

# Understanding the Evidence for the Silk Roads in Georgia and its Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, various international bodies have adopted many declarations, charters, conventions and programmes to protect and promote cultural heritage worldwide. European Cultural Routes by the Council of Europe, the World Heritage List and the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and the Memory of the World Register of the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) are those frameworks in which efforts have been made to preserve and manage heritage across the globe. Within the UNESCO World Heritage Programme, a relatively new Silk Roads Transnational and Serial Nomination appears to be another platform for international heritage management and cultural diplomacy (Williams, 2016, p. 12).

The term “Silk Road” is commonly attributed to a prominent German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, who worked in China from 1868 to 1872 to design a potential railroad line from Shandong to Germany (Hansen, 2012, pp.6-8; Clements, 2017, p.1-3; Whitfield, 2015, pp.1-2). However, recent research suggests that German Geographer Carl Ritter invented the phrase in 1838 (Winter, 2022, p.1). After a while, in 1938, Swedish Geographer Steve Hedin used the term as the title of the English translation of his book about his Central Asian explorations (Hansen, 2012, p.8). Over the last couple of decades, the phrase “Silk Road” gradually gained remarkable popularity. It is often used in international relations to describe bilateral and multilateral ties in Asia (Millward, 2013, 86). According to British historian and Silk Road researcher Susan Whitfield, the term has become a widely used brand inside and outside academia (Whitfield, 2015, pp.1-7). Australian sociologist Tim Winter reasonably believes that Silk Road is the most potent geo-cultural concept of the twenty-first century, yet it remains poorly understood (Winter, 2022, pp. 141-148).

The UNESCO Silk Roads Nomination strategy focuses on the heyday of the Silk Roads between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE (Frankopan, 2015, pp. 27-242) to reflect the scale, diversity and complex

chronologies of the concept (Williams, 2014, pp. 6-16). In addition, it clears the misconception about the term Silk Road which has often been conceived as a single line with direction from East to west between China and Rome and silk as the only trade good on this route (Millward, 2013, p.21). Thus, the metaphor “Silk Road” is used in plural tense in the UNESCO Nomination strategy to demonstrate that the concept encompasses multiple routes through which the trade goods and ideas were exchanged (Williams, 2014).

UNESCO Silk Roads Transboundary and Serial Nomination strategy is based on a “corridor approach”, following the thematic study on the Silk Roads undertaken by Tim Williams on behalf of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the Advisory Body of UNESCO (Williams, 2014, pp. 27-30). The approach opts to identify movements and their impact on the landscape between the nodes and encompass a more comprehensive range of sites than the grand monuments. It envisages the inclusion of caravanse-rais, inns, waystations, forts, bridges, smaller towns, industrial/production sites, religious sites, agricultural systems, and natural and cultural landmarks linked by an overarching concept of the Silk Roads.

The UNESCO Serial Transnational World Heritage Nomination of the Silk Roads project has already gained currency in several countries’ political and cultural agendas. In 2014 the World Heritage Committee inscribed a joint nomination “Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor” of the State Parties of China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan with the thirty-three components, including cities, trading settlements, fortifications, and religious buildings on the World Heritage List at its 38<sup>th</sup> session (UNESCO, 2014, pp.198-203). Furthermore, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan State Parties submitted the nomination dossier “Silk Roads: Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor” to the Tentative List last year (UNESCO, 2021). In addition, the South Asian Silk Roads (China, India, Nepal and Bhutan) and the Fergana-Syrdarya Silk Roads Heritage Corridor (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan

and Uzbekistan) are under preparation (Jing & Denyer, 2019, 13).

This article aims to understand how Georgia can, if at all, fit in such a nomination strategy. First, this article reviews and synthesizes evidence for the Silk Roads in Georgia and its long-distance connectivity from the ancient period to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Second, it discusses the opportunities of the sites and landscapes for framing a corridor for the nomination strategy. Last, it concludes that further research and collaboration seem indispensable to cope with the issue.

## 1. A SHORT SYNTHESIS FOR THE LONG-DISTANCE CONNECTIVITY FROM THE ANCIENT PERIOD TO THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

According to Greece (Strabo, citing Aristobulus and Patroclus) and Roman authors' (Varro, Pliny) records, one of the long-distance trade routes connecting India to the Black Sea passed through the Transcaucasia (Albania, Iberia, and Colchis). Namely, the westernmost section of the route ran along the Valley of the River Mtkvari, then crossed over Surami pass and from Sarapana (Shorapani) fortress went on to the River Phasis, present Rioni-Qvirila branch, towards the Black Sea at the city of Phasis (Strabo XI, 7, 3; Pliny 6, 52). From here, goods were shipped to the ports of Amisos and Sinope (Strabo XI, 2, 17).

The Caucasian segment of the route had been established already in the pre-Hellenistic period due to Greek settlements founded on the east coast of the Black Sea playing a significant role in trade relations with the Mediterranean (Lordkipanidze, 2002, p. 8). The topography of Greek imports dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC attests to the trading activity of Phasis already in the Archaic and Classical periods. Greek imports are discovered in every significant settlement between Phasis and Vani, namely in Simagre, Dapnari, Dablagomi, and Mtsdziri (Mikeladze, 1978, pp. 62–68; Tolordava, 1983, pp.136–138; Tolordava, 1983a, pp.129–135; Gamkrelidze, 1983, pp.127–128). Furthermore, the dissemination of Greek ware in the inner part of Colchis (Kutaisi, Brili, Sachkhere, Sairkhe, Chognari and Itkhvisi) indicates that the main overland trade routes were developed along the Rioni and the Qvirila Rivers. Archaeological evidence suggests that Greek imports were penetrated from Colchis to Iberia (eastern Georgia) through the route segment between India and the Black Sea. In Iberia, imported Greek objects were found in the valleys of the Kura River (Uplistsikhe and Khovle) and its tributaries, the Rivers Prone (Takhtidziri, Rustavi, Avlevi) and Aragvi (Qazbegi) (Lordkipanidze, 2002, pp. 12–13; Gagoshidze, 2020, pp. 19–55). The Greek black glazed pottery piec-

es have recently been found at Grakliani Hill (Licheli, 2022, p. 351).

The mentioned international route was used in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC in South Caucasia, according to numismatic data. A hoard of more than 500 coins, including five Bactrian silver coins (one issued by a founder of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom, Diodotus I, and four silver tetradrachms by the Bactrian King Eucratides (169–159BC), was discovered in Gabala, Azerbaijan (Lordkipanidze, 2002, p. 7). In addition, seven Bactrian coins have been unearthed in ancient Iberia. Six coins dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC were found in Tbilisi during the construction of a school in the 1970-s. A 1st century BC Sogdian imitation of a tetradrachm was discovered near Pasanauri (Dundua, 2013, p. 115).

A historian, numismatist Dundua (2019, p.13) defines a chronological range of the Transcaucasian transit route as follows:

1. Phase: III century BC - the first half of the II century BC, until 65 CE. The Transcaucasian transit seems to have been disrupted during the Flavian (69-96) era;
2. Phase: the beginning of the principle of Tiberius (14-37) - a period of its re-functioning.

Usage of this road decreased in the late Hellenistic period. It was then revived in Roman times, as hostile relations between Rome and Parthia blocked the road via Parthia and Armenia to the Western Roman World (Melikishvili, 2006, 56).

Notably, the majority of the settlements during the ancient and early middle Ages developed along the routes of the Rivers Rioni-Qvirila (Shorapani, Kldeeti, Vardtsikhe, Vani, Shuamta, Partskhanaqanevi, Mtsdziri, Dablagomi, Dapnari, Sajavakho, Tchaladidi) and Mtkvari (Zghuderi, Urbnisi, Uplistsikhe, Qhanchaeti, Dzalisa, Tsikhiagora, Nastakisi, Samadlo, Sarkine, Mtskheta) in the West and East Georgia, respectively (Gamkrelidze, 2021, p. 228; Braund et al., 2009). Moreover, archaeological excavations have uncovered products (pottery, jewellery, coins, metal and glassware) of different centres of the Roman World in these settlements (Gamkrelidze, 2021, pp. 221-226). Among them, the capital of Iberia, Mtskheta, was located at the intersection of strategic roads coming from and to Armenia (Artaxata), Albania, Colchis and the North Caucasus. These roads passing the territory of Mtskheta described by Strabo (XI, 3, 5) are also illustrated on the Tabula Peutingerianna – a 12<sup>th</sup>-century copy of a map named after its former owner. However, the original model dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century is based on the 1st century AD sources (Fellmeth, 2006).

The tribes of Siraces and Aorsi living between the Azov and Caspian Seas were importing the Indian and Babylonian merchandise from the Armenians and Medes, as stated by Strabo (XI, 5, 8). Therefore, they could have been using a trade route from Artaxata to Mt-

skheta and the North Caucasus via the Valley of the River Aragvi and Dariali Gorge. The discovery of Gozarzes drachmas in the North Caucasus, widely used in Iberia, and Bosphorus staters in Iberia, supports this opinion (Lordkipanidze & Muskhelishvili, 2011, pp. 158-159). Notably, the “Historical Monuments of Mtskheta” is already on the World Heritage List as a single property.

From the end of the IV century to the beginning of the VII century, new destinations have emerged along with the developments of some old ones in Transcaucasia, such as Dvini in Armenia, Bardavi in Azerbaijan, Nokalakevi and Vardtsikhe in Egrisi (west Georgia), Ujarma, Cheremi, Urnisi and Tbilisi in Iberia (Chilashvili, 1970, 34-60).

During the V-VII centuries, trade with silk becomes very popular in the Near and Middle East and one of the main factors for defining the international politics of the Byzantine Empire. As Sassanid Iran controlled the import of silk to the Byzantine Empire, the latter was trying to find new ways to import goods from the East. The records of a Byzantine historian, Menander Protector, describe the intense diplomatic exchanges between Sogdians, Türks and Byzantines in the exchange of silk via the passes of the Caucasus (De la Vaissière, 2005, pp. 234-242). In addition, the discoveries of the VI-VII centuries of Byzantine golden coins in Abkhazia, Svaneti and Racha and along the pass of Cherkessia, Balkaria and Ossetia suggest that Byzantine was using alternative routes in the north Caucasus for the economic relationship with the Middle East (Lordkipanidze & Muskhelishvili, 2011, pp. 158-159). Lortkianidze and Murgulia (2014, pp. 95-115) examine the role of Svaneti in the relationship between the Byzantine and Sassanid Iran in the V-VI centuries from a military and commercial standpoint in their relatively recent article.

Trade seems to be developed between Transcaucasia and the newly established Arab State from the VIII century, specifically in its II half. Mints producing Arabs silver coins Dirhams appear to have been established locally in the following cities of Transcaucasia: Tbilisi, Dvini, Bardavi, Ganja, and Derbend (Lordkipanidze & Muskhelishvili, 2011, p.173).

Transcaucasia became a part of the trade route connecting the Baltic Sea countries to the Arab State and India to Byzantine from the II half of the IX century. Artanuji was one of the new cities founded along the trade routes (Giviashvili & Koplataidze, 2004). Byzantine golden and silver coins spread over the whole territory of Transcaucasia, and reaching the Caspian Sea proves the engagement of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the trade activities (Chilashvili, 1970, p. 80).

During the XII-XIII centuries, Georgia is one of the most robust states in the Near East, developing intensive international trade. Trade between Iran and Transcaucasian cities Dmanisi, Samshvildze, Tbilisi and Ganja was developed in the mentioned period. Silk is supposed to be exported from Dmanisi, kars and Bardavi to Iran. From Tbilisi, saddles, bridles designed with elephant's bones, glass bowls, crystal productions, honey, wax, different types of cloths, felt cloaks, carpets, wool and silk were exported (Chilashvili, 1968).

Byzantium glazed vessels and white earthenware pots were found in Kutaisi, Vani, Tsikhisdziri, Gonio, and Sokhumi in the XI-XIII centuries. At the same time, Iranian and Armenian faience were discovered in Rustavi, Dmanisi, Tbilisi and Ujarma (Lordkipanidze & Muskhelishvili, 2011, p.179). In Dmanisi, along with Iranian fiancé and Palestinian pottery, archaeologists have also unearthed Chinese pottery pieces and different types of beads supposedly imported from Yemen (Kopaliani, 2017, pp.120-123). Georgia was connected with the Byzantine through Artanuji, while with the South (Tabriz) via Dvini-Anisi, and with Ardebil via Barda (Chilashvili, 1970, pp. 170-171).

The Mongols' invasions during the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries in Georgia, followed by the division of the United Kingdom of Georgia into small kingdoms in the XV century, triggered a trade activity decline. However, from the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Kakheti Kingdom and its capital Gremi became more advanced than other kingdoms in Georgia due to its proximity Ghilan-Shamakh-Astrakhan trade route (Suny, 1994, p.46).

## 2. GREMI HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE AS A DESTINATION ON THE TRADE ROUTE

In 1466, Gremi was founded at the Caucasus Mountains and Alazani Valley junction. Situated at the crossroad of these two different geographical landmarks, Gremi served as a connecting bridge between the socio-economic life of the two regions (Chilashvili, 1980, pp. 12-13). Culturally and economically developed, Gremi ceased to exist in 1616 due to the devastating invasions by Iranian Shah Abbas I with his army and never regained its former glory (Suny, 1994, p. 50). The strategic and economic centre of the independent Kingdom of Kakheti is one of the most short-lived cities in Georgia. Nevertheless, it has a remarkable history for which it is cherished today. The State Party has submitted Gremi Church of the Archangels and the Royal Tower to the Tentative List since 2007. However, the historical landscape of Gremi encompasses a much wider area and consists of four main parts, including the citadel, the royal area, the commercial quarter, and the Holy Trinity fortification (Chilashvili,

1980, pp. 44-46). The citadel encompasses the Church of the Archangels, a royal residence with a bell tower and a surrounding defensive wall (Zakaria, 1975, pp. 21-50). The manufacturing facilities, such as wine cellars and a wine press, are also found here (Chilashvili, 1980, pp. 44-45). The Church of the Archangels and the adjacent dwelling tower with the belfry occupy a dominant position among surviving medieval buildings (Mepisashvili et al., 1979). The Church of the Archangels was built in 1565 by King Leon I of Kakheti (1518-1574), according to a Greek inscription carved above the western door of the church (Zakaria, 1975, pp. 21-23). The church is characterized by a traditional cruciform dome with two detached piers, with a distinct emphasis on height. The interior wall paintings date to 1577 (Mepisashvili et al. 1979, p. 179). Both the Church of the Archangels and the royal tower are built using brick, densely arranged patterns instead of stone, which testifies to the Iranian influence. The decoration of the facades with pointed arches reflects the spread of Iranian form and taste. The Church of the Archangels is significant in religious, cultural heritage, architectural, historical, scientific and aesthetic value (Jamburia, 2019).

Like the Church of Archangels, the historical and cultural heritage values can be attributed to the royal tower. It is a three-storey building designed for residential use with living and reception rooms and a belfry, a later addition. Since 1975, the building has served as a museum where visitors can see archaeological artefacts and portraits of the royal members and watch the slideshow and animation showing the chronological reconstruction of the city of Gremi (Jamburia, 2019). In the royal tower, on the right of the corridor, a toilet has its plumbing system. Its exceptional organization takes a visitor by surprise even in the 21st century. From the top floor of the tower, there is a panoramic view of Alazani Valley and the peaks of the Caucasus Mountains (Mepisashvili et al. 1979, p.179), revealing the beauty and aesthetics of the Gremi historical landscape.

In the royal district (20 ha), archaeologists uncovered remnants of a palace complex, the residential houses, a pavilion with water fountains, pools, baths, a bakery, a wine storage facility, and the remains of some other buildings (Zakaria, 1975, pp. 51-91; Chilashvili, 1980, pp. 86-104). Although all the buildings here were destroyed, the royal district preserves archaeological and historical significance for the current and future generations, regardless of the condition of the remaining structures.

The most significant part of the city appears to be the commercial quarter (30 ha), where trading caravans and travellers from foreign countries used to trade (Chilashvili, 1980, p. 45). The architectural complex of the market, the caravanserai, residential houses and

manufacturing buildings, a public bath-house, two inns, several parish churches, and the Tarsa wall were situated in this lively part of the city (Zakaria, 1975, pp. 92- 114; Chilashvili, 1980, p. 46-72). Merchants of different ethnic groups (Georgians, Armenians, and Jews), artisans and servants (Chilashvili, 1980) were its primary inhabitants. The architectural complex of the market occupied 1,400 square m in total. It consisted of 30 trading arcades of pointed arches built with cobblestones and mortar and had small balconies in front. The fireplaces found in each shopping arcade suggest that they operated throughout the year. Some of the markets were two-storey buildings with deep basements that might have been used as cold storage rooms. Each of the arcades served a different purpose. Some accommodated shops and workshops, others, located at the entrance, were used by guards and customs officers. In one of the markets, a discovery of coins and the remains of a furnace with burnt copper items indicates the presence of an ironsmith's workshop. One room in the middle of the market with a swimming pool is thought to have been used for leisure activities by local and foreign merchants who stayed at the adjoining caravanserai.

According to the reconstructed plan of the caravanserai, it was 75m long, with 32 rooms situated on both sides of its corridor. Between the architectural complex of the market and caravanserai, a three-metre passage facilitated the markets to be supplied with goods (Chilashvili, 1980:48-56). The commercial district of Gremi reflects the socio-economic and political values of its heyday. In the present day, it can be associated with historical, archaeological, and cultural heritage values. Despite its lack of physical integrity, the market district is as part of Gremi's historical and cultural heritage as the Church of Archangels (Jamburia, 2019).

The fourth part of Gremi, the Holy Trinity fortification, was a defensive complex situated on the ridge on the opposite side of the Church of the Archangels. It encompassed the Holy Trinity Church, a hall, a tower, the workshops, a water system and a perimeter wall (Zakaria, 1975, pp. 132-138). In addition, it was a vantage point from where one could see the other three parts of the city, the gorge, the Caucasus and the Alazani Valley.

Arguably, Gremi's central cultural heritage and historical significance lie not only in the architecture of the Archangels' church and the royal tower but also in the biography of the place and in its attributes formed out of the interactions with the different nodes of that time. In addition to this, it is against the comparative study of the existing World Heritage Sites, and it would be difficult to justify why "Gremi Church of Archangels and the Royal Tower" would bring Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) in comparison with other cultur-

al sites. In addition, it is not in compliance with the Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced, and Credible World Heritage List (Jamburia, 2019).

One of the essential biographical facts of Gremi's bustling life derives from its trade connection with Persia and other oriental countries as part of the Silk Roads, which, in turn, defines the associative and symbolic values of the place (Jamburia, 2019). Here, archaeological excavations uncovered imported artefacts from various trading centres of Persia (Kerman, Kashan), including various types and colours of glazed ceramic ware, fiancé, copper and silver items. Among remarkable discoveries were fragments of Chinese porcelain and celadon (Mindorashvili, 2015, pp. 207-208).

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the export of Kakheti consisted of silk and carpets, gold cloth, rubia (a plant used to make paint), wine, horses, sheep and precious furs (Chilashvili, 1980, pp. 151-152). Ensuring the infrastructure provision to facilitate trade and transportation was highly important for the Royals of Kakheti. Archaeologists have discovered a three-metre-wide red brick road starting from Gremi and stretching over the several dozen kilometres in Kakheti (ibid, p.233).

Gremi was connected to Persia, Dagestan and Russia via Shamakhi (Azerbaijan) (Fig.1). The journey from Gremi to Shamakhi took ten days at an average rate of 30 kilometres per day, while the distance from Shamakhi to Derbent was covered in six days. The total travelling time between Gremi to Derbent thus was 16 days. Taking into account known topographic and cultural features and reports of some foreign Ambassadors, Chilashvili (1980, pp. 237-238) reconstructed the route from Gremi to Shamakhi. The first overnight stop for travellers after Gremi would be Gavazi, then Areshi, Togha, Zagemi, Qakh and Sheki until they reached Shamakhi.

Remnants of buildings in Gavazi, Areshi, and Togha are deemed to be caravanserai or halting places. The remains of a defensive tower and the old road were identified between Gavazi and Togha (Chilashvili, 1980, p. 238).

On the route from Gremi to Shamakhi, Zagemi (Bazari), another prominent economic and political centre of Kakheti Kingdom, emerged due to the commercial activities in nowadays Zakatala region of Azerbaijan, in the village of Aliabad. It represents an under-researched area: archaeological excavations have not taken place here, only field surveys. According to Russian and Turkish sources, Zagemi consisted of three districts: the Church District, which included the royal quarters as well as the main church; the Rabat (outskirts) and the Market District, which was a walled trading area encompassing the caravanserai and restaurants. Except for these buildings, a mint has been located in Zagemi since the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The tradition of minting coins here seems to have been revived by the 16<sup>th</sup> century: 189 coins minted at ten different locations were accidentally found here, of which eight coins were minted at Zagemi. Among the revealed coins were European ducats which testify to the connection between the European and local traders. Zagemi ceased to exist simultaneously as Gremi in 1616 (Zakaraia, 1975, p. 94).

One of the leading destinations for the traders from Gremi was Shamakhi - an important centre of culture and trade and the royal seat of Shirvan shahs from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Adam Olearius (1599-1671), a German traveller and diplomat who visited Shirvan in the 1630s, Shamakhi consisted of two parts, the southern and northern, each surrounded by walls. In the northern part of Shamakhi, Turks, Armenians, and some Georgians lived, but all the inhabitants spoke Turkic, which was common all over Persia. Spinning, weaving and embroidery with silk and paper were inhabitants' activities of this part of the city (Mustafayev, 2018).

The main markets of Shamakhi were in the southern part, which was more significant than the northern one. Here, a large market with several covered streets, dotted with shops of local merchants, offered silk and cotton fabric, silver and gold brocade, bows, arrows, and other handicrafts for a reasonable price (Mustafayev, 2018, p. 39). In addition, two large caravanserais with chambers and galleries, where foreign merchants stayed and traded, were situated in the southern part of the city. In one of the caravanserais, named after Shah, mostly Russian merchants used to stop and bring tin, leather, copper, furs, and other commodities for trading. In another one, the so-called Lezgi caravanserai, traders from the North Caucasus from Circassia and Dagestan, offered horses and enslaved people for purchase (Mustafayev, 2018, pp 39-40).

According to the Dutch traveller Ian Streis (1670), Georgians also played a significant role in the economic life of Shamakhi. For example, in one of the parts of the city, there should have been Giurji-bazaar, the Georgian market, which is preserved in Ermakov's photo documentation of Shamakhi, destroyed by an earthquake on January 31, 1902 (Chilashvili 1980, p. 249).

Indeed, Shamakhi was not the final destination of the merchants coming from Gremi and other places. Commonly caravans used to carry on to the south towards Ardabil (modern Iran), one of the main cities on the territory of southern Azerbaijan (Mustafayev, 2018, p. 39-40) and towards other nodes. The trip from Shamakhi to Ardabil took eight days (Matthee, 1999, p. 55); thus, the journey from Gremi to Ardabil lasted 18 days (Chilashvili, 1980, p. 252).

According to the Dutch traveller Jan Streiss (1670), Ardabil was a famous and excellent trade city where merchants came and went from Gilan, Kurdistan, Georgia and other countries (Chilashvili, 1980, p. 252). From Ardabil, two roads diverged: the western route towards Tabriz and the south-eastern to the cities of Qazvin and Kashan. Silk from Gilan province was also ferried across the Caspian Sea to Astrakhan (Matthee, 1999, p. 54). While a trip from Shamakhi to Naziabad took five days, the distance between Naziabad to Astrakhan was covered by a boat in five to nine days, depending on the season and circumstances (Matthee, 1999, p.55).

In the increasingly globalized World, cultural heritage is recognized not only of national but potentially international importance too. The significance of each heritage site is determined by the values that are ascribed to the place (Jamburia, 2019). The deconstruction of Gremi's biography showcased its future international potential in a somewhat different way than it is featured on the Tentative List. The concentration on material and tangible manifestations of culture confine the imagination and interpretation of landscapes (Baird, 2017, pp. 5-6). The biographical approach to Gremi's landscape makes apparent that focusing predominantly on the best-preserved parts of the city, such as the church of Archangels and the adjoining royal tower, considerably limits the representation and expression of the very essence of the place. Alternatively, framing Gremi as an outcome of the Silk Roads makes it possible to fully represent its history and capture all values that one might ascribe to it. However, it is also evident that the Gremi historical landscape cannot be individually seen as a manifestation of an exceptional response to the Silk Roads. Therefore, developing a serial nomination that reflects a particular geo-cultural system can be relevant to discuss in this case (Jamburia, 2019).

Considering cultural, historical, and eco-geographic reasons, Gremi can form the basis for two serial nomination projects combined with some sites in Azerbaijan, Iran, and, theoretically, Russia. The first option for the project to develop could be the Gremi-Shamakhi-Ardabil route combined with relevant sites in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Iran, respectively. The second option would be the Gremi-Shamakhi-Derbend route in collaboration with the State Parties of Azerbaijan and Russia. However, the latter does not seem viable considering the existing political tension and frozen conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia. Furthermore, the significant issue here, which is relevant to both routes, is demonstrating physical evidence on sites and the scale of archaeology (Jamburia, 2019).

The potential for the Gremi-Shamakhi-Ardabil Silk Roads corridor to be submitted to the Tentative List

depends on proper knowledge of heritage resources and their condition and ability to demonstrate the OUV.

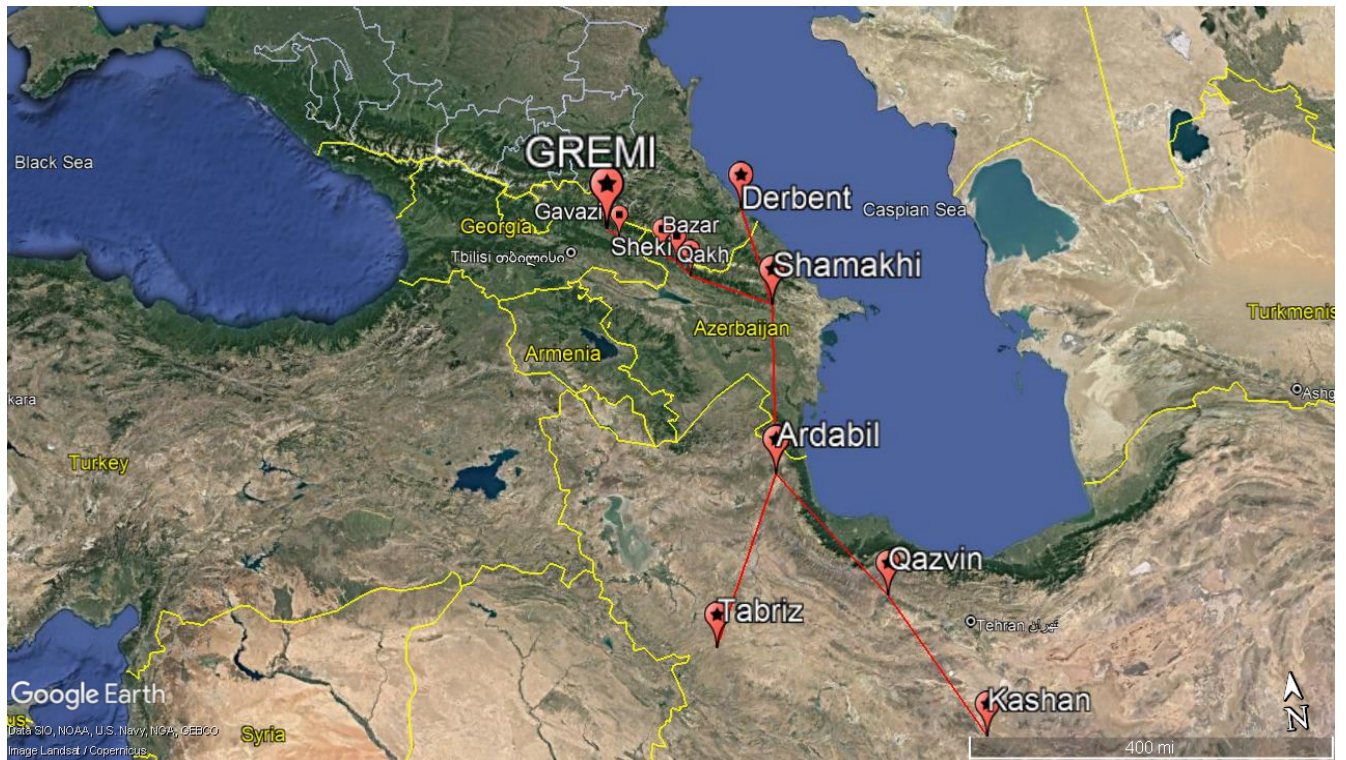
Further research and surveys using modern technologies need to be undertaken with the involvement of local experts for the identification of potential heritage resources in the section between Gremi and Sheki, particularly in Gavazi, Areshi, Togha, Zagemi, Qakh, also between Shamakhi and Ardabil, and beyond it in Iran. The main challenges with this route are that many potential sites are under-researched, and some are in poor condition. In contrast, those well-studied and well-preserved, such as Sheki, Ardabil and Tabriz sites, have already been individually inscribed on the World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2022).

The nomination of Gremi as part of the Silk Roads transboundary project is a difficult task, and it poses many challenges, which may not be overcome due to the decay or extension of the physical embodiments of the Silk Roads' concept. However, the complex values of Gremi's historical landscape and trading centre on one of the branches of the Silk Roads should not be ignored but enhanced if nominated. It would be helpful for Georgia to work closely with Azerbaijan, another under-represented country on the World Heritage List, to identify and evaluate the potential of the sites within the proposed corridor to justify OUV and find a feasible solution together to developing future intercultural cooperation in this regard.

## CONCLUSION

Nowadays, the historic Silk Roads gain new values and importance in contemporary society. One can attribute historical, cultural, social, economic, and political values to the Silk Road within the current heritage discourse. Place branding, regional competitiveness and attractiveness, niche tourism, image and symbols creation, sense of place, identity building, community participation, social cohesion, and return on investment are benefits of identifying and managing the Silk Roads heritage for the development strategy worldwide. Thus research should continue to shed more light on the evidence of the long-distance connectivity that existed in the past to embrace cross-cultural collaboration in the present and future. In a world full of wars and tension, cultural heritage can and should be used as a source of mutual understanding and cultural diplomacy.

Even discussion on the possible joint nomination opens a horizon and platform for cooperation between countries and creates room for cultural diplomacy since it requires a joint effort from the beginning at a research stage.



**Figure 1.** Route from Gremi to Persia and Russia via Shamakhi. Map compiled by Salome Jamburia

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