

# T'amar Bagrationi (1184–1210)

Subjects: Art

Contributor: Irakli Tezelashvili

T'amar Bagrationi, Queen of Georgia (1184–1210). T'amar Bagrationi was the ninth monarch from the royal house of Bagrationis who ruled over the united Georgian Kingdom. She reigned as a co-monarch alongside her father, Giorgi III, from 1178, assuming full authority in 1184. During her reign, dynastic legitimacy necessitated the appearance of the monumental royal portraits displaying the monarch with immediate predecessors and heirs. T'amar's gender required introduction of meticulous visual language that would re-gender her with all signs of a male ruler and justify her status and sole right to rule. This notion was embodied in her portraits that were carefully incorporated in the overall programmes of the churches. T'amar's five monumental depictions survive where she is identified in inscriptions; two other monumental images are presumed to depict her. Of all the depictions, only one can be determined to have been commissioned directly by her. T'amar's imagery relies on Byzantine elements and adheres to established Georgian models for the local royal portraiture; however, it also adopted sophisticated visual means that was aptly used for manifesting royal power and manipulating authority over the nobility.

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Queen T'amar was born in c. 1166 to King Giorgi III Bagrationi and his wife, Queen Burdukhan. T'amar acceded to the throne as a co-ruler to her father after the failed coup, which was facilitated by T'amar's first cousin Demetre ('Demna') through the aid of the prominent aristocratic families. After her father's death, she was recrowned at the demand of the clergy and nobles in 1184 (In general, about T'amar see: <sup>[1]</sup> (pp. 123–172, <sup>[2]</sup>, <sup>[3]</sup> (pp. 171–237)). T'amar ruled over the united Georgian kingdom until her death in 1210 (for this date, see <sup>[4]</sup> (pp. 348–363)), alongside her second husband, Davit' Soslan, whom she appointed King-Consort after their marriage in late 1180s and later with their son, Giorgi IV Lasha, from 1207.

T'amar's right to succeed was challenged by traditional Georgian succession rules; her father, Giorgi III, did not hold ground for ascending the throne because he was King Demetre I's (r. 1125–1156/57) younger son. In 1155/56, Demetre's heir Davit' V had forced his father into monastery by tonsuring him a monk, just to rule himself only for six months before being poisoned. On his death, he left an heir, Demetre ('Demna'), who was still a minor. Difficulties arise when trying to establish who succeeded Davit' V. Most historians agree on the returning of the tonsured Demetre, at that time already known as monk Daniel or Damiane. He passed shortly after regaining royal authority and was succeeded by his younger son, Giorgi, who had, as sources indicate, promised to rule only until Demna's majority. By the 1170s, it was becoming apparent that Giorgi was not intending to let Demna rule—this resulted in a major coup, instigated by Demna and several aristocrats, which failed through the military support of peeried commoners and, probably, church parties. This unsuccessful coup finally forced Giorgi to make arrangements for his succession. Soon after the 1178 coup, Giorgi, through ecclesiastical support, nominated his only daughter T'amar as a co-monarch. Shortly after Giorgi's death, the nobility challenged Tamar's accession to the throne, demanding to crown T'amar themselves. This recrowning confirmed T'amar's right to rule and gained her aristocrats' loyalty (For T'amar's succession problems with an earlier background, see: <sup>[2]</sup> (pp. 94–97), <sup>[3]</sup> (pp. 172–178). T'amar succeeding to Georgian throne was an exception to the succession rules considering that they only recognized succession through male lineage, effectively excluding the female heirs from succeeding. Consequently, the early years of Tamar's reign were marked with suspicion from nobles as they were much more inclined and accustomed to having a male ruler. T'amar's exclusion from the military command furthermore complicated her position. Therefore, it does not seem surprising that the allegiance of nobles shifted towards T'amar's first husband from an arranged marriage—the Russian Prince Yuri (Giorgi), who was expected to rule by the right of his marriage to the queen.

T'amar's initial struggle to justify her ruleship (<sup>[5]</sup> (pp. 27–39); <sup>[3]</sup> (pp. 171–172)) was not unique, as the gender-sensitive problem of a female succession also persisted in the Byzantine empire (See: <sup>[6]</sup> (pp. 104–106), <sup>[7]</sup> (pp. 9–25)) and beyond (See, <sup>[8][9]</sup>). This issue was generally problematic in thirteenth-century Georgia, Anatolia, and the Near East (See, <sup>[6]</sup>). T'amar's accession was setting a precedent in Georgian succession rules when a female heir was not excluded from

succeeding or was not substituted by her male consort. This precedent would later, in the early 1220s, support T'amar's daughter Rusudan (r. 1223–1245) in succeeding her brother Giorgi IV Lasha, who only had an illegitimate son. T'amar and Rusudan remain the only female monarchs in Georgian history.

Although the second aristocratic coronation finally secured T'amar's position, justifying and legitimising her rulership persisted throughout her reign. For these purposes, the crown employed court historians and theologians who constructed visual and narrative languages that could re-gender T'amar's identity to become a legitimate ruler. Art was employed as a tool for promoting and propagating royal legitimacy and authority. This was aptly applied to the royal portraiture (<sup>[10]</sup> (pp. 98–103), <sup>[11]</sup> (pp. 12–30), <sup>[12]</sup> (pp. 93–187), <sup>[13]</sup> (pp. 288–293)), which could promote and demonstrate the royal self-fashioning and power through representation. Even though, after the 1190s, T'amar's position seems to have been established and generally accepted, and her surviving imagery reveals careful considerations for re-gendering her image to equally ascribe her the double rights of a king and a queen (for the issue of re-gendering female rulers, see <sup>[14]</sup> (pp. 189–202)). This was also strengthened by the generalised ideological justification of female rulership, exemplified in the writings of Catholicos Nikolaoz Gulaberisdze (r. ca. 1150–1178) (See: <sup>[12]</sup> (p. 120), <sup>[3]</sup> (p. 179), <sup>[15]</sup> (p. 106)).

T'amar's rule coincided with the period of Georgian history that the later historiography coined as the 'Golden Age'. This age of prosperity, brought by the decades of military and economic successes, lasted until the Mongol invasions. It was furthermore strengthened by the demise of the Byzantine empire during the Fourth Crusade, allowing T'amar to interfere with international politics. At the zenith of this era, the Georgian Kingdom expanded to include the whole Caucasian region, while bordering and contacting the nearby Islamic states, acting as an international player between East and West <sup>[1]</sup>. Military success and economic prosperity ended in a cultural and intellectual flowering aptly manifested in the courtly arts (e.g., Rust'veli's poem 'The Knight in Panther Skin', etc.), luxurious art commissions from the royals and aristocrats, and interests in Neoplatonic philosophy (<sup>[3]</sup> (pp. 206–237)). Moreover, this period was marked by the intrusions of Islamic influence in Georgian art (noticeably in the 1210s), witnessed mostly in Seljuk motifs and the general shift in taste (On this issue, see: <sup>[11]</sup> (pp. 109–111), <sup>[16]</sup> (p. 105), <sup>[6]</sup>).

All of Tamar's portraits are monumental, publicly displayed images incorporated in the church decorations in Georgia: at Vardzia (1180s), Nat'limtsemeli (1190s), Q'intsvisi (1206/7), Bet'ania (after 1207), Bert'ubani (1220s—currently in Azerbaijan, posthumous) and, possibly, at Gelat'i (date: uncertain) and K'olagiri (1190s) (In general, about the imagery of T'amar, see: <sup>[10]</sup>, <sup>[11]</sup> (pp. 12–30), <sup>[12]</sup> (pp. 93–187), <sup>[13]</sup><sup>[16]</sup><sup>[17]</sup><sup>[18]</sup>, <sup>[19]</sup> (pp. 60–61).

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