



**Universiteit  
Leiden**

## **Muslim Georgia: Islam's Northern Frontier through Arabic Eyes**

### **Applicants**

<b>Supervisor Name</b>	<b>Discipline</b>
Joanita Vroom	Archaeology
Peter Webb	Arabic Studies

### **Project description**

Our understanding of Islam's early history, the meanings of Muslim identity and culture, and the relationships between Muslim and Christian in early Islam are in the process of being transformed. Previously, Islam's first centuries were largely studied from the perspective of the centre: the Caliph and the capital city were privileged as the locus of 'official Islam', and the story of life in the provinces was deemed peripheral, politically marginalised and culturally secondary. Favouring the view from the centre regrettably silenced voices from the diverse provinces of the nascent Muslim world, and our grasp of Islam's rise was accordingly impoverished. To redress the imbalance, recent projects have put regions back on the map, and their findings are crafting fuller and more nuanced accounts of Islam's spread, but not all regions have yet made it back onto that scholarly map, and this project aims to use the new approaches and interdisciplinary methodologies to reintegrate Georgia into studies of early Islam.

Georgia offers uniquely rich material for the new trends in Islamic historiography. Georgia was the Caliphate's extreme northern frontier, it was not wholly Islamised and thus witnessed constant negotiation between Muslim and Christian identities, it separated from the Caliphate into an independent Muslim Emirate, and even after the Emirate was absorbed into a Christian kingdom, Arabic and Muslim culture continued to resonate during the medieval period.

Arabic references to Georgia are spread across a wide range of source texts, and this project will be the first to gather a comprehensive database to launch further projects, collaborations and publications, detailed below. The material will vitally enable us to develop deeper understanding of how Islam's frontier functioned, what facets of Arabic culture from the 'centre' entered the region and how they were expressed locally, how Christians and Muslims interacted, and comparison of the Georgian experience with other regions of the Caliphate will broaden our view of the struggles and cultural cooperation that marked Islam's rise.

## Research Trainee Profile

BA3, MA and ResMA students can apply. Research Trainees should have a demonstrable knowledge of Arabic at an advanced level (B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). They should also be familiar with the medieval history of the Middle East.

General tasks of each Research Trainee:

- Searching for and recording references to Georgia in pre-modern Arabic textual sources. Peter Webb will devise with the Trainees the topics, keywords, names and toponyms to search and the corpus of texts to be studied;
- the search will involve both digital and print sources, developing the Trainees awareness of resources available today, the genres of pre-modern Arabic writing, and methods to search the vast array of texts for relevant information;
- the findings will be recorded in a database, Trainees will accordingly be introduced to principles of digital humanities;
- the project will also study material culture to augment the texts: Trainees will gather references to material finds from Muslim-era Georgia, including coins, seals, ceramics, glass, metal and other small finds, inscriptions, and archaeological reports, which will be catalogued in a separate database;
- the Arabic texts will be translated into English: the translation is the responsibility of Peter Webb; Trainees will participate in bi-weekly sessions in June-August where the translations will be discussed alongside theoretical discussions of translation theory and translating for modern audiences; and
- the intended publication will also be annotated, thus Trainees will learn about methods of historiographical interpretation, integration of texts with material finds, and the approaches for making critical annotation.

## Collaboration

Reconstructing the history and culture of Georgia in the early Caliphate is necessarily interdisciplinary, since textual indicators are in some cases limited, and much can be learned from integrating material culture. Accordingly, the project aims to collect a comprehensive corpus of Arabic literature in which Georgia is mentioned, alongside as comprehensive as possible a database of material finds from Muslim-era sites in the region. Once the materials are gathered, they will be studied together, and it is intended that the combination of expertise in Arabic studies and historiography (Peter Webb) alongside expertise in material culture (Joanita Vroom) will enable innovative source interpretation.

This project's gathering of Georgian-specific material will create opportunities for its integration into wider-scale projects focusing on other regions of the Caliphate. This will facilitate important comparative research, as the Georgian examples shall reveal material similarities and differences relevant to answer broad questions about Islamisation and the development of the Caliphate's regions in general. Joanita Vroom and the Faculty of Archaeology are undertaking projects in Turkey, Syria and Jordan which will form the basis of initial comparative study. Georgia's reintegration in the Greek-Christian political sphere in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries also has particular synergies to inform Joanita Vroom's work on Byzantium and Islam.

Leiden also hosts an ERC consolidator grant project (Embedding Conquest: Naturalising Muslim Rule in the Early Islamic Empire (600-1000), PI: Petra Sijpesteijn, LIAS, which focuses on Egypt and Eastern Iran, and since this project represents a different region in the same chronological period, we aim to collaborate and participate in their conferences and workshops, as applicable.

## **Deliverables**

This project has threefold deliverables: (i) a book; (ii) application for funding for collaboration with scholars from the University of Tbilisi, Georgia; and (iii) contribution to an online archaeological database.

*Publication:* a book containing translations and an annotated study of the Arabic texts gathered by this project. Preferably to be published in Liverpool University Press' series: Translated Texts for Historians. (<https://liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/collections/series-translated-texts-for-historians>)

This will constitute the first comprehensive source-book and critical historiographical study about Muslim-era Georgia in English.

*Collaboration:* the findings will prepare material to make an application in 2019 for the Erasmus+ Mobility scheme to work with scholars in Georgia. Georgian scholars have studied Arabic material, but with limited involvement in major current projects on early Islam. An Erasmus+ grant will enable Georgian scholars to participate in workshops and lectures in Leiden, and for Leiden staff to reciprocate. In addition to the project proposers, scholars from Petra Sijpesteijn's ERC project who work on other regions will also benefit from such collaboration.

The ultimate aim is a joint-publication with Georgian scholars to make their research on Muslim-era Georgia available in English for the first time in a dedicated scholarly volume.

*Database:* LIAS researchers Edmund Hayes and Alon Dar are creating an encyclopaedic online database for material sources related to early Islam: this project offers unique opportunity to make Georgian-specific material available in a high-visibility and readily-accessible forum. (<https://materialsourcesforearlyislamandlateantiqueneareast.hcommons.org>)

## **Planning**

February = Trainees meet with Peter Webb to devise the list of terms, keywords, names and toponyms to be searched in Arabic texts, and to select the textual corpus. The form of the database fields to be completed by the Trainees will also be devised.

March – June = Trainees search the textual corpus, inputting their findings into the database.

March – May = Trainees meet and assist Joanita Vroom and her ResMA students during the research seminars "The Archaeology of a Byzantine City" at the Faculty of Archaeology where they will also receive a hands-on experience with finds of the Islamic period from the reference collection and the storage rooms of the Faculty.

June – August = Peter Webb will commence the translation of Arabic texts, and Trainees will meet with him to discuss the translation and the process of analysing/interpreting the material for the annotated study.

## **Student Application**

Prospective trainees should apply by email to [p.a.webb@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:p.a.webb@hum.leidenuniv.nl), sending a CV, a motivation letter, and a transcript of courses (including grades) in PDF format.