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Coats of Arms of Georgian Cities Created in Russian Empire

Annotation: The main aim of this article is to investigate coat of arms of Georgian cities and towns created during Russian Imperial rule in the XIX-XX cc. through the lenses of that time socio-political and cultural context. Russian civic heraldry in Georgia was directly serving and openly reflecting Imperial propaganda. It was conveying ideological messages through the heraldic symbols. It was also promoting existence of common grounds between Georgian and Russian nations, especially the shared religion – Orthodox Christianity, as well as joint fighting against same enemies. This was mixed with a glorification of imperial might and promotion of bringing peace and welfare in the region. From another side, Russian heraldry authorities were by any means successfully attempting to veil national Georgian emblematic traditions and heraldic heritage by emphasizing on placing architectural features, geographical characteristics, or main professions or occupations of the local population in the coats of arms. Only a few rare exclusions from these mainstream approaches could be identified among the XIX c. coats of arms of Georgian cities. Despite its ideological role, creation of coats of arms for Georgian cities by Russian Imperial authorities also played a positive role for Georgian heraldry, because, while Georgia had original tradition in family, state, or provinces heraldry, civic coats of arms were unknown in the country prior to the annexation by Russian Empire in 1801. The author comes to the conclusion that civic heraldry of Russian Empire in Georgia played a considerable role in the XIX c. socio-political life of Georgian territories under Russian rule by strengthening Tsarist propaganda messaging through heraldic symbols and eliminating any traces of ancient Georgian heraldry or emblematic traditions.

Keywords: Georgia, city heraldry, Georgian heraldry, 19th century, Caucasus, Tbilisi, Kutaisi

Herby miast gruzińskich utworzone w Imperium Rosyjskim

Streszczenie: Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest analiza herbów miast i miasteczek gruzińskich, powstałych w okresie carskiej Rosji w XIX-XX wieku, w kontekście sytuacji społeczno-politycznej i kulturowej. Rosyjska heraldyka miejska w Gruzji bezpośrednio służyła i otwarcie odzwierciedlała imperialną propagandę. Przekazywała przesłania ideologiczne za pośrednictwem symboli heraldycznych. Promowała również istnienie wspólnej płaszczyzny między narodami gruzińskim i rosyjskim, zwłaszcza wspólną religię – prawosławie – a także wspólną walkę z tymi samymi wrogami. Łączyło się to z gloryfikacją potęgi imperialnej i promowaniem pokoju i dobrobytu w regionie. Z drugiej strony, rosyjskie władze heraldyczne z powodzeniem próbowały ukryć narodowe tradycje symboliczne Gruzji i dziedzictwo heraldyczne, kładąc nacisk na umieszczanie w herbach elementów architektonicznych, geograficznych lub głównych zawodów i zajęć miejscowej ludności. Wśród herbów gruzińskich miast z XIX wieku można zidentyfikować jedynie nieliczne wyjątki od tych dominujących podejść. Pomimo swojej roli ideologicznej, tworzenie herbów dla miast gruzińskich przez władze carskiej Rosji odegrało również pozytywną rolę w heraldyce gruzińskiej, ponieważ podczas gdy Gruzja miała pierwotne tradycje heraldyki rodzinnej, państwowej lub prowincjonalnej, herby miejskie były nieznane w kraju przed aneksją przez Imperium Rosyjskie w 1801 roku. Autor dochodzi do wniosku, że heraldyka miejska Imperium Rosyjskiego w Gruzji odegrała znaczącą rolę w XIX-wiecznym życiu społeczno-politycznym terytoriów gruzińskich pod panowaniem rosyjskim, wzmacniając carski przekaz propagandowy za pomocą symboli heraldycznych i eliminując wszelkie ślady starożytnej heraldyki gruzińskiej lub tradycji symbolicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Gruzja, heraldyka miejska, heraldyka gruzińska, XIX wiek, Kaukaz, Tbilisi, Kutaisi

Introduction

The main aim of this article is to investigate coat of arms of Georgian cities and towns created during Russian Imperial rule in the XIX-XX cc. through the lenses of that time socio-political and cultural context. To achieve this, it will be necessary not only to describe civic coats of arms of Georgia, but also briefly characterize the epoch in which these armorials were created, and to have a short overview of introduction and development of heraldry in Georgia.

From the very beginning of the XIX c. Russian Empire began gradual occupation of Georgian kingdoms and Principalities. In 1801 literally under barrels of Russian cannons, abolition of eastern Georgian Qartli-Kakheti Kingdom and annexation of all of its lands by Russian Empire was officially announced, marking start of a long process of establishment of Russian rule in the country and in the whole South Caucasia. By 1830-ies most of Georgian lands were under Russian control and sovereignties of local rulers were annulled. This is the moment when creation of coat of arms of Georgian cities by Russian Imperial authorities begins.



a1. Attributed coat of arms of Georgia from Grünenberg's Wappenbuch. 1480.



a2. Coats of arms of Kingdom of Imereti. An example of provincial coats of arms created by Prince Vakhushti Bagrationi. 1735.¹

¹ ვახუშტი ბაგრატიონი. საქართველოს ატლასი. (XVIII ს.). მეცნიერებათა აკადემიის გამ. თბ. 1997 წ. პ. 2-3. (Vakhushti Bagrationi, *Atlas of Georgia. (XVIII century)*, Press of the Academy of Sciences, Tbilisi



a3. One of the first Georgian coats of arms on the one of the first printed books in Georgia "The Book of the Acts of the Apostles". 1709.²

As civic heraldry naturally is connected to administrative entities of a state, it is important to briefly describe administrative structure of Imperial rule in Georgia. Immediately after annexation, so called Georgian Guberniya (Russian equivalent of governorate) was created. Later after occupation of Western Georgian Kingdom of Imereti, District (Oblast) of Imeretia was also established in 1811. In course of spreading of Russian control in South Caucasia, different Guberniyas and Districts were conjoined into Gruzino-Imeretinksaya Guberniya in 1840, which by itself again was soon substituted by Tiflis (Tbilisi) Guberniya and Qutaisi (Kutaisi) Guberniya on the territory of Georgia. The guberniyas were divided by so called "u'ezd", i.e., a county or a small district (in Georgian – "mazra"). In addition, separate larger districts – "oblast" also existed, for example in Georgian territory such was a District of Batumi.

Heraldry spread in Georgia much later after its birth in the Western Europe. The first coats of arms related to Georgian lands were so called attributed armorials created in Europe, such as for example Georgia related armorials from the XV c. Grünenberg's

1997, p. 2-3.)

² ქართული წიგნი. ბიბლიოგრაფია. (1629-1920 წწ.). ტ. I. თბ. 1941 წ. p. 12. (*Georgian book. Bibliography. (1629-1920). Vol. I. Tbilisi, 1941. p. 12.*)

Wappenbuch.³ Later, in the XVII c. the first real coats of arms for Georgian kingdoms appear in various sources.⁴ This was followed by spread of state, territorial (i.e. land or provincial) and family heraldry in Georgia in the XVIII c. However, despite development of all different segments of heraldry in Georgia, city coats of arms or so called civic heraldry never been established in the country during its independence. This can probably be explained by the reality that while typical western European feudal system flourished in Georgia, European style “burgs” independent self-governed cities never developed in Georgian lands. Therefore, historical bases for creation of municipal, city coats of arms did not exist. Consequently, the first armorials of Georgian cities and municipalities were created only in the XIX c. during Russian Imperial rule in Georgia.

The main sources for study of civic coats of arms of Georgia under Russian Empire are archives of РГИА (State Historical Archive of Russia in St. Petersburg), works of different Russian or Georgian authors on the subject created before or after Russian communist revolution and some material sources from everyday life of Georgia in the XIX c.

In the following chapters emergence and development of coat of arms of Georgian cities and towns will be discussed chronologically together with the interpretations of reasoning behind certain symbols or heraldic compositions used by Russian authorities for Georgian civic heraldry.

Projects of the first coat of arms of Georgian cities and towns in the beginning of the XIX c.

The first known attempt to create coats of arms of Georgian cities and towns was made in the beginning of the XIX c. After above mentioned annexation of Georgian lands and defeating several anti-Russian rebellions in different regions of Georgia, apparently Imperial administration decided it already was possible to initiate process of creation of new regional and municipal coats of arms what was a usual routine in that time Russia. Besides being a standard routine, this process also had a political substance, symbolizing complete inclusion of the new lands into the Empire. The initiative of creating civic coats of arms can be considered in line with Russian Generals and Governor of Caucasia, Aleksey Yermolov's activities of developing Georgian economic, social and cultural spheres, which projects were conducted in parallel with his brutal military campaigns.

In this context, in 1843, so called project of the first Georgian civic coats of arms were created by Russian authorities. Interestingly, during that period the Governor and Chief Administrator of Georgia and Caucasia was General Aleksey Yermolov

³ *Das Conrad Grünenberg-Wappenbuch facsimile*, R. Stillfried & A.M. Hildebrand, 1875-1883, Steen Clemmensen, Conrad Grünenberg's Wappenbuch, Farum, Denmark, 2009, p. 95-96.

⁴ *Царский титулярник. Большая государственная книга или Корень российских государей*, Российский Государственный Архив Древних Актов, Ф. 135. Отд. V. Рубр. III. № 7 (№ 401), р. 64; И. Г. Корб, *Дневник путешествия в Московию: (1698 и 1699 гг.): с приложением 19 рис. на отдельных листах и указателей*, пер. и примеч. А. И. Малеина, Санкт-Петербург: издание А. С. Суворина, 1906, р. 24.

(1772-1861), who became infamous because of brutality used to suppress one another patriotic uprising in the western Georgian province of Guria. In 1819 Yermolov personally proposed an initiative to create coats of arms of Georgia and Georgian cities-district centers under Russian Empire.⁵ It is a rather bitter irony of history, that the person who was hated by local population due to his harsh character and methods in combat and politics, at the same time granted Georgia its first examples of civic heraldry, even though those were created by occupying authorities.

These first examples of Georgian civic coats of arms are named as “projects”, because they never have been officially adopted by Russian authorities. It is not absolutely definitely known how the projects looked. The most realistic version is a possibility that these “projects” of Georgian cities’ coats of arms are published in Mikheil Vadbolski’s well-known monograph⁶ without detailed explanation of their origins given by the author. Unfortunately, Vadbolski did not specify dates or creators of those coats of arms. By the style, they more or less look like early XIX c. armorial examples of Russian civic arms.

Illustrations presented below, represent the projects of coats of arms of Georgian cities provided by M. Vadbolski, which, with considerable certainty, could be the projects designed based on General Yermolov’s initiative in 1819 on creation of civic armorials of Georgia and its cities.



b1. Tiflis (Tbilisi) Guberniya⁷

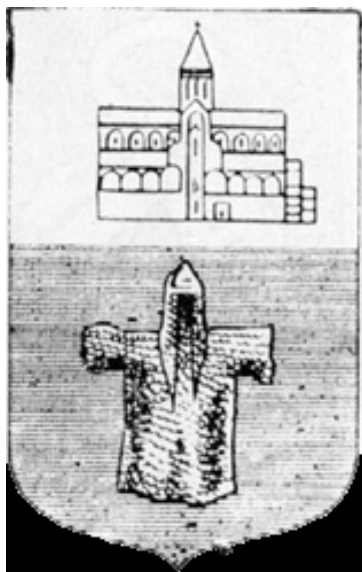


b2. Qutaisi (Kutaisi) District (oblast)

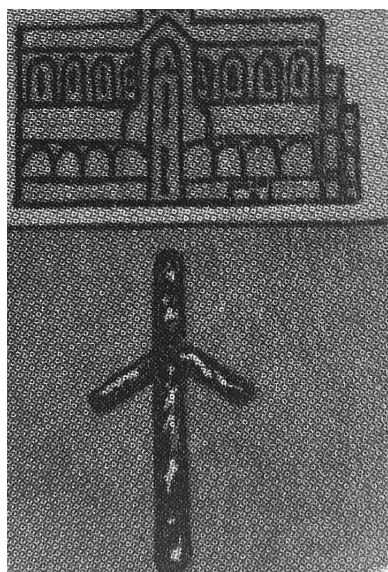
⁵ Н.А. Соболева, *Российская городская и областная геральдика XVIII-XIX вв.*, Москва 1981, p. 125-140, <https://gerboved.ru/t/1741> Accessed: 2025-03-01; Центральный Государственный Исторический Архив, ф. 1343, оп. 15, д. 117, л. 49 – 51.

⁶ მიხეილ ვადბოლსკი. საქართველოს ჰერალდიკური სიმბოლიკა. გამ. „ხელოვნება“. თბ. 1980 წ. (Mikheil Vadbolski, *Heraldic Symbolism of Georgia*, Pub. “Art”, Tbilisi 1980.)

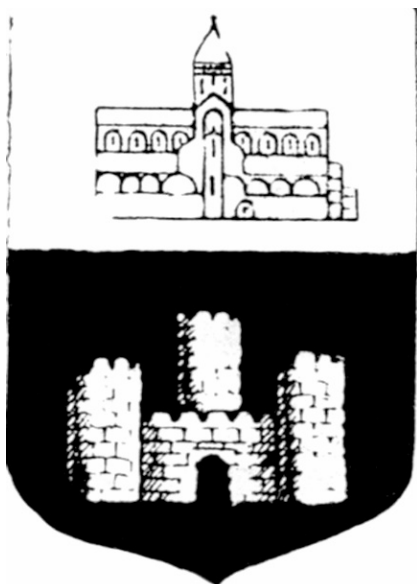
⁷ All illustrations of this section are from the same source – მიხეილ ვადბოლსკი. საქართველოს ჰერალდიკური სიმბოლიკა. გამ. „ხელოვნება“. თბ. 1980 წ. (M. Vadbolski, op. cit.).



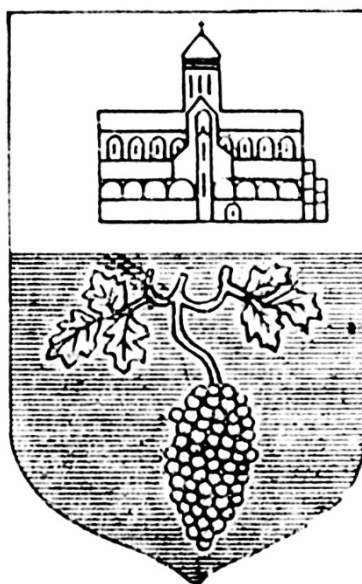
b3. Tush-Pshav-Khevsureti County (Geo: mazra)



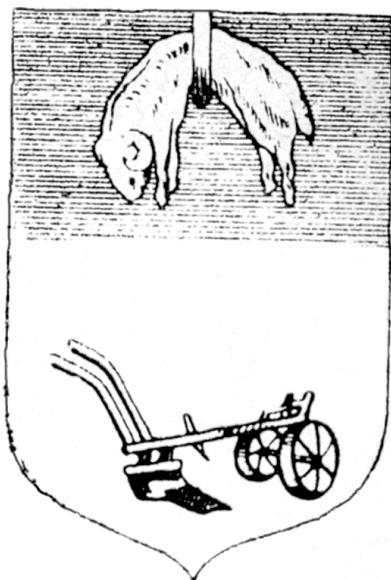
b4. Tiflis city



b5. Gori



b6. Telavi



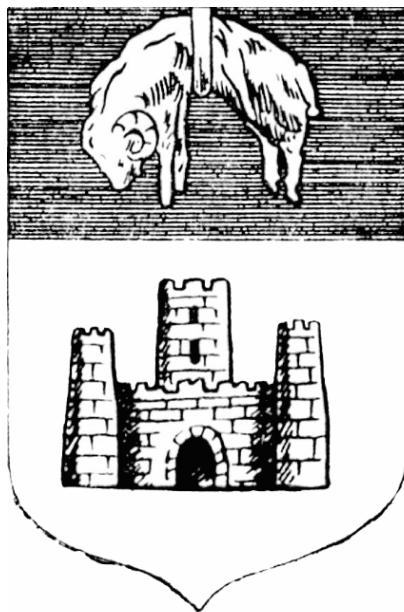
b7. Akhaltsikhe



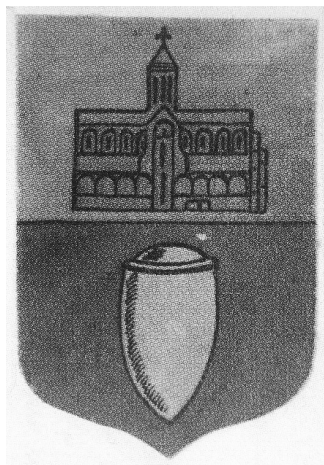
b8. Oni



b9. Ozurgeti



b11. Shorapani



b10. Signaghi

As can be seen, almost all coats of arms are divided *per fess*, only with one simple charge in each part of the shields. Symbology is mainly connected to signature buildings of the given cities or typical businesses – mainly agricultural, in the areas. These versions of Georgian civic coats of arms do not reveal traces of Imperial ideology so archetypal for Russian state or civic heraldry, as it can be seen in the other variants discussed later. It is easily noticeable that the main charges of Tbilisi and Qutaisi armorials are placed in the upper part of smaller cities' and towns' coats of arms. This was a long standing heraldic practice in Russian civic heraldry till the second part of the XIX c.

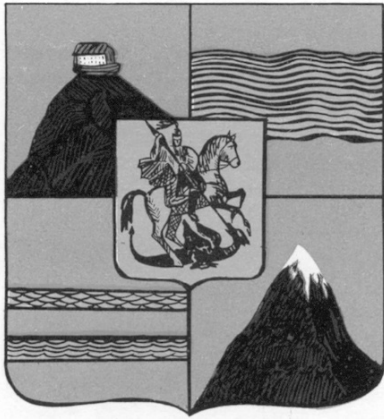
The charges in the second, lower parts of the shields, individual to each coat of arms, are politically neutral. In some cases they represent either history, or traditions of the given Georgian regions, existed long before Russian intervention. For instance, chainmail armor in coat of arms of Tush-Pshav-Khevsureti is known to be used in this historic province since early Middle Ages, just as clay amphoras from the coat of arms of Signaghi were traditionally used in Georgia since even pre-historic times for making and keeping wine under a ground. By the way, such wine making and keeping technology is till today widely used in Georgia. The golden fleece of Kutaisi coats of arms also obviously derived from Hellenic epoch of Georgian history, connected to the legend of Argonauts. The church in Tbilisi and so called St. Nino's (baptizer saint of Georgia) cross, respectively from the guberniya and city coats of arms of Tbilisi are not only sacred religious emblems, but also prominent national identity symbols too. It must be also noted though, that no signs of old Georgian heraldry or symbols and emblems can be identified in these coats of arms, the authors, whoever they were, either did not know their existence or totally ignored those.

All of above discussed: from one side – absence of Imperial propaganda in the projects and from another – traces of Georgian ancient history and traditions among

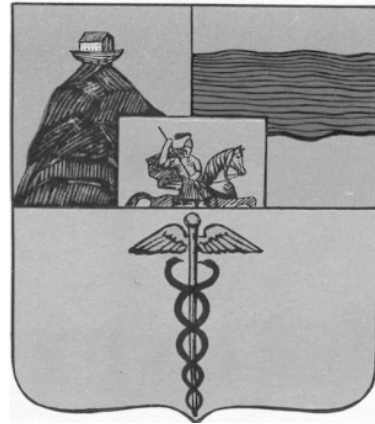
the charges in the shields could possibly be the reasons why these projects never been officially adopted by Russian authorities.

The first officially adopted coats of arms of Georgian cities and towns in 1843.

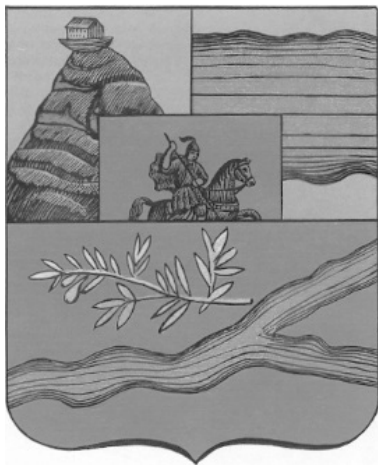
The first coats of arms of Georgian cities officially adopted by Russian Imperial authorities emerged in the middle of the XIX c. Based on official regulations issued in 1842, reform of the sphere of heraldry was commenced. As a result of this process, civic coats of arms of Georgian territories and cities under Russian Empire were created in 1843. Below are the images of these civic armorials.



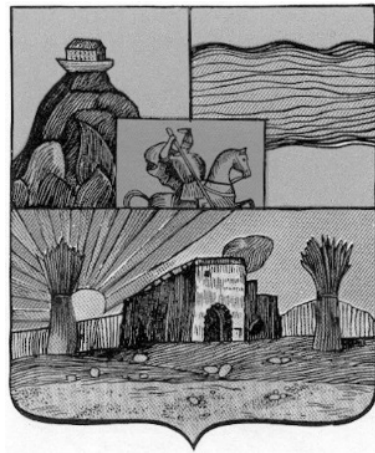
c1. Gruzino-Imeretinskaya Guberniya



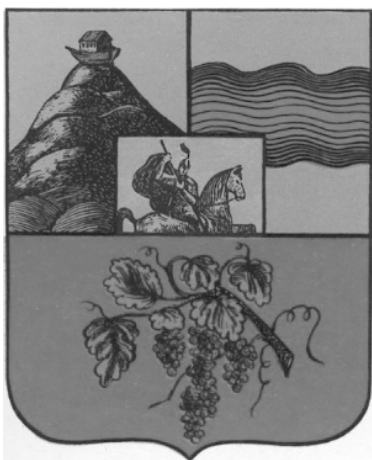
c2. Tbilisi



c3. Qutaisi



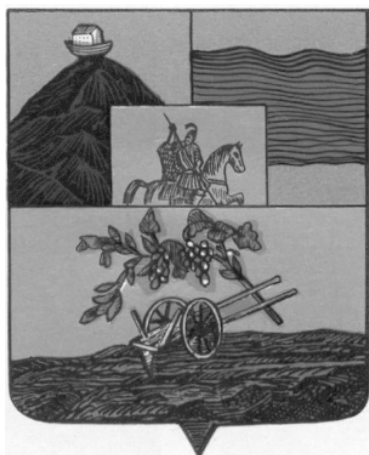
c4. Gori



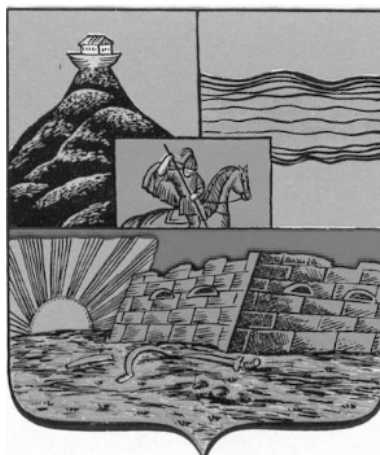
c5. Telavi



c6. Akhlatsikhe



c7. Ozurgeti



c8. Zaqatala

Though coat of arms of Gruzino-Imeretiskaya Guberniya (i.e. Governorate of Georgia and Imereti, representing all historical Georgian lands) is not technically a city armorial, it will be still discussed, because parts of it are incorporated into the shields of Georgian and other Russian Empire cities in South Caucasia, according to the heraldic practice mentioned above.

The coat of arms of Gruzino-Imeretia is a rare exclusion when in the civic coats of arms of Georgia under Russian rule, a historic national symbol of Georgia is presented. In this case it is an *inescutcheon* charged with figure of mounted St. George killing the dragon. St. George (Geo: tsminda giorgi) is the ancient symbol of Georgia – its guardian, most revered saint. The mountain, in the first part of the

shield, with a structure on top, symbolizes mount Ararat, as Armenian lands were also included in administrative borders of the Guberniya. Further: the wavy *fess* represents the Black Sea; two wavy *bars* are rivers Kura (Mtkvari in Georgian) and Aras (Arax – in Armenian). As it can be seen, all symbols are geography and Christianity related, unrevealing any rich ancient symbols or previous heraldic traditions of the region. Even, St. George – traditional symbol of Georgia was somehow screening heraldic legacy of former ruling royal Bagrationi dynasty of Georgian kingdoms, erasing sovereignty of the country.

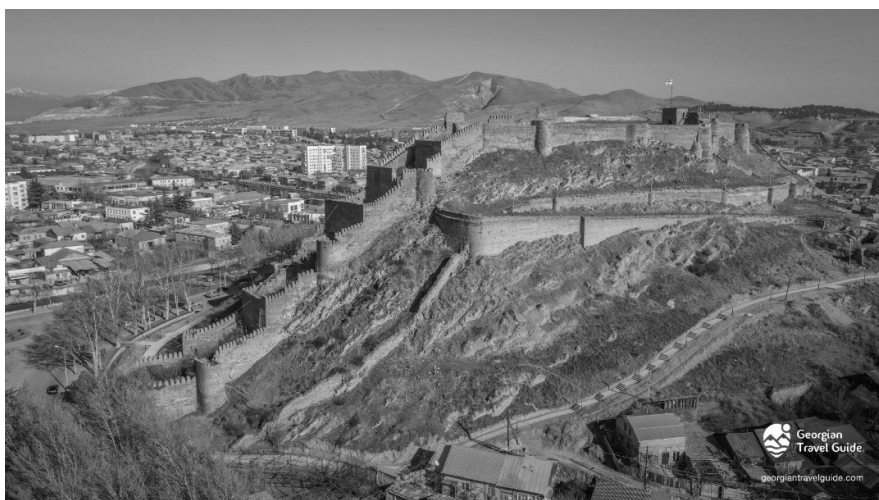
It is interesting, that in this series of civic coats of arms, Tbilisi is represented by caduceus of ancient Roman god of merchants and trade, symbolizing city's role as a regional center of trade. While Tbilisi indeed was founded as a city on trade routes and since early Middle Ages was well known as a trading center on cross roads of international trade marchroutes, still it is difficult to explain how any other feature of the city was not also included into its heraldic shield, because Tbilisi had extremely rich history, diversities of cultures, landmark architecture or many other different unique characteristics suitable for use in heraldry. Another such characteristic is for instant a mixture of religions and ethnicities in the city, which always was and till now is on the touching edges of Europe and Asia and an example of a boiling pot of multicultural and multi-religious coexistence. This is why, from the first view it looks strange, that nothing else than trade was put up forward as a symbol of capital of Georgia and for that time the most important city of whole south Caucasasia. However, with a more focused look politics can be seen behind such a choice of Heroldmeister Office (Rus: Герольдмейстерская кантора) – the top heraldic authority in Russian Empire from 1722 till 1848, when it was transformed into the Department of Heraldry (Rus: Департамент герольдии). Probably the only logical reason for such mismatch between spirit and nature of the city and its armorial was a desire of Imperial authorities to diminish Georgian nationwide and Caucasian regional wide political, historical and religious significance of Tbilisi to a humble role of just another mere trading city.

Same can be said about Qutaisi. The city, which also had many more remarkable features, leave alone historic architecture or mythology, than just a junction of two rivers placed in its heraldic shield. This is a city with the history going back to Hellenic and even earlier ages, with its past related to the Greek mythology. This will be discussed in details later below. Again, Russian authorities promoted in the coat of arms the insignificant geographical characteristic of the area – junction of two rivers: Rioni and Kvirila, with a branch of olive over it. It must be noticed that olive also is not in reality that important agricultural plant for a local population, as it is claimed in the *blazon* provided by the Department of Heraldry that it was widespread in the region.



c9. Painting of Gori castle by Italian missionary Don Christophoro de Castelli. 1628.⁸

A bit more interesting composition, though still with a slight of propaganda in it, is offered in the coat of arms of Gori. The city indeed is famous with its astonishing castle, which is a marvel of Georgian fortification architecture. But in the coat of arms, the ruins of the castle symbolize, that in the new peaceful life under Russian rule there is no need for castles which, because of that, are abandoned and stay in ruins. At the same time, to strengthen this Imperial ideological message, the sun is rising behind the castle and wheat haystacks are standing in front of it, representing bright and peaceful agricultural life replacing war torn past.



c10. Contemporary view of Gori castle.⁹

⁸ დონ კრისტოფორო დე კასტელი. ცნობები და ალბომი საქართველოს შესახებ. მეცნიერება. თბ. 1976. (Don Cristoforo de Castel, *Information and Album about Georgia*, Science, Tbilisi 1976.)

⁹ Photo, courtesy of Georgiantravelguide. <https://georgiantravelguide.com/ka/goris->

The territory of former Russian Empire District (“oblast”) of Zaqatala is not inside contemporary Georgian state borders, it is in Azerbaijan, but for long historic periods of time it was part of Georgian states and it was under Gruzino-Imeretinskaya Guberniya in the defined timeframe of this article. Though, the most important reason why its coat of arms is discussed here is a direct, uncovered imperial propaganda represented in the coat of arms. Similarly to Gori’s armorial, in the shield of Zaqatala also is a castle with a rising sun behind it, but in this case to strengthen the message of Russians bringing peace, a broken sabre and sickle over it are at the bottom of the castle wall, symbolizing that, citing the *blazon*: “population left a warmongering life and follow agriculture and peaceful businesses”.¹⁰



c11. Siege of Akhaltsikhe fortress in 1828. A painting by Polish artist January Suchodolski.¹¹

Similarities in propaganda messages encrypted into the Russian civic heraldry symbology in the coats of arms made for Georgian cities do not end on these vivid examples. Shield of Akhaltsikhe closely resembles previous two ones described above. Akhaltsikhe fortress was prominent in the region with a great history of been a strong-

tsikhe#photo-gallery-1 accessed: 01 July 2025.

¹⁰ Н.Н. Сперансов, *Земельные гербы России XII - XIX вв.*, Москва 1974, p. 56.

¹¹ Courtesy of wikipedia (Википедия). [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%90%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%85%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B5_%D1%81%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5_\(1828\)](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%90%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%85%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B5_%D1%81%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5_(1828))

hold under Georgian rule for the centuries as a center of Georgian Meskheti province. Later it fell in hands of Ottoman Empire rulers – Pashas of Akhaltsikhe Pashalik. The fortress was captured by Russian forces with support of Georgian militia in 1828 after a long siege and fierce battle. Respectively, Heraldmeister Office in this instant could not avoid inclusion of the fortress in the coat of arms, though again the composition was used for Imperial propaganda: the fortress was shown ruined and in front of it were placed a cornucopia – horn of plenty and an ox. Message is once again very clear: castles captured by Russian military might are not needed any more, so population can enjoy prosperity and peacefully follow cattle husbandry widely spread in the area.



c12. Contemporary reconstruction of Akhaltsikhe fortress – the Rabat.¹²

Beside political factors related to the civic heraldry developments in Georgia during Russian empire, naturally, other historic stories or aspects are also connected to the coats of arms of Georgian cities. Probably the most fascinating fact is, that Tiflis coat of arms was imprinted on the very first postal stamp practically used in Russian Empire.¹³ The stamp was circulating from 1857 to 1865 between Tbilisi (that time Tiflis) and town Kojori. It was issued few months before start of widespread use of stamps in Russia. Later, the stamp became a well-known and extremely highly priced philatelist rarity, named – “Tiflis Unica”. In general, Tbilisi coat of arms was widely used in everyday life of Georgian capital in official documents, as elements of trademarks of

¹² Photo, courtesy of Georgiantravelguide <https://georgiantravelguide.com/ka/rabatis-tsikhe#photo-gallery-1> accessed: 01 July 2025.

¹³ Б. М. Кисин, *Страна Филателия*, Москва 1969, p. 240.

various locally produced goods or items, as decorations, and even as accessories of official authorities' or trade guild masters' dresses.

As it was clearly revealed in the above described civic coats of arms, Georgian heraldic traditions were completely disregarded. Before the XIX c. territorial heraldry of Georgia already had about 200 years tradition. While the cities never had armorials in Georgia prior to the Russian annexation, many examples of provincial coats of arms existed in different time periods. Practically all Georgian cities which were granted coat of arms by Russian Empire are the centers of historic provinces or former kingdoms and principalities. Accordingly symbols from old territorial coats of arms could easily and appropriately used in civic heraldry. Despite this, Russian authorities obviously were attempting to cut any ties to independent Georgian traditions in all spheres of life, especially in heraldry which is a symbol of sovereignty.

From political point of view, civic coats of arms of Georgian cities created in 1843, which were completely detached from traditional emblems or previous local heraldic heritage, were a symbolic, heraldic formalization of annexation of all Georgian lands by Russian Empire.



c13.¹⁴ Tiflis Unica – the first postal stamp in Russian Empire circulated in Georgia, with Tbilisi coats of arms on it.

Renewal of coats of arms of Georgian cities and towns in the second part of the XIX c.

In the second part of the XIX c. large scale reform engulfed Russian heraldry. Newly appointed in 1857, Head of the Armorial Division of the Department of Her-

¹⁴ Тифлисская уника. Википедия. https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fru.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2F%25D0%25A2%25D0%25B8%25D1%2584%25D0%25BB%25D0%25B8%25D1%2581%25D1%2581%25D0%25BA%25D0%25B0%25D1%258F_%25D1%2583%25D0%25BD%25D0%25B8%25D0%25BA%25D0%25B0&psig=AOvVaw3SIk8nkwGc8-4A9WcHcBlv&ust=1752384254808000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBcQjhxqFwoTCNiztj3Kto4DFQAAAAAdAAAAABAE

aldry, Baron Boris Köne initiated update of existing and creation of new civic coats of arms across the whole empire. The main ideas behind his reforms were westernization and standardization of civic armorials, though what stayed unchanged was a task to keep away local national symbolic traditions of the countries included in the Empire from appearing in the heraldic shields of Guberniyas, Districts, cities and towns. Nevertheless, for Georgia, Köne's reforms had certain positive side too. As it could be seen above, previous coats of arms of Georgian cities were either very primitive or performed in a very low quality heraldic art. As a result of the reforms, Georgian cities received newly looking, more western European style coats of arms. At the same time, some other districts or cities in Georgia also received new coats of arms or at least projects for such were made, which much later, nowadays, after restoration of Georgian independence were used as a material or inspiration during creation of contemporary civic heraldry of the country. However, in some parts of Russian Empire, for example in the occupied Poland Köne's reforms had very negative consequences, as because of those, already existing long time established traditional civic heraldry was unwantedly altered by new rules common to all Imperial administrative entities.¹⁵



d1. Tiflis (Tbilisi) Guberniya¹⁶

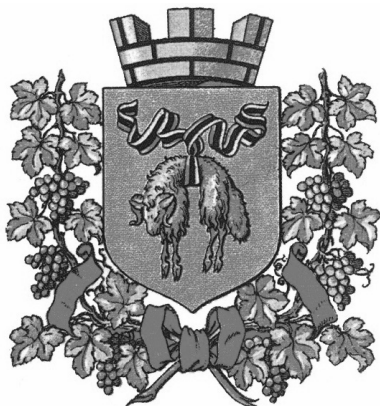


d2. Tiflis city¹⁷

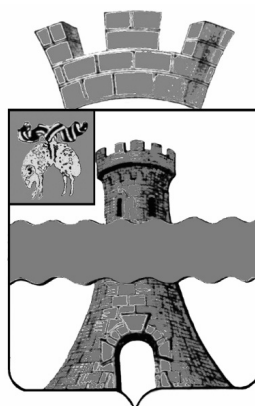
¹⁵ A. Górak, *System heraldyczny Bernharda von Koehne w zastosowaniu do miast Królestwa Polskiego*, „Rocznik Polskiego Towarzystwa Heraldycznego” nowej serii t. XVIII (XXIX), s. 237-256, doi: 10.36693/RPTHer.2019.16.

¹⁶ A. Ch. Fox-Davies, C. B. Grafton, *Heraldry: A Pictorial Archive for Artists and Designers*, Dover Publications 1991.

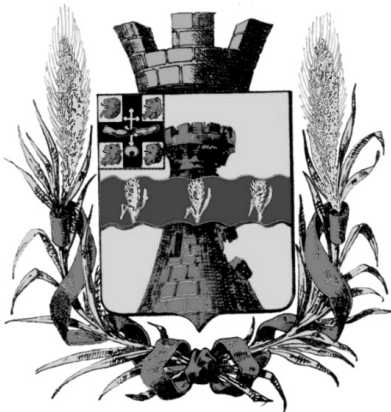
¹⁷ If not referenced differently, all city coat of arms illustrations are from the same source, reconstructed or recreated for – T. Asatiani, *The Story of Georgian Heraldry*, The State Council of Heraldry at the Parliament of Georgia, Tbilisi 2023.



d3. Qutaisi city



d4. Photi



d5. Gori



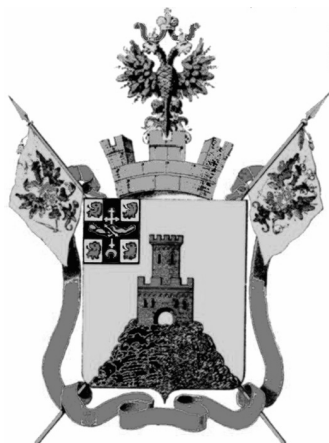
d6. Telavi



d7. Dusheti



d8. Signaghi



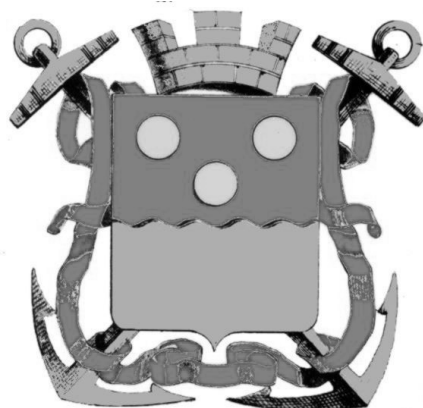
d9. Akhalqalaqi



d10. Kulevi



d11. Batumi District



d.12. Batumi city

One of the biggest changes what Köne's reforms introduced in civic heraldry was a change in positioning of part of Guberniyas' coats of arms from upper half of the shield to the *canton*. Since that time, instead of a part of a Guberniya coat of arms, under which the city was administratively subordinated, the whole coat of arms of Guberniya was placed in the *canton* of the city's shield. This was a new standard what was visually more appealing and simultaneously closer to the western European style of heraldry. Another significant introduction to Russian civic heraldry made by Köne was a system of external decorations around the shield. guberniya, district and fortress coats of arms had their own original decorations,¹⁸ while city coats of arms were provided with decorations reflecting main functions of the settlement such as agriculture, industry or naval port. Crowns over the city coats of arms were representing status or size of a city.

¹⁸ Н.А. Соболева, *Российская городская и областная геральдика XVIII-XIX вв.*, Москва 1981, p. 116.

For Georgian civic heraldry Köne's reforms resulted with creation of coat of arms to several additional cities and towns, such as: Dusheti, Akhalqalaqi, Redut-Kale and most importantly – Batumi. In instant of Batumi, both – city and District coat of arms were adopted. This is another positive side of Köne's initiative for history of Georgian heraldry. Some of the new coat of arms' designs never been officially adopted by Imperial authorities, though this does not diminish historical or heraldic importance of such projects. Scrupulous investigation of all coats of arms of Georgian cities created by Russian Imperial authorities is not a goal of this article and neither its format would allow that, though some most interesting or typical examples revealing common trends and characteristics of the civic heraldic process in the second part of the XIX c. will be discussed below.

Coat of arms of Tbilisi, adopted in 1878, is probably one of the best examples of Baron Köne's reforms. Its visual is very close to the Western European style of heraldry and objectively esthetically is a very high quality representation of heraldic art. Creators also managed to skillfully synthesize *ordinary* and *common charges* with historic and ideological messages encrypted in the composition in full accordance with heraldic rules.

Emphasis in the heraldic composition of coats of arms of Tbilisi is made on shared religion by Georgians and Russians and recent common struggle against that time traditional Muslim invaders of Georgia. The Golden cross on the black field of the shield, according to the likely idea behind its meaning for the creators of the composition, must be symbolizing prevail of Christianity under Russian Empire protection over black past of Georgia facing permanent menace of Muslim onslaughts for centuries prior to the XIX c. Such interpretation of history and new realities for the XIX c. for Georgia was a mainstream narrative reinforced by imperial authorities for decades. Four "cut off" (as stated in the *blazon*) lion heads are continuation of the same idea or narrative, symbolizing defeat of historic enemies of Christianity in Caucasia.

The *charges* in the central place of the shield carry the main message of the composition: two hands – one symbolizing Russian and another Georgian, holding Orthodox cross standing over an overthrown crescent, replicating that time recent victory of joint Russian and Georgian forces over Turkey overtaking large swaths of historic southern Georgian territories during 1877-78 conduct of hostilities, including Kars and, most importantly for Georgians, Batumi regions. Tbilisi coat of arms is a quintessence of Tsarist propaganda and the best illustration how Imperialistic messages were skillfully incorporated in Russian civic heraldry.

As could be seen, Tbilisi coats of arms was completely changed in 1878, but some city armorials did not experience such drastic alterations and the main messages from the earlier coat of arms had been carried through the Köne's reforms. Example of that is a renewed coat of arms of Gori. Partially ruined castle and bunches of wheat are kept in the *escutcheon*, but in more stylized manner, enabling the ideological message to stay unchanged – Russian rule brought peace and prosperity, making a need in the castles obsolete. As shown, in case of Gori, a form of the coat of arms was modified, though the propaganda message was kept intact.

Interesting examples of the late XIX c. Russian civic heraldry in Georgia are the coats of arms of Qutaisi (guberniya and city) and Redut-Kale Fortress. They represent a slight deviation from the overwhelming propaganda expressed in symbols and emblems. A golden fleece is in the center of the shield of Qutaisi – the main city of western Georgia and that time center of similarly named guberniya, in reminiscence of Hellenic legend about Argonauts stealing golden fleece from Colchis (Kolkhida, geo: Kolkhethy), ancient Georgian barbaric kingdom on territory of contemporary western Georgia. Though the primary story of the coat of arms is historical – the legend of Argonauts, a piece of Imperial presence was still added into the shield, hanging the golden fleece on a ribbon made of Russian Imperial colors – black, white and gold.

Another instant of incursion of history in coat of arms of Georgian cities is a coat of arms of Redut-Kale Fortress, which was established in Kulevi bay at the western Georgia Black Sea coast, nearby of a small settlement, to protect active trade routes and ensure reinforcement of customs duties. Head of a bull in the *escutcheon* is most likely taken from one of the variants of so called Colchian Tetri – a silver coin, minted in western Georgian Colchis Kingdom and circulated across the Black Sea basin. These coins are well known in the numismatic world. Apparently, by placing an element from those coins in the coat of arms of the fortress standing in the area contested by Turkey, Russia probably desired to underline, that Turkish influences are just a short living, late, temporary intervention in a long history of the region.



d13. One of the variants of Colchian Tetri coins. 500-200 BC.¹⁹

It is easy to notice, that unlike almost all other civic coats of arms of Georgian cities created by Russian authorities, these examples mainly reveal antique past of the country, rather than propaganda narratives. This probably can be explained by the situation in Georgia for that time, as the country was already under solidified strong grip of Imperial rule and independence uprisings mostly were left in the past. Conse-

¹⁹ Colchian Tetri II Type Hemidrachm. <https://en.numista.com/catalogue/pieces105227.html> accessed: 10 June 2025.

quently, Russian authorities had lesser fears to include certain pieces of rich Georgian history in some representations of the civic heraldry.

Interestingly, one of the greatest Russian heraldry theorist and practitioner, Alexander Lakier in his famous foundational work – Russian Heraldry, written in 1855, was specifically highlighting that certain symbolic traditions historically existed in Georgia, what could be used for creation of coats of arms related to the country.²⁰ Nevertheless, he also mistakenly mentioned, that heraldry in Georgia never existed, apparently been unaware of coats of arms created in Georgia during the XVIII c.

The above discussed examples clearly show, that practice of Russian imperial authorities to hide historical past, national identity and any even ancient signs of sovereignty of the captured lands was fully continued during the second part of the XIX c.

Conclusions

For a reader without deep insight in the dynamics of Russian gradual invasion of Georgia through the whole XIX c. the arguments in this article claiming that heraldry was one of the weapons in hand of Russian propaganda and imperial ideological machine might not be fully convincing. It can be perceived that Russian evasion of Georgia went smoothly and it was uncontested after announcement of elimination of ancient Bagrationi ruling dynasty and establishment of Russian rule in eastern Georgia in 1801. In reality, this was continuously violently challenged by all layers of Georgian society – aristocracy, highlands freemen or even regular peasants. Together with political oppression, Russian harsh serfdom was completely alien to the Georgian version of feudalism with much lesser tensions among the social classes.

On the international stage, annexation of Georgian kingdoms and expansion of Russia in Caucasus and Black Sea basin was raising concerns in the British empire. Though, as it is known, that time international relations system could not influence seriously enough any decisions of great powers, to force Russia giving up on Georgia. However, these concerns later culminate with Crimean War. From another side, Napoleon recognized Georgian and South Caucasia as sphere of influence of Iran. Later during Tilsit Treaty he revoked this position, agreeing on Russia's control over Caucasus on exchange of participation in the Continental System against Britain²¹. Though, changing positions of France was still worrying that time Russia. Later, Napoleon invasion of Russia in 1812 was used by Georgians to stage a rebellion in eastern Georgian region of Kakheti.

Most importantly, Russian rule was strongly resisted inside Georgia. Below are the examples of different types of anti-Russian actions in Georgia throughout the whole XIX c: 1803 – murder of Russian General Lazarev, who was tasked to exile Bagrationy family to Russia, by widow of the last King of Qartli-Kakheti Kingdom – Queen Mary; 1804 – uprising in Mtiuleti – eastern Georgia highlands; 1810 – armed resistance to

²⁰ А.Б. Лакиер, *Русская геральдика*, кн. 1-2, Санкт-Петербург: тип. 2 отд. собств. е. и. в. канцелярии, 1855, § 94.

²¹ Euan R. Wall, *The Historical Context of James Justinian Morier's Travels: France, Britain, and Persia, 1798-1815*, Columbia University, Department of Art History and Archaeology, N.Y. 2017.

Russian invasion and elimination of Imereti Kingdom; 1812 – Kakheti rebellion; 1819-20 armed uprising against Russian colonial type polices in Western Georgia – Imereti and Guria; 1832 – conspiracy against Imperial rule organized by Georgian aristocracy; 1841 – insurgency in Guria in response to the elimination of Guria Principality and establishment of Russian rule; 1875-76 uprising of free men of Svanetia against introducing of oppressive Russian style serfdom in historically free local communes.

The formal annexation of Georgia was not a single act either: Qartli-Kakheti Kingdom was annulled in 1801, Imereti Kingdom was annexed in 1810, Principality of Guria in 1829, highlands of Svanetia – 1833, Principality of Mingrelia – 1867.

Starting from the XX c. movement for Georgian national autonomy and ultimately independence was led by intellectual elite of the nation in the urban centers and social-communist ideological armed resistance blended with criminal or terrorist activities was widespread at countryside across whole Georgia.

As it can be seen, Russia had a solid, uncontested grip over all Georgian territories only during short period of 1870-1900. Due to all these factors accounted higher, Russian administration was using all means to erase from collective memory of the nation its independent past, any trace of Bagrationi dynasty rule and traditional Georgian national identity. Obviously, symbols and heraldry is narrowly tied to all these elements. This is why, Imperial heraldic policy was so vigorously introducing absolutely new, Russian style heraldic symbolism in Georgian civic coats of arms.

Russia had an extremely pressing need to eliminate any memories and reminiscences of independent Georgia or Bagrationi dynasty as the rulers of the country. Consequences of this need is reflected in heraldry too, by erasing local symbolic or heraldic traditions and completely replacing it with Russian.

Responding on the main aim of this work formulated in the introduction, civic heraldry of Russian Empire in Georgia played a considerable role in the XIX c. socio-political life of Georgian territories under Russian rule by strengthening Tsarist propaganda messaging through heraldic symbols and eliminating any traces of ancient Georgian heraldry or emblematic traditions.

Russian civic heraldry went a long way with multiple transformations of its forms and content, though in regard to the coats of arms of Georgian cities, certain common characteristics stayed unchanged²². Russian civic heraldry in Georgia was directly serving and openly reflecting Imperial propaganda and was conveying ideological messages through the heraldic symbols. It was also heralding existence of common grounds between Georgian and Russian nations, especially the shared religion – Orthodox Christianity, as well as joint fighting against same enemies. This was mixed with a glorification of imperial might and promotion of bringing peace and prosperity in the region. From another side, Russian heraldry authorities were by any means successfully attempting to veil national Georgian emblematic traditions and heraldic heritage by emphasizing on placing architectural features, geographical characteristics, or

²² „If previously coat of arms in Russia were symbolizing self administrative rights of the cities, from the XIX c. civic heraldry became an embodiment of centralization of Imperial power, propaganda and ideology.” (Символы России. Н.А. Соболева, В.А. Артамонов. Панорама. М. 1993 г. page 101)

main professions or occupations of the local population in the coats of arms. Only a few rare exclusions from these mainstream approaches could be identified among the XIX c. coats of arms of Georgian cities.

Despite being initiated by Russian Empire, which part by part annexed independent Georgian Kingdoms and Principalities in the first part of the XIX c., creation of coats of arms of Georgian cities still played a great role in the development of Georgian heraldry. This research is one another prove to what extent any segments of heraldry are tied in with almost all spheres of life of countries and reflect political, military, cultural and social realities.

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