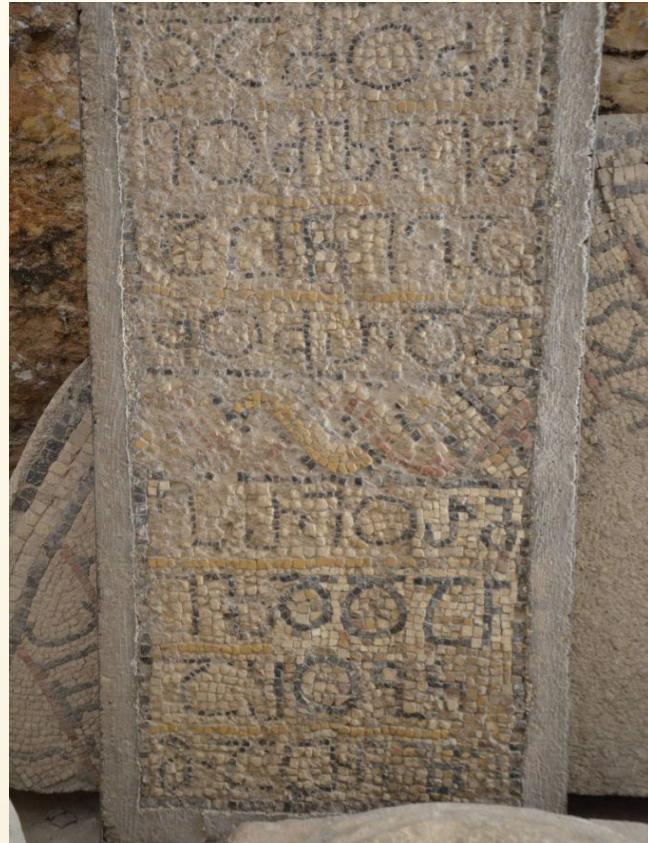
**The Mkhedruli script** – the final stage in the development of the Georgian script. It has been designed by way of simplification of Nuskhuri letters. Its earliest records have been attested since the 10<sup>th</sup> century. One of the earliest specimina of the Mkhedruli script has been assumed the inscription from the Ateni Sioni Church, dating back to 982-986. According to some scholars, the Mkhedruli script chronologically preceded the Nuskha-Khutsuri alphabet.

Asomtavruli, that is Mrgvlovani, Nuskha-Khutsuri, and Mkhedruli scripts have harmonically co-existed for centuries without hindering each other’s development. Nuskha-Khutsuri is still in use in church rituals. There are inscriptions in which the three scripts, Asomtavruli, Nuskha-Khutsuri and Mkhedruli are used at a time. Picture 16 inscription in Aten Zion 711 (Mkhedruli).

FIG. 17 The rule of writing the Georgian alphabet is presented. Also, the signatures (signatures) of Georgian kings, religious figures: Davit Agmashenebeli, King Tamar, Archil the second, Erekle the second, Anton II and others (p. 30-31) and the pictures (p. 32-40) show some samples of the design of the Georgian alphabet.



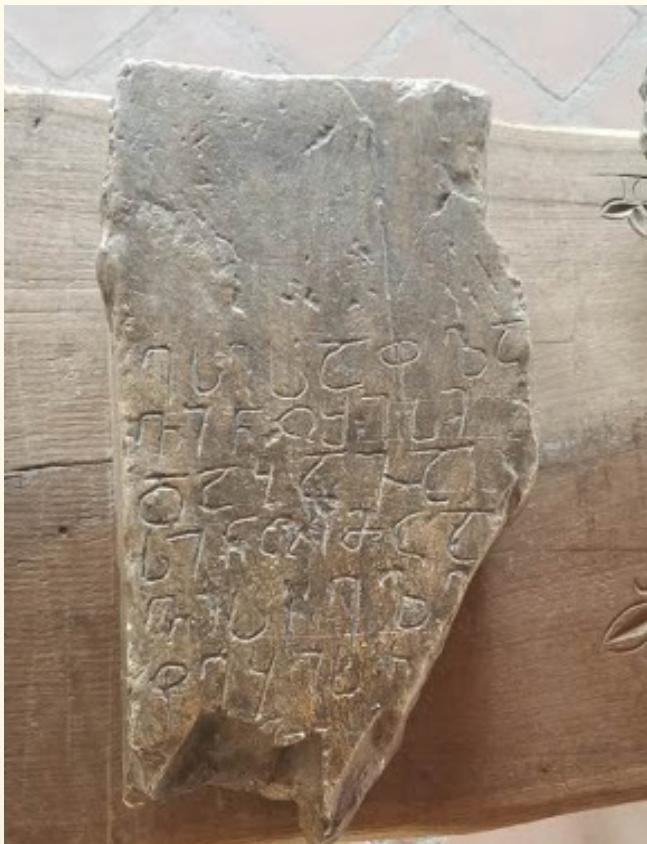
**Pic. 1. Davati Stella (Qvakhati),**  
IV C., approx. 367 y, Asomtavruli



**Pic. 2. Inscription in Palestine,**  
433 y. or 532-552 y, Asomtavruli



**Pic 3. Inscription on Bolnisi Sioni Cathedral (493-494), Asomtavruli**



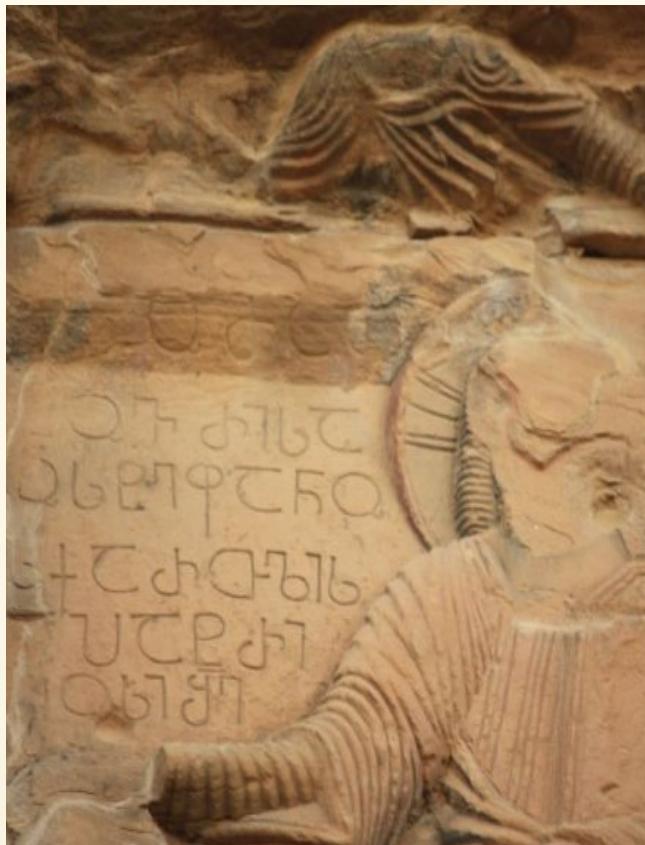
**Pic. 4. Inscription of Nekresi,  
ძ. წ. IV – ას. წ. III საუკუნეები,  
Asomtavruli**



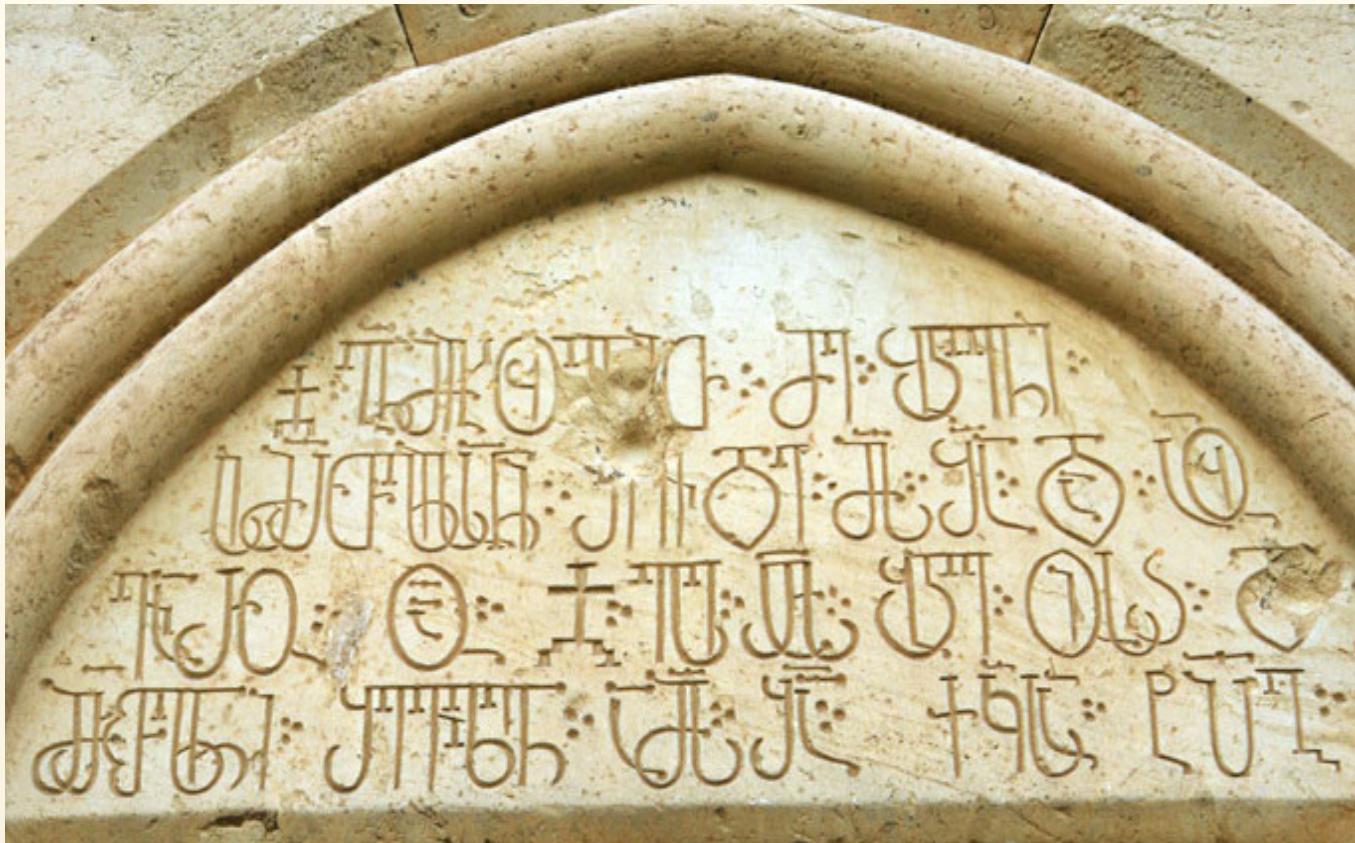
**Pic. 5. 6th-7 centuries Inscriptions from  
the Monastery of the Holy Cross at  
Mtskheta, Aasomtavruli**



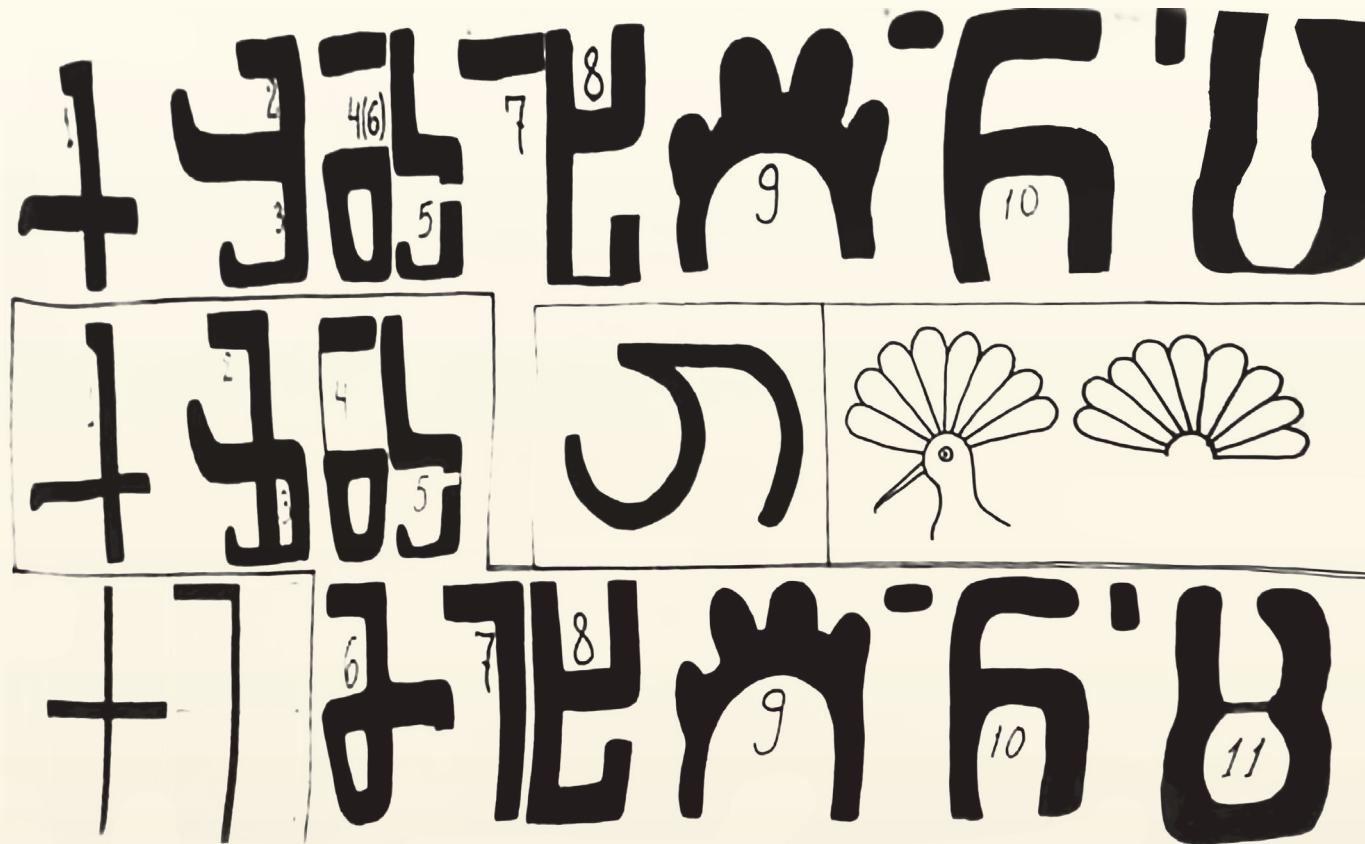
**Pic. 6-7. Inscriptions from the Monastery of the  
Holy Cross at Mtskheta,  
VII beginning (586/587-604/605), Asomtavruli**



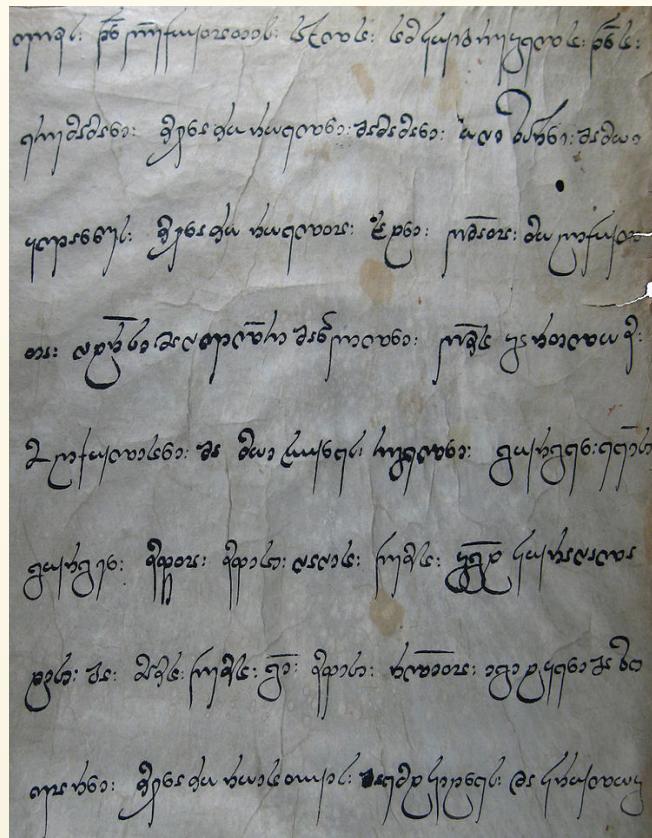
**Pic. 8-9. Inscriptions from the Monastery of the  
Holy Cross at Mtskheta,  
VII beginning 586/587-604/605), Asomtavruli**



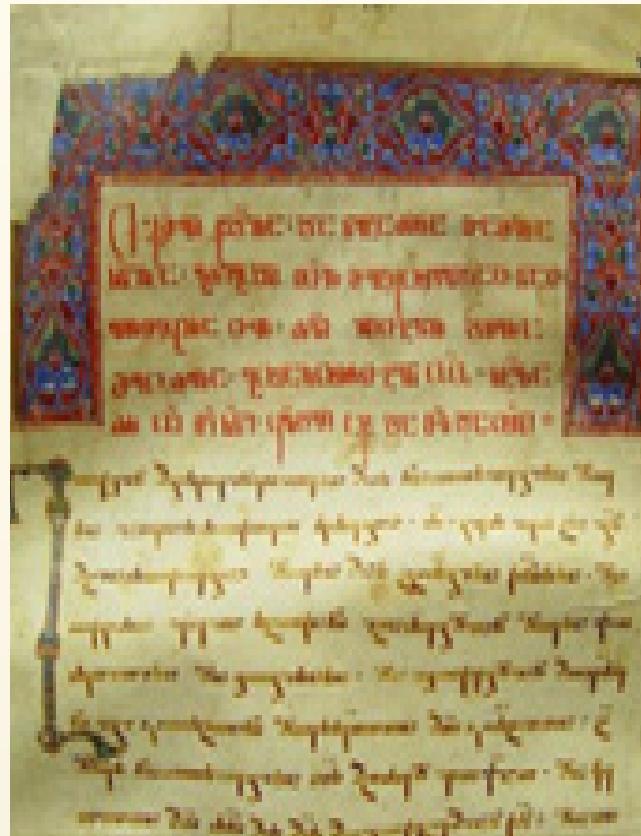
**Pic. 10. Asomtavruli Inscription,**  
On the arch above the entrance gate of St. David Lavra ( David Gareji Monastery



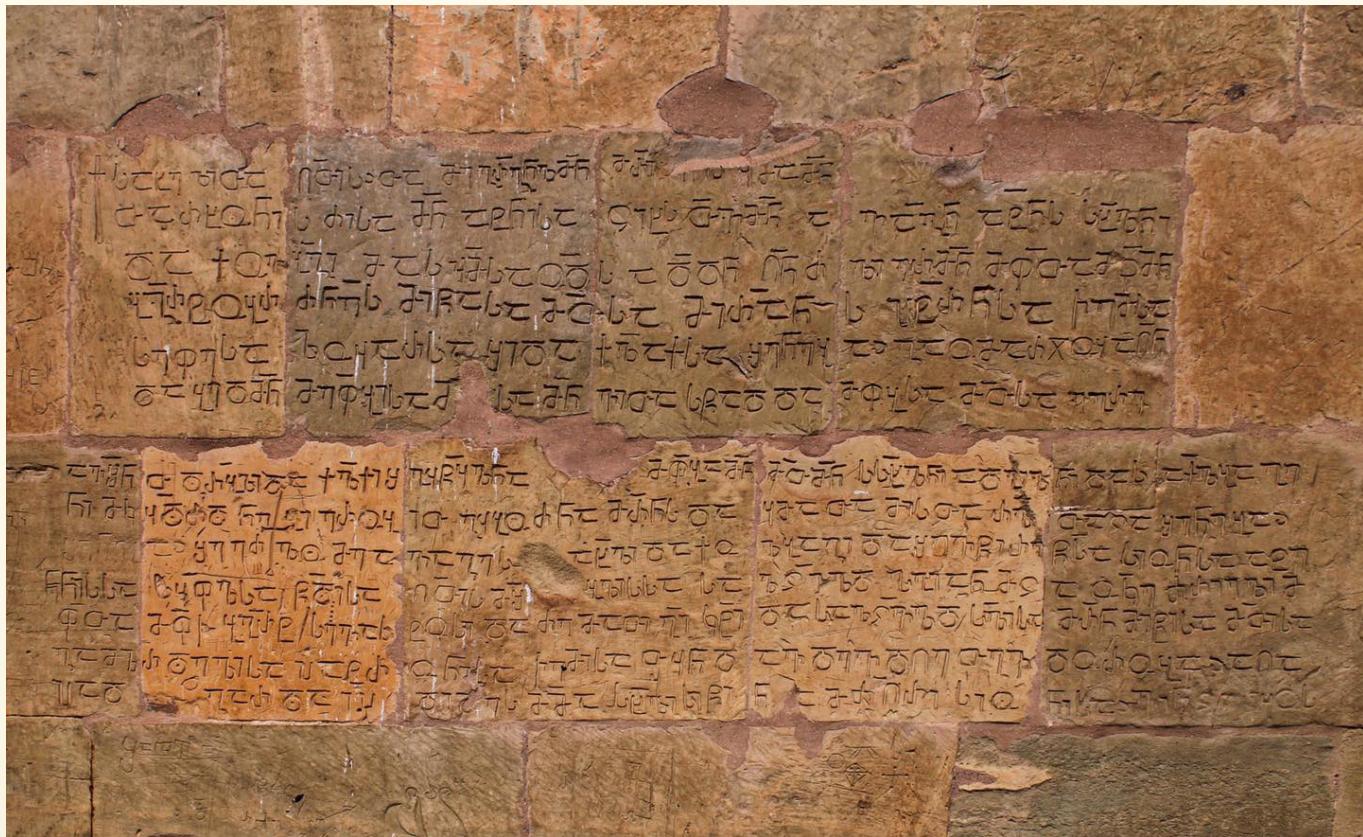
Pic 11. Inscription on Mount Grakliani XI-X BC



**Pic 12. Book of Donations of the Shiomgvime Monastery.**  
1058 AD Nuskha-Khutsuri



### **Pic 13. Deed of Opiz of Bagrat IV, 1060-1065 AD**



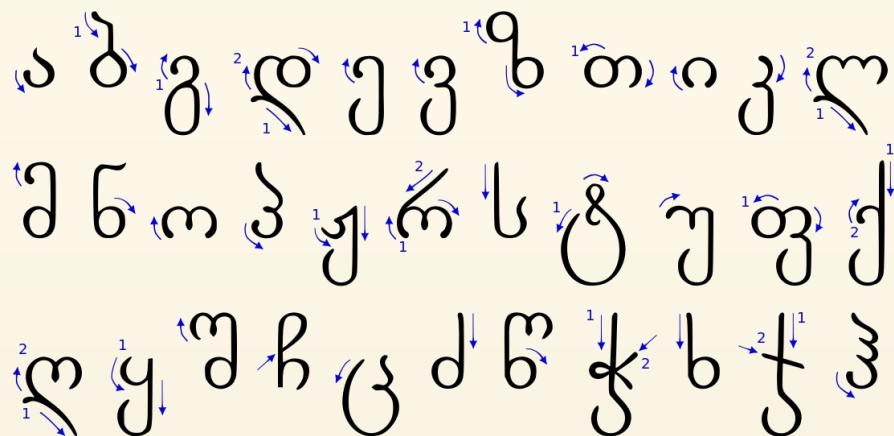
**Pic 14. Nuskhuri inscription of Ateni Sioni Church (835 AD)**



**Pic.15.** Capital 'გ' in the beginning of a paragraph from the Gelati Bible (12th AD.)

წმინდა მარიამ წმინდა მარიამ  
წმინდა მარიამ წმინდა მარიამ  
წმინდა მარიამ

**Pic 16. Inscription in Aten Zion 711 AD (Mkhedruli).**



**Pic 17. Stroke order and direction of the letters of the Georgian alphabet**



Pic 18. Gospel of Anbandid, IX century



David the Builder (1073-1125) Khelrtva - signature



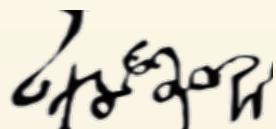
King Tamar (1160-1213)



Lasha Giorgi IV (1192-1223)



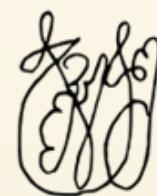
Archil II (1647-1715)



Queen Rusudan (1194-1245)



Queen of Kartli - Rusudan (1703-1740)



Vakhtang VI (1675 - 1737)

Pic. 19 Signatures (Khelrtva) of Georgian kings, and other state and religious figures



Erekle II (1720 -1798)



Giorgi XII (1746-1800)



Solomon I (1735 — 1784)



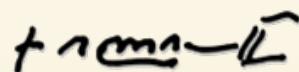
Mariam Dadiani, Queen of Kartli (1599 — 1684)



Joseph Catholicos (1739-1776)



Anton II Catholicos (1762-1828)



Ilya II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia (1933 )

Pic. 20 Signatures (Khelrtva) of Georgian kings, and other state and religious figures

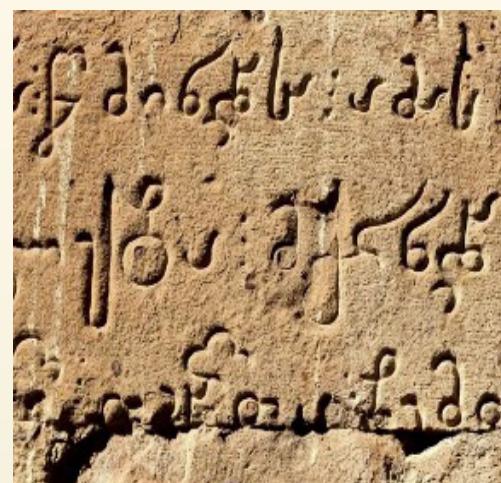
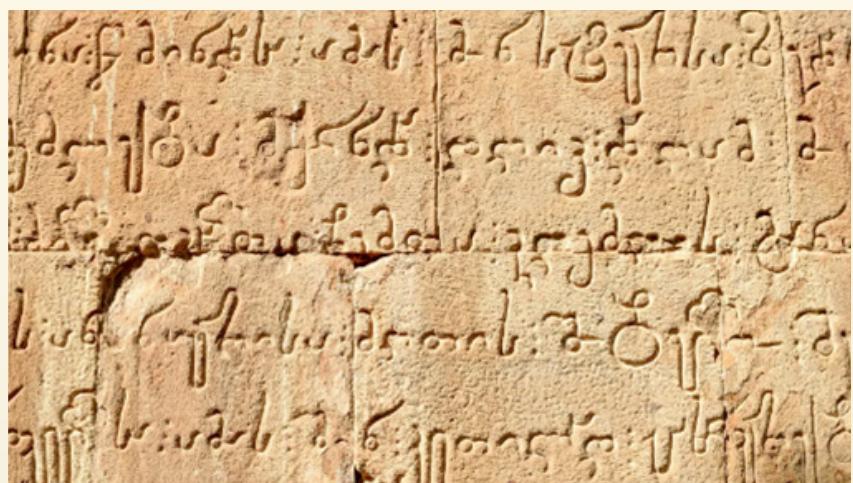
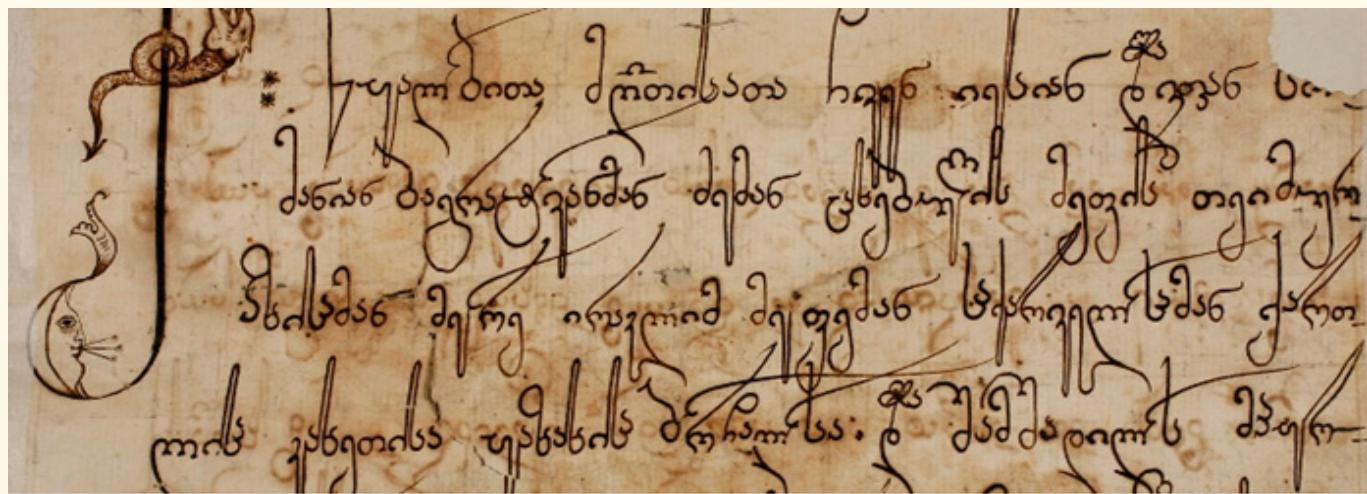


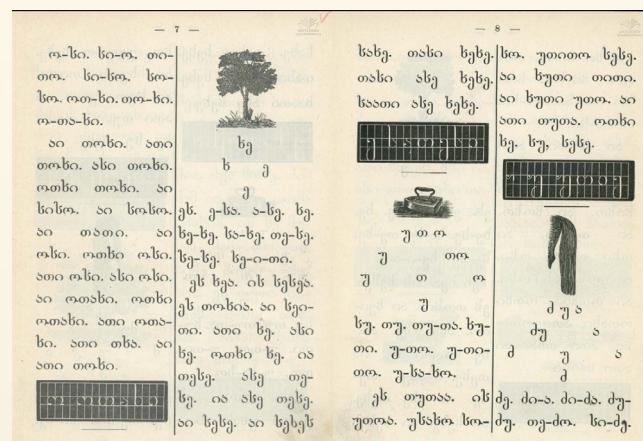
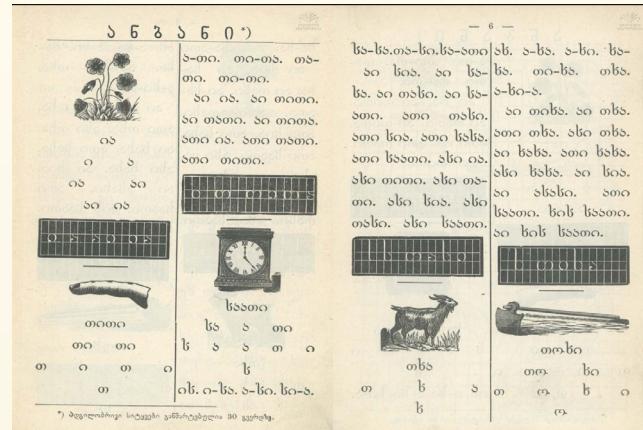
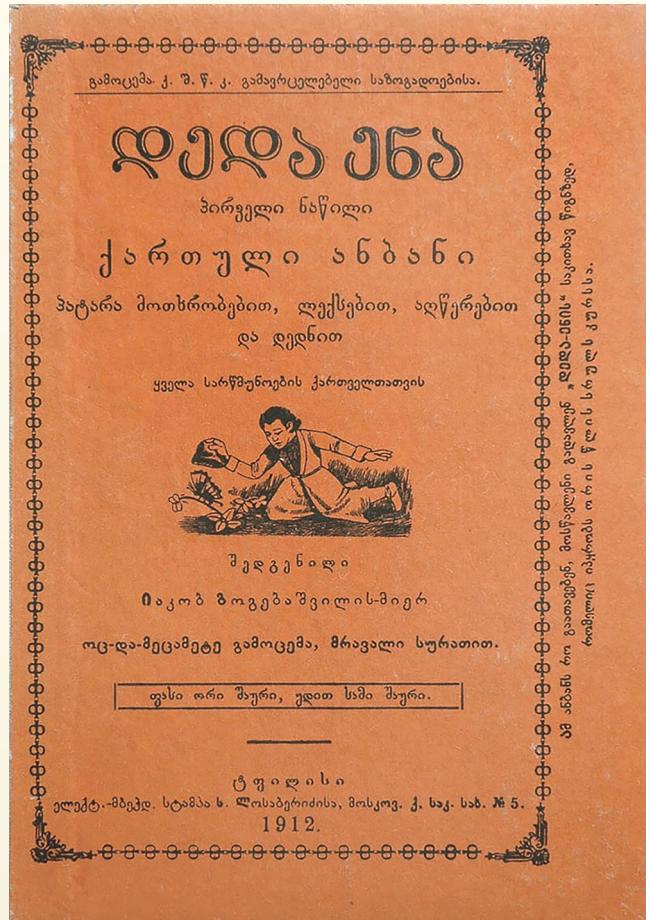
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କାନ୍ଦିବ୍ରଦ୍ଧିତୀର୍ଥମିନିଷ  
ଶକ୍ତିଶାତ୍ରପ୍ରଦ୍ୟମିତ୍ର  
ଧର୍ମକାନ୍ଦିବ୍ରଦ୍ଧି



## Pic. Coat of arms and text of the anthem of Georgia



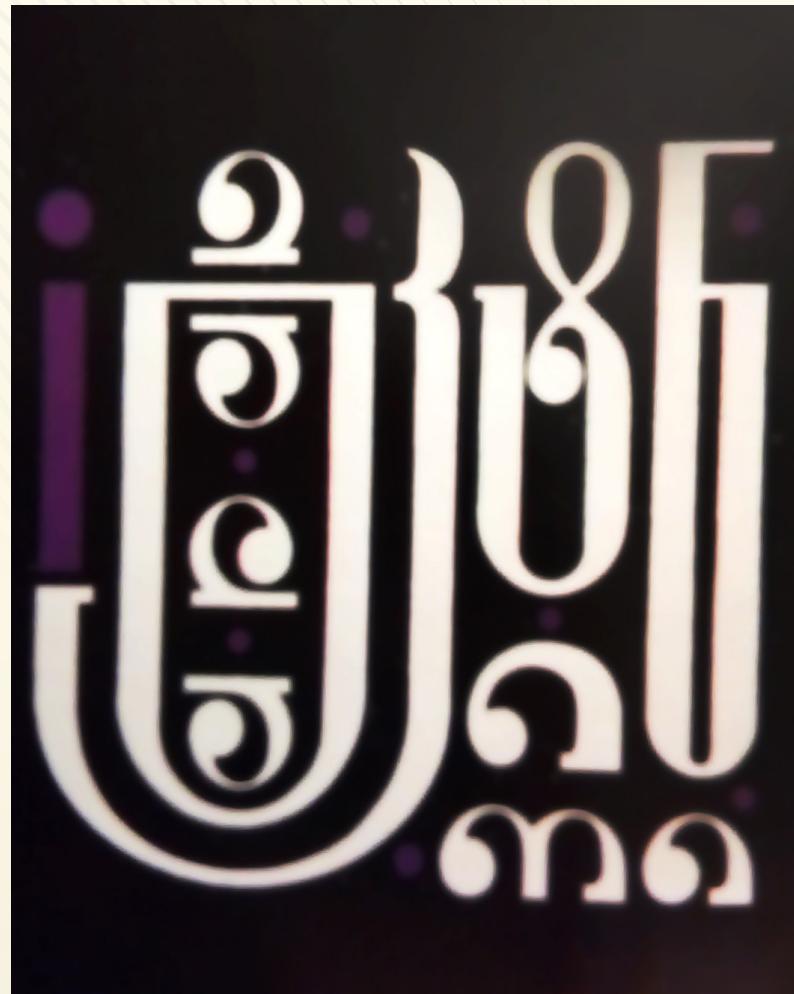


## Pic. "Mother Tongue" by Jacob Gogebashvili, 1912

ც	ვ	ლ	Օ	ე	ზ	ბ	რ	ჳ
ანესი	ბანაკი	განგაში	დონე	ენა	ვინაობა	ზენტექი	ცერეფი	თანხა
ინდაური	განკელი	ლასტი	მანქანა	ნარდი	აეს	ონკანი	პარკი	ქანგი
რაები	სანთელი	ტარხუნა	(თ)კსება	ფარშევანგი	ქანდაკება	ლანძილი	ყარაული	შინდი
ჩინელი	ცანგალა	ძილი	წილისყრა	ჭარხალი	ხანბარი	კარი	ჯანი	პაერი
შპერა	ჭართელი ცნბანი	ც - ჳ 1 - 9	ქ - ე 10 - 90	ქ 100-900	ქ 100 000 ბევრი	ქ 1 000 000 უშერი	ქ 10 000 000 უშეტი	ქ 100 000 000 უშეტის უშეტი

Pic. Georgian Asomtavruli and its numerical values





# ანდანი



**The present Sculpture of the Georgian Alphabet unifies the three scripts into a single composition.** The sculpture is a triangular framework, made of the precious wood, its size being 23 \* 11 cm (Picture 3D), with the three scripts carved on it:

**On its first side:** There are carvings of the current Mkhedruli alphabet and, adorned with a sticker, a map of contemporary Georgia with the Georgian flag bearing the inscriptions “საქართველო” and “GEORGIA” (in Georgian and English), the State Coat of Arms.

**On its second side:** There are carvings of the Asomtavruli script, a map of Georgia bearing the inscription “Once upon a time Georgia was great” (by poet Murman Lebanidze), alongside the wording “Georgia” inscribed in the Asomtavruli script and in English.

**On its third side:** There is a carving of the Nuskha-Khutsuri script. In March, 2015, initiated by the Georgian National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation, Asomtavruli, Nuskhuri and Mkhedruli, the three scripts of the Georgian alphabet, were granted a status of an object of national non-material cultural heritage with the title “The Living Culture of the three Scripts of the Georgian Alphabet.”

**On November 30, 2016, UNESCO added it to the representative list of non-material objects of cultural heritage with the title “The Living Culture of the three Scripts of the Georgian Alphabet.”**

The upper side of the sculpture of the Georgian alphabet bears the inscriptions: ქართული ანბანი, GEORGIAN ALPHAABET, ГРУЗИНСКИЙ АЛФАВИТ. The sculpture is completed with a gilded diadem and a built-in gilded Bolnisi cross as a token of greatest respect to the Georgian alphabet and Orthodox Christianity.

The three Georgian scripts belong to all the provinces of Georgia (Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti, Guria, Samegrelo, Racha, Lechkhumi, Svaneti, Meskhet-Javakheti, Lazeti,,,), and, in accordance with the Constitution of Georgia, Georgian is the official language of Georgia, alongside Abkhazian in Abkhazia.

Alongside Georgian, a number of languages are spoken in Georgia. They are: the Kartvelian languages (Megrelian and Svan, spoken in respective provinces; Laz is mostly spoken in Turkey), Abkhazian, mostly spoken in Abkhazia, Ossetian. 5 million people speak Georgian all over the world.

Finally, we would like to quote a passage from the hymn “Praise and Exaltation of the Georgian Language” by Ioane-Zosme (Georgian religious writer, hymnographer, translator of the 10<sup>th</sup> century; he worked in Palestine; initially, he was at Sabatsminda

Lavra, and, later, since the 970s, at Mount Sinai): ***“Georgian language is buried until the day of the Messiah’s second coming as a witness, so that God may judge in every language through this language”*** (similarly to other ancient languages, “ena,” the Old Georgian word for a language referred not only to a language but also a people, a nation, a race).

The Sculpture of the Georgian Alphabet has been designed with the idea and aspiration to make it feature educational and patriotic values, since Georgian culture is a very significant constituent of the world’s cultural treasury. It represents our, Georgians’ glorious heritage. We believe that the sculpture of the Georgian language will facilitate to publicize the Georgian language and alphabet, particularly, arousing young people’s interest at schools and universities throughout Georgia; it will be aimed at stimulating people’s interest in the Georgian language both in Georgia and internationally, among Georgian migration communities.

## **WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF THE GEORGIAN ALPHABET!**

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ପ୍ରକାଶନ  
2021

