

Graeco-Persian Intaglios from Georgia

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Abstract: This study examines glyptic materials from the Nastagisi cemetery in Eastern Georgia, including two stone scaraboids and a transparent greenish glass intaglio. Although, these finds provide important evidence for cultural and artistic interactions between Georgia and the wider Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid world. The stone scaraboids, based on stylistic parallels, are likely imports and are attributed to the Bern group of the Graeco-Persian glyptic tradition, whereas the origin of the glass intaglio remains uncertain, suggesting local production influenced by Graeco-Persian art. The presence of these glyptic materials in the later graves dated to the second-first centuries BCE, also illustrates long circulation and continued prestige of Achaemenid-derived glyptic traditions in the South Caucasus. Overall, the Nastagisi materials demonstrate both the persistence of Graeco-Persian artistic traditions and their adaptation within a local Georgian context.

Keywords: Graeco-Persian, Glyptic Art, Scaraboids, Georgia

Introduction

Very interesting glyptic materials, a transparent greenish intaglio and two stone scaraboids, were found in the burials at the Nastagisi cemetery during the archaeological excavations in 1979 and 1980. These objects can be confidently attributed to the later phase of the so-called Graeco-Persian glyptic, more specifically to the Bern group. Although, I previously published these finds in Georgian, their significance warrants reconsideration here in light of recent scholarship and new perspectives on the cultural interactions reflected in glyptic art.

The Bern group is predominantly represented by small scaraboids, though glass tabloids are also popular. Their iconography is generally schematic and less detailed, while stylistically they demonstrate stronger Near Eastern rather than Greek influence. According to John Boardman, the scaraboids of the Bern group are to be dated to the post-Achaemenid period, namely the fourth-third centuries BCE and even later, and he suggests that this group continued in circulation within the provinces of the Achaemenid Kingdom into a relatively late stage (Boardman 1970, 320-321).

In Georgia, imported Achaemenid seals are represented only in very limited numbers—only six specimens in total, most of which come from later, mostly Roman-period archaeological complexes (Javakhishvili 2009). Although modest in quantity, such finds are of considerable importance. Their study contributes not only to the reconstruction of the development and diffusion of Achaemenid glyptic, but also provides valuable evidence for examining the cultural and political interactions between Georgia and the Achaemenid world.

Stone Scaraboids from Nastagisi

The Nastagisi cemetery is located in Eastern Georgia, near the town of Ksani in the Mtskheta Municipality. Two small stone scaraboids were discovered in grave No. 35 (115) during the excavation season in 1980 of the Nastagisi archaeological expedition (Gabunia 2021, 30-32; Gabunia 2023a, 80-86). The burial also yielded gilded beads and two bronze rings.¹



FIGURE 1. Scaraboid made of milky chalcedony (© The Author)

Small scaraboid made of milky chalcedony (Fig. 1). Well preserved. The seal's surface is covered with a fantastical composition, apparently depicting a flying griffin. The

¹ The objects are preserved in the archaeological repository of Nastagisi.

composition is schematic, with poorly developed details. The execution is not particularly refined, and some elements are disproportionate.

Chalcedony and serpentine scaraboids of the Bern group, with stylistic features similar to those from Nastagisi, are discussed by Wollenweider and Boardman. One clearly shows Egyptian influences, while the other reflects Indo-European motifs. The seals are dated to the second half of the fourth century BCE (Boardman and Wollenweider 1978, cat. no. 199, 202). Another sapphire scaraboid, attributed to an unknown workshop, is kept in the State Museum in Moscow. Its composition is stylistically very close to the examples from Nastagisi. It likely originates from Central Asia. The seal is dated to the fifth century BCE (Bersina 2010, 42).



FIGURE 2. Scaraboid made of gray banded agate (© The Author)

A horseman with a spear and pointed hat is depicted on a scaraboid made of gray banded agate (Fig. 2). The figure's anatomy is only roughly indicated. The execution is schematic and disproportionate. Details are poorly developed, and the overall design is not particularly refined.

Similar motifs are frequently represented on the Bern group scaraboids and tabloid seals (Boardman 1970, cat. nos. 881, 882, 883, 925, 973, 974). Considering both the style and imagery of the scaraboid, it can be attributed to the Bern group. A small scaraboid made of chalcedony, depicting a horseman with a pointed head holding a staff, comes from a burial unearthed in the Sagarejo municipality, Kakheti region, and is now preserved in the Georgian National Museum (Javakhishvili 2009, 90-91, figs. 10-11). Stylistically, the depiction of the seated figure closely resembles examples discussed by Boardman, and can also be associated with the Bern group (Boardman 1970, 457, nos. 974-976). The above mentioned scaraboid is attributed to the third century BCE (Javakhishvili 2009, 90).

The dating of the burial No. 35 of the Nastagisi cemetery has not been firmly established, as the published inventory is very limited. However, the Nastagisi cemetery is generally dated to the period from the mid-second century to the first century BCE. (Bokhochadze et al. 1982). The burial that yielded scaraboid-type seals should be considered within this period. The seals themselves should be attributed to the third-second centuries BCE.

Transparent Glass Intaglio from Nastagisi

Another very interesting glyptic material has been revealed in one of the burials at the Nastagisi cemetery during the archaeological excavations in 1979. A transparent greenish intaglio was found in the burial No. 29 (53), Inv.N137. The intaglio has the shape of a rectangular parallelepiped. There is a combat scene depicted on the flat side—three persons: two foot soldiers against one. They are all armed with shields and spears and wear similar clothes—knee-length dresses (Fig. 3).



FIGURE 3. A transparent greenish intaglio (© The Author)

There is a glass tabloid found in a rich burial of Tsikhia Gora, in Kaspi municipality, which bears a similar depiction (Fig. 4)

The intaglio is made of glass. High level of iridescence of the tabloid makes it impossible to define the original color of the glass. There was another glass tabloid revealed in the same burial. A combat scene with four persons is depicted on the intaglio (Fig. 5).

According to the stylistic and characteristic similarities, both tabloids revealed in Tsikhia-Gora as well as the intaglio from Nastagisi must have been produced from a single mould. It is worth noting, that the rich burial from Tsikhia-Gora is dated to the third century BCE, while the date of Nastagisi burial is the second-first centuries BCE.



FIGURE 4. Glass tabloid from Tsikhia-Gora (© The Author)



FIGURE 5. Glass tabloid from Tsikhia-Gora (© The Author)

Of particular interest are the bullae from the Achaemenid Persian satrapy of Daskyleion, some of which show thematic parallels with the seals from Nastagisi and Tsikhia Gora. The author opts to use the term “Persianizing” over “Graeco-Persian” and dates them to the fourth century BCE (Kaptan 2002, 107). Thematically similar scaraboids are also illustrated by Boardman, who assigns them to the broader stylistic context of the Bern group (Boardman 1970, pl. 310, cat. no. 883).

Warfare images are among the most common motifs in the Achaemenid art. They are found on the monumental reliefs, on personal decorations, stone sculptures, painted wood

and on the seals and the impressions of seals throughout the Achaemenid Kingdom (Wu 2014, 216).

Warfare representations could be either historical or generic. Images produced in court workshops in Persia are more likely to provide reliable reflections of Achaemenid history than those produced in provincial workshops. Moreover, unlike the Court style, which exhibits a highly unified set of stylistic traits executed with super skills, the Persianizing style has a much broader geographic distribution and displays greater stylistic variability (Wu 2014, 242-243).

It is thought that Achaemenid seals with the warfare images belonged to the elite members of the society. It is noteworthy that the tabloids with warfare images were found in the rich burial dated back to the third century BCE from Tsikhia-Gora (Tskitishvili 2001, 41-44). The combat scene with four figures is depicted on the flat part of tabloid as mentioned before. It shows a warrior armed with a shield, bow and spear attacking another figure, who is falling to the ground. All the three figures are shown in profile, and the composition is balanced across the surface of the seal. The seals depicting a battle scene with a fallen warrior originate from Persepolis and Murashu archive. A similar narrative scene can also be found on Arshama's cylindrical seal (Wu 2014, pls. 4,a,b; 6,d; 8,b).

On the Nastagisi and Tsikhia-Gora intaglios, all three warriors are depicted holding a shield and a short spear. Similarly, warriors wearing knee-length chitons and armed with a shield and spear are represented on the Heroon of Trysa built on 380 BCE (Oerleinter 1994).

In Achaemenid art, Persian soldiers are seldom shown carrying shields. In glyptic works, Greeks are often depicted with shields, demonstrating that artists were fully capable of representing them. The deliberate omission of shields for Persians suggests that, iconographically, shields were associated with Greek warriors and deemed inappropriate for Persian depictions. Similarly, Achaemenid coins portray royal figures with a bow, spear, or dagger, but never with a shield, indicating that the shield was not considered a defining or symbolic attribute of Persians (Tuplin 2010, 115).

If we look at the Greek and Latin literary sources from the Roman period, we see that the Iberian army included both cavalry and infantry, and their primary weapons were the spear and the bow. Of particular interest is Plutarch's reference to "Iberian lancers" (Plutarch, *Lucullus* 31.5). According to Appian, the Iberians "tried with darts and slings to prevent him (Mithridates) from coming in" (Appian, *Mithridatic Wars*. 15.101). Strabo also notes: "The Albanians use javelins and bows; and they wear breastplates and large oblong shields, and helmets made of the skins of wild animals, similar to those worn by the Iberians" (Strabo, *Geography* XI 4.5).

It is worth noting the depictions of cavalry on third century BCE amphorae from the Hellenistic period settlement of Samadlo in the Mtskheta municipality, whose weapons include short throwing spears, while the infantry are equipped with swords and shields (Gagoshidze 2004, 119). Cavalrymen armed with javelins and bows are also represented

on locally made engraved bone plaques discovered in the late Hellenistic-Early Roman period palace at Dedoplist Gora in Shida Kartli (Gagoshidze 2004, 119). Iulon Gagoshidze points out that, in his search for parallels outside the territory of Georgia, he could not identify any depictions of cavalry armed with short throwing spears (Gagoshidze 2004, 119).

Conclusion

The glyptic finds from Nastagisi, consisting of two scaraboids and a glass intaglio, provide important evidence for the cultural and artistic interactions between Georgia and the wider Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid world. The presence of Achaemenid glyptic materials in the later graves, dated to the second-first centuries BCE, also illustrates long circulation and continued prestige of Achaemenid-derived glyptic traditions in the South Caucasus.

On the basis of stylistic parallels, the two stone scaraboids can be regarded as imports, whereas the same cannot be said with certainty of the glass intaglios. Production of an early group of blue glass tabloids with representations of warfare and hunting scenes probably started at the beginning of the third century BCE in Iberia (tabloids from Tsikhiagora, Nastagisi), though the influence of Graeco-Persian glyptic is still evident. A later group of glass tabloids, dating to the second-first centuries BCE, was also manufactured in Iberia; these remained in circulation for a long time and continued to appear in burials as late as the third-fourth centuries CE (Gabunia 2023b).

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