Some 15 miles northwest of Tbilisi stands the ancient Georgian city of Mtskheta, the first capital of the east Georgian kingdom of Iberia. Situated at the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers, Mtskheta contains the late antique palace and cemetery complex of Samtavro, while nearby the earlier fortress and acropolis of Armazistsikhe overlooks the city. However, Mtskheta’s enduring importance for Georgians may be attributed to the presence of Svetiskhoveli cathedral, long regarded as the holiest place in all Georgia. According to Georgian tradition, a pious Jew of the first century named Elias brought back Christ’s robe to Mtskheta from Jerusalem. Elias’s sister, Sidonia, was so overcome with joy when she grasped the robe that she died instantly, and the robe had to be buried with her since no one could loosen her grip even in death. From Sidonia’s grave a huge tree grew up, and when, in the fourth century, St. Nino encouraged the newly-converted king Mirian III to build a church, columns for the new structure were made out of timber from the tree. One of the pillars could only be put in place through St. Nino’s prayers, and this column exuded miraculous power for healing, thereby giving the church its name, Svetiskhoveli, or “the life-giving pillar.”

1 This article arose from a paper that was presented as “Shifting Religious Adherence & Geo-Political Competition in Late Antiquity: Vakhtang Gorgasali of Iberia and Yusuf As’ar Yath’ar of Himyar,” Group and Religion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: A Workshop Organized by the Group for the Study of Late Antiquity, Princeton University, April 17, 2009. I am grateful to all those who generously shared with me their suggestions and assistance: Glen Bowersock, Peter Brown, Niko Chocheli, Christina Maranci, Hagith Sivan, Mark Humphries, and Basil Lourié.

2 The fullest Georgian version of the introduction of Christianity to the Iberian kingdom may be found in the corpus of texts known collectively as The Conversion of K’art’li (mok’c’evay k’art’lisay), embedded within the History of the Kings of K’art’li; text in ი. აბულაძე, ძველი ქართული აგიოგრაფიული ლიტერატურის ძეგლები [I. Abuladze, Monuments of Ancient Georgian Hagiographical Literature] Vol. 1 (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1963), 81-163; trans. by R. W. Thomson in Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84-145. Both the Conversion of K’art’li and the History of the Kings of K’art’li probably date from the seventh-ninth centuries (though
Drawing near to the altar area, one notices very prominently in the floor a cenotaph frequently adorned with fresh flowers. This cenotaph marks the traditional gravesite of Vakhtang Gorgasali, the late-fifth-century sainted king of Iberia. He acquired his sobriquet of Gorgasali because of the distinctive helmet he wore bearing the face of a wolf. “Gorgasali” was thought to derive from a Persian term for “wolf’s head.” Tales of Vakhtang’s martial prowess, his Christian piety, his sense of duty, and his justice as a ruler abounded during the medieval period, so much so that the success of medieval Georgian rulers was often measured against the high standard set by Vakhtang Gorgasali. By the twelfth century, Georgian historical writers had coined an adjective which was invoked whenever they wanted to pay the supreme compliment to their monarch—gorgasalian. This term