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## NOTES

### OPENWORK BRONZE BUCKLES FROM THE CAUCASUS: PROBLEMS OF ATTRIBUTION

#### ABSTRACT

This note examines whether the bronze buckles/clasps found in profusion in Georgia were really belt-fastenings. Stylistic study of different groups, as well as the circumstances of discovery and the pattern of distribution, indicates that they were really pieces of breast armour belonging to royal troops of the Caucasian Iberian kingdom.

Large quantities of openwork rectangular bronze 'buckles' or 'clasps' are housed in museums in Georgia and elsewhere and in private collections.<sup>1</sup> For many generations scholars have been interested in them and have published the results of their observations,<sup>2</sup> not least the monograph by M. Khidasheli.<sup>3</sup> Here I offer some of my own suggestions and interpretations. First of all, I am not going to discuss dating: it is a very complex problem which requires further investigation, and here I will simply use the more-or-less fixed chronology (1st–3rd centuries AD).<sup>4</sup> The difficulties connected with the buckles are several: insufficient statistical data, unquestioning acceptance of previous assumptions and theories, the failure to treat the buckles within their archaeological context, etc.

All the earlier studies were concerned to establish the stylistic evolution of the depiction of animals. This led to a stasis in study of the problem. Because of the existence of stereotypes, it was difficult to admit that the form or shape of an object could easily be created without any evolutionary process—the buckles had been regarded as mass-produced goods on account of their large quantity. Within the chronology mentioned, I hope it is possible to determine the function of the buckles and to clarify how far they may be an item of mass production. Who formed the 'mass' for whom these items were produced? By whom was the 'mass' assembled and for what purpose? Whom did the 'mass' serve? Where did it move? Why did each of its members wear buckles of a single type, differing only in style and composition?

The museums of Georgia hold several hundred openwork bronze buckles; the number continues to increase. The result is that it seems as though nearly half of the

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<sup>1</sup> Moscow, St Petersburg, Kiev, New York, Boston, London, Cologne, Vienna, San Francisco, the George Ortiz Collection, etc. For literature, see n. 2 and Curtis and Kruszyński 2002, 51–53.

<sup>2</sup> The most important among them are Takaishvili 1913; Rostovtzeff 1922; Miller 1922; Ivanovskaya 1926; Meshchaninov 1926; Hancar 1931; 1934; 1935; Salmony 1938; Kufun 1941; Gobedjishvili 1942; Amiranashvili 1944; Koridze 1961; Pchelina 1968; Tekhov 1969; Curtis 1978; Urushadze 1988.

<sup>3</sup> Khidasheli 1972, 1–120, pls. 1–20.

<sup>4</sup> They are dated from the 9th century BC to the 3rd century AD. The vast majority of examples lack archaeological context and many of those in Western museums may be forgeries. Only a few come from excavated contexts, usually graves which date from the 1st–2nd centuries AD. For a discussion and bibliography, see Curtis and Kruszyński 2002, 53. For metallographic analysis of examples from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see Muscarella 1988, 441; from the British Museum, see Curtis and Kruszyński 2002, 53, 93–98.

ancient Georgians wore some kind of buckle as a sort of 'symbol'. We must accept that a symbol cannot have a mass character, otherwise it ceased to be a symbol and becomes a mere sign, an emblem, or an indication of something else.

An openwork bronze buckle is rectangular, framed by a *bordure*, and with knobs or cones at each of its corners. The space within the *bordure* is filled with figures; the central animal surrounded by other beasts. Each buckle has a ring and a tongue on its rear surface (Fig. 1). The main motif of the buckles is the central figure. Its modelling and stylistic peculiarities have always excited the interest of scholars. The central figures are deer (five stylised variants, in two of which the head is turned backwards, and in one of these the legs are spiral-like), horses (three variants) and an ox (Figs. 2-4). The secondary creatures are reptiles, oxen, wolf-hounds, birds, 'horses', bucrania and heads of rams.

Academics have sought the origins of the image of a deer with its head turned backwards in Scythian culture,<sup>5</sup> of a wolf or a dog in Colchian and Koban bronzes,<sup>6</sup> double-protome bodies (a single example among these buckles) in both the Median-Iranian and Scythian worlds.<sup>7</sup> *Bordures* can be found in Luristan,<sup>8</sup> a bird on the back of a hoofed animal in Hallstatt culture,<sup>9</sup> a deer with its head turned backwards on material from the earliest sites in Sweden (a silver belt-clasp),<sup>10</sup> etc. But in none of the countries or cultures just mentioned, including Transcaucasia, are there any signs of the use of these images in combination. Thus, the original model and artistic traditions of the buckles are unknown in spite of the large quantity of buckles accumulated over almost three centuries—scholars have hunted in vain.<sup>11</sup> As a rule, the central figures are splendidly modelled; their forms are dynamic, impressive and well balanced (Figs. 2-4). The outer figures received less attentive treatment. Here the figures seem to be deliberately deformed. This is so whether they be birds, oxen, embryonic images of horses or reptiles, or whatever (Figs. 16-18). Noteworthy are the haunches and shoulders of the central figures: they are in the form of impressed circles (or radial circles and spirals), which points directly to the deification of these animals.<sup>12</sup> This suggests to me that the central and peripheral figures have not only a different meaning but also different subject matter. If so, their combinations depend on the function of the buckles themselves (see below).

Each model of the buckle has fixed dimensions. The buckles with a central image of a horse are 13-17 cm in length. No other designs are of this size, and there is no image of a horse in buckles of larger or smaller size. Buckles with a central deer are 9.5 cm long, those with an ox are 10.5 cm, and so forth. Thus, the central image, the secondary creatures and the dimensions form particular combinations and variables, to which the corner pointed knobs must be added. These are not simple protrusions; more like cones upon a disc-shaped base. Such a form is directly connected with battle. They too vary in size according to a set pattern: they are 5 cm in length on buckles with a horse, 3 cm on those with a hornless deer, etc. (Figs. 7-11, 13-15).

<sup>5</sup> Hancar 1931, 156-57.

<sup>6</sup> Hancar 1931, 152-53.

<sup>7</sup> Khidasheli 1968, 70-71.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Brentjes 1978, fig. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Schlette 1984, 55, fig. 54.

<sup>10</sup> Stemberger 1977, 296, fig. 189.

<sup>11</sup> Maksimova 1941, 75-92; Gagoshidze 1964, 34-36.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Kantor 1947, 250-74.

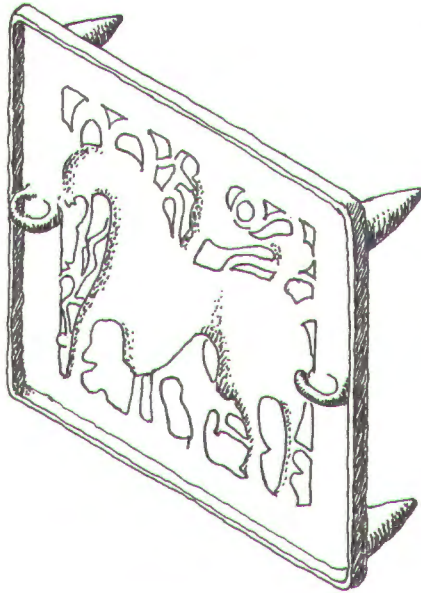


Fig. 1. Rear surface of buckle (buckle with a horse).

It is these knobs that point directly to the function of the buckles, although there are other indicators. A look at the rear surface of a buckle reveals a tongue for holding a felt or leather cushion. These buckles are flat, not bent, which is why they cannot be used as belt-clasps. In practice, the largest belt-buckle/belt-clasp that a person may wear about the waist is 9.5 cm long—not 12, 14 or 17 cm, unless it fails to follow the curvature of a man's waist (Fig. 6). I presume, therefore, that such large buckles were worn on the breast (Fig. 5) and served as both a shield and a thrusting weapon (the projecting knobs) during hand-to-hand fighting. Such weapons, known as *polotiki*, were common in Georgia. In S.S. Orbeliani's *Georgian Lexicon* defines them as 'flat, iron plates used as a cover for the breast and as a weapon'.<sup>13</sup> If we accept that the 'buckles' are in fact *polotiki*, i.e. an important piece of body armour, we can establish a clear meaning to the animals depicted: combination of deified and monstrous animals to frighten the enemy. The central creatures were in some way divinely 'empowered' (the impressed signs on their haunches and shoulders), surrounded by terrifying beasts (apotropaic images).

If we examine the circumstances of discovery of the 'buckles', we find that most were chance finds, usually turned up during cultivation of land, as is the case with daggers, spearheads, etc. Generally they are to be found among the grave goods of hasty burials or are simply scattered about in the fields (like other pieces of armour).

Georgian archaeology has collected large numbers of objects with symbols reflecting the beliefs of particular groups of people, but the openwork 'buckles' are completely different: they bear none of the features characteristic of these other objects—solar signs, floral motifs (the Tree of Life, rosettes, etc.), opposed faces or paired depictions.

<sup>13</sup> Orbeliani 1966, 624.

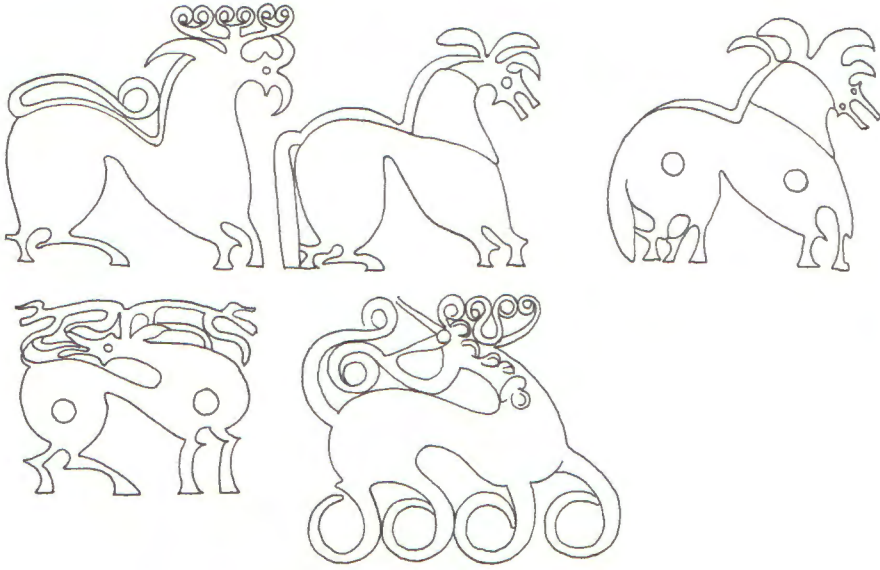


Fig. 2. Deer (with and without antlers) with head turned backwards.

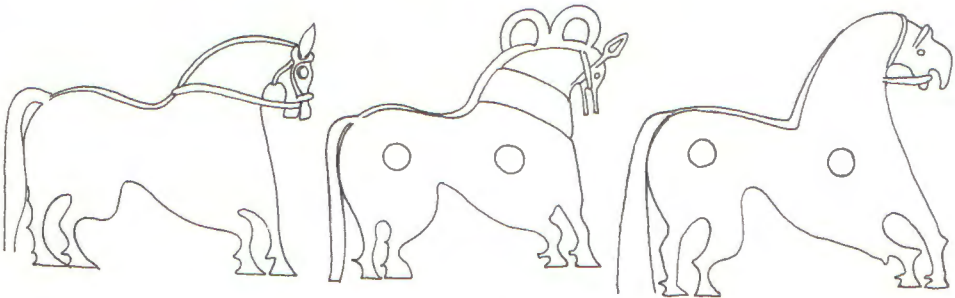


Fig. 3. Horses.

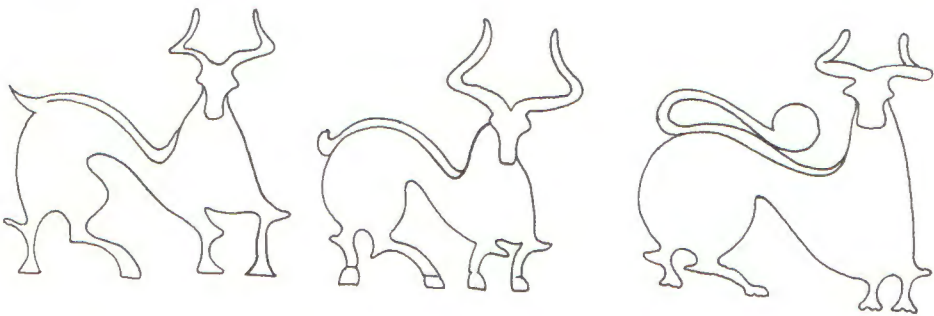


Fig. 4. Oxen.





Fig. 5. Warrior with breast plate (reconstruction).

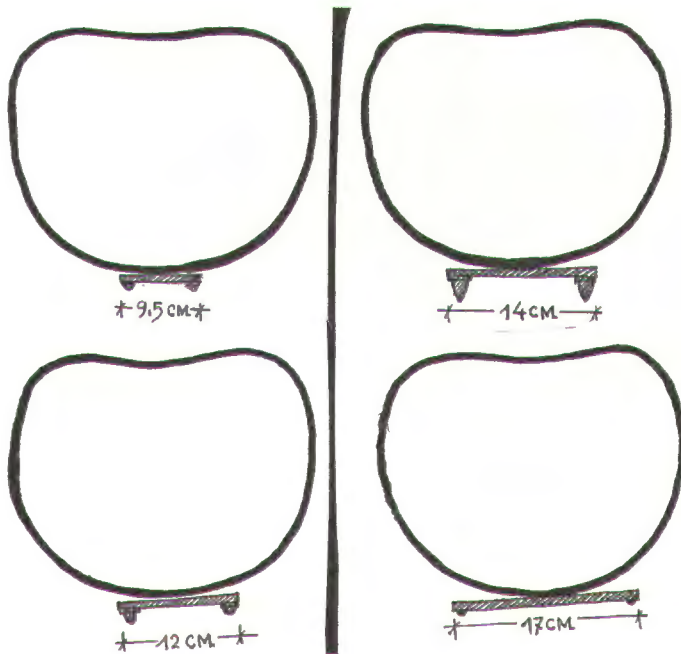


Fig. 6. Configuration of man's waist with 'buckles'.



Fig. 7. Deer with head turned backwards  
(State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg).



Fig. 8. Buckle with an ox (State Museum  
of Georgia).



Fig. 9. Buckle with a deer. Djietei village  
(State Museum of Georgia).

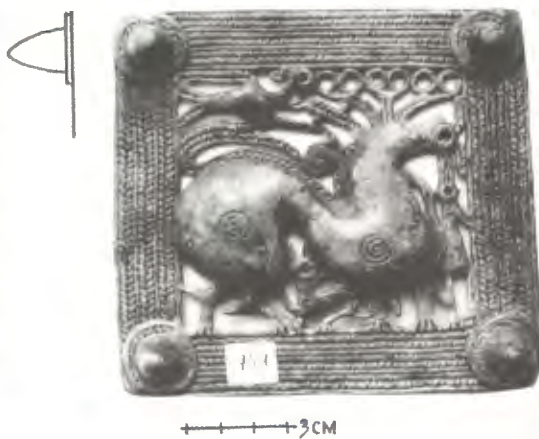


Fig. 10. Buckle with a stylised deer (Tetrtskaro  
Site Museum).

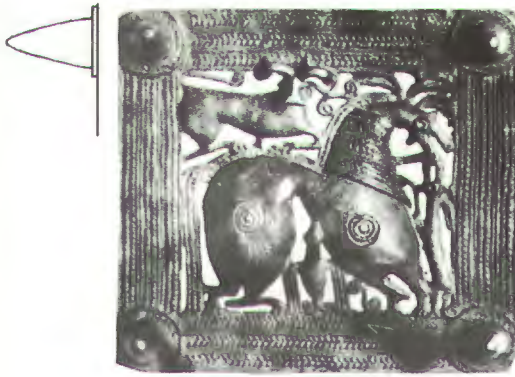


Fig. 11. Buckle with elk (The British Museum).

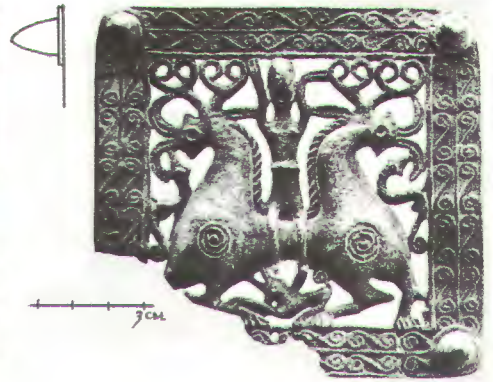


Fig. 12. Buckle with a double-protome deer and a goddess on it. Gebi village (Moscow Historical Museum).

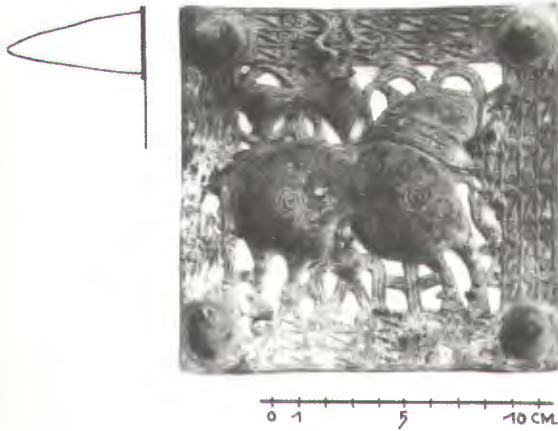


Fig. 13. Buckle with horse. Ikoti village (Akhgiori Site Museum).



Fig. 14. Deer with head turned backwards and spiral legs. Balanta village (Bordjomi Site Museum).



Fig. 15. Deer with legs bent (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg—purchased in Tbilisi).

Their composition is entirely distinct and must, therefore, belong to some special group of people. It should be stressed that the only metal used for them is bronze, which I believe is a further indication of the exclusiveness of this group of finds. All the images on them face towards the left. This does not seem accidental. There is one unusual 'buckle', the only one showing a goddess standing on a double-protome deer, her hands raised (Fig. 12). This is the central image and it bears some kind of heraldic features. The goddess's left hand is directed leftwards. What does this signify? I can only conjecture that it has some symbolic meaning, especially in war—a sign of domination, conquest and destruction, completely opposed to peace.<sup>14</sup>

It is notable that no 'buckles' have ever been found in rich graves, which may indicate that they were not possessed by the upper ranks of society. They are absent too from the administrative and cultural centres of ancient Georgia in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Indeed, their find spots seem deliberately to eschew major centres such as Mtskheta, Dedoplist Mindori, Tsikhia Gora, Dzalisa, Nastakisi, Samadlo, Sairkhe and Vani. They have been found in Kartli, eastern Georgia (except in the Gudamakari Gorge), Racha and Upper Imereti, but no farther west (Fig. 23), and they are concentrated on the approaches to the Mamisoni, Roki and Khalatsa passes. In the rest of Georgia they were usually found along roads and close to passes, i.e. in militarily important areas through which people passed. A distribution map of the 'buckles' shows that some people tried to move from the south to the east. Only two 'buckles' have been found in the North Caucasus, but little or nothing is known about this kind of material either from excavation or from local museums. It seems possible to suppose that some groups of people had traversed the Caucasian passes and moved southwards along Georgian roads. Two observations may help to elucidate this.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper 1986, 111.

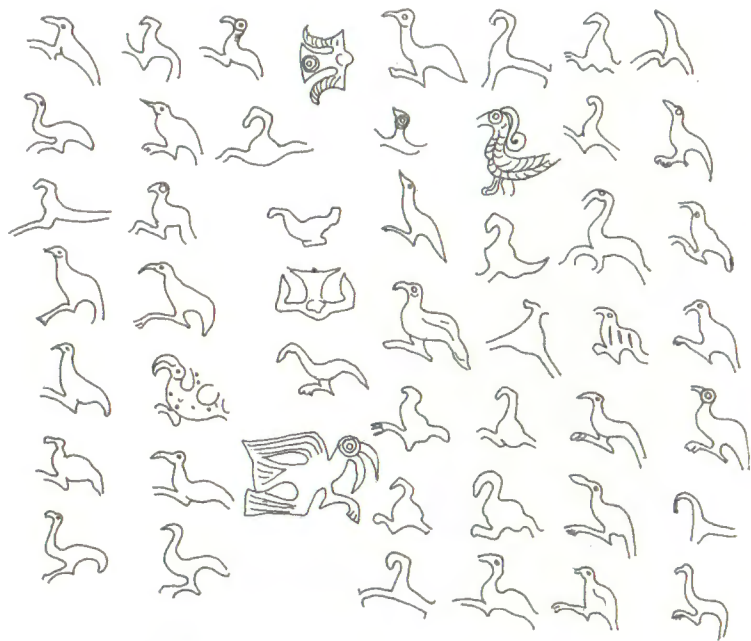


Fig. 16. Subsidiary figures—birds.

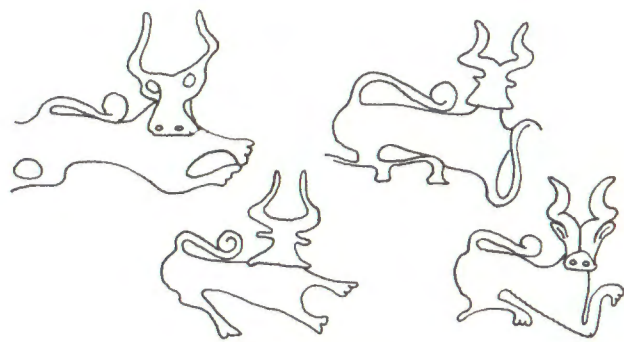


Fig. 17. Subsidiary figures—oxen.

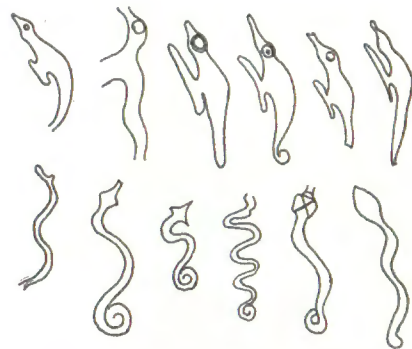


Fig. 18. Subsidiary figures—reptiles.

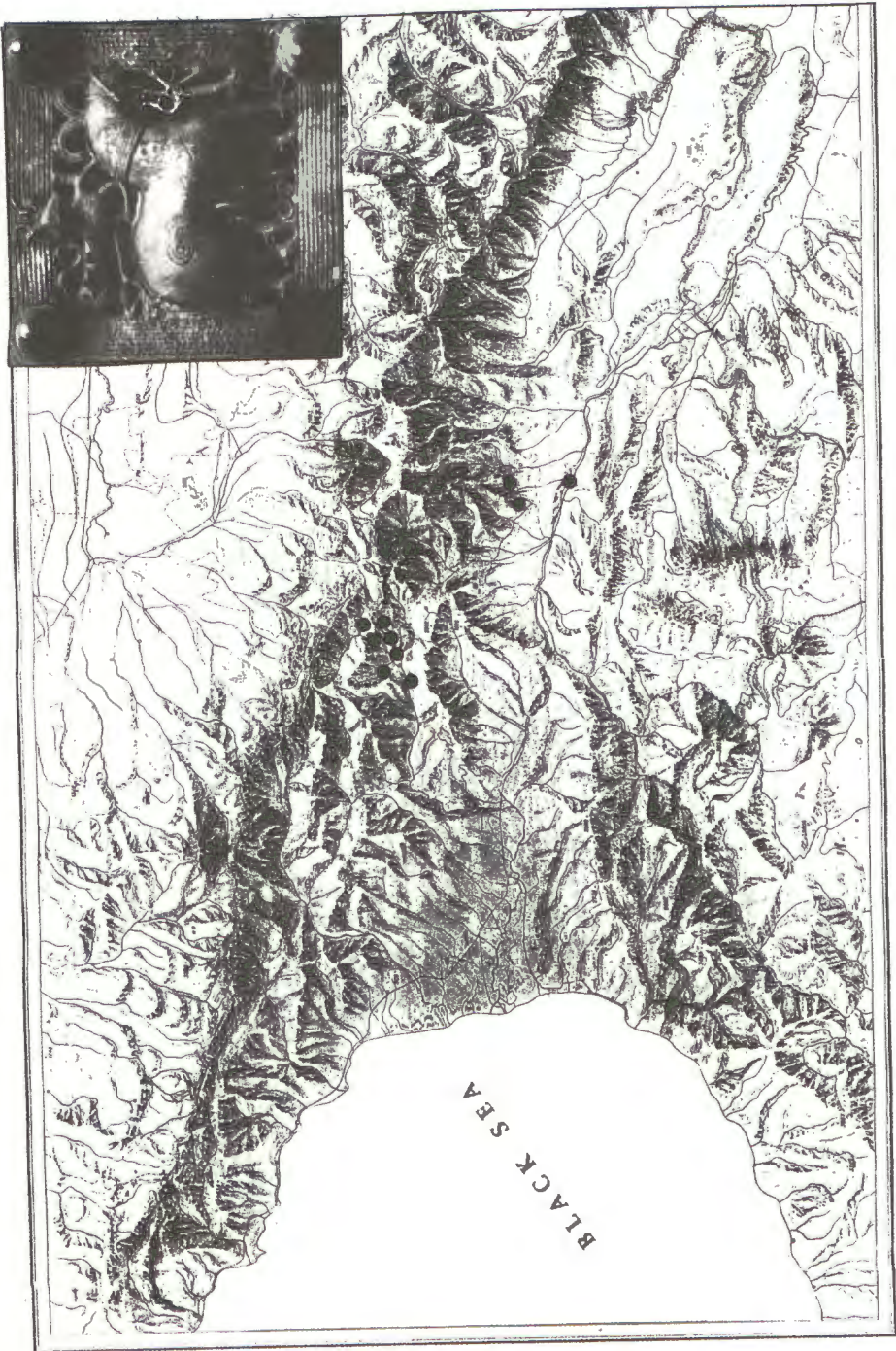


Fig. 19. Distribution of buckles in Georgia.

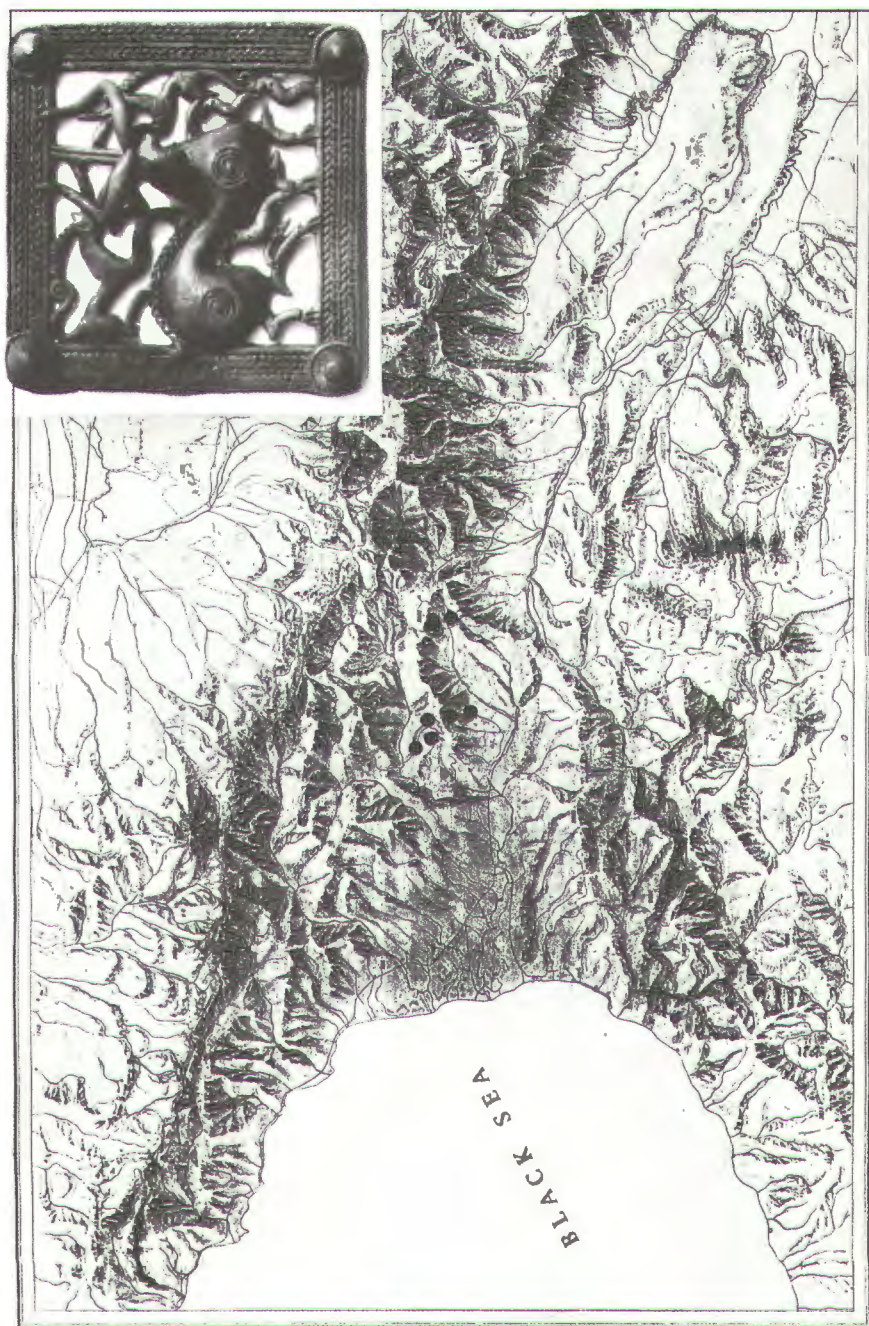


Fig. 20. Distribution of buckles in Georgia.

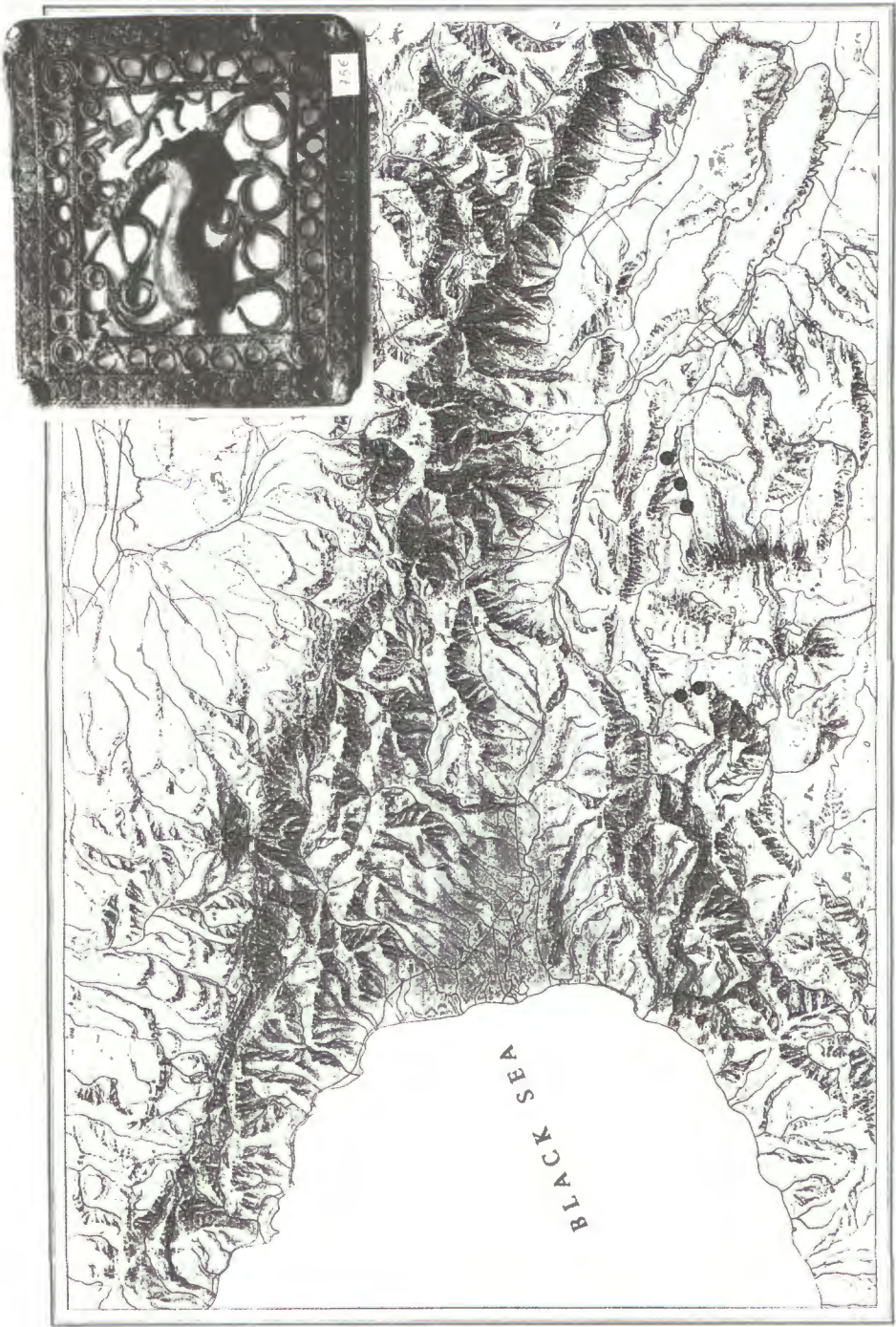


Fig. 21. Distribution of buckles in Georgia.



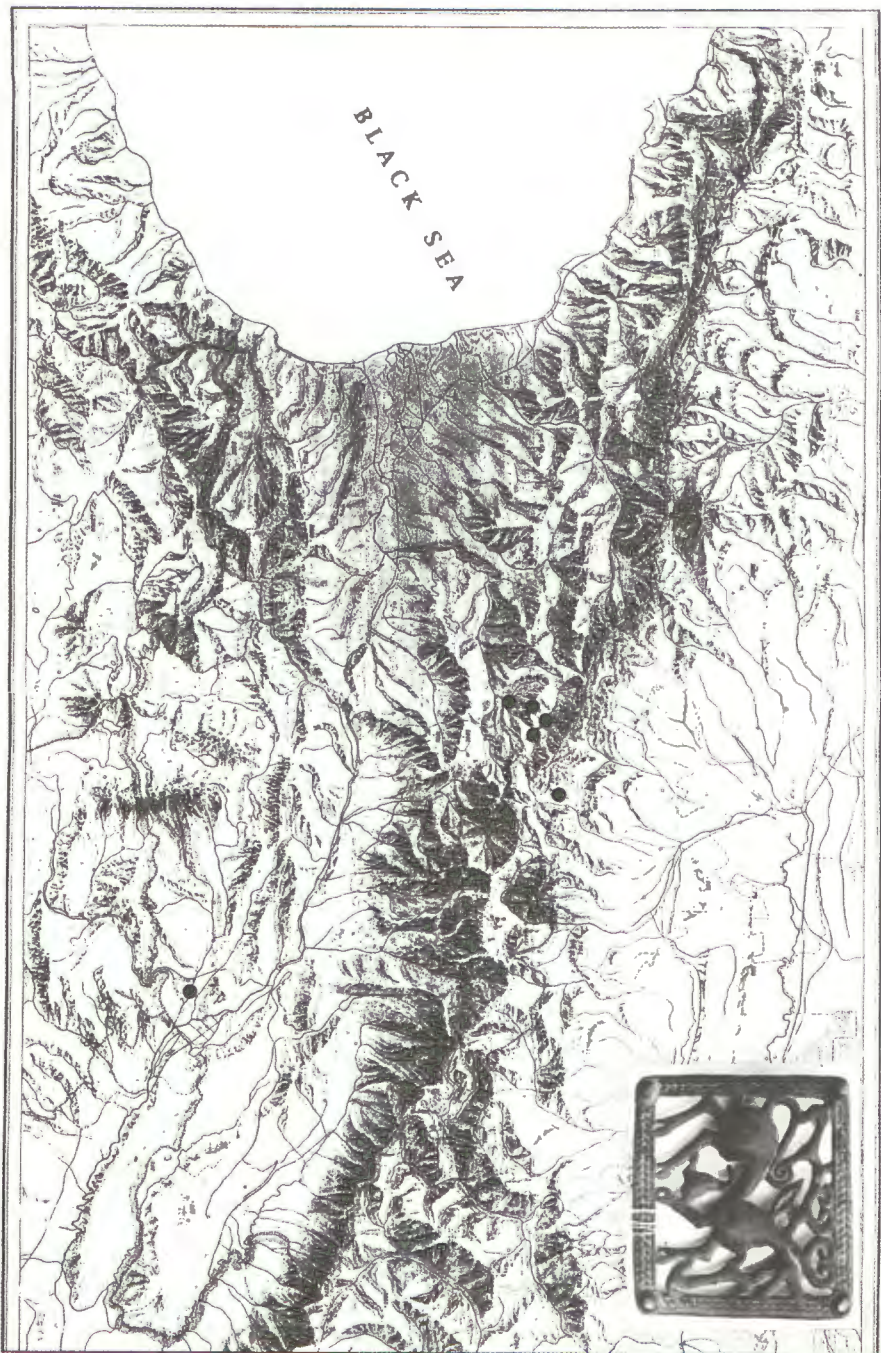


Fig. 22. Distribution of buckles in Georgia.

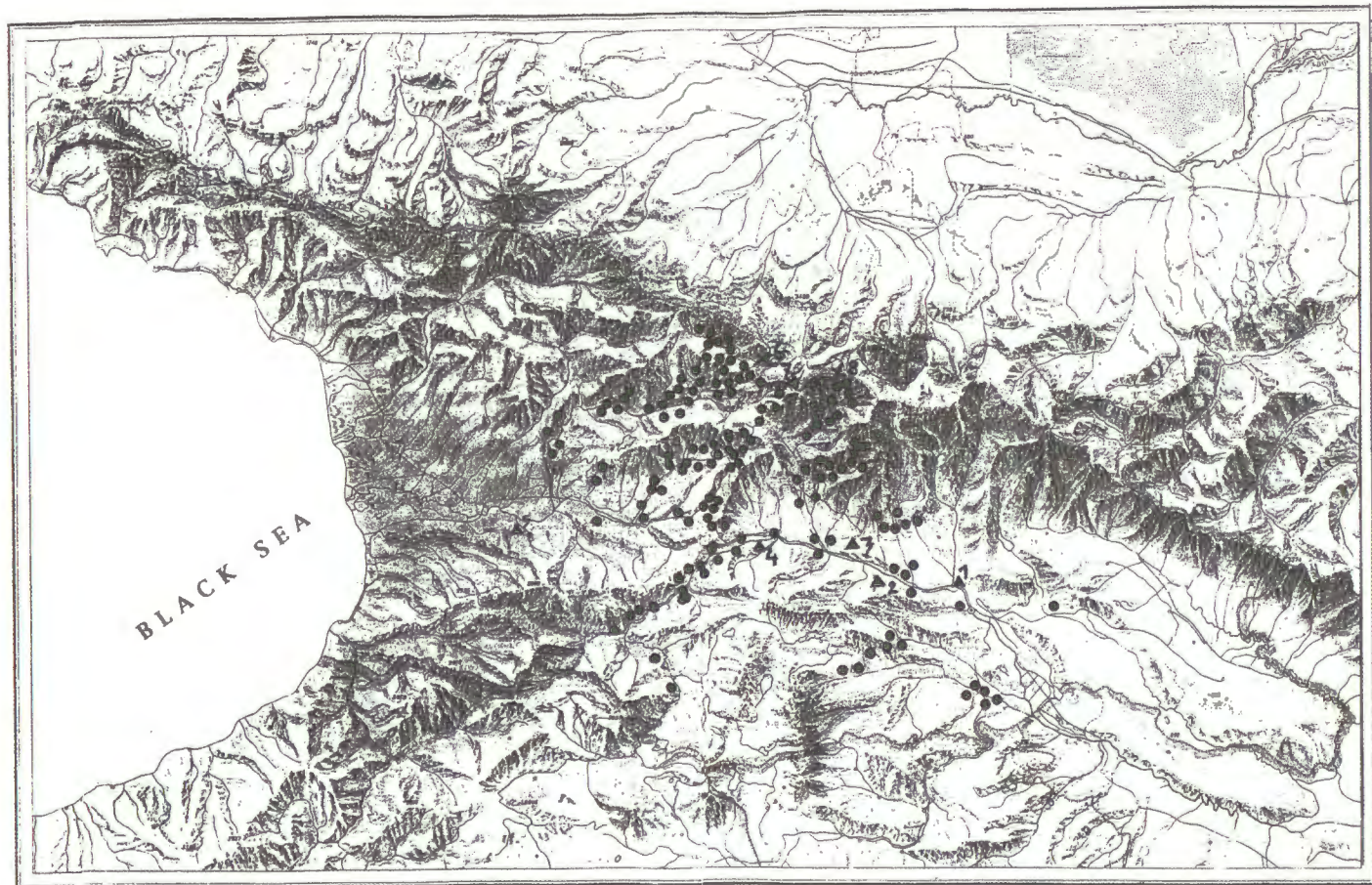


Fig. 23. Distribution of buckles in Georgia: 1. Mtskheta; 2. Tsikhia Gora; 3. Uplistsikhe; 4. Dedoplis Mindori; 5. Vani; 6.-8. Passes through the Great Caucasus mountains.

The first concerns the area of distribution of 'buckles' (*polotiki*) depicting an ox at their centre, found only in the central parts of Kartli and Imereti (western Georgia): the owners of these moved neither towards nor down the Caucasian passes (Figs. 19–20, 22). The second is about largest 'buckles' (*polotiki*) with a deer, head turned backwards and with spiral legs, found only in the southern regions of Kartli. The owners of these not only did not cross the Caucasian passes, they did not even move to the central parts of Kartli-Imereti (Fig. 21). Let us suppose that ancient Georgia was used for transit, i.e. military forces moved through it and then on northward through the Caucasian passes. In this case, we should have traces of the prior movement of these people in the eastern, southern or south-western regions of Georgia, but these 'buckles' are unknown in these areas.

Collating all the evidence suggests that the 'buckle' is, in fact, a breastplate (*polotiki*), part of a suit of body armour. It is even possible that each model belonged to a separate military unit. These pieces, with their emblems, were created or made to special order for military purposes, very likely in Kartli, in the 1st–3rd centuries AD; and such an order could have been placed only for royal troops of the Caucasian Iberian kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Translated from Georgian by M. Kapanadze.

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