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**SWORDS AND SABERS OF WESTERN GEORGIA
WITH INCLINED HILTS AND WITHOUT CROSSGUARDS,
AND THEIR PLACE IN THE EVOLUTION
OF CAUCASUSIAN EDGED WEAPONS**

Abstract: *The article examines a type of edged weapon – kabianikhmali – fascinating, yet little known to scholars outside the Republic of Georgia. This type of cavalry sword supposedly emerged in the late 17th or early 18th C. in the Samegrelo and Imereti, regions of Western Georgia. As authors we separately examine all distinctive features of the kabianikhmali, starting with the one that gave the kabianikhmali its name, which literally means “sword in a skirt.” This name was inspired by the peculiar form of the kabianikhmali’s protective leather mantle arranged around the body of the sword’s scabbard in a manner resembling a skirt. The authors benefited from the research ideas forwarded by Eduard von Lenz, the first scholar who drew attention to this type of edged weapon in his article “Eine Sabelstudie”, published in Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde in 1912.*

The main purpose of the “skirt” was to protect the scabbard from soaking in horse sweat. Otherwise the soaking would inevitably occur as the warrior kept his sword beneath the saddle, between the horse’s flank and his leg. Extra protection would prevent sweat from penetrating through the scabbard and, through its chemical content, ruining the sword blade. Having examined miniatures created for Middle Eastern manuscripts as well as works of some Western painters, the authors were able to trace the roots of this tradition to the 16th C. Other distinctive features of the sword that determined its functional characteristic are the hilt without crossguard and the pronounced (up to 30 degrees) angle between the blade and the hilt. Disclosing a number of historical parallels from different cultures and times the authors explain that the tilted hilt of a kabianikhmali that puzzled Eduard von

Lenz, had indeed a functional significance and was not just an attribute of a ceremonial type of weapon as had been falsely assumed by foreign scholars. Two other features – a hilt without a guard and the manner in which these swords and sabers were suspended – link this type of weapon to the other distinctive edged weapons of Caucasus known as Caucasian or Circassian shashkas.

The authors point at the similarity of functional and structural features between the kabianikhmali and the Caucasian shashka or the saber. Moreover, the review of Georgian written sources and manuscripts of the 17th-18th C. suggests that the kabianikhmali was not purely local Western Georgian phenomenon, but a part of a long process in the entire region of Caucasus, where historical circumstances instigated development of new types of cavalry sword and saber. In the conclusion to the article the authors describe in detail a few examples of kabianikhmali held in museums of Georgia, Russia and Europe. A few swords from museum collections bear inscriptions on their hilts and examination of the lettering helped to identify the swords' original owners, mostly members of prominent aristocratic families of Western Georgia.

This article presents a short comparative study of a specific type of Caucasian long-blade weapon which has previously attracted occasional attention in the Russian and later in the Soviet weapons' historiography, but overall has been overlooked. Hence this subject still needs further and focused research. This type of weapon is known among Russian collectors and historians of edged weaponry as the Georgian broadsword and saber with a "skirt" [Astvatsaturyan, 2004: 335] or "jupon" [Denisov, 1956, Kuznetsov, 2009]. The name was given due to a conspicuous and peculiar scabbard structure – a cone-like leather protective cover arranged around the scabbard's shaft in a way resembling a skirt. Other less noticeable yet important features of the scabbard are the following: a special construction of the scabbard throat and positioning of the harness rings dictating a certain way of suspension, i.e., the blade edge is facing up and backward in contrary to down and forward as in conventional way of broadswords and sabers with crossguards. Both these features are similar to that of the Circassian open-hilttype of saber known internationally as the *shashka*. In addition to the very specific decorative design of

a hilt, other distinctive features of Georgian broadswords and sabers were a hilt without a crossguard, which the authors call the “openhilt” type (we shall hereafter use the term “open hilt type”), and a significant inclination (varying from 20° to 30 degrees) of the hilt toward the blade.

The total number of Georgian broadswords and sabers held in the State museums of Georgia, Europe, Russia and in private collections is relatively small, thus this type of weapon can be considered a rare type. Some of the broadswords and sabers kept in foreign collections and museums are especially precious as they bear inscriptions that identify original owners, often Georgian princes and statesmen of Georgia or members of famous ruling and aristocratic dynasties 18th-19th centuries¹²



Fig. 1. State Historical Museum, Moscow. Mingrelian broadsword. ref. no. 7326



Fig. 2. State Historical Museum, Moscow. Imeretiansaberr. ref. no. 7327



Fig. 3. Livrustkammaren / Armory, Stockholm, Sweden. Mingrelian broadsword. ref. no. 7323



Fig. 4. The Hermitage. St Petersburg. Imeretian broadsword. Ref.no. 2965



Fig. 5. Military Historical Museum. St Petersburg, Ref.no. 109/375



Fig. 6. State Historical Museum. Kutaisi, Georgia. Broadsword of King SolomonII; ref. no. 2810



Fig. 7. Simon Dzhnashvili State. Georgian Museum, Tbilisi. Mingrelian Saber. Ref.no. 98-10 “Kabianikaldi”



Fig. 8. Simon Dzhnashvili State. Georgian Museum. Named after Georgia, Tbilisi. “Kabiani” broadsword



Fig. 9. P.V. Alabin Local History Museum. Samara, Russia. Georgian broadsword. Ref.no.KP-872

¹ Georgian specimens (broadswords and a fragment of a saber) belonging to the Collection of the Military Historical Museum of Artillery, Engineer and Signal Corps, have been examined in a separate paper [4]

Images of this weapon are even rarer than the weapon itself. As far as we know it was never depicted in the iconography of Georgian weapon, and all the images known to us at present have appeared quite recently, namely in the 19th C. and are mostly owed to the efforts of Russian artists who arrived to Georgia in early 19 century.



Fig. 10. Imeretian duke. [Begrov, 1822]



Fig. 11. Imeretian duke. [Gagarin, 1847]



Fig. 12. Georgian portraiture of the 18th -19th C. [Tsitsishvili]

This type of weapon was first presented to Russian and European audiences in 1913, in a research article by Edward von Lenz, a weaponry historian, who worked with Imperial and Grand Ducal collections in Russia.

Edward von Lenz's main aim was an attempt to analyze the method of attribution and to establish the genuine origin of certain sword blades previously attributed to the legendary Italian smith Andrea Ferrara. One of the pieces examined by the author was the Georgian broadsword from the collection of Grand Duke Mikhail Nicolaevich (Viceroy of the Caucasus, 1862-1882). This broadsword was presented to him by the Dadiani family, until recently the ruling dynasty of the Georgian region of Samegrelo (Mingrelia) [Lenz, 1912].

Upon completing his main topic von Lenz devoted the final part of the article to analysis of that Georgian broadsword. This specimen attracted his attention due to the unusual configuration of the hilt as the author indicates "*Abgesehen von der Meisterfrage, welche wir, soweit die hierbesprochenen Klingen in Betracht kommen, als erledigt ansehen, beansprucht der auf der Abb. 1 abgebildete Haudegen Nr. 1313 nocheinbesonderes Interessedurch die ungewohntscharfausgesprochene Schrägstellung des zur Schneideabgebogenen Griffescutting*"² [Lenz, 1912].

Despite the fact that von Lenz has underlined the importance of further research on this type of weapon the next research paper did not appear till 1956, almost half a century later, in the collected works by the State Historical Museum (HSM) staff. This was an article by E. Denisov dedicated to two specimens of the HSM arms and armor collection; namely the saber of Bezhan Tsereteli and the broadsword of David Dadiani [Denisov, 1956]. A few decades later in 1980-90s, the following short entries appeared in the articles of A. Kuznetsov, a writer and connoisseur of Caucasian weapons. Kuznetsov wrote: "Its hilt and pommel are bent toward the blade at 25-degree angle, which makes it unfit for cutting. This is just a ceremonial sword, a tribute to a tradition: hilt would be made slightly inclined toward the blade, but in case of this piece they had overdone it. For this very reason the Dadiani broadsword has the traditional Georgian "skirt" [Kuznetsov, 2009].

As we can see from the quotation given above, a doubt in the precise functionality

² Translation: Beside the question of the master maker regarding blades that we discussed already, the broadsword (pic.1) with a catalogue number 1313* is of a special interest as its hilt is positioned at an unusually sharp angle toward the cutting edge of the blade.

of these Georgian swords, expressed by E. von Lenz and repeated by E. Denisov, has suddenly changed to a statement in which inclined hilt and “skirt” are now presented as features of a ceremonial sword. This statement, however, was made without any cross research on this type of weapon or its technique or method of use. In addition, we will attempt to prove that statement as being a misleading one. Last but not least mention should be made the monumental work of E. Astvatsaturyan entitled *Weapons of the Caucasian Nations*, published in Moscow in 1995 [Astvatsaturyan, 2004]. In this book, in the section “Transcaucasia,” Georgian broadswords and sabers “with a skirt” were mentioned and described once again. Comparison of the above given sources shows that all the papers they were published after von Lenz’s *Eine Sabelstudie*, apart from adding descriptions and parameters of new examples of broadswords and sabers “with a skirt,” were just repeating some assertions made by von Lenz, without offering much analysis of the factual material. The research proposed and outlined by von Lenz never took place. Questions raised by him were not worked through. A comprehensive research of a described type of weapon, started by the authors of this article, is still far from being complete – thus material presented in this article is given in brief with the aim of attracting weapon historians’ attention to this type of weapon.

Starting our review of Georgian sabers and broadsword with a “skirt,” let us start with its most typical feature, which provided the actual name for these types of weapons.

Either under the influence of the Russian terminology or independently the term “sword in skirt” also appeared and was used in Georgian circles. In Georgian “*kabianikhmali*” literally means “sword in a skirt,” being formed from Georgian word *kaba* (women’s dress or a skirt) and *khmali* (saber) [Qapianidze, 2010: 315]. This term has presumably appeared among the museums’ employees and it is not found in the traditional terminology describing Georgian weapons.

It should be noted that E. von Lenz, the first to research this weapon, did not use the term “skirt” in his article. He described the scabbard as follows: “*Zum Schluss bleibt noch die trichterförmige Leder hülle zu bemerken (Abb. 22), welche den Samtüberzug der Scheide vor der Reibung am Sattel und Steigbügelriemen zuschützen hatte. Diese Art von Schutzhülle, deren der Chevalier de Gamba in*

seiner Reisebeschreibung vom Anfange des vorigen Jahrhunderts als im Kaukasus vorkommenderwähnt, und welche heute noch vereinzelt bei Kurden stämmenanzutreffenist, gehörtjetztzu den Seltenheiten und istallgemeinemüblichen, fest an der Scheide anliegenden Tuchüber zügegewichen, dessen lappenartige Enden in der Mitte der Scheide zusammengeknüpft wurden.”³

Four features define the *kabianikhmali*'s combat functions. First – the prominent inclination of the hilt toward the edge of a sword blade. Second – a hilt with no crossguard (open type). Third – the scabbard throat structure with a lengthened opening on one of the sides. This structure accommodates and protects the inclined hilt yet presents no hindrance to a fast withdrawal. Fourth – a specific positioning of rings for the sword harness (hangers) that provides for the weapon's suspension with the edge of the blade and the hook of the handle facing backward and up, which features are imperative for the fast withdrawal of this type of weapon, as we will show later.

It is the first feature that is the most eye-catching. Hilt inclination of different types of *kabianikhmali* varies from 20° up to 30 degrees. Even though this pronounced tilt or inclination had perplexed von Lenz, he pointed out historical analogies and authors who had addressed some of these analogies: “*Das Konstruktionsprinzip der in der Griffzunge gebrochenen Längsachse des Säbelsist von unseren führenden Autoritäten: Boeheim, Jahns, Hampel u. a. wohlbemerkt und gestreiftworden, besonder von lauteremdurch Hinweise auf Analogien hervorgehoben, doch stehteine systematische Erforschung sowohl der theoretischenwie der praktischen Seitedieser Erscheinungnoch.*“⁴[Lenz, 1912].

Further, von Lenz lists swords from a wide timeframe and from various cultures,

³ In translation: “In conclusion should be noted that the leather cover in a form of a cone (pic.22) was intended to protect the velvet scabbard cover from friction with the saddle and stirrup leathers. This type of protective mantle was mentioned by the Chevalier de Gamba in his description of his trip to Caucasus in the beginning of the last (*sic*) century. Such protection is still used by some Kurdish tribes; however, nowadays it is rare. Now this purpose is achieved by a fabric case tightly snuggling against the scabbard with its hanging ends fastened in the middle of the scabbard” [Lenz, 1912].

⁴ In translation “The design of the saber's longitudinal axis with such an inclination of a hilt was noticed and marked by our leading authorities on sabers – Boeheim, Jahns, Hampel and others. They could have given due indications to the analogies, but there were no systematic researches of this phenomenon either in theory or in a practical aspect” [Lenz, 1912].

which in his opinion reflect the western nations' acquaintance with this type of swords with tilted hilt and its practical usage. The listed archeological discoveries includes not only weapons – see 14th and 15th C. Circassian sabers excavated from burial mounds in the Western Caucasus; 8th to 10th C. Hungarian (Magyar) swords; and also different items of artistic craftsmanship – Sasanian silver dishes decorated with images of hands holding sabers (Iran), Hittite sculptures (Zicirli, Turkey), a belt buckle with a warrior figure (cave fortress of Rucha, Kumbulta, Ossetia), findings in the necropolis of the Italian township of Novilara, findings in the gravesite of Podol, near Zlatoverkho-Mikhailovsky monastery (Kiev, Ukraine), etc. In addition to these artifacts von Lenz mentions examples of edged weapon with hilts similarly tilted toward the edge of the blade that were used until recent times by peoples in Siberia, Asia and China.

Von Lenz's comments upon the design and function of the scabbard case fully coincide with the Western Georgian oral tradition about so-called "Mingrelian sabers". Traditionally these sabers are said to be a cavalry weapon. According to the above-mentioned tradition there were two ways in which a warrior could equip himself with a saber of this type. In the first, the saber was fixed on the man's left side, free or wrapped in left flap of the traditional Caucasian coat known as a *chokha* (Georgian) or *cherkesska* (Russian from *cherkes* (Circassian)). In the second way, the saber was attached to the horse's left flank, below the saddle, so it would be positioned between the rider's left foot and the horse. The question still remains – why was it necessary to complicate a scabbard design with a skirt-type case? Oral tradition offers a number of explanations, one of which might be correct. Among these is: the leather cone case was protecting the scabbard and the sword from accumulating the horse's sweat; this method allowed a scabbard be tightly squeezed against horse while withdrawing a saber from it without any need to hold the scabbard with the left hand. It is also possible that the skirt case eased the friction or distributed it between the rider's foot, scabbard and the horse's flank.

First of all, we shall find out either such an unusual practice of suspending a sword between the rider's leg and the horse's side really was practiced. Though de Gamba described such a practice in his travel notes, there are no indications for this motive in the Georgian iconography. Therefore, let's search the answer in the foreign arts

and graphics of 16th-18th C. depicting hunting or battle scenes. The best early European artwork that serves as an example of the subject under study is a painting by the Flandrian painter Roelant Savery “Polish cavalry traversing a wood” (1614; The Louvre, Paris).



Fig. 13. Roelant Savery “Polish cavalry traversing a wood” (1614; fragment)

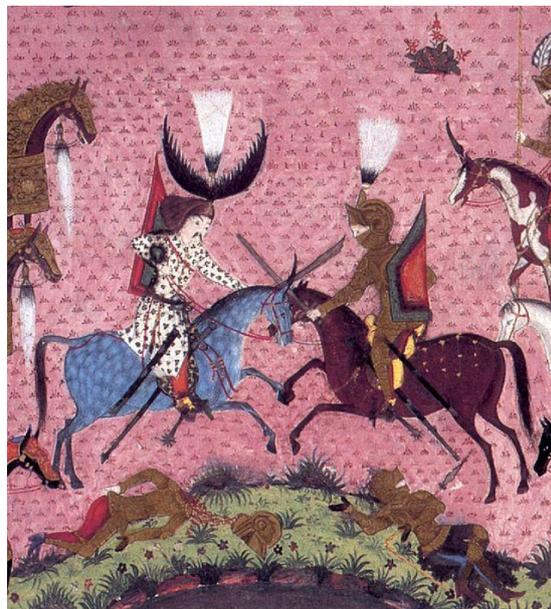


Fig. 14. The Fight between the Ottoman De (Suleiman-nama, mid. 16th C).

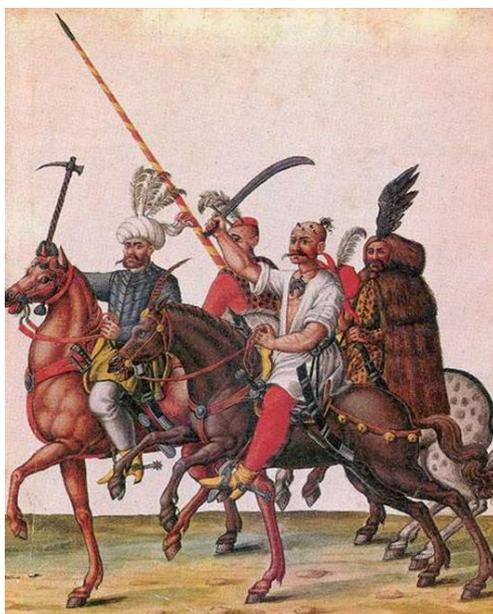


Fig.15. Turkish *delibashes* (*irregulares*). (Codex Vindobonensis, end of 16th C.).

It is quite an early painting evidently depicting a mounted soldier with a sword hanging under the saddle and located between the rider's leg and the horse's side. There is a difference only in one detail – the sword is hanging on the right side. However, in the works of Polish 18th-19th C. artists we can also find a sword shown located on the left side. In different examples it is either a long spear-tipped sword known as a *koncerz* (derived presumably from Tatar word *kandzar*), or a heavy saber depicted in the painting “Polish Winged Hussar in Armor” (Alexander Orlovsky, 1777-1832) and in “Polish Hussars” (Joseph Brant, 1841-1915). It is interesting that many existing *koncerz* swords have the so-called “pistol grip” form, i.e., with inclination from the imaginary blade axis.

It is possible to assume that the manner of such equipping of the stabbing *koncerz* or slashing heavy saber originally existed in Europe or what is more probable, it was borrowed from the military practices of the Ottoman Empire. Because it is from there that Polish and Hungarian cavaliers borrowed types of weaponry, technical terminology and even the tactics of a cavalry fight during the period of the Empire's expansion into Europe. There is strong evidence to suggest that the earliest images of such practices as the suspending of the sword below a saddle belong to the Turkish illustrated manuscript *Suleiman-nama* (Topkapi Museum, Istanbul) created during the reign of Sultan Suleiman I (1520 – 1566).

A more exuberant image of this type of a rider's outfit is represented by the illustrations from the *Codex Vindobonensis* (Austrian National Library). The creation of the codex was commissioned by Bartolomeo Pezzen, who from 1586 to 1591 served as ambassador to the Porte for Rudolph II, the Holy Roman Emperor.

Unfortunately, as was mentioned earlier, there are no surviving images of warriors with *kabianikhmali* in Georgian iconography. However, it is quite likely that due to close military and cultural contacts and the reciprocal influence of Western Georgia and the Ottoman Empire, such a manner of equipping the saber or broadsword became known and was adopted by the Georgians of the Samegrelo and Imereti regions, just as had happened in Europe.

In connection to our topic, Circassian sabers from the Western Caucasus are of great interest [Nagoev, 1981: 34-35] as Circassian lands were in close vicinity to Samegrelo and Imereti in Western Georgia, where, based on our suppositions, the

kabianikhmali type had emerged and evolved. But based on the study of specimens discovered during the excavations of the Belorechensk and Pyatigorsk grave mounds in southern Russia [Report, 1896: 5], the angle of hilt inclination on these sabers is not that significant in comparison with other *kabianikhmali*. Moreover, according to the illustrations in Georgian church and chant manuscripts of the 14th to 17th C. from the Dzhruchi monastery (Georgian National Manuscript Center, Tblisi/Psalms H-1665, Q-104, S-1347), a slight inclination of sword hilts was apparently known in Georgia.

Hungarian cavalry sabers found in Europe and dated to the 8th to 10th C. are the closest to Georgian broadswords and sabers in terms of slight blade curvature and significant inclination of the hilt toward the blade. This type also refers to a famous saber of Charles the Great (Charlemagne), King of the Franks, 768-814), at present held in the Austrian National Museum, Vienna. This saber was used as a coronation sword of French kings over the course of centuries [Hampel, 1897].



Fig. 16: Hungarian sword/saber hilts with crossguards:

1. Sword with a crossguard from the grave site of a famous Hungarian warrior, 10th C., Nitra, Slovakia. (Hungarian National Museum.)
2. Saber, 10th C., found in Trnovecnad Vahom, Talant region, Slovakia. (SAN Archeological Museum.)
3. Saber from a Hungarian warrior's gravesite, 10th C. (Hungarian National Museum).
4. Saber of Charles the Great.

Hungarian sword (No. 1) differs from the mentioned sabers by a slight incline of a tang (shank) toward the blade and by its two holes for hilt fastening. This specimen is amazingly similar to the above-mentioned Circassian sabers from the Belorechensk and Pyatigorsk grave mounds in the tang form and the bars of the crossguard, slightly tilted toward the blade. Hungarian sabers' blades (Nos. 2, 3)

are almost straight. The sabers' curvature is no more than 10 mm (perpendicular length from the blade's center to the projected line connecting crosspiece lower side and the blade's tip). Sword blades do not have a significant point and sometimes smoothly round up to a false edge.

The inclination of the hilts of some Hungarian sabers reaches that of the *kabiani-khmali*, i.e. 20°-25 degrees; however, the bend starts not from the guard line, but higher – at a distance of 1/3 of the hilt's whole length from the crossguard. The blade's tang is fixed in the hilt by means of a so-called hidden method and fastened with one rivet. The globular hilt pommel is slightly elongated to a tear-drop shape. One of the earliest known specimens of a saber with an inclined hilt is the saber of Charles the Great (No. 4), now in the former Imperial Treasury, in the Hofburg, in Vienna. [Hampel, 1897] A number of mutually exclusive fables about Charles the Great's finding of the saber do not clarify its origin. But this saber obviously shares the features of the Hungarian "Huns" saber. The mere fact of the existence of such sabers in the Western European area in 8th to 10th C. is of importance within the context of this article.

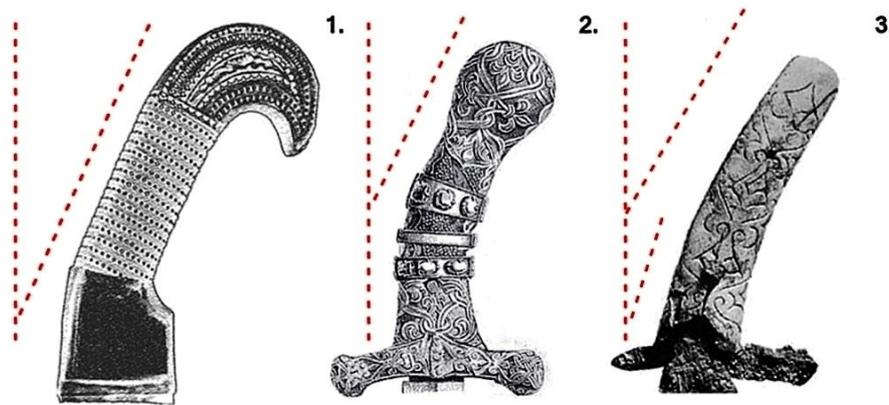


Fig. 17. Comparison of a *kabiani* hilt inclination angle (18th-19th C.) Charles the Great's Saber (8th to 11th C.), Hungarian saber from Trnovec (10th C.).

In considering the functional qualities and features of blades with inclined hilts it is impossible to ignore this phenomenon observed in European and American edged weapon of 19th to 20th C.

In 1812-1813 Nathan Starr, a sword-maker from Middletown, Connecticut got the first big governmental order in American history: to produce 10,000 sabers for cavalry dragoons, in the pattern developed by one William Rose. Starr's sabers in

this production order are distinguished by their significant curvature and hilt inclination toward the blade. The blades had an even lengthwise curvature from the crosspiece to the edge. The cross piece of the hilt is of an S-type and has a knuckle-guard. The hilt inclination angle toward the blade on the existing specimens varies within 10-15 degrees. This series of sabers had a poor decorative finish in comparison with those imported from Europe; thus they were considered too simple for issue to officers. Nevertheless, they proved to be a good combat weapon and were kept in service during the Anglo-American war of 1812-1815, the American-Mexican War of 1846-1848, and First, Second and Third Seminole wars of 1814-858 [Hopkins, 1940, Harold, 1965: 28-29].

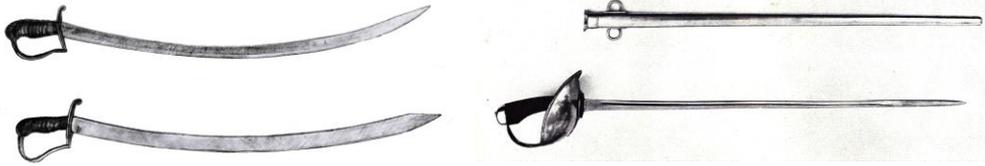


Fig.18-a. A saber by the American armorer Nathan Starr, 19th C.

Fig. 18-b. British cavalry sword; 1908.

We shall give one more interesting example from British practice. At the end of 19th C. the Cabinet's Military Committee members were discussing the necessity of developing a multifunctional British cavalry edged weapon that would meet all the requirements noted during the previous century. One of the major tasks was to design a cavalry weapon able to produce strong stabs without losing its cutting properties. Tests and evaluation were assigned to two well-known and reputable weapon-manufacturing firms – Wilkinson and Mole. In the course of work specially collected 19th C. European sabers were subjected to tests and analyses. The product of this hard work was a combat cavalry sword designed in 1908 and, following it, an officer-type sword designed in 1912. The suggested model was to have a single blade 35 inches long and 1 inch wide at the shoulder, with a regular taper to a spear point, with a strong back and fullered to within 9 inches of the point. It featured a hilt well-protected by full bowl, a knuckle-guard and a "pistol" handle grip, designed by Colonel G.M. Fox. The new weapon looked so unusual that King Edward VII was at first hesitant, and only after the advice of specialists it was finally approved for issue to all Cavalry troopers, with King Edward remarking that he "didn't really like the look of it" [Wilkinson, 1966: 50-51].

One feature of this sword that is of particular interest to us is its “pistol” grip, inspired by the combined analysis of sabers with inclined hilts. The sword’s service was not of long duration as it was created at the dawn of a new military and technological era, that totally changed the war tactics and strategy of the previous century. By the time new sword was in service on the battlefield “the cavalry charge was becoming more of a folly than a useful maneuver”. However, all the reports from officers and soldiers who had a chance to evaluate this new cavalry weapon helped experts to conclude that this “first sword that have ever been designed specifically from scratch for a purpose ... was without doubt the best sword with which any army in the world has ever been equipped” [Wilkinson, 1966: 50-51].

All the examples mentioned above do not in any way amount to a full historical list of sabers and broadswords with varying inclined-hilt designs, but they obviously prove that this design was a deliberate choice of different nations’ cavalry for more than a millennium. Final conclusions on the questions of the functional characteristics of edged weapon with open-type inclined hilts, particularly *kabianikhmali*, might be arrived upon the completion of broad-scope research. But even now the answer is partially given in E. Lenz’s suppositions in his 1913 article: “*The reason might have been in the calculated correction or modification of an obtuse angle formed between a wrist and a blade’s axis when an arm is straight, even if a wrist joint is significantly bent down. In other words: when a hilt is bent forward, the blade’s axis almost coincides with the horizontal arm level and the blade’s impact on the strike point is going in almost a perpendicular direction. Thus the strike impact increases and there is no loss on the strength of the pull as a result of the cutting edge’s curved bent*” [Lenz, 1912].

In the authors’ opinion the study of Western-Georgian sabers and broadswords with an open hilt bear significance for the full geographic range of Caucasian studies, as this weapon could not have appeared and existed independently from the regions of adjoining the Georgia, where similar types of weapon should have been developed under the same conditions and as a result of identical processes. Suggestions of the possible existence of an edged weapon of similar design both in Western Georgia and Northwest Caucasus, and particularly in the Circassian cultural area, are possibly quite close to the truth.

The 2-volume work entitled *The Nations of Russia* was published in 1811-1813 in Paris, with the assistance of Carl Rehberg, a Bavarian representative at the Russian court. It contained 96 hand-painted water-colored prints reproduced in aquatint, eau-fort and mezzotint techniques. The album was based on the drawings that Korneev Emelyan Mikhailovich (1780-1839) made during his travel through the Russian Empire in the period 1802-1805. The significance of these drawings can hardly be overestimated, the more so since the painter paid close attention to the details of arms, costumes and equipment. Among pictures depicting representatives of the Caucasian nations, one – “The Circassians” – is of special interest in light of our study.



Fig. 19. The Circassians

In this picture we can apparently see and identify a saber with an inclined hilt of the open type. Its connection to the existing Georgian pieces is obvious to the eye. Unfortunately, as of today, we don't know of any surviving examples of such Circassian sabers. During the 19th and 20th C. many tragic events and processes occurred in the Caucasus region, causing not only the disappearance of mere cultural items but sometimes of whole nations. We can only hope that such specimen may be found in future years in private foreign collections or perhaps in the museums in

those countries that offered refuge to the Circassian tribes expelled from their homelands in the 1860s.

Even though we do not have this missing link between the two types of weapon, yet the genealogical connection between the *kabianikhmali* and Circassian saber known today as the *shashka* is fully established by the three of four above-mentioned features of the Georgian weapon – open-hilt, the design of the scabbard mouth, and the identical arrangement of the weapon harness that dictated a certain positioning of the blade. This positioning, with the edge and the hook of the hand-piece facing up increased the chance of a faster first strike due to a shorter strike line to the target. This was achieved by the fact that the sword came to this line from the original position edge up. An open hilt in its turn allowed for faster withdrawal due to a technique that will be explained later.

The appearance of an open-hilt weapon was a logical response to the changes in military tradition and practices that had been taking place in the Caucasus and adjacent regions after the availability and use of firearms was spreading. Presumably, the appearance and transition to a new type of edged weapon was demanded by changes in the methods of personal and group cavalry combat. These changes were preceded by the wider distribution of firearms. This process coincided with dramatic geopolitical shifts and development in the Caucasian regions reacting to the rising rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia. In their turn, domestic Caucasian political and economic changes contributed to the strengthening of the raiding-party war system, which meant that a fast strike and then the rapid withdrawal of the raiding party became a key strategy. Such a system ensured that both the mounted and the foot soldier's arms and armor were getting lighter in order to increase mobility. Such changes influenced the development of new methods of sword application in attack and defense. The new techniques were not completely new but have already been prepared by the existing and well developed combat system of fighting with another traditional local weapon without a crossguard – a large Caucasian dagger called a *satevari*. That is why these systems are so similar in their technique and character. Defensive action in both systems is one of evading, not parrying, though parrying is also used but in very different manner than used with crossguard swords. Both systems favor an attempt to overtake opponent

with a speedier cutting strike and both are characteristically fast in resolving combats [Abazadze, 2007: 25].

Details from several songs from Georgian folklore heritage describe Caucasian guardless saber fighting in terms of lightning cuts. Another important detail is the very brief nature of such combat, providing quick and bloody resolution instead of a prolonged fencing bout. One of the examples directly illustrating our subject can be found in the song “Ambavsagetkvit”, where the characters use a *lekuri* saber, another type of open-hilt saber. The song tells about a fight between an infamous highwayman and a Georgian traveler. In response to an unforgivable insult the traveler whips out a *lekuri* saber, but the bandit beats him to the draw and strikes first [Svanidze, 1957: 47-48].

<i>Lekur hmals heli tsavavle</i>	<i>My hand reached to whip out my lekuri</i>
<i>Nachukar stsoli dzmisasa</i>	<i>A gift from the brother-in-law</i>
<i>Utsina eman momastsro</i>	<i>But he (the adversary) beat me to the draw,</i>
<i>Rishvasa hgavdes gytisasa</i>	<i>Swift like God's punishment,</i>
<i>Erti iseti gadavtshe</i>	<i>I struck him with such force that</i>
<i>Tsverma utsia mitsasa</i>	<i>My saber's point had hit the ground</i>
<i>tavs is mokvda da bolos me</i>	<i>He died first, and then I expired</i>

Note: the *lekuri* is related to the *kabianikhmali*: it is a saber of North Caucasian type, also an open-hilt type, and similar to the Circassian *shashka*.

A test of the Circassian *shashka*'s functional characteristics, conducted by a Kabardino-Balkar research group under the leadership and direct participation of the KBNM (the Kabardin-Balkar National Museum; Director Felix Nakov), independently proved the specific combat features of the above-mentioned weapon, which were earlier assumed only through the study of oral folklore and tradition. It was established that open-type hilt with no crossguard and a suspending harness allow the swordsman to withdraw and strike almost simultaneously.

“The flat of the hand slides along the abdomen and almost at once reaches the upper part of the scabbard. With a continuing further movement it encounters and catches the hook of the pommel... As the saber is hanging with the edge up, it increases its most important characteristic – the speed of the first strike” [Nakov,

2004, 39-40].

The withdrawal of the saber and strike could be executed in a single movement, with the hand establishing a firm grip as the blade is being pulled out of the scabbard. The withdrawing movement naturally brings the *shashka* to a striking position with edge of the blade up, and the strike is executed almost simultaneously. Thus, withdrawal is actually the beginning of an attack.

Speaking about the types of blade weapon similar to the *kabianikhmali* and the Circassian saber/*shashka* we need to mention Georgian sabers known as *cholauri* or the *Svanetian cholauri*. Cholauri is an ancient locality and community within Lentekhi, in the gorge of Svaneti's Tskhenisi-tskali river. Cholaur, together with two other settlements in Tskhenisitskali upper basin were historically under the patronage of the Dadiani family – the ruling dynasty of Samegrelo. At present, only a few types of *cholauri* are preserved. They have completely straight or slightly curved blades, both with open type (guardless), a very slightly inclined hilt topped by a beak-shaped pommel and blades with similar or more significant curvature, but with the hilt inclined to a somewhat greater extent. The beak-like shape of *cholauri* pommels is almost identical to the contours of the *kabianikhmali* pommel.

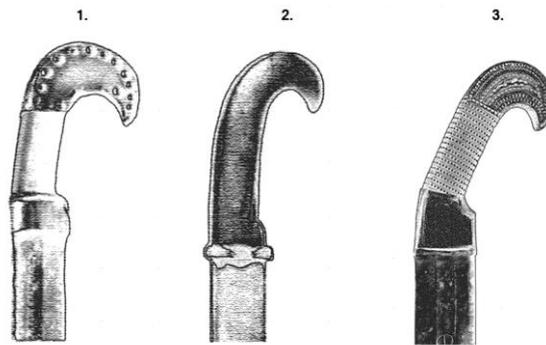


Fig. 20. Open-type hilts – comparison: *cholauri*/*cholauri*/*kabiani*.

In the figure above two types of hilt are presented: the *cholauri* and *kabianikhmali*. Despite obvious differences in the angle of inclination, all three specimens have common features – pommels are single piece, are of similar contours, and are not split or divided into halves or the so-called *ears* as on the northern Caucasus sabers known as *shashka*.

Sabers with open hilts can be found in the illustrations in late medieval Georgian manuscripts. Unfortunately, there is no image found with that clearly reminds the

viewer of a *kabianikhmali*. However, there is one detail worth our attention. An illustration in a western Georgian manuscript (GNM, S1347, dated to the end of the 17th C.) shows St George holding a weapon with blade slightly curved at the end, with a seemingly straight hilt with no crossguard. By the type of blade we can classify it as a Georgian *cholauri* saber. However, on the depicted weapon's pommel an artist made a stylized pattern reminiscent of a typical pattern found on *kabianikhmali* pommels. Another detail is also interesting: the warrior holds a scabbard with his left hand. This scabbard has a significantly inclined mouth, the same as found in *kabianikhmali* scabbards.

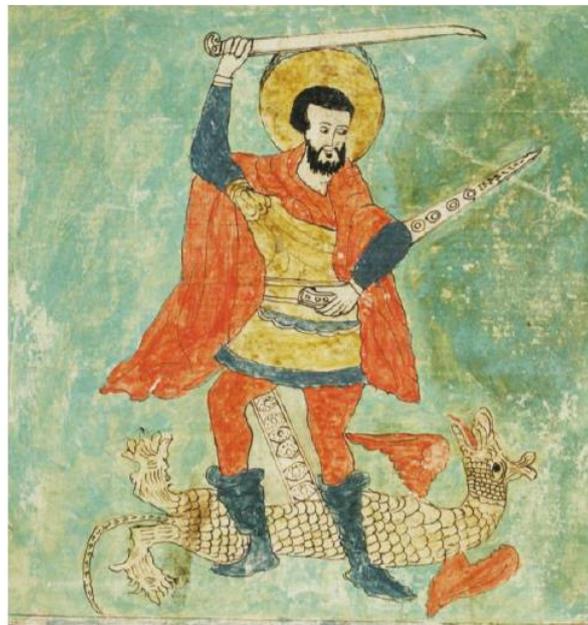


Fig. 21. St George defeats the dragon, 1791 / MS H1347.

At a certain point any research into Georgian weapon point leads to the examination of ancient texts and manuscripts. In this case, Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani's *Georgian Lexicon*, which he compiled between the late 17th C. and the early 18th C. is an important source of information. Two types of sabers related to the *kabianikhmali* – the *cholauri* and *lekuri*– are found in this important work. The *cholauri* and *lekuri* have both common and distinctive features. The *kabianikhmali* type – or Western Georgian saber – with an inclined hilt should have been in existence by the time the *Lexicon* was compiled: it is hard to imagine that this weapon with its more archaic blades and hilts appeared after the emergence of a North Caucasian type of saber. Indeed, the archaic form of the pommel clearly preceded the ear-type

pommel of the Caucasian *shashka*. N. Denisov also made this supposition in his work. Moreover, some specimens of broadswords with the signatures of Imeretian and Mingrelian dukes are attributed to the mid-18th C. [Anisimova, 2015]. All of these specimens share a specific hilt and scabbard design by which they are easily distinguished. If in the mid-18th C. this type of weapon was manufactured with such an elaborate and unique design, which obviously was well established, we can therefor assume that this weapon had appeared at least several decades earlier. Yet term *kabianikhmali* cannot be found in the *Lexicon*; it appeared only at the beginning of the 20th C. among museum employees. To what type of weapon shall we place the *kabianikhmali*, according to old terminology?

Lekuri per the *Lexicon*'s definition it is a "saber of the Lek type with no crossguard" [Orbeliani, 1991], in other words a Lezgin or Dagestanian saber. We may possibly attribute the weapon under study to the *cholauri* type. The final answer to this question may be given only after the course of further research.

The authors are sure that guardless Western Georgian weapon was not a strictly local phenomenon, but that it had emerged as a result of the processes taking place in the neighboring regions. Despite the social structural differences among Caucasian states, dukedoms and independent communities they were in fact parts of interconnected culturally related units of an entity that may be called the Caucasian Ecumene. This cultural area was a breeding ground that saw thousands of years of interchange in the production technologies, metallurgy, crafts, religions traditions and artistic styles. It was there that the types of weapon and military outfits were emerging and being mastered. It is due to this close cooperation that the Circassian *shashka* gained its fame and replaced other types of long-blade weaponry.

It is at present difficult to answer the question: which of two forms of an open-hilt sword type preceded the other – straight or inclined? But we definitely may assume that by the end of the 17th C. in the western regions of Caucasus – Georgia and Circassia – the process of the emergence of new weapon was already ongoing and that in the course of time the least effective types of swords were being replaced. Imeretian and Mingrelian guardless sabers/broadswords with inclined hilts and Svanetian *cholauri* were gradually giving place to the more successful form – the North Caucasian type of saber. By the 1870s they were totally replaced and

were kept in family arsenals only as ancestral or memorial weapons. The Svanetian *cholauri* remained in use for a longer period, and was preserved in this hard of access mountainous region of Western Georgia just as archaic forms of Khevsurian broadswords were preserved in the eastern Georgian region of Khevsureti.

In conclusion, it must be noted that in the *kabianikhmali* examples we have studied we find all types of blades existing in Georgia within the stated period. In addition to imported European blades and their local imitations, there are also types of original Georgian blades, including those mentioned in Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani's *Lexicon*. All the mentioned blades were greatly valued for their quality; they were highly appreciated and in constant demand in the production of assault weapons [Qapianidze, 2010: 315, Orbeliani, 1991]. Given the circumstances of Georgian historical reality, using such blades for a non-functional weapon would be an unforgivable waste, and as such is impossible. Another important observation is about *kabianikhmali* scabbards. Many of those that have survived do not have the velvet cover that required protection against rubbing friction, as was supposed by some of the mentioned researchers. Instead, these scabbards are entirely leather and have traces of hard wear and deterioration caused by exposure to horse sweat. It clearly shows that a *kabianikhmali* was in direct contact with horse's flank and that it had its cone-like leather mantle not as mere ceremonial embellishment but as real protection. Taking in consideration the care of blades that was habitual in the Caucasus and the manner of suspending *kabianikhmali* below the saddle it is obvious that this way blade was guarded against exposure to horse sweat that could be harmful to the blade. In the authors' opinion, all mentioned details, as well as results of already conducted tests and historical parallels mentioned in the article, indicate functional for-combat character of this weapon.

Even though the *kabianikhmali* belongs to the Western Georgian historical heritage, this type of weapon has an important place in the weapons genealogy of the entire Caucasian region. Along with the Svanetian *cholauri* it is an intermediate link between its predecessors – Caucasian broadswords and sabers with a crossguard – and the so-called Circassian *shashka*, a masterpiece crowning the genealogical line of edged weapon of Caucasus.

The authors' research on *kabianikhmali* and study of its historical parallels is still

in progress. Future research includes a series of tests designed to establish the functional specification of this type of weapon.

Appendix

The parameters of some broadswords and sabers presented in figs. 1-9

1) Mingrelian broadsword (inventory no. 7326).

Inscription on the hilt in the Georgian *mkhedruli*⁵ script reads “David Dadiani.”

Total length of the broadsword: 85 cm; blade length: 72 cm; hilt length: 14 cm; blade width at the *ricasso*: 3.8 cm. The original case and one throat are lost.

The sword blade has three fullers, with the middle one having a triple stamp mark; above the fullers along the false edge is a row of “toothed” stampings sometimes called “eyelash” or “sickle” *marks* are placed on top of metal cracks. Some of them were either badly stamped or gradually wore out during filing and polishing. On the right side “sickle” *marks* are stamped with sides up, and on the left, with sides down. A triple stamp in the middle fits in within the northern Italian brand marks of the 16th to 17th C. As Behaim suggests, the brand belongs to one of the Brescian masters of edged weapon. “Sickle” *marks* along the spine reminds one of the known *gorda* stamp in its general form. However, they are significantly different in details from this brand: not half-round, but half-oval form, with steeply bent thickened ends. In the first place, these rows of “toothed sickle” stamps serve to cover the cracks near the false edge, which probably appeared during the forging process. Despite differences in details the broadsword’s ornamental line and stamp type generally fit in with the Italian items of the 16th to 17th C. Maybe this blade was indeed manufactured in the Caucasus (in Georgia) in the 16th to 17th C. or later, in the first part of the 18th C. It is also possible that the eastern (Georgian) master had known the stamps and ornaments of certain Italian swords now lost and not known to us today.

Hilt pommels are covered with stamped silver; from the right and left side amid the ornament there is a stylized image of a fish grasped in a hand – ancient symbol of power. The upper parts of the broadsword and saber (# 7327) pommels are decorated with various patterns” [Denisov, 1956].

2) Imeretian saber (inventory no. 7327)

⁵ *Mkhedruli* is the third type of Georgian script. *Mkhedruli*, literally meaning “cavalry” or “military”, derives from *mkhedari*, meaning “horseman”, “knight”, “warrior” and “cavalier”. Like the two other Georgian scripts, *Mkhedruli* has no upper case.

The inscription on the hilt, in Georgian *mkhedruli* script, reads: “BezhanTsereteli”
Total length: 80 cm; blade length: 68 cm; width at the *ricasso*: 3.7 cm; at the *yalman* (widened top part of blade) width 4.5 cm.

“It has a shortened blade with a small *yalman* and double-sloped *ricasso*; judging by its form the saber reminds one of early Turkish sabers of the 16th -17th C., without fullers and ornaments but, due to the sharp rounding of the edge at the tip toward false edge, a slight curvature and a specific *ricasso* with flowery ornament, a hexagram star in a circle and a bird, this saber is closer to the work of Balkan people“ [Denisov, 1956].

The Tsereteli dukes played a prominent role in Imereti since the end of the 16thC. They achieved a powerful position and strong influence by the mid-17th C., during the rule of Solomon I, and kept this power till the elimination of the Imeretian kingdom. Their possessions included the Dzhruchi monastery – the place of origin of the manuscript mentioned in the article. The Tseretelis achieved right to inherit and keep the position of the *sardal*⁶ in Upper Imereti. Judging by the blade this broadsword was assembled in the 18th C.

Dukes with name Bezhan were known from the beginning of the 18th C, namely Bezhan Tsereteli, son of Kaikhosro (brother of the military leader Kveli Tsereteli) and Bezhan Tsereteli, son of Kveli.

3) Mingrelian broadsword: *shashka* or *Pallasch-schaschka* (inventory no. 7323)

Mass 790 g. Total length: 86.1 cm; blade length: 73.8 cm; width: 5.2 cm. Blade has a *gorda* stamp, 18th C. From the former collection of Duke A.I. Shakhovskoy.

Presented to the Livrustkammaren Museum, Stockholm, Sweden, in 1920.

The broadsword’s hilt has an inscription in the *Mkhedruli* script. An old Georgian manner of writing is primarily shown by the fact that vowels in some words are omitted in accordance with the existing rules. These contractions – *karagma* – were often used in inscriptions on weapon; it is an old tradition, and examples can be found in Sul Khan-Saba Orbeliani’s *Lexicon*. As per Professor T. Bolkvadze, some words of the inscription are written in such a way that they could be pronounced

⁶ *Sardal* originates from the Indo-Persian *sardar*. In Georgian this term meant the general, leader of armed forces.

only in western Georgian dialects. One of several interpretations is the most probable: “K: for me, Svimon, the King bestowed to draw near the grace and engirdled (me) with the enemy’s blood spiller.” As was mentioned earlier [Anisimova, 2015], following tradition the letter K (an abbreviation for Kriste –Christ) was usually placed before the text. As we can see from the text, one Svimon was given the honor, and the Tsar engirdled him with a gift – a sword. “Enemy blood spiller” here refers to a sword without inscribing the word “sword” itself. The poetic practice of replacement of a noun with a pictorial or descriptive phrase is not uncommon in inscriptions on Georgian swords. The inscription on the broadsword from the VIMAIVS collection described below under No.5, provides a similar example. Here we find the name “the Salvational“ referring to the sword⁷³.

4) Imeretian broadsword (inventory no. 2965)

Total length: 91 cm; blade length: 78 cm. The sword’s hilt has an inscription in the *mhedrulis* script – “Nestori Tsereteli,” and an inscription on the scabbard: “Vladimir Vasilievich Levashov.” Apparently it was presented to the Russian Count Levashov, a major-general at that time, in 1862 -1866, by the Georgian Prince Nestor Dmitrievich Tsereteli, Major-General of His Majesty’s Escort, Marshal of the Nobility in the Province of Kutaisi, on the occasion of Count Levashov’s appointment to the position of military governor of Kutaisi (Imereti, Western Georgia).

5) Imeretian broadsword (inventory no. 109375)

Total length: 88 cm; blade length: 74.7 cm; Blade width: 4.2 cm; scabbard length: 86.2 cm. Presented by Queen Anna Orbeliani-Bagrationi to Kaikhosro Baratashvili, Commander of her Escort, approximately within 1784 – 1789.

Single straight blade. Wide central fuller from the hilt up to the middle of the blade. On both sides of the hilt are engraved inscriptions in *mhedruli* script [Anisimova, 2015]

A lyrical inscription reads: first side - “Queen of Queens Anna, blessed up to the heavens by all Imeretian people. Condescended to me, devoted to her and...”.

Second side: “ready to spill the blood (for her sake), me – Kaikhosro Baratashvili,

⁷³Translation and analysis of the inscription – Tinatin Bolkvadze, Giuli Abashidze. Original photos of the broadsword and crosspiece with the inscription were taken from the archive of the Livrustkammaren Museum, Stockholm, Sweden in cooperation with K. Rivkin.

she generously endowed with this Salvational.”

“Salvational’ here refers to a broadsword according to a lyrical twist.

6) King Solomon II, broadsword (ref.no. 2810)

This broadsword was presented to the King by Chidzhavadze family representative at the end of the 18th C. Legend has it that the broadsword was forged in one of the settlements of Samtskhe Saatabago – Machakhela (from the museum’s written sources– 192, no.1679).

“The mentioned sword is recorded in the museum’s reference book as a *kaldim*... Sword’s length: 87 cm; sword blade is straight with a width of 5 cm. From both sides of the false edge we can see closely placed round and oval stamps typical of the Georgian masters’ products. The blade ends in a sharp point. The silver parts of the scabbard are decorated with specific carved and embossed low-relief ornament. The silver-clad hilt is characteristically inclined and decorated with carved ornamentation and granulation; it has a mark stamp “David” [Qapianidze, 2012]

7) Mingreliansaber (inventory no. 98 – 10) *kabianikaldi*

Total saber length: 89 cm; from the edge to the hilt, lower part: 78 cm; blade width at the hilt, lower end: 3.2 cm; at middle of blade: 3 cm; blade inclination: perpendicular distance from the center of the blade to the imaginary projected line connecting the blade with the hilt base: 3 cm. Open-hilt type; hilt inclination approximately 23° – 25°. Decoration: pseudo-granulation, filigree, blackening. Saber weight: 600 g. There is no scabbard. There are stamp marks on the both sides of the blade. Has the wolf-image mark of the Georgian (Caucasus) type (not to be confused with the wolf-image mark of the Passau and Zolingen types), made by number of chiseled short strokes. On the other side is the Royal *kaldimi* stamp mark (an orb with a cross) made with cut-in inlay technique [Ferrario, 1816].

8) Kabianikhmali broadsword (ref. no. 28 – 10), 1700-1750.

Blade length: 91 cm.

9) Broadsword. Georgia. 18th C.(ref. no KP-872)

Steel, white metal, copper alloy, wood, velvet, leather. Forging, encrustation, granulation. Length without scabbard: 85 cm; blade length 71.5 cm; width: 3.5 cm. Steel blade, straight, forged with three narrow fullers. The blade has a “gazelle” stamp. The hilt is significantly inclined, in shape similar to the hilt of Caucasian

shashka saber. The pommel is decorated with granulation. The scabbard mouth is lined with red velvet. Two throats of copper alloy, carved. White metal pommel. Wooden scabbard, lined with red-colored leather. There are remnants of the case with copper buttons. It represents ceremonial weapon of the Georgian nobility of the 18th C.⁸

⁸ based on the Museum's description.

<http://www.alabin.ru/alabina/exposure/collections/weapon#kavkaz>

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