*Hunara: Journal of Ancient Iranian Arts and History*
Vol. 2, No. 2, 2024
DOI: 10.22034/hunara.2024.207374

# Metal Finger Rings with Achaemenid Motifs Discovered on the Territory of Georgia

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**Abstract:** Finger rings with an engraved bezel made of gold, silver, and bronze were highly popular in Georgia during the 5th to 2nd centuries BCE. Most of these rings were found during the archaeological excavations of various cemeteries and burial complexes across the country.

Finger-rings with an engraved bezel were usually used not only as jewelry, but also as a seal. Therefore, production and distribution of the finger-rings were closely associated with the development of the society, its needs and private property.

These types of rings are considered to be of local production. However, the influence of Achaemenid glyptic is evident in the style of ornamentation and depictions. Some of the motifs are known from Graeco-Persian gems such as Persian women seated or standing holding various objects, Persian men with a stick, etc. Rings with depictions of a human, probably a priest, holding a *barsom* above a fine altar; double-protome animals; rhyta with a representation of a horses and ibex(?) protomes; fantastic creatures; animals; were common motifs in the Achaemenid art.

These materials confirm the significant influence of Achaemenid art across the entire territory of Georgia (East, West, and South) during the Late Achaemenid and Post-Achaemenid periods (4th and 3rd century BCE).

**Keywords:** Finger Ring, Georgia, Achaemenid Art, Graeco-Persian Gems

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This research was supported by the FaRiG under John Wilkinson Research Grant.

## Introduction

Finger-rings with an engraved bezel made of gold, silver, and bronze were in common on the territory of Georgia in the 5th to 2nd centuries BCE. Finger-rings with an engraved bezel were usually used not only as jewelry, but also as a seal. Therefore, production and distribution of the finger-rings were closely associated with the development of the society, its needs and private property.

The vast majority of rings were found during the archaeological excavations of various cemeteries throughout the country. Depictions on the rings varied. Animals were the commonest motifs on the rings. Worship scenes, humans, fantastic creatures and astral symbols were popular too.

The development and distribution of glyptic art in Georgia were largely influenced by the country's cultural, economic, and political relations with the outside world. Depending on the political circumstances, glyptic materials from Eastern and Western countries spread throughout the region. Consequently, these processes affected local glyptic artifacts that are characterized by certain peculiarities while still following the broader developmental trends of this field of art.

According to the archaeological data, the first examples of Persian-Achaemenid Jeweler's art were brought to Georgia (mostly in Colchis) in the 5th century BCE as diplomatic gifts, but the adoption of Achaemenid forms started only in the 4th century BCE (Gagoshidze 1996, 129). During the same period, the mass production of metal finger-rings began in Georgia.

Ancient Georgia (Colchis and Iberia) was one of those regions where interactions between Achaemenid and strongly Hellenized Greek cultures occurred already in the Achaemenid epoch (Gagoshidze 2009, 15). These interactions were reflected in different fields of art, including glyptic arts. Metal finger-rings produced in Georgia were considered to be the provincial imitation of the Achaemenid and Graeco-Persian circles (Lortkipanidze 1975, 109-112; Gagoshidze 2009, 91; Javakhishvili 2015, 6). Therefore, finger rings with Achaemenid devices are extremely valuable in the study of cultural contacts between Georgia and Iran. Over the last decade, archaeological investigations of early Hellenistic period cemeteries have led to a dramatic increase in both the number of metal finger rings and the range of motifs. Therefore, it is necessary to study the accumulated materials.

## Achaemenid Glyptics

The origins of Achaemenid glyptic are complicated. Mesopotamian, especially Babylonian and Assyrian, and Elamite styles play important parts in the decoration of the early Achaemenid cylinder and conoid stamp seals. In Syria and Phoenicia, the local taste was for scarabs, while Greek style emerged in the Western Asia Minor and Cyprus (Boardman 1970, 305).

Achaemenid seals were of various forms: cylinder, conical, pyramidal, scaraboids, and tabloids. Chalcedony, particularly the blue variety, was a favored material for gems. Cornelian, rock crystal, agate and jasper were also in use (Boardman 1970, 304).

The repertory of motifs is diverse, featuring eastern hunting and battle scenes, one animal attacking another. Some new animals are introduced: the hyena, bear and fox. Domestic scenes were in fashion: Persian men with their women, women with their children and dogs, and Persian characters depicted as relaxing, dancing, etc. (Boardman 1970, 323-27).

Achaemenid cylinder and stamp seals were produced in Persia, Assyria, Babylonia, and elsewhere in the Eastern Kingdom. In western Asia Minor, scaraboids were preferred, though cylinder seals and tabloids were occasionally used too (Spier 1992, 56). Rings with an engraved bezel were also popular. The ring shapes bear similarities to contemporary Greek ones, developing from leaf-shaped bezels to oval forms. The most common Achaemenid type features a small bezel with a thin hoop (Boardman 1970, 322; 2000, 155). Sources of information about Achaemenid finger rings include a series of impressions found in excavations in Mesopotamia and Persia. Notable finds include clay impressions from Persian tombs at Ur, cuneiform tablets from Nippur (specifically the Murashu sealings), and clay tablets from the Treasury of Persepolis (Boardman 1970, 322).

The interaction and cooperation between Greeks and Persians in the sphere of glyptics is represented by the so-called Graeco-Persian gems. These gems are identified based on their style, shape, and motifs, and they can be dated to the $5^{th}$-$4^{th}$ centuries BC. These seals were mainly unprovenanced. The term "Graeco-Persian" was conceived by Adolf Furtwängler to describe gems that he considered to come from the western regions of the Persian Kingdom. There is an ongoing debate regarding whether these gems were cut by Greeks serving a non-Greek market or by eastern artisans imitating Greek styles and motifs.[1]

Boardman believes that it is hardly possible to draw a clear line between Greek and Persian styles in the Achaemenid seals. He recognizes three major styles in Achaemenid glyptics: The Court Style, The Greek Style, and the Mixed Style, which is considered the most typical Graeco-Persian style (Boardman 1970, 326). Although Boardman struggles to identify the exact location of Graeco-Persian gem studios, the distribution of stylistic features indicates a predominant concentration in Anatolia, particularly in regions such as Caria, Lycia, and Cilicia (Boardman 1970, 326). According to Boardman, due to the fact that the majority of these gems were not produced for the Persian market, it is reasonable to call them "Graeco-Oriental gems" (Boardman 1990, 401).

[1] For an investigation of Graeco-Persian seals, their chronology and imagery, see Furtwängler 1900, 116-126; Richter 1956; Boardman 1970, 303; 1990; 1994, 42-46; 2000, 152-173; Nikulina 1971, 90-106; Gates 2002, 105-132).

## Iconographic Groups of the Metal Finger-Rings

There are quite a few finger rings with the Achaemenid devices from the territory of Georgia. The vast majority of them were found during the archaeological excavations of various cemeteries and burial complexes throughout the country. Graves are mostly dated to the 4th to 2nd centuries BCE. Images are categorized into a few iconographic groups according to the motifs.


FIGURE 1. Bronze Finger Rings (© the Author)

The three bronze rings of the Achaemenid type with "worship scenes", from Khoghoto (Fig. 1.1), Naomari Gora (Fig. 1.2), and Atskuri (Fig. 1.3), must have been made under the influence of Achaemenid art. Rings dated to the 4th-3rd centuries BCE have been found in the graves. dated around 4th-3rd centuries BCE. A human figure, possibly a priest, holding a *barsom* above a fire altar is depicted on the rings from Khogoto and Naomari Gora. Atskuri ring features a priest possibly holding a lotus flower in his hands, alongside representations of a crescent moon and an altar.

Worship scenes were very popular in Mesopotamia during the Neo-Babylonian period and continued to be produced at least to the end of the 5th century BCE (Bregstein 1993, 16). One bronze finger ring found in Pasargadae, Tall-i Takht, closely resembles that of the depictions of our rings. This ring shows a human figure with raised hands, possibly holding a *barsom* above a fire altar (Stronach 1978, 181, fig. 163a). Another bronze finger ring with a similar motif belongs to a private collection now kept in the Museum of Art and History in Geneva (Vollenweider 1983, 36, fig. 63). One more bronze finger ring exhibits a priest standing in profile to the right, holding a lotus flower above an altar, with a vertical cresent depicted to the right (Vollenweider 1983, 36, fig. 63). Bullae with worship scenes are also known from the Hellenistic Babylonia, notably from Uruk (Wallenfels 1994, 20-21, figs. 54-57). An impression from a finger ring found on the bulla of Seleucia on the Tigris shows a worshiper wearing a high conical cap standing before an altar, closely resembling the images of our rings (Invernizzi 1984, 31, fig. 5).

A group of finger rings featuring rhyta is particularly interesting for our study. Two of these rings depict a long-horn rhyton ending with horse protomes, while a third ring exhibits an ibex protome. The fourth ring is corroded, which makes it difficult to identify the animal's protome. Such rings were discovered in different locations in Georgia. One was found in the Hellenistic cemetery of Pitchvnari (Fig. 1.4) dated to the 4th-3rd centuries BCE, while another one was retrieved from an Atskhuri cemetery in Samtskhe (Fig. 1.5) also dated to the 4th-3rd centuries BCE. Additionally, two rings were discovered accidently: one in Colchis, in Brili (Fig. 1.6), and the other in Kakheti Eastern Georgia (Fig. 1.7), during street renovation.

A rhyton is a horn-shape drinking vassel used for ceremonial purposes and has a long history in the Near East, especially in Persia. Rhyta originated in the Achaemenid Persian Kingdom, combining the older Near Eastern traditions of animal-headed beakers and Iranian traditions of animal-shaped vessels. Rhyta were thus symbols of high status. No Greek rhyton is known to exit before the seventies of the fifth century BCE (Hoffman 1961, 21). According to Herbert Hoffmann, three types of rhyta appear in Classical Greek art shortly after Graeco-Persian wars. These are bent rhyta, horn rhyta and animal-headed cups. Each of these three types derives from a Persian prototype (Hoffmann 1961, 21). There are two types of horn rhyta: long-horn rhyta ending with animal's protomai and the short-horn rhyta ending with animal's head. Both types were adopted in Greek cultural world from Persia (Veleva 2008, 14).

Based on the types of rings, it could be assumed that all the rings featuring images of rhyta found in Georgia were produced in local workshops, while the depictions of rhyta lean more toward Persian style than Greek.

Only a few glyptic materials with similar motifs are known, although none feature the same images. A rhyton, ending in the forepart of a hind, is depicted on a Greek silver finger ring dated to the late Archaic period (Richter 1968, 67, no. 175). Three rings featuring rhyta have been discovered in the Corycian Cave in central Greece, dated to the

4th century BCE. One bronze ring depicts a rhyton ending with a winged deer protome (Zagdoun 1984n93), while another bronze ring depicts a hand holding a rhyton ending in a deer protome (Zagdoun 1984, no. 109). A third ring features rhyton with a human head (Zagdoun 1984n208). A very interesting glyptic material is a Graeco-Persian blue chalcedony scaraboid with a depiction of a rhyton with an antelope forepart (Boardman 1970, 316, pl. 994). Additionally, an impression from an Achaemenid ring stone at Ur shows a human arm holding a rhyton with a sphinx forepart and fluted jag. Furthermore, a bulla is dated to the 5th century BCE (Boardman 1970, 322, fig. 315; Collon 1996, 574, no. 832).

Several rhyta were discovered at the territory of Georgia during the excavations in Mtisdziri, Gomi, Tsebelda, Uplistsikhe, Kazbegi and Vani (Gamkrelidze 2012, 100-118). A rhyton from Mtisdziri is thought to have been produced in a local workshop, influenced by the Achaemenid style (Gamkrelidze 2012, 103).

Two bronze finger rings found in Georgia would also be made under the influence of Achaemenid art. One ring was found in Eastern Georgia, at Grmakhevistavi (Fig. 1.8), in the burial dated to the 4th century BCE. Two half-figures of different animals are depicted back to back on the bezel (Lortkipanidze 1981, 53n8). The second ring, recovered in Nokalakevi in western Georgia (Fig. 1.9), features a double protome of horses depicted back to back. This type of rings was made in local workshops and is mostly found in graves dated to the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE.

Images on a number of rings provide interesting examples of an Achaemenid architectural motif transferred to glyptic art. The opposed protomes of animals are an old oriental motif and was quite popular in Achaemenid architecture (Herzfeld 1941, 239-240). These depictions on our rings bear resemblance to the Achaemenid double animal protome column capitals found in Persepolis and Pasargadae.

The image of two half-figures depicted back to back as capital is rare in glyptic materials. The closest comparison in iconography to our rings is a gold finger ring from the Oxus treasure (Dalton 1905n106; Boardman 1970n989). Back-to-back horse protomes sharing one wing are depicted on the bullae from Samaria (Wadi-Daliyeh), dated to the 4th century BCE (Leith 1990, pl. 50.1). Additionally, another bulla from a leaf-shaped metal finger ring found in Nippur depicts a double horse protome (Legrain 1925, 844).

This architectural detail was known in Georgia. The double-protome capitals were found in Tsikhia-Gora, Uflistiske, Sairkhe, and Vani (Gagoshidze 1996, 132-133). The double-protome capital from Tsikhia-Gora is considered a local provincial product that imitates Persian examples (Gagoshidze 1996, 132).

Another group of finger rings with human images appears to be influenced by Achaemenid art. One of the most common motifs in Graeco-Persian art - the so-called “Persian woman” - is depicted on rings from Kamarakhevi (Fig. 2.1) and Takhtidziri (Fig. 2.2). These rings are identified as a local production belonging to the circle of Graeco-Persian gems (Lortkipanidze 1981, 49; Javakhishvili 2015, 10; Ramishvili and Giunashvili

2024, 37-38).


FIGURE 2. Finger Rings Made of Silver, Gold, and Bronze (© the Author)

A seated woman facing right holding a bowl is depicted on a ring from Vani, dated to the first half of 4th century BCE (Fig. 2.3; Lortkipanidze 1975, 88-93). Seated woman engaged in various activities such as writing, playing, holding flowers, birds, subject and etc. is one of the common motifs in Greek glyptic art (Richter 1968, figs. 271-276). At the same time, this motif was also popular on the seals that belong to the Graeco-Persian circle (Boardman 1970, 990, 991; Barak and Amorai-Stark, 1989, pl. 74, fig. 1). Lordkipanidze believes that the ring from Vani was made in the local workshop under the influence of Greek Archaic Style whereas Boardman argues that it was a local production under the influence of Graeco-Persian art (Boardman 1994, 220).

A similar image of a seated woman holding a bowl is depicted on a ring from Nokalakevi (Fig. 2.4). This ring type is a local work and dates to the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE. In contrast to the ring discussed above, the figure of the Nokalakevi ring is rendered in a more simplified and less detailed manner. It is very likely that this motif continued to be used in Georgia until the second century BCE.

The images of a standing man from Takhtidziri (Fig. 2.5) and Koghoto (Fig. 2.6) should also be related to Achaemenid art, despite their stylistic differences. Both figures

are depicted wearing knee-length robes in the Persian style. The man from Takhtidziri holds a sword, while the figure from Koghoto carries a long staff in his left hand and a pouch in his right. It is common to see Persian figures holding a staff or sword on Graeco-Persian gems (Nikulina 1994, figs. 519, 521, 524, 426, 527).


Figure 3. Finger Rings with the Depiction of Griffin, GNM (© the Author)

The griffin is depicted on ten finger rings discovered in Georgia (Fig.3). These griffins are shown either alone, in profile to the right, or with their heads turned back, with large wings depicted as bent down and rising from above. Notably, images of the griffins on these rings are only found in Eastern Georgia, with one exception from the West Sairkhe (Fig. 3.3).

The griffin is a creature characterized by a combination of a winged lion's body, with a lion or bird-like tail and the head of a bird of prey. It originated in Iran, where it was first evidenced in the glyptic are dating back to the fourth millennium BCE. By the seventeenth century, depictions of the griffin were observed in the Aegean and remained popular in both Eastern and Western cultures. Over the course of three millenia, the griffin has been portrayed in various poses, including sitting, standing, walking, rampant, and leaping (Wallenfels 1994, 70). Ketevan Javakhishvili has suggested that the griffins depicted on rings found in Georgia closely resemble the Achaemenid type (Javakhishvili 2015, 10).

## Conclusion

Despite the strong interrelation between Georgia and its neighbour, Persia, during the 5th to early 4th centuries BCE, there is no evidence of imported Achaemenid finger rings in Georgia from this period. Metal finger rings featuring Persian motifs, produced in local workshops under the influences of Achaemenid art, began to appear in the middle of the 4th century BCE, following the collapse of the Achaemenid Kingdom. These rings continued to be used until the 2nd century BCE. Therefore, it can be assumed that the emergence of these finger rings was associated with the process of Hellenization.

Finger rings influenced by Achaemenid, primarily Graeco-Persian glyptic art, have been found throughout Georgia, suggesting that cultural relations among the Eastern, Western, and Southern regions of the country were significant during the 4th-3rd centuries BCE. Based on the glyptic materials referenced above, it can be inferred that, as a peripheral region of the Achaemenid and later Hellenized worlds, Georgia preserved elements of Achaemenid or Graeco-Persian art until the late Hellenistic period.

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