

MEDIEVAL GEORGIAN CHURCHES

A Concise Overview of Architecture



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DAVID KHOSHTARIA

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Frontispiece: The Church of St George at Ikvi

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PREFACE

This book is about architecture, one of the most visible aspects of Medieval Georgian culture. Since its essence and character are best expressed in church buildings, the book focuses on religious architecture. It also talks about the people responsible for construction, both patrons and builders. I look at key monuments to briefly discuss the typological, structural, and decorative aspects of architecture, so as to reveal significant artistic and technical achievements of Georgian master builders, as well as the political, cultural, and economic context of architecture and construction.

The book is largely based on previous scholarship, from the seminal works of George Chubinashvili to the fresh research carried out by my former students. But I also add some insights of my own. When writing it, I was particularly inspired by the development of the scholarship on Georgian architecture over the past two decades. New discoveries on the one hand and methodological reconsiderations on the other have challenged many aspects of our knowledge about Medieval Georgian architecture and resulted in the need for an extensive comprehensive survey that includes both the new evidence and the new ways of looking at that evidence. I have no illusion that this short book can fill the gap, but it can provide a summary of recent research by my colleagues and myself and thus shed some new light on the subject. Therefore, the goal of this short work is to introduce the Medieval architecture of Georgia to the reader and to offer a new perspective on some of its aspects.

There is extensive literature on Georgian architecture in the Georgian language. Until 1990, many works were written in Russian as well. Taking into consideration the purpose of this book, I omitted most of them from the references. Exceptions have been made for the most essential works, or in case of no other alternative. In other cases, references have been made only to publications in Western European languages (English, French,

German, and Italian). Of these, I also refrain from referring to semi-popular books published in the 1970s and 80s for the purpose of spreading knowledge about Georgian art and architecture. However, they are listed in the Selected Bibliography, since they may still be of interest to a broader audience. Where references to bilingual publications occur (Georgian-English, Georgian-French, Russian-French, etc.) the title is given in the Western European language.

For the transliteration of Georgian proper names and words, both in the body text and references, I have employed the simplified (without apostrophes) national system of romanisation adopted by the State Department of Geodesy and Cartography of Georgia and the Institute of Linguistics. For the transliteration of Russian, the Library of Congress system, without diacritics, has been used. In capitalisation, I followed the rules of the respective languages.

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I wrote this work while the head of the Medieval Department at the George Chubinashvili National Research Centre in Tbilisi. I am grateful to the Centre's administration and academic staff for the encouragement that I have received from them, and even more for the spirit of kindness, friendship, and collaboration that has always pervaded the Centre. I am particularly thankful to the late Dimitri Tumanishvili for commenting on an earlier draft of the book. I am also indebted to my colleagues Natia Natsvlishvili and Natalia Chitishvili, both of whom read the manuscript and provided helpful suggestions.

Thanks also to those who have shared their photos for this book or granted permission to use copyrighted images. Acknowledgments regarding sources and copyright of images are provided in the List of Illustrations.

The idea for this book owes much to inspiration from the late John Wilkinson, who back in 2003 suggested that I write a book in English on Georgian architecture. This brief overview is, indeed, not what he expected of me, but I hope that I have at least partially done my duty to my good friend.

CHAPTER ONE

CHURCH BUILDING IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The Beginning of Christian Architecture in Eastern Georgia

At the beginning of our era, two kingdoms existed on the territory of Georgia – Lazica (ancient Colchis) in the west, and Iberia in the east. The former was historically closely connected with the Graeco-Roman world, while the latter leaned more towards Iran. However, preferences and allegiances were not constant, and sometimes changed due to geopolitical shifts.¹ The rivalry and wars between the two great powers, Parthian (later Sasanian) Iran and the Roman (later Byzantine) Empire largely determined the development of the two Georgian states throughout the half millennium from the first century AD to the 620s.

According to Church tradition, Christianity was first preached in Georgia by the Apostles Andrew the First-Called and Simon the Canaanite.² Archaeological data and written evidence, such as the Manichaean *Book of Magic* and the inscription of Kartir the Magus Master, attest to the presence of Christian congregations in Iberia in the second and third centuries.³ The first proponents and disseminators of the teaching of Jesus Christ were Judeo-Christians. Their groups sprung up

¹ S. H. Rapp Jr, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes. Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature* (Farnham, Surrey – Burlington, VT, 2014), 2, noted that ancient Georgia simultaneously belonged to two great commonwealths, the Iranian and the eastern Christian or Byzantine.

² V. Licheli, “St. Andrew in Samtskhe - Archaeological Proof?,” in *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus, Iberica Caucasia*, vol.1, ed. by T. Mgaloblishvili (Richmond, Surrey, 1998), 25-37.

³ T. Mgaloblishvili, “Introduction”, in *ibid.*, 4.

amongst the Jewish population of Mtskheta, the capital of the Iberian Kingdom, and other towns.

Christianity became the state religion of Iberia during the reign of King Mirian. He belonged to the highest Iranian aristocracy allied with the Sasanian court. In 284, the king of Iran placed him on the Iberian throne. King Mirian remained the vassal of the Sasanid Empire, but held a large autonomy in internal affairs. He pursued a flexible religious policy, remaining himself a Zoroastrian, but tolerating the pagan cults of local deities as well as the Jewish faith. Around 330, King Mirian and Queen Nana adopted Christianity, owing to the missionary work of Nino, a young woman from Cappadocia revered as the Apostle of Georgia.

The newly converted King Mirian immediately took up the construction of a church. Inspired by St Nino, he built the first church in the name of the Saviour in the royal garden, on the site believed to be the burial place of Christ's chiton.⁴ Early Georgian chronicles usually refer to it as the Lower Church, distinguishing it from the Upper Church, built some years later in Mtskheta.

The Lower Church of Mtskheta collapsed in the 420s and was later replaced by a large basilica, which in turn gave place to the domed Cathedral that still stands today. In the 1970s, Vakhtang Tsintsadze conducted archaeological investigations in the Cathedral and, based on their results, attempted to reconstruct the Lower Church.⁵ Later studies have challenged his reconstruction, however. To date, it is generally accepted among researchers that nothing has survived of the first church. Therefore, our judgment of its architecture has to be based entirely on narrative sources.

The story of the building of the first church in Mtskheta is found in all Georgian written records dealing with the events of the conversion of Iberia, as well as in the writings of Gelasius of Caesarea, Rufinus of Aquileia, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Socrates Scholasticus, and Hermias

⁴ The story of the burial of Christ's chiton in Mtskheta is an essential part of the Georgian church tradition. For narrative sources, see *Renwriting Caucasian History. The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles. The Original Georgian Texts and the Armenian Adaptation*, transl. by R. W. Thomson (Oxford, 2002), 103, 106-109; *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography. The Early Medieval Historical Chronicle. "The Conversion of K'art'li" and "The Life of St. Nino"*, transl. by C. B. Lerner (London, 2004), 171.

⁵ V. Tsintsadze, "Sveti-Tskhoveli vo Mtskheta", *Ars Georgica* 9 (1987), 19-21.

Sozomenus.⁶ Based on those data, which mainly coincide with each other, one can conclude that the church was a wooden structure with a walled precinct. The deathbed letter of King Mirian to his daughter-in-law Princess Salome says that “the Lower Church was called the Holy of Holies and nobody dared enter it except priests.”⁷ This suggests that church attenders, including the royal family, stood in the precinct, open to the sky and surmounted by a timber enclosure. Gelasius describes the space allocated for laity as divided into separate sections for men and women by means of columns.⁸

According to Georgian tradition, one of the pillars that supported the church roofing was made from a cedar tree, which had grown on the burial place of Christ’s chiton. It was considered miraculous and was called *Svetitskhoveli*, Life-Giving Pillar. Later, this name began to be applied to the cathedral itself.⁹

King Mirian was contemporaneous with Constantine the Great. Wishing to promote the building activity of the newly converted king, the emperor sent masons to Iberia. Georgian chronicles mention that “the Greeks” built churches in Mtskheta *extra muros* (the so-called Upper Church, on the site of the present Samtavro Monastery), Erusheti, Tsunda, and Manglisi. None of those buildings has survived, but judging from the indirect evidence provided by historic sources, one can suggest that at least some of them were basilicas with columns and timber roofing. However, the activity of Constantinopolitan builders did not exert significant influence on the further development of eastern Georgian architecture. The fifth and sixth-century Georgian churches clearly differ in design and building technique from Constantinopolitan churches.

⁶ Rufinus, *Hist. Eccl.* I. 10. 11; Theodoret, *Hist. Eccl.* I. 23; Socrates, *Hist. Eccl.* I. 20; Sozomen, *Hist. Eccl.* VII. 7. Concerning the authorship of Gelasius, see *Gelasius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History: The Extant Fragments*, ed. by M. Wallraff, J. Stutz, and N. Marinides, transl. by N. Marinides (Berlin-Boston, 2018), XIX-LXXXV; on the conversion of Georgians and the construction of the first church: *ibid.*, 140-156.

⁷ *The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography.*, 191.

⁸ *Gelasius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History: The Extant Fragments*, 151.

⁹ A. Plontke-Lüning, “Feurige Säulen: Zu den Gründungslegenden der Kathedralen in Valarsapat (Armenien) und Mxeta (Georgien)”, in *Gestalt, Funktion, Bedeutung. Festschrift für Friedrich Möbius, zum 70 Geburtstag*, Herausgegeben von F. Jäger und H. Scieurie (Jena, 1999), 31-49.

At various times, the arched structure in Cheremi (the so-called Cheremi Square), the tripartite chapel in Nekresi Monastery, the southern lateral room of the Church of St George in Bodbe Monastery, the Chapel of St Nino in the yard of Samtavro Church, and the oldest part of the Church of the True Cross in Ujarma Fortress were thought to have been fourth-century structures.¹⁰ At present, these datings are considered insufficiently substantiated, and none of these buildings can convincingly be attributed to the fourth century.

The Fifth and Sixth Centuries: Development of Basilica in Eastern Georgia

There are a few churches in eastern Georgia that can be more or less cogently dated to the fifth century. The oldest church in the monastery of Dzveli Shuamta in Kakheti province is a small basilica with two pairs of piers, of which the eastern piers are rectangular in plan while the western ones are L-shape. The southern and northern aisles communicate by means of a passage on the west, thus forming a three-sided ambulatory around the nave. The material and workmanship of the church follow local building practice. It is built of mortared rubble and cobblestone and has relatively thick walls and a vaulted ceiling. Arches are horseshoe-shaped, which is typical of the early architecture of Georgia, as well as that of Armenia, Mesopotamia and the High Plateau of Asia Minor. The so-called Antiochia (i.e. Antioch) Church in Mtskheta, a simple vaulted single-nave structure with two wide openings on the southern side, built presumably c. 420, provides an early example of horseshoe-shaped arches made of smoothly hewn stone blocks.

The late fifth and sixth centuries were a period of active church building in Iberia. The Iranians retained political control for the majority of that period, but failed to spread Zoroastrianism in Georgia. King Vakhtang Gorgasali (457-502), being a vassal of Iran and even participating in Iranian military campaigns, remained irreconcilable towards fire worshipping. He significantly contributed to strengthening the Georgian Church by supporting the elevation of the Bishop of Mtskheta to the rank of Catholicos

¹⁰ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakheti* (Tbilisi, 1959), 37-45, 86, 207-208; N. Chubinashvili, *Shashianis Sameba* (Tbilisi, 1988), 52-53.



1. Dzveli Shuamta Monastery. View from the south-east, with the early Christian basilica on the left.

and by establishing twelve new episcopal sees. In matters of faith, King Vakhtang always resisted his Iranian patrons, sometimes doing so in an openly confrontational manner. His chronicler says that in Nikozi, he built a church “on the hearth of a fire-temple.”¹¹

Georgian historical tradition highly praised King Vakhtang’s efforts. In the chronicle of his life, compiled about three hundred years after his death, he is depicted as a hero, a powerful ruler. However, authentic written sources show something of a different situation. The donor inscription of Bolnisi Cathedral (known as *Sioni*, i.e. Zion), made above the main northern entrance, records the patronage of the local bishop David, but does not mention Vakhtang, despite the fact that the chronicle of his life credits him with the foundation of the episcopal see in Bolnisi. Instead, the inscription refers to the Iranian King Peroz, and even calculates the date of the

¹¹ *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 217. On Vakhtang Gorgasali, see S. H. Rapp Jr, *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*, 271-329; C. Haas, “Geopolitics and Georgian Identity in Late Antiquity: the Dangerous World of Vakhtang Gorgasali,” in *Georgian Christian Thought and its Cultural Context*, ed. by T. Nutsubidze, C. Horn, and B. Lourié (Leiden-Boston, 2014), 29-44; for the chronology of Vakhtang’s life, see *ibid.*, 34-35.



2. Sioni Church near Bolnisi. Southern façade

construction from the year of his accession to the throne, saying that it was begun in the twentieth year of the reign of Peroz and took 15 years. Hence, the cathedral was built between 479 and 494.

Bolnisi Cathedral is a basilica with five pairs of cruciform piers and a projecting apse.¹² The proportions of its plan, as well as the arrangement of the doorways in the southern and northern walls, accentuate the latitudinal axis. In addition to a nave and two aisles, the cathedral has a *stoa* in the north, and a porch and a two-apsed room in the south, which was identified by George Chubinashvili as a baptistery.¹³

Bolnisi has preserved unique archaeological evidence of the division of the internal space by gender. The western part of the nave and aisles was separated from the rest of the space by means of a barrier and was allocated for women.¹⁴ The holes where the horizontal beam of the barrier was inserted are still visible on the walls and piers. The female part had a

¹² G. Chubinashvili, *Bolnisskii Sion* (Tbilisi, 1940), 7-61.

¹³ *ibid.*, 128-130. See also N. Gengiuri, "Universal and Distinctive in Early Christian Ritual. Baptism and Baptisterium Architecture in Georgia," in *Anadolu Kültürlerinde Süreklilik ve Değişim. Dr. A. Mine Kadiroğlu'na Armağan*, ed. by A. Ceren Erel, B. İşler, N. Peker, and G. Sağır (Ankara, 2011), 234.

¹⁴ N. Chitishvili, "samrevlo sivrtsis danatsevreba aghmosavlet sakartvelos adreul eklesiebsi (tsinastsaruli mosazrebebî)," *sakartvelos sidzveleni* 23 (2020), 21-23.



3. Sioni Church near Bolnisi. Exterior of apse

special entrance from the north, about 5 m to the west of the main door. The inscription above the entrance mentions Parnavaz (or Parsman; the inscription is damaged in this place) and Azarukht, apparently a noble couple, as the donors to the arrangement of this door. It is the earliest reference to female patronage in Georgia.

Recently, Guram Qipiani supported the reading of the donor's name as Parsman and identified him with King Parsman IV of Iberia.¹⁵ According to him, Parsman and Azarukht were the founders of Bolnisi Church in

¹⁵ G. Qipiani, *bolnisis sioni (tadzgis adreuli samsbeneblo penebi da misi udzvelesi tsartserebi)* (Tbilisi, 2022), 12-55.



4. Sioni Church near Bolnisi. Pilaster capital in northern gallery



5. Sioni Church near Bolnisi. Lintel of northern door with inscription

the 420s,¹⁶ which, destroyed by the invading Huns or Iranians in 479, was restored as a cathedral, with some changes in plan, by Bishop David in 494. This supposition indeed carries some weight, especially due to the fact that the story of the conversion of Iberia in the compendium of Georgian chronicles *The Life of Kartli* credits Parsman IV with the construction of a church in Bolnisi.¹⁷ However, the planning concept and decoration of Bolnisi Cathedral can hardly be attributed to early fifth-century architecture.

The vaults of the nave and aisles of the cathedral were rebuilt around 1640. At present, they are almost of equal height and are housed under a common pitched roof. The original form of the roofing is under question. Chubinashvili believed that the seventeenth-century restoration nearly repeated the initial form, while Rusudan Gverdtseteli viewed the original cathedral as a standard basilica with clerestory walls rising above the aisles.¹⁸

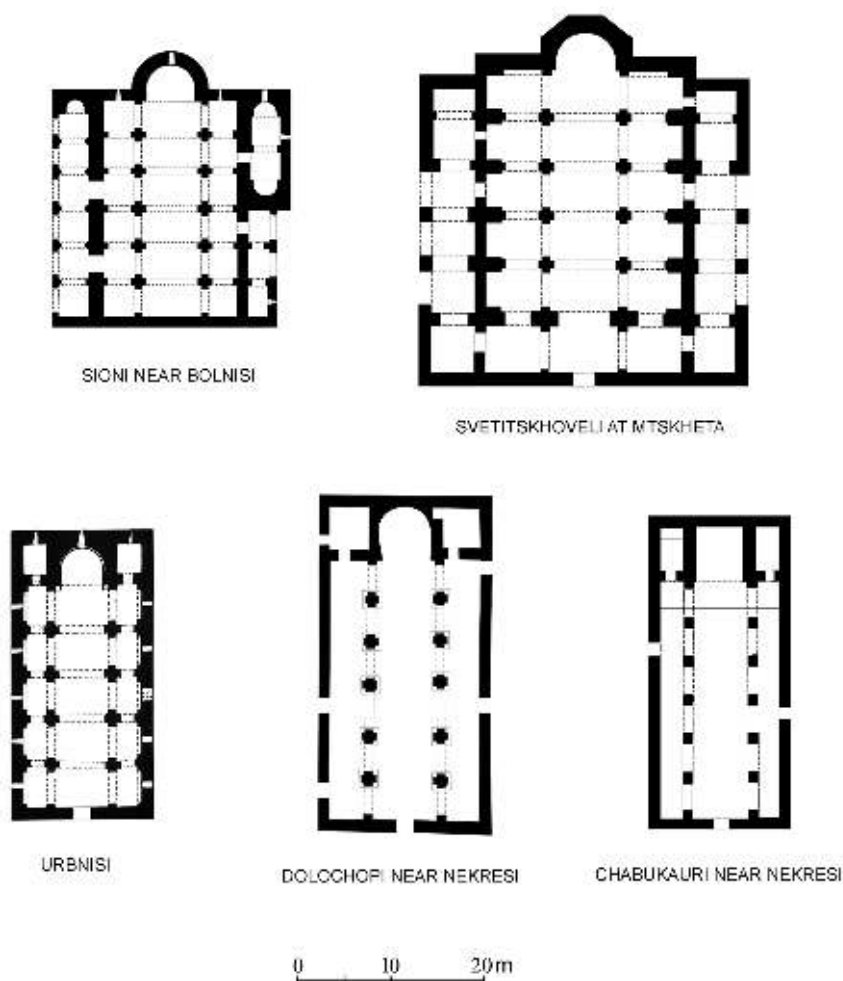
Owing to the use of stone as the main building material, architectural sculpture appears in Georgian churches from the early period. Bolnisi Cathedral is the earliest church in Georgia to have a developed stone-carved decoration. Along with foliage and geometric ornaments, the capitals of the pilasters and columns are adorned with images of animals. Some of these images are typical early Christian representations, such as a pair of peacocks facing each other and flanking a cross in the centre. Others are related to Sasanian art both in their iconography and style.¹⁹ Apparently, the main media for transferring artistic methods were metalwork and movable stucco panels. Translated into stone, the images show a certain deviation from Sasanian patterns. The same can be said about Bolnisi's floral ornaments, among which a palmette prevails.

¹⁶ This is the date suggested by G. Qipiani (*ibid.*, 55). Usually, the brief reign of Parsman IV is dated to the period from 406 to 409. See C. Toumanoff, "Chronology of the Early Kings of Iberia," *Traditio*, vol. 25 (1969), 27.

¹⁷ *Rewriting Caucasian History*., 152. See also S. H. Rapp Jr, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts* (Louvain, 2003), 316. The royal list included in *The Conversion of Kartli* assigns the construction of Bolnisi to Parsman's predecessor, King Bakur (*The Wellspring of Georgian Historiography*., 147).

¹⁸ G. Chubinashvili, *Bolnisskii Sion*, 136-140; R. Gverdtseteli, *shromebi*, I (Tbilisi, 2017), 106-109.

¹⁹ On the Sasanian influence on Georgian art, see N. Iamanidze, "Georgian Reception of Sasanian Art," in *Sasanidische Spuren in der byzantinischen, kaukasischen und islamischen Kunst und Kultur (Römisch Germanisches Zentralmuseum 15)*, ed. by N. Asutay-Effenberger and F. Daim (Bonn, 2019), 93-105.



6. Plans of eastern Georgian early basilicas

Basilica remained the principal type of church until at least the mid-sixth century. In around 500, shortly before his death, King Vakhtang Gorgasali erected a large basilica in Mtskheta, on the site of the ruined fourth-century Svetitskhoveli, and made it the see of the Catholicos of Georgia. Gorgasali's basilica was almost completely reconstructed in the eleventh century, but its plan was clearly established during archaeological excavations.²⁰ It shows

²⁰ V. Tsintsadze, "Nekotorye osobennosti bazilik rannekhristsianskoi Gruzii i arkhitektura baziliki V veka Sveti-Tskhoveli v Mtskheta," *Ars Georgica* 10 (1991), 17-50.



7. Tbilisi, Anchiskhati Church of the Mother of God.
Exterior from the north-west

a close resemblance to that of Bolnisi Cathedral except for some details, such as the polygonal outer shape of the apse instead of the semicircular of Bolnisi. The most marked difference between the two cathedrals is in the structure of their longitudinal walls. In Svetitskhoveli, they have buttresses projecting inside which serve to resist the outward thrust of the vaults of the aisles, which are wider than the ones in Bolnisi. In Svetitskhoveli, as well as in Bolnisi, the projecting apse is not flanked by subsidiary rooms. These two prominent examples suggest that basilicas in Georgia had no additional rooms on the sides of the sanctuary until at least the year 500.

It is noteworthy that Svetitskhoveli Cathedral was called the “Mother of all Churches,” like the church built by Bishop John II on Mount Zion on the site of an earlier, smaller church. When King Vakhtang replaced the small wooden church with a huge basilica, he was obviously following the Jerusalem precedent.²¹

²¹ T. Mgaloblishvili, I. Gagoshidze, “The Jewish Diaspora and Early Christianity in Georgia,” *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus, Iberica Caucasia*, vol.1, ed. by T. Mgaloblishvili (Richmond, Surrey, 1998), 43.



8. Dolochopi Church. View from the west

The basilicas built in Georgia during the sixth century mainly follow the plan designed in Bolnisi and Mtskheta. The only significant innovation, determined by the development of the liturgy, was a tripartite sanctuary, i.e. an apse flanked by rectangular side rooms. In Georgia, as well as in other eastern Christian countries, the purpose of those rooms was not yet strictly regulated.²² The Church of the Mother of God (present Anchiskhati Church) constructed *c.* 510 by King Dachi in Tbilisi, the newly founded capital of Iberia, has a lateral chamber with a door in the eastern wall. The innovation resulted in a new arrangement for the eastern part of the church - most of the sixth-century basilicas in eastern Georgia have a sanctuary backed by a straight wall instead of a projecting apse.

²² See G. Descoedres, *Die Pastophorien im syro-byzantinischen Osten* (Wiesbaden, 1983), 1-25, 69-75, with the conclusion that there was no regulation on the use of side rooms in early Syrian churches.

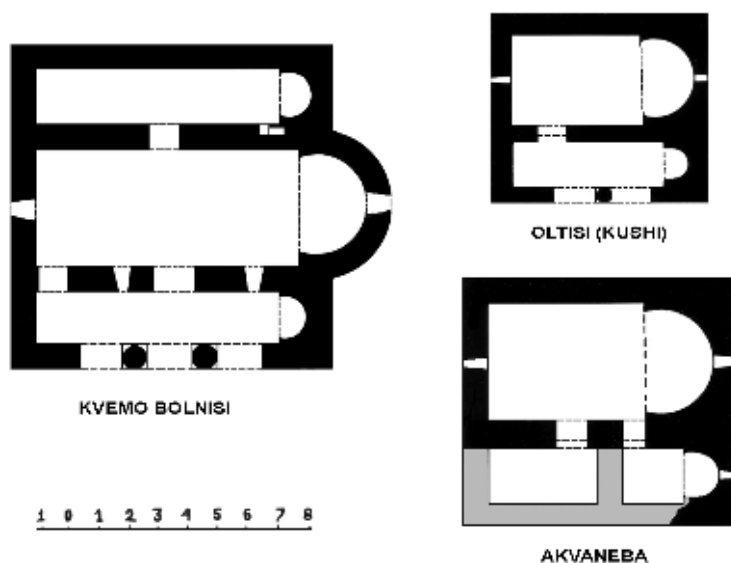
In recent decades, two important basilicas have been excavated in the area of the historic city of Nekresi in Kakheti. In Antiquity, Nekresi was one of the largest Georgian cities. According to the Georgian chronicles, it was founded by King Parnajom (109-90 BC), enlarged by King Arshak (20 BC – AD 1), additionally fortified by King Mirian (284-361), and provided with a church by King Trdat (394-406).²³ Archaeological evidence completes the data of written sources. A church unearthed in the Dolochopi district of the ancient city is the longest known basilica in Georgia. Its space is divided by five pairs of cruciform piers and it has a sanctuary that is horseshoe-shaped in plan. The imposing ruins of the basilica clearly show its particular importance. Along with its large size, a number of characteristics, such as five entrances and a synthronon consisting of four tiers of seats, suggest that it may have served as the cathedral of Nekresi.

Another sixth-century church, excavated in the Chabukauri district of Nekresi, is also a basilica with five pairs of piers, but it is smaller than that of Dolochopi. It features a rectangular sanctuary without an apse, an arrangement that has no analogue among the early Georgian basilicas and might have been introduced from northern Syria²⁴ by Abibos, the bishop of Nekresi who arrived in Georgia in the mid-sixth century among the group of Syrian monks, the so-called “thirteen Syrian Fathers”.²⁵ Another peculiarity of this basilica, the rectangular form of the piers, also recalls

²³ *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 42, 47, 77, 151. For the dates of the reign, see C. Toumanoff, “Chronology of the Early Kings of Iberia,” 10-27.

²⁴ For Syrian basilicas with rectangular sanctuaries, see H. B. Butler, *Early Churches in Syria* (Princeton, 1929), 131-141; J. Strzygowsky, *L'ancien art chrétien de Syrie* (Paris, 1936), fig. 48; G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord* (Paris, 1953), vol. I, 110-111; vol. II, pl. IX-3, XCIX, CLVI-1,2.

²⁵ For the dating of Dolochopi and Chabukauri churches, see N. Aronishidze, “durujispira bazilikis kompozitsiis raobisatvis,” *sakartvelos sidzveleni* 20 (2017), 61-97. The first explorer of these churches, Nodar Bakhtadze, suggested earlier dates. See N. Bakhtadze, “Archaeological Research upon One of the Earliest Georgian Christian Basilica,” *Temporis Signa: Archeologia della tarda antichità e del medioevo* IX (2014), 65-73; N. Bakhtadze, V. Mamiashvili, B. Gabekhadze, and J. Chkhvimiani, *An Archaeological Study of the Ancient Churches in the Former City of Nekresi* (Tbilisi, 2018). His conclusions and datings have been accepted by some other authors as well. See E. Loosley Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism: Cultural Interaction between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity* (Leiden-Boston, 2018), 44-51, with a statement that “the evidence from recent excavations at Chabukauri and Dolochopi on the territory of Nekresi show that large Christian basilicas were being built from the fourth century onwards” (*ibid.*, 182).



9. Plans of east Georgian early single nave churches with annexes

Syrian architecture. As a rule, late fifth- and sixth-century basilicas in eastern Georgia have cruciform piers.

The fifth-century basilicas in eastern Georgia have moderately oblong proportions. In Sioni at Bolnisi and Svetitskhoveli at Mtskheta, the ratio of the length to the width without annexes is 1.5:1. In the sixth century, one can observe a tendency towards more elongated plans, though the number of piers still never exceeds five pairs. They stand close to each other - in contrast to Syrian wide-arched basilicas. The length of the Cathedral of St Stephen in Urbnisi is twice more than its width. Nearly the same proportion is applied in Dolochopi, while Chabukauri is even more elongated, having a ratio of length to width of 2.2:1.

The standard plan of a basilica in Armenia is in many respects close to that of Georgia, but there is a principal difference in the form of piers: In Armenian basilicas (Ereruik, Kasakh, Ashtarak, Eghvard, Tekor, *etc.*²⁶) the piers are usually T-shaped. Richard Krautheimer considered the South Caucasian basilica to have originated from Asia Minor, and even attributed some

²⁶ See F. Gandolfo, *Le basiliche armene, IV-VII secolo* (Roma, 1982), fig. 13, 24, 36, 37, 183, 200, 258, for the plans of the Armenian basilicas.

structures to the building activity of Cappadocian mason crews.²⁷ Friedrich W. Deichmann challenged this opinion by noting that the best-surviving basilica in Asia Minor, Church no. 1 in Binbirkilise (Madenşehir), dating from the sixth century, is technically more primitive than contemporary Georgian and Armenian basilicas.²⁸

The Single-Nave Design and its Variations

From early Christian times, builders of churches in small villages often applied a simple single-nave plan which responded to both the needs and the resources of local communities. A standard single-nave church consists of a barrel-vaulted rectangular hall and an apsed sanctuary on its eastern end. The latter may be either projecting or hidden behind a flat eastern façade. Two sixth-century churches in Mankhuti, located close to each other, illustrate these two different arrangements. A single-nave church may also have a porch or a *stoa*, usually from the south side, as it is in the churches at Akvaneba and Oltisi (present-day Kushi). Among later examples, one can note the tiny oratory built on top of the forty-metre tall natural rock pillar near Katskhi.²⁹

The single-nave structure remained the most widespread type of rural parish church in Georgia until the nineteenth century. In the mountainous province of Svaneti, it is the only known type of Medieval church.

A growing need for auxiliary spaces also affected the development of the single-nave design. Already in the sixth century, a number of churches were being built that combined an inner single-nave structure with a basilican outer shape. This type of church features, instead of aisles, side rooms to the south and north, which are separated from the nave by walls. Baltrušaitis referred to this plan as *église cloisonné*, while Chubinashvili named it *Dreikirchen Basilika*, implying the presence of three altars in the church.³⁰

²⁷ R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 340.

²⁸ F. W. Deichmann, "Zur Entwicklung der Pfeilerbasilika: die Basilika Sion von Bolnissi," *Rom, Ravenna, Konstantinopel, Naber Osten, Gesammelte Studien zur spätantiken Architektur und Geschichte* (Wiesbaden, 1982), 831-833, fig. 5-6.

²⁹ G. Gagoshidze, "Katskhi Pillar," *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 12 (2015), 287-306.

³⁰ G. Chubinashvili, *kartuli kbelovnebis istoria*, vol. 1 (Tiflis, 1936), 61-68; J. Baltrušaitis, *L'église cloisonnée en Orient et en Occident* (Paris, 1941). The English term "triple

The earliest known examples of the *église cloisonné* are preserved at Kve-mo Bolnisi and Vanati, both located in the Kvemo Kartli province and both dated back to the mid-sixth century.³¹ The two churches have similar plans, consisting of a nave, a partly open gallery to the south, and a narrow room to the north running along the entire length of the nave. All three parts terminate in apses to the east. The nave was covered with a gable roof, while the much lower side rooms had single-pitched roofs, thus creating a resemblance to a standard basilica. The southern galleries of Kvemo Bolnisi and Vanati had the same purpose of housing catechumens and penitents during the service as the longitudinal galleries in the large basilicas at Bolnisi, Mtskheta, and Dolochopi. The northern room, which has no outside entrance and communicates only with the nave, could have multiple functions, serving as a sacristy, a place for keeping pre-consecrated gifts, and perhaps even as a baptistery.³²

Churches built in the later half of the sixth century display further complications of the *église cloisonné* plan. In the Church of St Nicholas in Kardanakhi, completely built of cobblestone, there are additional small compartments to the west of the nave.³³ The church is remarkable as it

church basilica” is used less commonly; however, it was recently applied by E. Loosley Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism*., 115-121. U. Monneret de Villard, “Una chiesa di tipo georgiano nella necropoli tebana,” *The Bulletin of the Byzantine Institute 2: Coptic Studies in Honor of Walter Ewing Crum* (Boston, 1950), 495-500, described a church of a comparable plan excavated at Thebes in Egypt as that of the “Georgian type.”

³¹ G. Chubinashvili, *Voprosy istorii iskusstva*, vol. 1 (Tbilisi, 1970), 104-115. For a critical discussion of Chubinashvili’s opinion, see A. Plontke-Lüning, *Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien. Die Entwicklung des christlichen Sakralbaus in Lazika, Iberien, Armenien, Albanien und den Grenzregionen vom 4. bis zum 7. Jh.*, (Vienna, 2007), 213-219.

³² N. Chitishvili, “Some Aspects of Early Liturgical Planning in the South Caucasus,” Paper in the workshop *Artistic Networks in the Caucasian Space: New Researches and Perspectives*, carried out within the SNSF research project *Cultural Interactions in the Medieval Subcaucasian Region: Historiographical and Art-Historical Perspectives*, University of Fribourg, May 10-11, 2022. A largely similar function of the northern room has been observed in Nubia. See A. Łajtar and D. Zielińska, “The Northern Pastophorium of Nubian Churches: Ideology and Function (on the Basis of Inscriptions and Paintings),” in *Aegyptus et Nubia Christiana. The Włodzimierz Godlewski Jubilee Volume on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday*, ed. by A. Łajtar, A. Obluski, and I. Zych (Warsaw, 2016), 435-457.

³³ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii*, 143-147; G. Gagoshidze, “Georgian Churches Dedicated to St. Sabas the Purified,” in *The Sabaitic Heritage in the Orthodox Church from the Fifth Century to the Present*, ed. by J. Patrich (Louvain, 2001), 381.

provides one of the earliest examples in Georgian architecture of the arrangement of an upper gallery. It runs above the western and southern rooms in an L-shaped plan.

The Church of the Mother of God in Nekresi Monastery has a symmetrical plan with two double-arched entrances in the longitudinal walls. The side rooms are connected by a corridor to the west, forming an unbroken U-shaped ambulatory around the nave. To the east, there are separate rooms at both ends of the ambulatory. A similar plan occurs in the Church of the Mother of God in Zegani Monastery, with the significant difference here being that the upper gallery is arranged above the western portion of the ambulatory.³⁴

Single-nave churches with additional rooms to the south, north, and often also the west were built in Georgia until the late tenth century. These show a great variety of plans. A unique version can be seen in the Church of St George in Eredvi.³⁵ According to the inscription carved on the round column at the southern entrance, its construction was started in 906 by the master builder Theodore Taplaisdze. The church has an ambulatory that surrounds the nave on all four sides, including the east. It is interrupted only in the north-eastern corner by a room adjacent to the sanctuary reachable from the nave. Presumably, the unusual eastern portion was added to the ambulatory at the will of the donors from the local princely house of Tbeli to serve as their burial place.³⁶

Early Basilica in Western Georgia

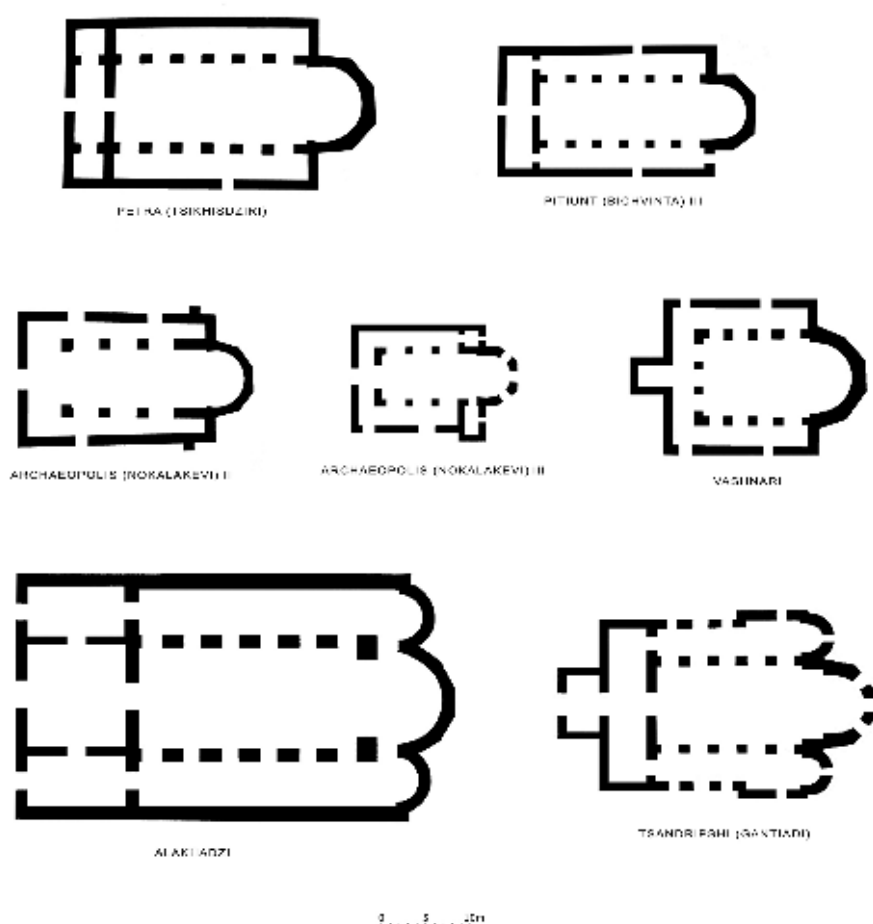
In the fourth and early fifth centuries, the Kingdom of Lazica, the successor to the ancient state of Colchis, was a strong local power largely independent from the Roman Empire. Romans maintained the chain of fortifications along the Black Sea littoral, however, actual responsibility for the security of both the coast and its hinterland was on the Lazi kings.³⁷ The first Christian communities emerged in the coastal fortified cities inhabited mainly by Greeks.

³⁴ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii*, 164-176.

³⁵ R. Mepisashvili, "eredvis 906 tsilis khurotmodzghvruli dzeqli," *Arts Georgica* 4 (1955), 101-136.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 127.

³⁷ D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity* (Oxford, 1994), 266.



10. Plans of west Georgian early basilicas

Pityus (Pitiunt, present Bichvinta), a rich trade port in Abasgia (Abkhazia), a semi-autonomous principality within the Kingdom of Lazica,³⁸ already had a significant Christian congregation by the early fourth century. Stratophilus, the bishop of Pityus, attended the first council of Nicaea in 325. Excavations within the city enclosure revealed four churches, each constructed above

³⁸ “The Abasgi have been from ancient times subjects of the Lazi, but they have always had two rulers of their own blood” (Procopius, *Goth.* VIII. 3. 12).



11. Archaeopolis (present Nokalakevi) churches. View from the east

the ruins of an older one.³⁹ The first church, a simple single-nave structure, dates from the first half of the fourth century. In the early fifth century, it was replaced by a basilica with an asymmetric five-sided apse to the east and a narthex to the west. In the southern part of the narthex, there was a

³⁹ I. Tsitsishvili, "bichvintis sakulto nagebobata kompleksi," in *didi pitunt: arkeologiuri gatxrebi bichvintashi* II, ed. by A. Apakidze (Tbilisi, 1977), 83-100; L. Khroushkova, *Les monuments chrétiens de la côte orientale de la mer noire: Abkhazie, IVe – XIVe siècles* (Turnhout, 2006), 29-33; I. Berdzenishvili, "The Ancient Christian Monuments of the Black Sea Eastern Littoral – Pitunt (Bichvinta)," *Talanta: Proceeding of the Dutch Archaeological and Historical Society*, vol. XXXVIII-XXXIX (2006-2007), 303-314. For the mosaic decoration, see M. Odišeli, *Spätantike und frühchristliche Mosaiken in Georgien* (Vienna, 1995), 31-60; for baptisteries in western Georgia, including Pitunt-Bichvinta, see I. Berdzenishvili, "Early Christian Baptisteries from the Eastern Black Sea Coast," *Ethnology and Archaeology of Armenia and Neighboring Countries. Materials of International Conference, 25-27 October, 2010* (Yerevan, 2014), 292-303.

baptistery with a rectangular font. Fragments of Proconnesian marble columns and mosaic decoration in the sanctuary and baptistery are testimony to both the artistic taste and financial resources of its builders. The third church, built in the late fifth century, was also a basilica with a projecting pentahedral apse and a narthex, but with five pairs of piers instead of columns. The last church on the site was constructed in the early sixth century to a single-nave plan. Its apse, horseshoe-shaped inside and three-sided outside, stood above the narthex of the previous church.

Justinian's *Novels* say that "Pityus and Sebastopolis should be considered forts rather than cities."⁴⁰ However, there were several settlements around the fort that formed a conurbation already known as the "Great Pityus" to Greek authors in the first century BC.⁴¹ Two sixth-century churches excavated in the vicinity of modern Bichvinta attest that by that time, the suburbs of Pityus had grown far beyond the fort. The first one, located about 0.5 km to the south of the town, has an unusual design: It is a square structure with two equal apses to the east and one free-standing pier in the centre, from which arches sprang to all four sides, dividing the interior into four compartments. To all appearances, the church was vaulted. The other church, unearthed in the present village of Alahadze, is the largest known basilica in western Georgia.⁴²

The capital of the Kingdom of Lazica, Tsikhegoji, known to early Byzantine historians as Archaeopolis, and referred to as a "large and ancient fort" in Justinian's *Novels*, is situated in the hinterland of the country. The archaeological site has preserved huge fortification walls and the ruins of palaces, baths, barracks, and three churches, two of which survive at ground level only, while the third was reconstructed in the Middle Ages.⁴³ The first church, built in the mid-fourth century, is single-nave. About a century later, the original church made way for a basilica with three pairs of piers and a projecting apse to the east, horseshoe-shaped in the interior and five-sided outside. The third church, built next to the second in the sixth century, has a similar arrangement of the sanctuary, but has only two pairs of piers and differs in the proportions of the plan, which is almost square. In both basilicas, the aisles are connected by a passage to the west, forming a three-sided U-shape ambulatory surrounding the nave.

⁴⁰ *Novellae Constitutiones*, 28.

⁴¹ Strabo, 11. 2. 14.

⁴² L. Khroushkova, *Les monuments chrétiens de la côte orientale.*, 33-34, 39-40.

⁴³ P. Zakaraia, V. Lékvindzé, N. Lomoouri, "Fouilles de Nokalakévi-Archéopolis," *Bedi kartlisa, revue de kartvélogie* XXXVII (1979), 194-202.

The combination of a horseshoe-shaped interior plan of the sanctuary with a pentahedral exterior form can also be seen in the basilica excavated at Petra (present Tsikhisdziri).⁴⁴ Being a small Roman fort since around AD 300, Petra became a city owing to the efforts of Emperor Justinian, who in the early 530s enclosed it within a strong defensive wall and constructed new buildings in it.⁴⁵ Apparently, at the same time, an episcopal see was established there, and a cathedral, a sizeable basilica with five pairs of piers and a narthex, was erected. The basilica in Tsandripshi, which was convincingly identified as the Church of the Mother of God built by Emperor Justinian in Abasgia, is shorter, having only four pairs of piers. Its aisles are slightly widened in their eastern sections and terminate in apses.⁴⁶

Fourth-, fifth- and sixth-century basilicas in western Georgia tend to be either heavily destroyed or reconstructed, which makes it difficult to discuss their roofing systems. It is commonly believed that they had timber roofs, which is true for fourth- and fifth-century coastal churches. As for the sixth century, at least some of the western Georgian basilicas were obviously vaulted. The thick longitudinal walls, bulky piers and narrow spans in Petra indicate that the bearing structure was intended to hold a heavy stone vaulting. The church in Tsandripshi preserved the lower parts of the restored barrel vaults in the nave and southern aisle; however, the strength of its supporting framework attests to the existence of stone vaulting from the beginning. Later, when the vaults apparently showed signs of falling, the structure was partly reconstructed and reinforced by adding buttresses to the piers and ribbing arches to the vaults. In the church building of inner Lazica, vaulting had no alternative, at least from the late fifth century onwards.

The discussion of the early Medieval architecture of Lazica urges one to take a comparative look at its neighbours and, in the first place, at Iberia (eastern Georgia), which already by the late fifth century had developed its own architectural language, one that had absorbed not only the Roman and Sasanian influence but also a strong local building tradition. Basilicas in the hinterland of Lazica display an obvious Iberian impact. This is manifested

⁴⁴ D. Khoshtaria, "The Basilica at Petra (Tsikhisdziri)," in *Medieval Ports in North Aegean and the Black Sea: Links to the Maritime Routes of East, Proceedings of the International Symposium, Thessalonike, 4-6 December, 2013*, ed. by F. Karagianni (Thessalonike, 2013), 367-376.

⁴⁵ I. Mania and N. Natsvlishvili, "Littoral Fortifications in South-West Georgia," in *ibid.*, 279-281, 286-287.

⁴⁶ L. Khroushkova, *Les monuments chrétiens de la côte orientale de la mer noire.*, 45-55.

in the shortened plan, three-sided ambulatory around the nave, and in the L-shape plan of the westernmost piers of basilican churches, features that closely recall the church in Dzveli Shuamta. Actually, it should come as no surprise, since this area directly borders eastern Georgia. From the mid-fifth century to 522, and then briefly in the 540s, both Iberia and Lazica were in the sphere of Iranian political influence.⁴⁷ Information provided by Greek and Latin sources is echoed in Georgian chronicles, which say that the Iberian King Vakhtang Gorgasali, a rebellious vassal of the Iranians, brought the most part of western Georgia under his control.⁴⁸ Iranians constructed a new road between Iberia and Lazica, which was so smooth that not only cavalry but also elephants could comfortably pass along it.⁴⁹ Involvement in crucial geopolitical developments in the Middle East hastened integration processes in the Caucasus. To quote David Braund, the Byzantine-Iranian wars “promoted the unification of what was to become the great medieval kingdom of Georgia.”⁵⁰ These would have been favourable for the migration of masons and for the exchange of design ideas, architectural forms, and building techniques between eastern and western Georgia.

It seems that after the mid-sixth century, the influence of Iberian architecture expanded far beyond the hinterland of Lazica. Buildings indicative of this influence can be found in Abasgia (Abkhazia), the westernmost part of western Georgia. The above-described *église cloisonnée* plan, which was customary for eastern Georgia, was used in the church erected in the fort of Gagra (Triglite of ancient Greek sources). Later, the *église cloisonnée* plan was adapted to local traditions. In Ambara Church at the Miussera Cape, thought to have been built in the eighth century, it is combined with a narthex, an essential element of the Black Sea littoral basilicas.

Manglisi and Other Early Domed Churches

Fifth- and sixth-century domed churches in Georgia are relatively small when compared with basilicas. Typologically, they tend to be centrally planned cruciform structures. As in the whole early Christian world, some of them were martyria, while others might have been designed for regular liturgical use.

⁴⁷ D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 268.

⁴⁸ *Rewriting Caucasian History*., 172.

⁴⁹ Procopius, *Goth.* VIII. 13. 5.

⁵⁰ D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, 268.

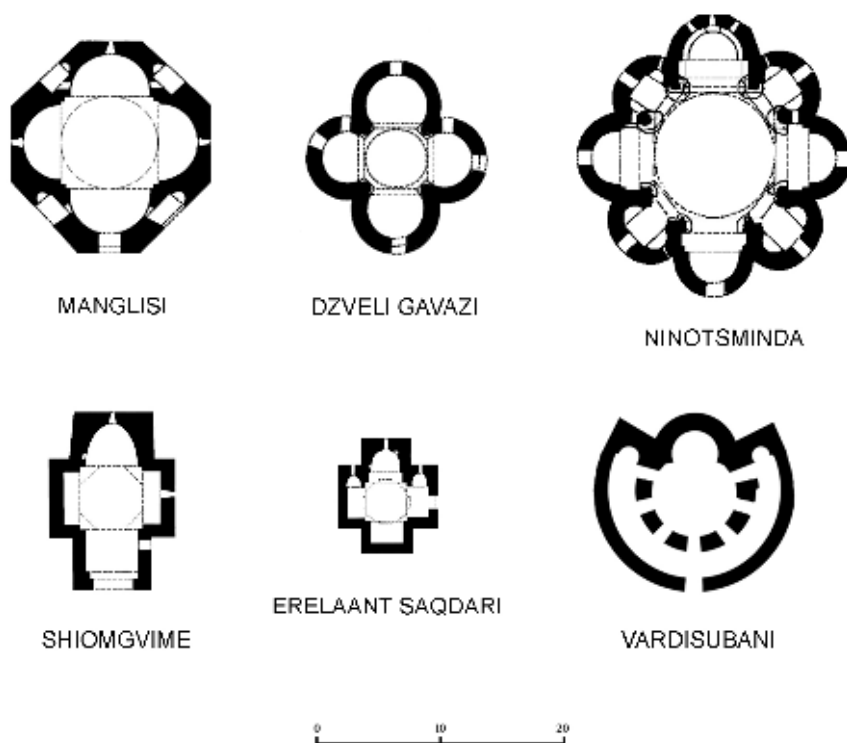
In the 490s, a new church was constructed in Manglisi.⁵¹ It was a special place - according to tradition, the first church was built there as far back as the fourth century to house the nails of the True Cross sent by Emperor Constantine to King Mirian. In Georgian chronicles, the story is vague and contains obvious anachronisms and discords – for instance, some sources mention the suppedaneum (foot rest of the True Cross) instead of nails, while others refer to both. However, it is fact that at least since the late fifth century, it was commonly believed that relics that had borne witness to Christ were kept in Manglisi. Their possession made Manglisi the all-Caucasian centre for pilgrimage. The Cross of Manglisi is often mentioned equally with the Cross of Mtskheta as one of the two holiest sites in Georgia. Along with Georgians, Armenian pilgrims also frequented the place.⁵² Apparently, the influx of pilgrims necessitated the need for a larger building, especially as in the reign of King Vakhtang Gorgasali, Manglisi became an episcopal see. Thus, the new building was to combine the functions of a cathedral and a pilgrimage church.

The new cathedral that replaced the old church in Manglisi was a tetraconch inscribed in an outer octagon, with four small chapels arranged in massive walls diagonally towards the main axes. The sources of its plan can be traced in the Theotokos Church built on Mount Gerizim in the 480s, and the Kathisma Church on the way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, a ruined structure of an even earlier date.⁵³ Both were pilgrimage churches, and their descriptions or sketches may have been brought to Georgia by pilgrims. Indeed, the idea of chapels disposed along the diagonal axes of an octagon could have been borrowed from these churches, but that is where the similarities end.

⁵¹ M. Dvali, *manglisi* (Tbilisi, 1974), 31-34, 50-53; T. Kaffenberger, "Transformation and Memory in Medieval Georgian Church Architecture: the Case of Manglisi Cathedral," in *Cultural Interactions in Medieval Georgia*, ed. by M. Bacci, T. Kaffenberger, and M. Studer-Karlen (Wiesbaden, 2018), 210-217.

⁵² Later, at the beginning of the seventh century, when the severance between Armenian and Georgian churches occurred, Armenian bishops specifically warned pilgrims to refrain from visiting Manglisi (Bishop Ukhtanes of Sebastia, *History of Armenia, Part II: History of the Severance of the Georgians from the Armenians*, transl., with introd. and comm. by Fr. Z. Arzoumanian (Fort Lauderdale, 1985), 116, 129). The decline of Manglisi as a pilgrimage centre would have started after 627, when Emperor Heraclius decided that the valuable relics deserved a better place to be stored and took them back to Constantinople (*Rewriting Caucasian History*, 236).

⁵³ A. Plontke-Lünning, *Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien*, 328; T. Kaffenberger, "Transformation and Memory in..," 215-216.



12. Plans of eastern Georgian early domed churches

Manglisi Cathedral is a very important building in terms of the development of planning concepts. It seems to be the first link in the chain of Caucasian tetraconch churches with corner rooms. In Georgia, the idea was further reinterpreted in Ninotsminda Cathedral, and finally in Jvari, the Church of the Holy Cross at Mtskheta.

Manglisi Cathedral was the largest centrally planned church in Georgia for about a century. The side of its central square bay measures about 7 m. The task of covering a space of this size would have been a challenge for fifth-century builders. Theoretically, one can assume that the cathedral had a timber roof, but judging from preserved evidence, this kind of structural arrangement was not in use in Georgia. It can be said almost with certainty that the cathedral was covered with stone. In search of structural stability, early Christian Georgian master builders tried at least two different vaulting



13. Shiomgvi Monastery, Church of St John the Baptist.
Exterior from the north-west

techniques to cover the central bay – a dome and a domical vault – and it seems that in the case of relatively large bays (with the side measuring 5 m or more) they preferred the latter to the former. In any case, the unusually thick walls of Manglisi Cathedral would provide necessary support to the heavy stone vaulting. In the 1020s, Manglisi Cathedral was completely reconstructed and lost its initial outer architectural shape. However, large parts of the fifth-century structure still remain identifiable in the interior.

There is a well-preserved example of an octopartite domical vault in Shiomgvi Monastery near Mtskheta, in the Church of St John the Baptist, dating from the 570s. The church was built on a free-cross (*croix libre*) plan above the cave where the founder of the monastery, St Shio, one of the “thirteen Syrian Fathers”, spent the last years of his life and was subsequently buried.⁵⁴ Sometime earlier, the free-cross plan was applied in the Church of St John the Baptist at Idleti and in the so-called Erelaant Saqdari Church. Two

⁵⁴ G. Tschubinaschwili, “Die Schiomgvi-Lawra, Ein Beitrag zur Architekturgeschichte Georgiens,” *Bulletin de l'Université de Tiflis* 5 (1925) 209-253. On the activity of the Syrian Fathers, see S. Matitashvili, “The Monasteries Founded by the Thirteen Syrian Fathers in Iberia: the Rise of Monasticism in Sixth-Century Georgia,” *Studies in Late Antiquity*, vol. 2. no. 1 (2018), 4-39.



14. Cathedral of Ninotsminda. View from the west

additional apses in the southern and northern arms distinguish the latter from other cruciform buildings.⁵⁵ Later, in the seventh century, the free-cross plan was used in the Church of the True Cross at Samtsevrissi, a small architectural masterpiece with ashlar facing and a peculiar system of squinches.⁵⁶

A simple tetraconch type appears in the church of Dzveli Gavazi, presumably dated from the early sixth century.⁵⁷ Its plan is noteworthy for the

⁵⁵ G. Chubinashvili, *Voprosy istorii iskusstva*, vol. 1, 44-50, with the review of typologically related churches in the East and the West.

⁵⁶ G. Tschubinaschwili, "Die Kirche von Samtzevrissi in Georgien," *Seminarium Kondakovianum* II (Prague, 1928), 127-134.

⁵⁷ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii* (Tbilisi, 1959), 216-231.

clear horseshoe shape of all four apses, an outline that often occurs in early churches both in eastern and western Georgia.

All mentioned churches have octagonal drums resting on squinches thrown astride the corners of a central square bay - a structure unknown to early Christian and early Byzantine Constantinople, but customary in Capadocia, Tur Abdin, and especially in Armenia. The squinch was adopted from Sasanian architecture, to which South Caucasian builders owed not a little of their technical knowledge. Structural prototypes of the Georgian and Armenian squinches can be seen in renowned palaces at Firuzabad and Sarvistan, where four large conical squinches straddle the corners of a square hall, forming a rounded, but not perfectly circular, base for the dome. The lack of geometric precision in design can be explained – at least partly – by the building technique of Iranian masons, who used brick and rubble. On the contrary, the masonry technique of smoothly hewn large stones used by the South Caucasian builders was conducive to the clarity of architectural forms. In the architecture of Georgia and Armenia, the squinch has a clear conical form, like an open half-funnel set on its side. It is built of wedge-shaped stones fanning out from the inside corner to the frontal arch of the squinch. The squinch proved to be the most appropriate device for early Medieval Georgian stone structures, both technically and aesthetically, and was in use until the tenth century in domed buildings of various plans.

From the later half of the sixth century, the domed structure becomes the leading type of church building. From then onwards, Georgian domed churches had a more compound design. The already mentioned Cathedral of Ninotsminda is built to a quatrefoil plan, with additional two-apsed chambers disposed in the diagonals between four major apses.⁵⁸ The outer shape of the building is formed by eight nearly semi-cylindrical volumes. The church was restored at least three times between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries, until it finally collapsed in 1824. It is likely that the central octagonal bay was initially also covered with an octopartite domical vault.

A sixth-century round church of double-shell design unearthed near Vardisubani is the only known example of a rotunda type in Georgia. Apparently, it is a replica of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre interpreted through local building technique and materials. The employment of stocky rectangular piers instead of columns of the prototype should be noted.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 232-246.

⁵⁹ A. Plontke-Lünning, *Fruchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien*, 187.

Jvari, the Church of the Holy Cross at Mtskheta and Allied Buildings

A new stage in Georgian architecture started in the late sixth century and was associated with the Church of the Holy Cross at Mtskheta, which became a national symbol due to its religious, historic, and artistic significance.⁶⁰ The church stands on a rocky mountaintop and is a famous landmark of Mtskheta. After the conversion of Georgia, St Nino erected a large wooden cross there, which was believed to work miracles and drew a lot of worshippers from throughout the Caucasus. Together with Georgians, Armenian and Albanian pilgrims regularly visited the Cross of Mtskheta, considering it to be one of the two major holy places in Georgia, alongside Manglisi.

Between 545 and 586, Prince⁶¹ Guaram of Iberia constructed a small church next to the cross, cruciform inside and rectangular outside. Between 586 and 605, his son, Prince Stephanos I, built another, much larger church over the cross so that the cross was sheltered in its interior. The dome was completed soon after 627. This is the building referred to as the Church of the Holy Cross of Mtskheta - *Mtskhetis Jvari* in Georgian.

The church is one of the best examples of the early Medieval architecture of Georgia, distinguished for its balance and harmony. Its walls inside and outside are faced with sandstone ashlar blocks. The church is a tetraconch with a broad central bay, which is the core of the whole inner space. There are additional bays in front of the eastern and western apses that make the building noticeably elongated. The altar apse is lighted better due to its three windows instead of one, as in the other apses. Between the apses, there are additional chambers in all four corners, which communicate with the central space by means of 3/4 circular niches. The transition from the central square bay to the octagonal drum and, further, to the circle of the dome, is effected through three rows of squinches. The low octagonal pedestal of the cross in the centre of the church was rebuilt on the remains of the initial one.

⁶⁰ G. Tchoubinachvili, *I monumenti del tipo di Gvari. Ricerca sull'architettura Georgiana* (Milan, 1974). On the sculptures of the church, see W. Djobadze, "The Sculptures on the Eastern Façade of the Holy Cross of Mtskheta," *Oriens Christianus*, vol. 44 (1960), 112-135, vol. 45 (1961), 70-77; T. Dadiani, T. Khundadze, E. Kvachatadze, *Medieval Georgian Sculpture* (Tbilisi, 2017), 15-16.

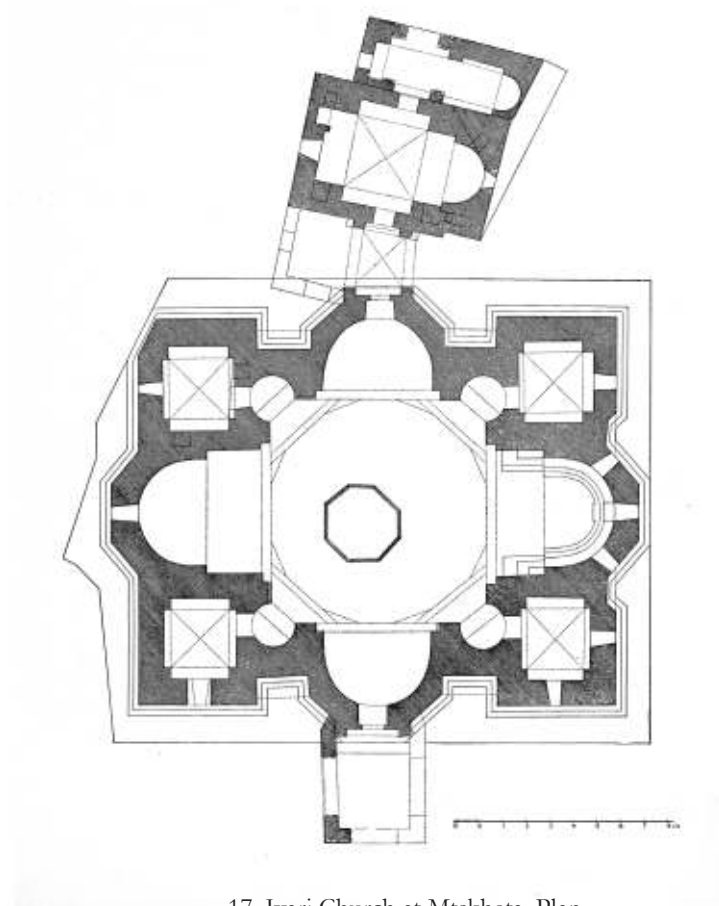
⁶¹ In Georgian *erismtavari*, the ruler of eastern Georgia without the title of "king."



15. Jvari Church at Mtskheta. View from the south-west



16. Jvari Church at Mtskheta. Eastern façade



17. Jvari Church at Mtskheta. Plan

The exterior outline of the church corresponds to the interior space. The apses, slightly jutting out from the main outline of the church, have three planes. The straight walls of the corner chambers are separated from the apse walls by means of arched niches. They are only absent on the western façade, which stands directly on the cliff and can therefore only be seen from a distance.

Jvari Church is the first preserved Georgian church to be amply decorated with façade sculptures. In the centre of the eastern façade, there are three relief slabs, one on each facet of the apse, representing the donors to the church Stephanos I, his brother Demetre, and Stephanos' heir Adarnase with his juvenile son. The sculptures are accompanied by explanatory inscriptions in old Georgian letters (*asomtavruli*). A relief of the Ascension of the Cross,

with two flying angels, is placed in the tympanum above the main entrance on the southern façade. On the same façade, above the window, there is a relief of yet another donor, Kobul-Stephanos, kneeling before St Stephen.

To the right of the central entrance, a smaller door leads to the south-western corner room. The inscription above the door mentions the contribution of Themestia, a woman presumably from the ruling house, and says that the room was intended for women to pray in. Apparently, the central door was for men, while women were to enter the church through the south-western room.

Jvari Church had a great influence on the further development of Georgian architecture, inspiring a wave of emulation both in eastern and western Georgia. Already in the seventh century, several churches were built in various parts of the country – Sioni at Ateni in Shida Kartli, Dzveli Shuamta in Kakheti, and Martvili in Egrisi – which more or less accurately repeated Jvari Church.

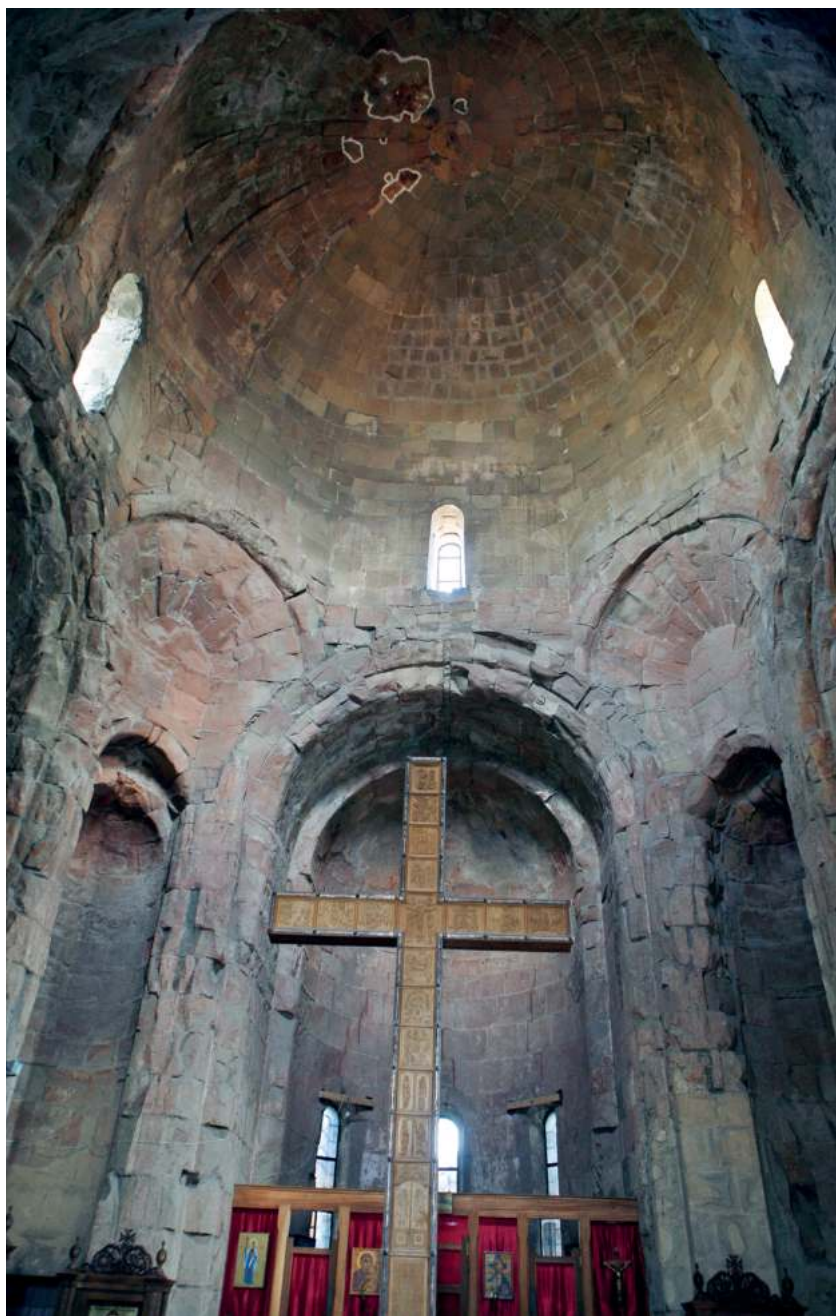
Ateni is one of the oldest monasteries in Georgia, believed to have existed already in the mid-sixth century.⁶² The first church built on the site could be dated to that period or even earlier, and an archaeological study has revealed that it was a large basilica. Its preserved details include marble architectural fragments and a tympanum stone with a relief image of two stags reused in the extant church above the northern door.

About a century later, a new Sioni church was erected in Ateni on the site of the earlier one. It is the most faithful copy of Jvari Church. The architect has carefully imitated the model in the plan, elevation and even in the articulation of the façades, without taking into account the location of Sioni, which, unlike Jvari, overlooks a ravine to the east.

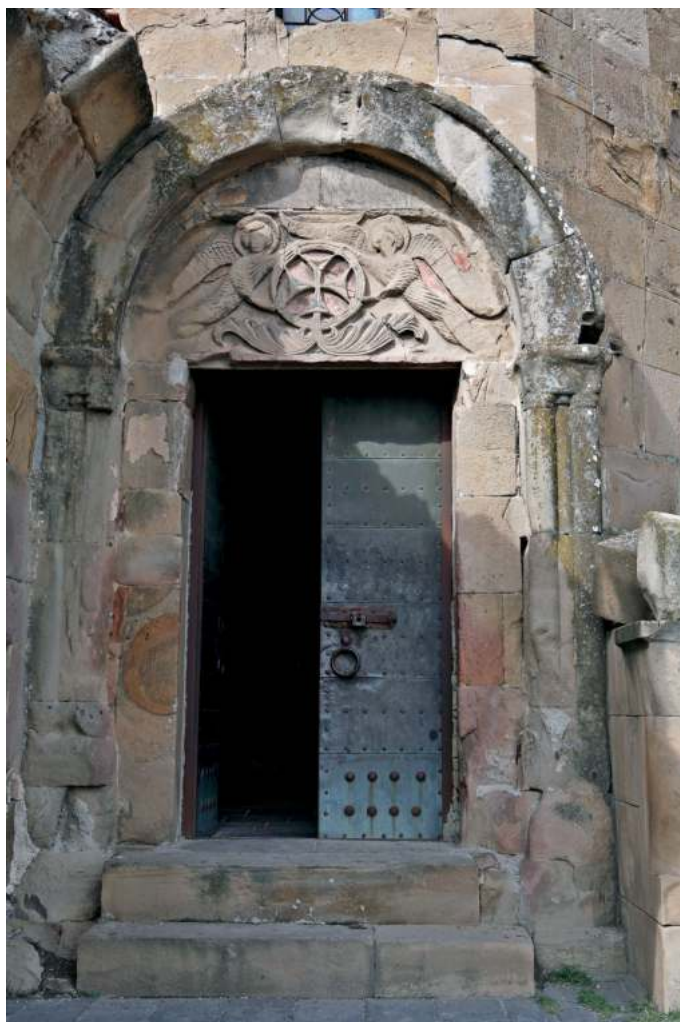
Apparently, Sioni had been badly damaged by the tenth century and was restored between 983 and 986 by a crew of Armenian masons. An inscription made on the southern façade mentions the name of the head of the masons' team – Thodosak.⁶³ The restored walls are faced with greyish-yellow blocks, while the original facing is made of reddish ashlar. The ample sculptural decoration of the church includes images from both the seventh and tenth centuries.

⁶² The source for this dating is a letter written by the abbot of the Monastery of Mar Isaac at Gabbula in Syria. See R. Draguet, "Pièces de polémique antijulianiste: 3. L'ordination frauduleuse des julianistes," *Le Muséon* 54 (1941), 59-89.

⁶³ G. Abramishvili, *atenis sioni* (Tbilisi, 2012), 48-56. A number of authors considered and still consider Thodosak the architect of the seventh-century church in Ateni. See, for instance, G. Tchoubinachvili, *I monumenti del tipo di Gvari.*, 147-150; J.-M. Thierry, P. Donabédian, and N. Thierry, *Les arts arméniens* (Paris, 1987), 499. A. Plontke-Lünning, *Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien*, 317, suggests that Thodosak may have been the local bishop who commissioned the construction of the church.



18. Jvari Church at Mtskheta. Interior looking east



19. Jvari Church at Mtskheta. Southern door

It seems that Ateni was a pilgrimage church, attracting devotees not only from Georgia, but from the much broader region. Its walls preserved hundreds of carved and painted inscriptions and graffiti made by pilgrims from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries, in Georgian, Armenian, Greek, Syriac, Arabic, and old Russian. The earliest inscription made in Georgian mentions Emperor Philippikos Bardanes and thus dates from 712/713. However, it is not clear what attracted pilgrims to Ateni, since no written source



20. Sioni Church in Ateni. Exterior from the south-west

(including those inscriptions) suggests the presence of particularly important relics or burials in this place.

Martvili is one of the most sacred sites in Georgia. According to tradition, St Andrew the Apostle cut down an oak worshipped by the pagans on this site and, after they had converted to Christianity, founded a church, the altar of which stood on the roots of the felled oak. The tradition is reflected in the ancient name of the place, Chkondidi, meaning “big oak.” In the early Middle Ages, Martvili became a famous monastery and, from the tenth

century, also a bishop's see. Its main church is a relatively free copy of Jvari. The apses are five-sided outside, due to which the façade niches appear deeper. The sculptural decoration is also different: instead of separate compositions, it features continuous relief friezes. The church was substantially restored in the reign of George II of Abkhazia (922-957) and has lost its initial external forms; however, it largely retained the original interior.

The seventh-century domed church standing next to the early Christian basilica in the Monastery of Dzveli Shuamta is much smaller than Jvari. The proportions of the parts of the church are also slightly different, with the dome and the central bay accentuated at the expense of the proportional reduction of the apses and bemas. The mortared rubble and cobblestone masonry of the façades creates an appearance very different from that of Jvari.

The plan applied in Jvari Church was known in Armenia as well (St Hripsime at Echmiadzin, Aramus, Targmanchats Vank, Garnahovit, etc). The apses of Armenian churches, unlike the above-discussed Georgian ones, do not project from the general outline of the building, with the result that the entire plan is inscribed within a plain rectangle. The question of precedence hotly discussed by Georgian and Armenian scholars for decades is actually meaningless, as the process of mutual influence and interchange was too complex to be explained by the "export" and "import" of ready plans and architectural forms.

Obviously, this design concept had a symbolic meaning and was used in places of a particular religious significance, such as the Holy Cross of Mtskheta, the burial of St Hripsime in Echmiadzin, the sanctuary of St Andrew in Martvili, the True Cross of Varag, an unknown relic that drew pilgrims in Ateni, etc.

Tsromi: Imperial Patronage and Development of the Cross-Domed Plan

The church in Tsromi is one of the most important early Medieval buildings in the Caucasus, from both architectural and historical points of view.⁶⁴ According to tradition, the church was erected on the place where St Razhden the Protomartyr, a fifth-century Iranian convert to Christianity, was executed. He was buried on the site of his martyrdom in Tsromi, but sometime later, King Vakhtang Gorgasali reburied him in Nikozi Cathedral. However, Tsromi retained its focal role in the cult of the martyr. It was the place of the

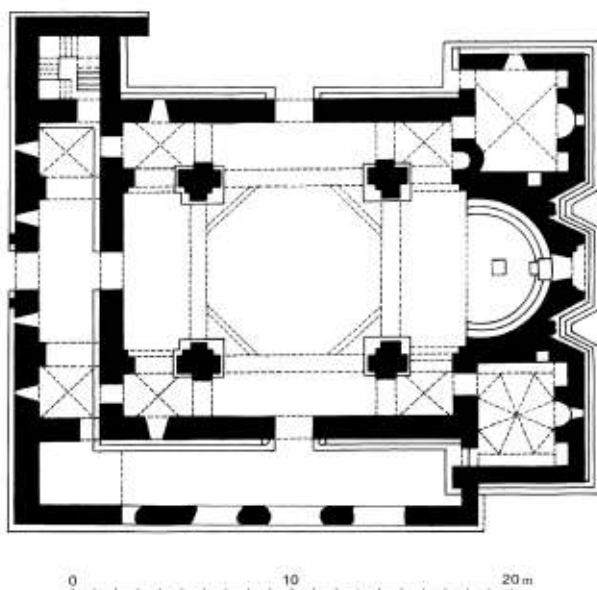
⁶⁴ G. Tschubinaschwili and J. Smirnov, *Die Kirche in Zromi und ihr Mosaik* (Tiflis, 1934).



21. Tsromi Church. Exterior from the south-east

martyrdom and first burial of St Razhden, rather than his final resting place, that became the *locus sancta* for his cult.

As witnessed by archaeological evidence, the first martyrium on the site of St Razhden's execution in Tsromi would have been built in the late fifth century, i.e. during the reign of Vakhtang Gorgasali. Remains unearthed on the site include fragments of column shafts made of Proconnesian marble. King Vakhtang would have ordered them through his connections with the imperial court, with which he became closer in 485 when, in his second marriage, he married Helena, a princess from the family of Emperor Zeno. Most likely, these were the columns of an altar canopy or a ciborium rising above the place of the martyrdom of St Razhden, or above his initial tomb. Other fragments surviving from the first martyrium in Tsromi are a sandstone Ionic capital and the fluted drums of a larger column, and a piece of a decorated cornice (the latter is included in the foundation of the extant church). Apparently, the first martyrium in Tsromi had been destroyed by the early seventh century. Its above-mentioned details were reused in the later church, which prevented them from disappearing.



22. Tsromi Church. Plan

The extant church of Tsromi was built about a century and a half after the first church. Medieval chronicles and other narrative sources say nothing about its construction. The only preserved inscription of the church mentions Stephanos, a prince from the local ruling family. Giorgi Chubinashvili identified him as Prince Stephanos II, and dated the church to the period of his being in power, between 626 and 634. Although his reading of the inscription was later challenged by other historians, his dating in general is beyond doubt. It is possible that Stephanos did indeed contribute to the construction of the church, but the historical context suggests that it was actually supported by another donor, one who was much more powerful and wealthy than the local prince. That donor would have been Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (610-641).

Construction of the church at Tsromi coincided with Heraclius' military campaign against the Iranians. In 627, when marching through Georgia from Lazica to Tbilisi, he would have passed the place of St Razhden's martyrdom located close to the main historic road, and he was likely informed about the martyr. Although there is no written evidence, considering the great piety and harsh anti-Zoroastrian sentiments of the Emperor, one can assume that he was the initiator and donor of the construction of a new, larger martyrium on the site of the earlier one.



23. Tsromi Church. Niches of eastern façade

This supposition seems even more reasonable when taking into account Heraclius' well-known enthusiasm for building. He was noted for supporting various foundations in the provinces, including churches, fortifications, and aqueducts. He also paid attention to construction while in the Caucasus during the war in 627. Georgian chronicles credit him with the foundation of two churches in Albania.⁶⁵ Georgian tradition also considers Heraclius the founder of the episcopal see in Atsquri and the donor to the construction of the first cathedral there. Heraclius somehow contributed also to the church at Mren in Armenia.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ S. H. Rapp Jr, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 353.

⁶⁶ In the donor inscription of Mren church, the date of the construction is calculated from the year of Heraclius' accession to the throne, and he is referred to as a "happily victorious king". Mren's close connection to the emperor is manifested in the sculpture above the northern door of the church, representing the Return of the True Cross to Jerusalem by Heraclius. See C. Maranci, "Building Churches in Armenia: Art at the Borders of Empire and the Edge of the Canon," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 88, no. 4 (2006), 656-675; *idem*, *Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia* (Turnhout, 2015), 40-45, 67-77.



24. Tsromi Church. Interior looking east

The magnificent size, ambitious architectural design, and high technical quality of Tsromi Church also suggest imperial patronage. Tsromi has never been a bishop's see, though its church is larger than many early Medieval Georgian cathedrals. This can be explained by the increased importance of the cult of St Razhden in the context of Heraclius' politics towards Iran. The erecting of a large imposing church on the site where Iranians martyred a convert to Christianity would be an action with a clear underlying message for both Christians and Zoroastrians. The developed sanctuary with a large apse and flanking rooms confirms that, together with being a martyrium, the church was intended for regular liturgical use. Perhaps it was also envisaged to accommodate pilgrims visiting the site. The eighth-century inscription in the church provides an early textual testimony to the cult of St Razhden.

Tsromi heralded new developments in the early Medieval architecture of the Caucasus. It is a cross-domed church with four free-standing piers supporting the dome.⁶⁷ The nave and transept form crossarms adjoining the central square bay on all four sides, and create a cruciform space underneath the dome. The eastern crossarm is continued with an apse of almost the same height. In the exterior, they are not partitioned, and form a single whole which is balanced to the west with an open gallery arranged above a narthex. A staircase leading to the gallery exists in the north-western corner room, which juts out of the rectangle of the plan. Its counterpart room in the southwestern corner is partly open to the outside. Groin-vaulted rooms on both sides of the sanctuary also project to the south and north. The sumptuous decoration of the sanctuary of Tsromi Church is contemporaneous to the church and may serve as further testimony to the imperial patronage.⁶⁸

The walls of the church inside and outside are fully faced with smoothly hewn large sandstone blocks. In the centre of the eastern façade, a recessed arch frames the window of the sanctuary. The arch is flanked by two deep and wide niches covered with conical vaults. Double colonnettes stretching up the inner walls of the niches would have been topped with sculptures, which have not survived to the present day.

Tsromi is a masterpiece of spatial geometry. Together with the contemporaneous Armenian churches of the same type (Mren, Bagaran, St Gayane in Echmiadzin), it is one of the earliest cross-domed structures with four free-standing piers – a plan usually referred to as a cross-domed basilica. Without a doubt, they had an important, though often underestimated role in the development of Eastern Medieval architecture.

The architecture of Tsromi Church continues local building practice. Its building technique and structural elements have little to do with Constantinople. If the Emperor really was the donor of the construction, it is obvious that he did not invite the architect from his capital, but entrusted the work to local master builders. To all appearances, Tsromi Church is an important imperial project initiated and supported by Heraclius and carried out by Georgian masons.

⁶⁷ The dome of Tsromi Church collapsed in the late Middle Ages and was completely restored during conservation works in the 1980s.

⁶⁸ Z. Skhirtladze, "A propos du décor absidal de C'romi," *Revue des études géorgiennes et caucasiennes* 6-7 (1990-1991), 163-183.



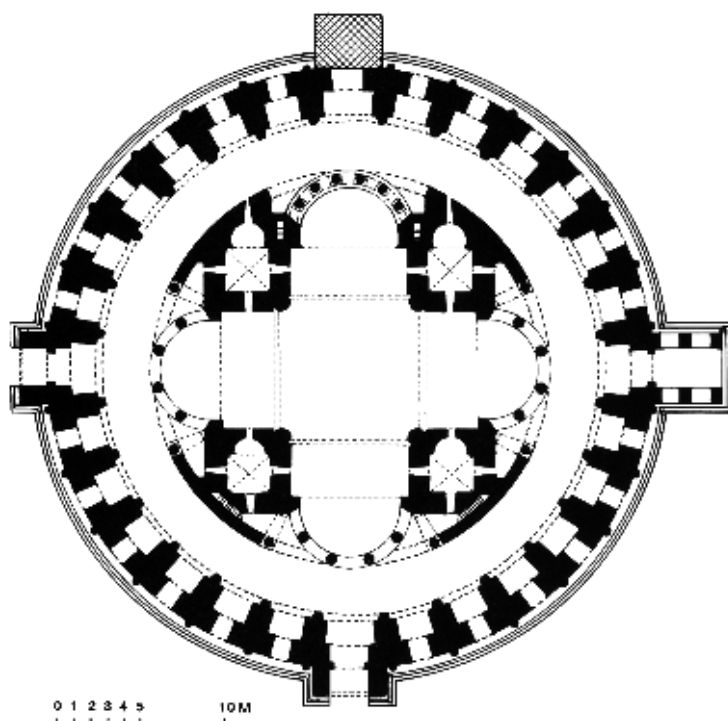
25. Cathedral of Bana. Exterior

Bana and Double-Shell Tetraconches in the South Caucasus

The dramatic ruins of the Cathedral of Bana are located in the historic province of Tao (now in Turkey).⁶⁹ It is one of the most important early Medieval buildings of the Caucasus. Being excited by its splendour, nineteenth-century travellers compared it with Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

The cathedral is built on a plan usually referred to as a double-shell tetraconch, or aisled tetraconch. Having emerged already in the late fourth century (the first known example is San Lorenzo in Milan), this plan was applied in church building both in the East and in the West, but received particular attention in Syria and northern Mesopotamia where a number of double-shell tetraconchs were erected in the fifth and sixth centuries. In the seventh century, the double-shell tetraconch plan was adopted in the Caucasus with certain modifications. Scholars pointed out similarities between

⁶⁹ R. Edwards, "Medieval Architecture in the Oltu-Penek Valley: A Preliminary Report on the Marchlands of Northeast Turkey," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 39 (1985), 27-32; R. Mepisashili, D. Tumanishvili, *The Church of Bana* (Tbilisi, 1989), 129-187; W. Djbadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries in Historic Tao, Klarjet'i and Šavšet'i* (Stuttgart, 1992), 78-85.



26. Cathedral of Bana. Plan

the Caucasian examples of the type (especially Zvartnots and Bana) and the Anastasis Rotunda in Jerusalem.⁷⁰

The Cathedral of Bana consists of an inner four-apsed structure with a central dome and a spacious round ambulatory ringing the central core. In their lower parts, the western, southern, and northern apses are pierced with arches resting on four columns. The eastern apse has six columns raised on a 2 metre-high wall, which makes the space of the sanctuary closed, as distinct from other apses. What makes Bana unique among other double-shell tetraconchs are the three-storied chambers with very thick walls disposed in the corners between the apses, which form powerful supports for the dome. This peculiarity is very important as it shows that the imported architectural concept was reinterpreted in accordance with the local experience. Apparently, the master builder of Bana Cathedral was inspired by the architectural concept of tetraconchs with corner rooms, an

⁷⁰ D. Piguet-Panayotova, "Recherches sur les tetraconchs à deambulatory et leur décor en Transcaucasie au VII^e siècle," *Oriens Christianus*, vol. 73 (1989), 176.



27. Cathedral of Bana. Interior looking east, as in 1970s

architectural type that occurs only in the South Caucasus and is represented in Georgia by Jvari Church at Mtskheta and its imitations (see above). History showed that the builders were right when strengthening the dome supports. The engineering design of Bana proved to be surprisingly reliable. Unlike other double-shell tetraconch structures, many of which collapsed in the early Middle Ages, Bana survived until the nineteenth century. Its dome was then destroyed by a cannonade during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878.

The construction date of the cathedral has long been the subject of scholarly discussion. According to Georgian chronicles, Adarnese II, the first prince who received the title of the “King of Georgians” in 888, “built Bana through Kvirike of Bana, who became the first bishop of Bana.”⁷¹ Adarnese

⁷¹ *Rewriting Caucasian History*., 372.



28. Cathedral of Bana. Capital of the apse column

died in 923, therefore his building activity in Bana would be dated to the late ninth or early tenth century. However, within scholarship, a divide exists between those who date Bana Cathedral to the reign of Adarnese and those who believe that it was built much earlier, and Adarnese merely restored the damaged church and made it an episcopal see (“built” in Medieval Georgian written sources may mean “rebuilt” or “reconstructed”). A number of architectural historians date the initial construction of Bana to the middle or late seventh century, pointing to its structural and decorative elements that are characteristic of the early period, such as the horseshoe shape of the apse arches and the depiction of a vine with leaves and clusters of grapes carved

on the façade of the cathedral.⁷² If accepted, the early date raises questions about the builders and donors of the church, which, considering the vague political and ethnoreligious situation in seventh-century Tao, can hardly be answered definitely. Another issue that can be solved only after a detailed archaeological examination of the building is to what degree it was destroyed or damaged by the late ninth century and what specifically was done by Adarnese.

In the tenth century, Bana was the capital of the Kingdom of the Georgians, which included the whole south-west Georgia and was ruled by the Bagratid family, subsequently the royal dynasty of united Georgia.⁷³ Even after the royal court had moved to Kutaisi in the 990s, Bana maintained its importance. It became the final resting place for a number of the Georgian Bagratids, the last of them being King Vakhtang IV (1443-1446) and his wife Siti-Khatoun. Apparently, the Bagratids felt a special attachment to their old metropolis. The king of Georgia Bagrat IV and Princess Helena, a niece of Emperor Romanos III Argyros, “celebrated the marriage and blessed the crowns at Bana” in 1032.⁷⁴

⁷² See, for instance, R. Mepisashili and D. Tumanishvili, *The Church of Bana*, 170-173. For the review of opinions on the construction date, see *ibid.*, 129-132.

⁷³ The origin of the Georgian Bagratids has been discussed by a number of authors. Most of them believe that the Georgian Bagratids branched out of the Armenian Bagratid dynasty in around 800. See, for instance, S. H. Rapp Jr, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography*, 14; R. G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed., (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), 29. Other authors have argued that Bagratids first appeared on the political scene of Georgia much earlier than the ninth century. See K. Salia, *History of the Georgian Nation* (Paris, 1983), 131; Z. Aleksidze, “Introduction,” *Le nouveau manuscrit géorgien sinaitique N Sin 50. Édition en fac-similé*, introduction par Z. Aleksidzé, traduite du géorgien J.-P. Mahé (Louvain, 2001), 33-39.

⁷⁴ *Rewriting Caucasian History...*, 288.

CHAPTER TWO

TRANSFORMATION AND RISE OF ARCHITECTURE

Church Building in Eastern Georgia after the Arab Invasion

The Arab conquest of Georgia was an event that exerted a powerful influence on the subsequent development of the country. The Arabs first appeared in eastern Georgia in 645 but managed to conquer it only after devastating punitive raids in 724-725 and 735-736, which were followed by the installation of the emir in Tbilisi. The Arab invasions led to the fragmentation of the Iberian state. Kakheti and Hereti became independent in the 770s and 820s respectively. In southwest Georgia, a new principality was formed under the rule of Bagratid (Bagrationi) family in the 810s. In 888, Prince Adarnese received the title “king of the Georgians.” In the mid-eighth century, the princes of Abkhazia expanded their power over the whole of western Georgia, assuming the title of “King of the Abkhazians”.⁷⁵

In the age of the Arab conquest and the formation of new Georgian states, architecture underwent a considerable transformation. This complex process of change is known as a transitional period in the development of architecture in Georgia, lasting from the late seventh to the mid-tenth centuries, that roughly correspond to a similarly named period in Byzantine architecture.⁷⁶

The turbulent early phase of the transitional period is marked by a decline in construction activity. We know of only a few churches built in the eighth century. One of the most important among them is Sioni in Samshvilde

⁷⁵ D. Rayfield, *Edge of Empires. A History of Georgia* (London, 2012), 55-60.

⁷⁶ For a discussion of transitionality in Byzantine architecture, see R. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture. The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands* (Oxford, 2019), 245-247.



29. Sioni Church in Samshvilde. Eastern façade

(Kartli, central Georgia).⁷⁷ A long inscription cut in its wall says that the construction started in the twentieth year of the reign of Constantine and ended in the third year of the reign of Leon. These sovereigns have reliably been identified as Byzantine emperors Constantine V (741-775) and Leon IV (775-780), and therefore Sioni of Samshvilde was dated to the period from 761 to 778. The inscription refers to local lords Varaz Bakur and Iovane as the builders of the church. Another source, a Georgian manuscript in the collection of the Monastery of St Catherine at Mount Sinai, mentions Deborah, the Queen of Samshvilde, “who completed the church of Samshvilde.”⁷⁸ Apparently, her name stood in the construction inscription too, in a place which is now damaged and unreadable.

The church, though lying in ruins, remains impressive for the quality of its construction, with walls faced with smoothly hewn large stones from inside and outside. Much of the layout of Samshvilde is reminiscent of the above-described church of St Razhden in Tsromi, which may have had a symbolic connotation in the period when many Christians preferred to renounce their faith and adopt that of their conquerors.

⁷⁷ N. Chubinashvili, *Samshvildskii Sion* (Tbilisi, 1969), 7-46.

⁷⁸ Z. Aleksidze, “Introduction,” *Le nouveau manuscrit géorgien sinaitique N Sin 50*, 56.



30. Tsirkoli Church. Eastern façade

In the 770s or 780s, Catholicos Clementos built a new church in Zedazeni Monastery near Mtskheta.⁷⁹ It is one of the oldest Georgian monasteries, which arose in the mid-sixth century around the hermitage of John of Zedazeni, the leader of the group of monks known as the “thirteen Syrian Fathers.” The church is a basilica with two pairs of piers, almost square in plan. Its northern aisle incorporated a sixth-century chapel with the grave of John of Zedazeni. The building material of the basilica, roughly cut stone, is indicative of the reduced material resources of the Georgian church in the eighth century.

⁷⁹ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii*, 97-109.



31. Church of the Mother of God near Gurjaani.
Exterior from the south-west

In the remote mountainous regions, Arab power was less influential than in Tbilisi, Mtskheta, and the Kura valley. In the late eighth and ninth centuries, the Ksani Gorge in Shida Kartli saw a period of blooming architecture. Tsirkoli Church, constructed around 800, has the simple outer shape of a single-nave structure, but its inner space is much more complex.⁸⁰ To the east, there is an altar apse with diminutive side chambers. The western part of the interior is two-storied, while the central part is completely covered with a drumless dome on squinches. The dome is invisible from the outside as it is hidden under the gable roof because of the absence of a drum. The facing of the church consists of alternating rows of square and horizontally laid thin stones, which gives the impression of an interpretation of Byzantine *opus listatum* in full stone masonry, without the application of brick. On the eastern façade, there is a large rectangular stone slab inserted below the gable. Apparently, it was intended for an inscription, but was left plain for unknown reasons. Both gables of the church have lower strips closing them from below, which is unusual in Georgian architecture and calls to mind the pediments of Syrian churches.

⁸⁰ G. Chubinashvili, *Voprosi istorii iskusstva*, vol. 1, 152-161.

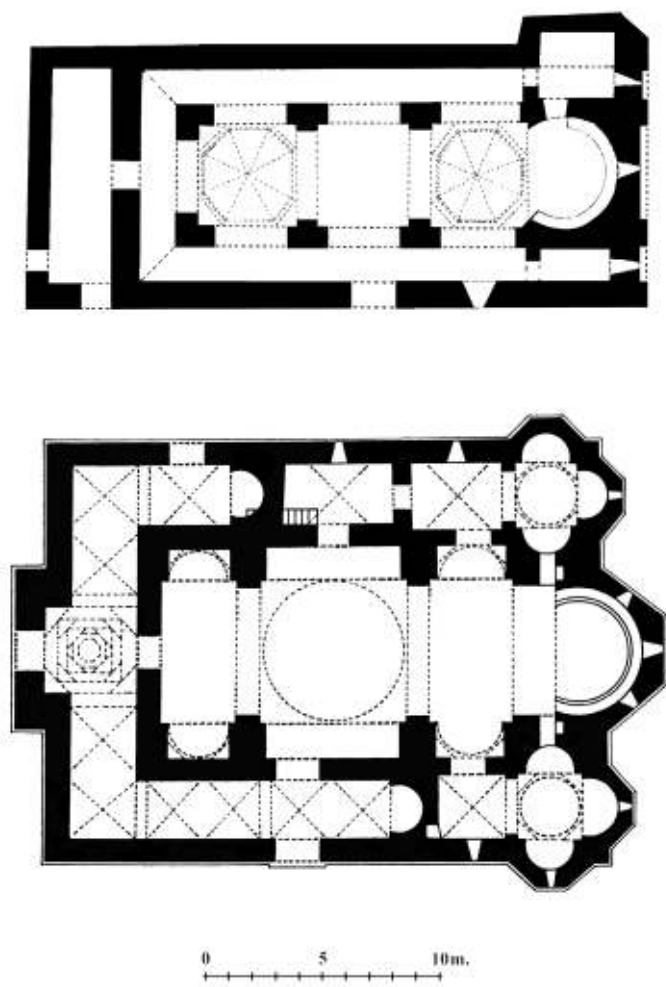


32. Church of the Mother of God near Gurjaani. Upper gallery

There is one more structure in the Ksani Gorge that features a drumless dome. It is the Church of St George at Armazi, started in 864 by the village headman, as states its inscription.⁸¹ Unlike Tsirkoli, in Armazi the dome is rested on four free-standing polygonal columns topped with pumpkin-shaped capitals. The pitched roof hides a large space above the dome and vaults of crossarms. The church has preserved its initial templon with painted images of saints, which is one of the earliest surviving murals in Georgia.

In the eighth and ninth centuries, several churches of outstanding artistic quality were built in the eastern Georgian province of Kakheti. They are highly interesting not only for their architectural design but also for the building techniques employed. Unlike other regions of Georgia, Kakheti was not rich in building stone, which led to the general adoption of cobblestone and light porous travertine for church buildings.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 143-152.



33. Plans of churches near Gurjaani (above) and Vachnadziani (below)

The eighth-century Church of the Mother of God near Gurjaani is a basilica with two equal domes raised on octagonal drums above the nave.⁸² Structurally, the domes are octapartite domical vaults. A large U-shape upper gallery runs around the nave from the south, west, and north. Its western part opens into the nave with five arches arranged in three tiers, while its longitudinal wings are almost completely isolated from the main space. To the east, they terminate

⁸² G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii*, 273-286.



34. Church of the Mother of God near Vachnadziani.
Exterior from the south-west

in small apsed chapels. The southern wing of the gallery originally had four arches in its south wall, which opened onto the balcony – a wooden structure judging by the articulation of the southern façade. Later, after the balcony had fallen, the arches were partly walled and turned into windows.

The gallery can be accessed, without entering the church space, through a door that leads to its western part from a special terrace. Based on this arrangement, Ernst Badstübner assumed that Gurjaani was a court church planned similar to the Western “double chapels”, with the upper gallery (*Oberkirche*) reserved for a prince or a local lord and his household and the lower story intended to accommodate common people during the service. The southern balcony could have served as a stage for the public appearance of the rulers.⁸³

⁸³ E. Badstübner, “Die Kirche Kwela Zminda in Gurdshani und die Muttergotteskirche des Klosters Kwela Zminda in Watschnadsiani. Ihre Beziehungen zu Byzanz und zum Westen,” *Baugestalt und Bildfunktion. Texte zur Architektur- und Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin, 2006), 41-49.



35. Church of the Mother of God near Vachnadziani. Interior of dome

Gurjaani is closely tied to the architecture of the sixth and seventh centuries, revealing archaic features, such as the horseshoe-shaped plan of the apse, low octagonal drums on the squinches, and domical vaults. However, its overall design, the most notable aspects of which are two domes and the developed upper gallery, clearly belongs to a later period. The church also provides one of the earliest examples of using brick in Georgian church architecture together with cobblestone, traditional building material in Kakheti. Its façade facing consists of even courses of specially picked level cobbles, while the arches, vaults, jambs, and drums are built of brick.

The double-dome design of Gurjaani has long attracted the attention of researchers. Recognising its uniqueness, various authors have tried to find at least distant parallels to it in the architecture of the East and West. Perhaps

the most appropriate among them is Üçayak Church in central Anatolia, but there, unlike Gurjaani, the two domes are erected above two naves and are not identical.⁸⁴ Cahors Cathedral evokes Gurjaani in the longitudinal arrangement of the domes surmounting two bays of the nave, but it is difficult to imagine any connection between them.⁸⁵

In the Church of the Mother of God near Vachnadziani, the use of brick is limited to the interior, while the façades are faced with cobble and coarsely hewn stones.⁸⁶ The church has a complex plan consisting of a domed core and a three-sided ambulatory divided into several chambers. The eastern pair of chambers are located symmetrically on both sides of the sanctuary, however, they are larger than standard pastophoria and have a triconch design with an oblong rectangular extension to the west and a small drumless dome in the middle.

The central dome, which dominates the inner space of the church, is supported by four strong projections of the longitudinal walls. Its drum was refaced with travertine slabs from the outside in the fourteenth century, but preserved its original structure inside. Vachnadziani is the oldest surviving church building in Georgia where two different methods of fixing a dome to a square bay have been applied. The central dome is carried on pendentives, while those in the side chambers rest on squinches, as well as the half-domes that cover the deep rectangular niches in the main space. Vachnadziani Church also has an upper story, but, unlike Gurjaani, here it consists of several compartments. On both sides of the central bay, the upper-story rooms open into the main space through triple arches.

The first explorer of Vachnadziani, George Chubinashvili, noted a certain resemblance of its interior space with that of the Koimesis Church in Nicaea and Hagia Sophia in Salonica.⁸⁷ Ernst Badstübner found a similarity between the abutment systems of Vachnadziani and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.⁸⁸ These connections do little to establish the date of the construction of

⁸⁴ M. Mihaljević, "Üçayak: a Forgotten Byzantine Church," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 107(2) (2014), 730.

⁸⁵ P. Donabédian, "Parallélisme, convergences et divergences entre Arménie et Géorgie en architecture et sculpture architecturale," in *Actes du colloque "L'Europe et le Caucase. Les relations interrégionales et la question de l'identité,"* sous la direction de M. Dokhtourichvili, G. Dedeyan, and I. Auge (Tbilisi, 2012), 248. Comparative references to Angoulême and Périgueux (*ibid.*) seem less suitable.

⁸⁶ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii*, 287-320.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, 309, note 1.

⁸⁸ E. Badstübner, "Die Kirche Kwela Zminda in Gurdshani und die Muttergotteskirche des Klosters Kwela Zminda in Watschnadsiani.," 53.

Vachnadziani Church, but there are more specific features to note as well. The triconch lateral rooms of Vachnadziani invite associations with the Church of Constantine Lips (dedicated in 907), Myrelaion (completed prior to 922), and Vefa Kilise Camii (a.k.a Molla Gürani Camii, presumably the Church of St Theodore, ca 1100) in Constantinople.⁸⁹ Further, in Vachnadziani, as in the mentioned Constantinopolitan churches, lateral rooms directly communicate with the sanctuary through doors. The latter feature might be interpreted as a result of the introduction of Constantinopolitan rite in Georgia in the late tenth century, but the architecture of Vachnadziani clearly speaks in favour of an earlier date. Four windows in the drum⁹⁰ and the horseshoe-shaped arches of the doors, as well as the absence of façade decoration, exclude the construction of Vachnadziani Church after 950.

Another question is a possible link between Vachnadziani and the construction agency of Hilarion the Iberian (Ilarion Kartveli), a monk famous for his monastic foundations in Kakheti. Vachnadziani has been identified with a monastery established by him in the 850s with donations from his family.⁹¹ According to Hilarion's *vita*, the monastery housed 76 monks. This number of people could really have been accommodated in Vachnadziani Church.

The Monastery of St John the Baptist at Kalauri near Vachnadziani is believed to be yet another foundation of Hilarion, a nunnery built for his mother in the same period.⁹² The identification is supported by the presence of graves of women in the church of the monastery. In the eleventh century, the church served as a burial place for female members of the royal family of Kakheti. A recently discovered inscription on a tombstone in the southern chapel of the church mentions Helene, the daughter of King Kvirike III of Kakheti.⁹³

⁸⁹ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkitektura Kakheti*, 309, note 1. One can also remember the church at Dereagzi in south-west Anatolia, built around 900, with its tetracoch lateral rooms. For the dating, see R. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture*., 435.

⁹⁰ It is noteworthy that in the late tenth-century palatial chapel at Kvetera, located in the same Kakheti, the drum has six windows, while its diameter is much smaller than that of the drum of Vachnadziani Church.

⁹¹ T. Dvali, "sop. kalauris natlismtsemlis monasteri – kartuli khurotmodzghvrebis saquradghebo dzeqli," *sakartvelos sidzvelni* 20 (2017), 129; I. Giviashvili, "ilarion kartveli da misi kvali kartul arkitekturaze," Paper in the International Congress of Caucasian Studies, October 3-5, 2022, Tbilisi.

⁹² T. Dvali, "sop. kalauris natlismtsemlis monasteri..," 121-131; I. Giviashvili, "ilarion kartveli da misi kvali kartul arkitekturaze."

⁹³ G. Gagoshidze, "epitaphia kalauris tsm. ioane natlismtsemlis monastridan," *dzveli kbelovneba dgbes* 8 (2017), 124-127.

The church in Kalauri Monastery is a sizeable building with a barrel-vaulted nave and a three-sided ambulatory around it. The clerestory walls of the nave provide an early example of façade decoration with blind arcades.⁹⁴ The church is constructed of cobblestone, with limited use of brick in the arches and vaults. Churches were seldom built in full brick masonry in this period. One of the rare exceptions is the cross-domed Church of the Ascension at Ozaani in Kakheti, constructed in the late ninth century.⁹⁵

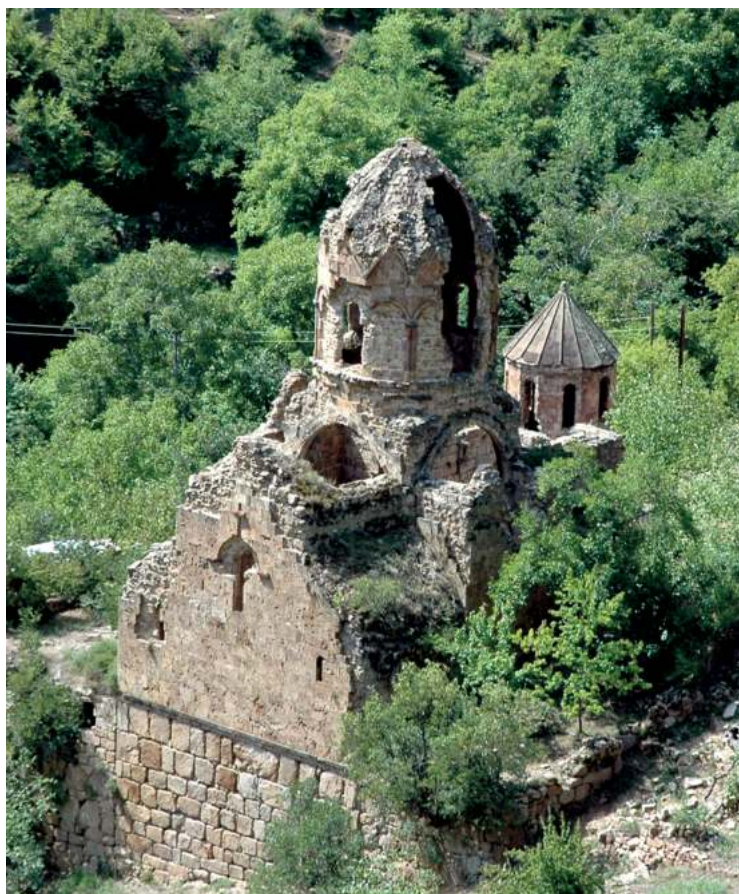
Gregory of Khandzta and Monastic Architecture in Klarjeti

In the late eighth century, the eminent religious leader Gregory of Khandzta (Grigol Khandzteli) initiated a large monastic movement in the south-western Georgian province of Klarjeti, which Medieval authors enthusiastically refer to as the “Georgian Sinai”. The arrival of Gregory in Klarjeti in about 780 gave rise to a spiritual revival, which resulted in significant architectural activity, energetically supported by the Bagratids, the house of local rulers at that time and the Georgian Royal family later. Soon, a great number of monasteries was founded or renewed in Klarjeti, making it the hotbed of new architectural ideas.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ A. Kazaryan, “The Blind Arcade in Medieval Architecture of Armenia and Georgia. Springs of Ideas and Principal Stages of Development,” in *Anadolu Kültürlerinde Süreklilik ve Değişim. Dr. A. Mine Kadiroğlu’na Armağan*, ed. by A. Ceren Erel, B. İşler, N. Peker, and G. Sağır (Ankara, 2011), 350-351, suggests that blind arches on the façades of Georgian churches first appeared in the early tenth century. Most probably, this happened at least a century earlier. Along with Kalauri, decorative blind arches can be seen on the drum of Telovani Church of the True Cross dated to the eighth or, more likely, ninth century. See V. Tsintsadze, “telovani jvarpatiosani (VIII-IX s. dzegli),” *Ars Georgica* 5 (1959), 73-89. Recessed arches were used for the articulation of façades even earlier. Blind arches surround the outer circular wall of Bana Cathedral, which seems to be the result of the early tenth-century restoration. For a review of the development of the motif of blind arches, see V. Bérédzé, *Monuments de Tao-Klardjetie dans l’histoire de l’architecture géorgienne* (Tbilisi, 1981), 253-257.

⁹⁵ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkitektura Kakhetii*, 354-363.

⁹⁶ M. Bogisch, “Einige Bemerkungen zur Entwicklung der Kirchenarchitektur in den historischen Provinzen Südwestgeorgiens (9.-10. Jahrhundert),” *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 57 (2007), 323-344; D. Khoshtaria, “Past and Present of the Georgian Sinai: A Survey of Architectural History and Current State of Monasteries in Klarjeti,” in *Heilige Berge und Wüsten: Byzanz und sein Umfeld*, Herausgegeben von P. Soustal (Vienna, 2009), 77-81, 106-111.



36. Church of St George in Khandzta Monastery.
Exterior from the north-east

The early stage of the monastic building in Klarjeti is illustrated by the monastery in Tsqarostavi, founded in around 840 by Hilarion, a monk from Gregory's circle. Now badly damaged, it was a cross-domed building with a short transept and long westarm expanded by two adjacent vaulted compartments to the north and presumably to the south as well. The room to the north of the sanctuary is unusually large, and is connected to the apse by means of a huge arched door, which may reflect local liturgical practice.⁹⁷ The monastery at Parekhi is another illustration of the activity of Gregory's

⁹⁷ D. Khoshtaria, "Past and Present of the Georgian Sinai.," 78.

followers. Founded in the 840s as a hermitage, it was soon turned into a coenobium. The monastic buildings are sheltered by a horizontal ledge and form an organic whole with the surrounding landscape. Two ninth-century churches, a single-nave structure and a basilica, stand in the middle of the monastery next to each other.

From the early tenth century, a new wave of construction activity was begun in the “Georgian Sinai” as a result of an increased number of monks on the one hand, and the growing power and wealth of their donors on the other. The Monastery of St George in Khandzta, the cradle of monasticism in Klarjeti, where Gregory himself began his activity, underwent significant renewal in the 910s and 920s.⁹⁸ Here, Amona, a master mason referred to as a “builder with great wisdom” by the hagiographer of Gregory, constructed a church, which shows that the previous humble churches built of roughly cut stone no longer corresponded to the aspirations of the time. Its construction was supported by members of the Royal family Ashot III, nicknamed “Kukh” in Georgian chronicles, and Duke of Dukes Gurgen. The church of Khandzta is an inscribed-cross (*croix inscrite*) structure with a dome supported by apse projections to the east and two free-standing piers to the west. A tall octagonal drum is erected above four big squinches. In the upper corners of the drum are eight smaller squinches, and above them sixteen diminutive ones. From the outside, the octagonal drum is enlivened not only by decorative arches on double colonnettes, but also by the broken line of the cornice and by the roofing in the form of a half-opened umbrella.

According to the Georgian chronicle, the celebrated monastery of St John the Baptist at Opiza was founded in the late fifth century by the foster-brother of King Vakhtang Gorgasali. The date is still disputable, but it is doubtless that Opiza was the first and perhaps the largest monastery in Klarjeti.⁹⁹ The cross-shape plan of the church, with an elongated westarm and two additional chambers on both sides of the sanctuary, dates back to the later half of the ninth century, while the dome with roofing in the form of a half-opened umbrella - a form obviously borrowed from Khandzta - was likely restored in the mid-tenth century by King Ashot IV.

⁹⁸ W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries...*, 24-39.

⁹⁹ A little has survived of its structures, recorded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The vaults of the church collapsed in the nineteenth century and the dome was pulled down in the early 1960s. The refectory, one of the best examples of that kind of building, is now almost completely ruined. See W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries...*, 65-67.



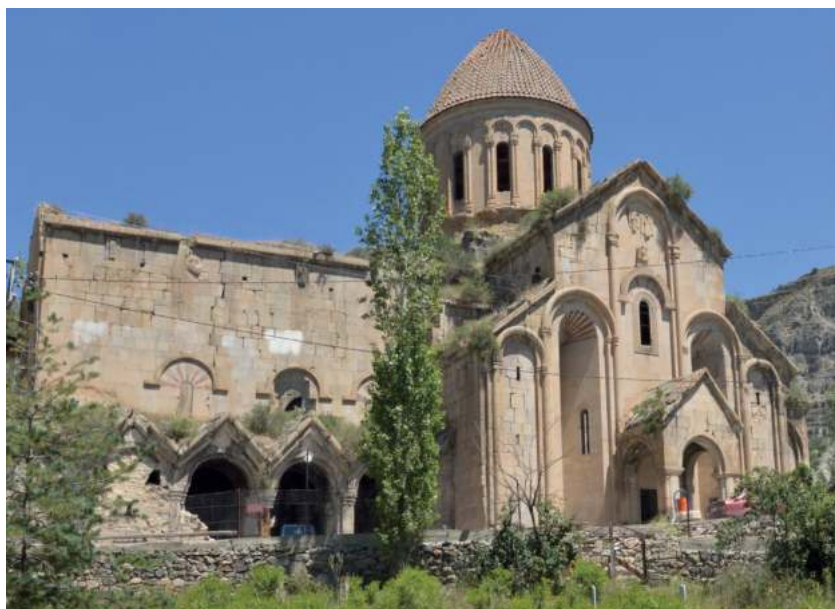
37. Church of St John the Baptist in Opiza Monastery.
View from the south, as in 1890s

The church at Dolisqana was also a royal commission. Two of its inscriptions mention King Sumbat (954-958). Its plan, with a cruciform core and additional rooms in all four corners, is inscribed in a rectangle. The façade decoration is richer in comparison with the earlier churches. Here, fully developed seemingly for the first time, huge omega-shaped ornate brows were made above the windows. Figurative sculptures appear too. A relief of King Sumbat is inserted into the drum; decoration of the southern window includes the images of the Archangels and of Deacon Gabriel, who is supposed to be one of the master masons of the church.¹⁰⁰

David Kurapalates and His Magnificent Projects in Tao

Changes that had taken place in the architecture of Klarjeti between 900 and 950 were developed by master builders working for David III Kuropalates in the later half of the tenth century. The new monasteries of Tao were large royal foundations intended to demonstrate the growing power and prestige of the Georgian Bagratids.

¹⁰⁰ W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries...*, 57-71.

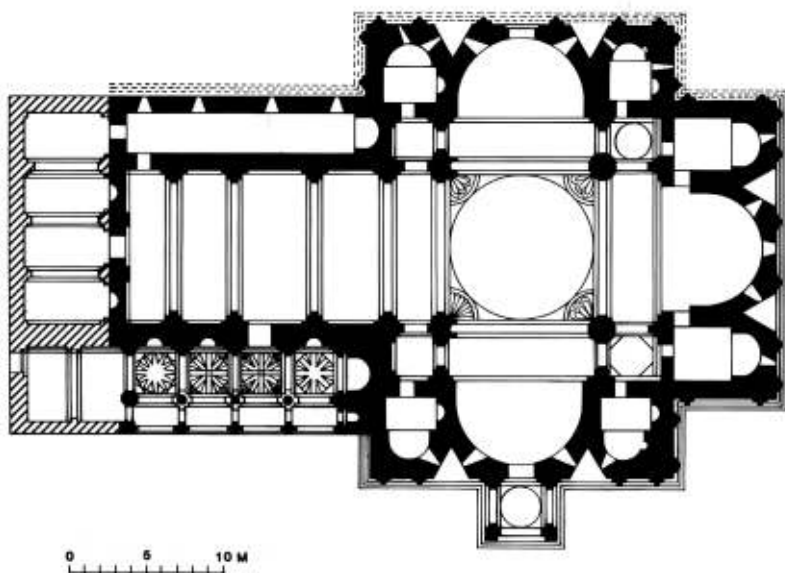


38. Church of St John the Baptist in Oshki Monastery. Southern façade

The Church of St John the Baptist in Oshki Monastery is the largest and most imposing building in Tao.¹⁰¹ It was constructed between 963 and 973 by David Kuropalates, then Magistros, and his brother, Duke of Dukes Bagrat. The church is a cruciform building, with a dome upheld by four strong piers. The eastern, southern and northern arms consist of apses flanked on either side by small chambers on two storeys, while the western arm is an elongated rectangle in plan. In the southwestern corner, there is an apsed gallery with two rows of columns.

The construction of Oshki Church was an enterprise of extraordinarily wide scope. Here, everything is imbued with the spirit of royal greatness and brilliance. The façades are fully faced with smoothly hewn ashlar, and are articulated with a slender blind arcade. The abundantly adorned bases and pedestals of the central piers together reach 3.5 metres in height. Each of the inner columns of the south-western gallery is decorated in a different way, revealing the skills and inventiveness of their carvers. The westernmost one is larger than the others and has an octagonal shape. Its capital is completely covered with sculptures, among which was the image of St Nino (now lost). Other sculptural images of the church include a Deesis group flanked by the donors of the mon-

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 92-141.



39. Church of St John the Baptist in Oshki Monastery. Plan

astery, David and Bagrat (figures of Christ and the Mother of God are lost) on the southern façade, the half-figure of St Simeon Stylites the Younger on the western façade, angels, saints, etc. Sculpted images of humans and animals are interlaced with rich floral ornamentation on the large window brows.¹⁰²

Oshki is unusually rich in inscriptions. The longest of them is written in red paint above the southern door. The text of the inscription is nothing else but the final report of Grigol, the building supervisor. It provides the annual expenses for masons and labourers, lists materials used in the construction, informs of the number of masons, labourers, and animals employed in transport, etc.¹⁰³

In the 1020s, the dome of the church was re-roofed with glazed tiles on the commission of Byzantine Emperors Basil II (976-1025) and

¹⁰² On the sculptures of Oshki Church, additionally see D. Winfield, "Some Early Medieval Figure Sculpture from North-East Turkey," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 31 (1968), 38-57; N. Simonishvili, "A Visual Concept of Royal Legitimacy: The Sculpted Program of St. John the Baptist Church of Oshk'i," in *The Georgian Kingdom and Georgian Art. Cultural Encounters in Anatolia in Medieval Period*, ed. by I. Givashvili and F. Akder (Ankara, 2021), 85-113.

¹⁰³ W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries*., 132-134; R. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture*., 391.



40. Church of St John the Baptist in Oshki Monastery.
Interior looking east

Constantine VIII (1025-1028) who had taken control of the region after David Kuropalates' death in 1001.

The Church of the Mother of God in Khakhuli, a large domed cruciform building constructed around 970, is also notable for its sculptural adornment,



41. Church of the Mother of God in Khakhuli Monastery.
Exterior from the south-west

and especially for the huge sculpture of an eagle, a symbol of royal power, placed above the richly decorated southern window.¹⁰⁴ The façade masonry of large yellowish blocks has red stone insertions, which create a polychromatic effect peculiar to the churches of south-east Georgia.

In the mid-tenth century, a hybrid structural form was developed in the architecture of Tao-Klarjeti which can be described as a squinch inserted into a pendentive. Unlike the earlier South Caucasian squinch that had a conical shape, this squinch was flattened in order to follow the curve of the pendentive.¹⁰⁵ This combined form underwent significant development in Georgian architecture during the later half of the tenth century. In Opiza, large conical squinches are flanked by smaller ones. The lower cornice of the drum lies closely above them. Squinches in Doliskana structurally resemble those in

¹⁰⁴ W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries*., 142-157. On the sculptures of Khakhuli Church, see D. Winfield, "Some Early Medieval Figure Sculpture..," 58-65.

¹⁰⁵ It has some resemblance to the structural form called by Wilhelm Rave *Zwickeltrompe*, which occurs in Romanesque structures, e. g. in Worms Cathedral. See W. Rave, *Trompe und Zwickel*, in *Festschrift für Hans Jantzen*, Herausgegeben von K. Bauch (Berlin, 1951), 97-103.



42. Church of the Mother of God in Khakhuli Monastery.
Double window of southern façade

Opiza, but the pendentives are more developed there, filling the space between the spanning arches and squinches, and creating a circular quadripartite crown. In spite of the increased role of pendentives, squinches still have a technical purpose and form straight sides. Khakhuli displays two important innovations, seeing the squinches becoming flat and taking on the shape of a spherical segment, like the pendentives themselves. Besides, they are no longer plain, but are embellished through radiating fluting, playing a significant role in the interior decoration. What is particularly interesting is that despite the change in form, the squinches in Khakhuli are still structurally functional. Together with the spanning arches, they form an octagon of unequal sides. Further, each of the four large squinches is accompanied by a pair of small squinches, which are set directly on its arch. In Oshki, huge squinches, which are also decorated with radiating fluting, almost completely cover the surface of the pendentives and virtually follow their curves, thus serving merely to adorn them.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ D. Khoshtaria, "Builders of the Churches of Tao-Klarjeti: Some Preliminary Notes," in *The Georgian Kingdom and Georgian Art.*, 118-119.



43. Church of the Mother of God in Khakhuli Monastery. Interior of dome

Along with domed structures, two basilicas appeared in the reign of David Kuropalates. The Church of the Evangelists in Otkhta Eklesia Monastery was built from 961 to 965, and reconstructed between 978 and 1001; the Church of St John the Baptist in Parkhali Monastery dates to the time shortly before 973.¹⁰⁷ Their close similarity to each other suggests that Otkhta

¹⁰⁷ W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries*., 159-190; M. Bacci, "The New Zion of Ot'kht'a," *Convivium*, vol. 9, issue 1 (2022), 28-50. E. Taqaishvili, the first explorer of the churches of Tao, suggested that Otkhta Eklesia could have been converted from an earlier (ninth-century?) church: E. Taqaishvili, *Arkheologicheskaia ekspeditsiia 1917-go goda v iuzhnye provintsii Gruzii* (Tbilisi, 1952), 83-86. See also I. Giviashvili, "Grand Basilicas of Otkhta Eklesia and Parkhali Monasteries: Stages of Construction," *Bulletin of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2020), 114-119.

Eklesia served as a model for Parkhali. Though being more modestly decorated in comparison with Oshki and Khakhuli, both are impressive owing to their large size, lofty proportions and airy interiors. Otkhta Eklesia and Parkhali were the last great basilicas in Georgia. Since then, the basilican plan occurred only sporadically in provincial church building.

The Cathedral of Ishkhani, the see of the bishops of Tao, has a long history.¹⁰⁸ It was first built by Armenian Chalcedonian Bishop Nerses (later the Catholicos of the Armenian Church Nerses III) in the 630s. This church was apparently a double-shell tetraconch similar to Zvartnots Cathedral founded by Nerses about ten years later. In the ninth century, the abandoned church in Ishkhani was rebuilt by Georgian monk Saba, a disciple of Gregory of Khandzta. It became the see of the bishops of Tao, the first of whom was Saba himself. In the tenth and early eleventh centuries, the cathedral underwent considerable reconstruction that almost completely changed its plan and architectural forms. The inscriptions of the cathedral mention the kings of Georgia, George I (1014-1027) and Bagrat IV (1027-1072), Archbishop Antony, the initiator of the last renovation works, and the master builder Iovane Morchaisdze, who was responsible for the completion of the reconstruction in 1032.

In its present shape, the cathedral is a large cruciform church with an elongated western arm and four free-standing piers supporting the dome. The most remarkable feature of the cathedral is its sanctuary with eight columns standing on a 1.5 metre-high semicircular wall and supporting narrow horse-shoe-shaped arches. A passageway behind the apse is inscribed in the outer rectangular layout. This open apse, which recalls those of Bana, was considered to be the remnant of Nerses' construction, but recent studies have cast doubt on this supposition. It is more likely that the arched colonnade was erected during the reconstruction of the cathedral in the middle or late tenth century.¹⁰⁹ Recent archaeological excavations in the cathedral have unearthed a beautiful decorative floor made of

¹⁰⁸ M. Kadiroğlu, *The Architecture of the Georgian Church at İshān* (Frankfurt a.M., 1991); W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries...*, 191-217.

¹⁰⁹ M. Bogisch, *The Appropriation of Imperial Splendour. Ecclesiastical Architecture and Monumental Sculpture in Medieval Tao-Klarjeti Around 1000*, PhD thesis, Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen (Copenhagen, 2009), 200-206. The author suggests that Ishkhani Cathedral "follows the spatial arrangement of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre almost literally, which can only be explained with the specific Georgian liturgical traditions which were strongly guided by Rite of Jerusalem." Therefore, the present plan of the cathedral should be dated to the period before the Georgian church adapted to the liturgy of Constantinople in around 1000.



44. Cathedral of Ishkhani. Exterior from the north-west

lime mortar, as well as five small burial chapels attached to the southern and western walls of the western crossarm.

Ishkhani Cathedral is distinguished for its lavish carved decoration, consisting of numerous ornamental motifs. Its dome, surrounded by ornamented blind arches resting on twin twisted columns and topped with a cornice embellished with hanging palmettes, is perhaps the most decorative of its kind in Medieval Georgian architecture.

A general idea of magnificence that permeates throughout the buildings of David Kuropalates could be the result of inspiration from Constantinople. Indeed, in the later half of the tenth century, architecture in Tao developed as a challenge to the Empire, serving to visualise the political ambitions of the Georgian Bagratids. From the technical point of view, the Byzantine influence was insignificant. Masons who constructed the churches and monasteries of Tao-Klarjeti had their own building methods that were very different from Byzantine. Only a few churches in Tao-Klarjeti obviously demonstrate the Byzantine building technique, among them a small single-nave burial chapel in Otkhta Eklesia Monastery built using the *opus listatum* technique. Bands of stone alternate with brick from two to five courses high. The same mixed



45. Cathedral of Ishkhani. Dome



46. Cathedral of Ishkhani. Interior of dome

technique was used in the interior of the main church of the monastery, while its exterior continued the local building practice of facing façades with carefully hewn ashlar blocks.

The architecture of Tao-Klarjeti also had an impact on its eastern and southern neighbours. The church at Çengelli-köi, built for the Chalcedonians of western Armenia in the early eleventh century, is a vivid illustration of cultural interchange in the region. Along with Georgian inscriptions, the Çengelli church has a number of architectural characteristics, including the above-described combination of squinch and pendentive, which indicate its close ties to Tao-Klarjeti¹¹⁰.

Building Activity of the Kings of Abkhazia

Abkhazia was another region of Georgia where architecture flourished in the tenth century. Located on the Black Sea shore, in the early Middle Ages, Abkhazia was exposed to a strong Byzantine cultural influence that was

¹¹⁰ J.-M. Thierry, “A propos de quelques monuments chrétiens du vilayet de Kars (Turque),” *Revue des études arméniennes, nouvelle série*, III (1966), 79-90.



47. Cathedral of Mokvi. Exterior from the north-west



48. Cathedral of Kumurdo. Exterior from the south-east

reflected in the region's architecture. The Cathedral of Dranda, thought to have been built in the eighth century, is a typical Byzantine church having little to do with Georgian architecture. From the ninth century onward, Georgian culture gradually became dominant in Abkhazia, including its architecture, though church buildings still revealed some Byzantine flavour.¹¹¹

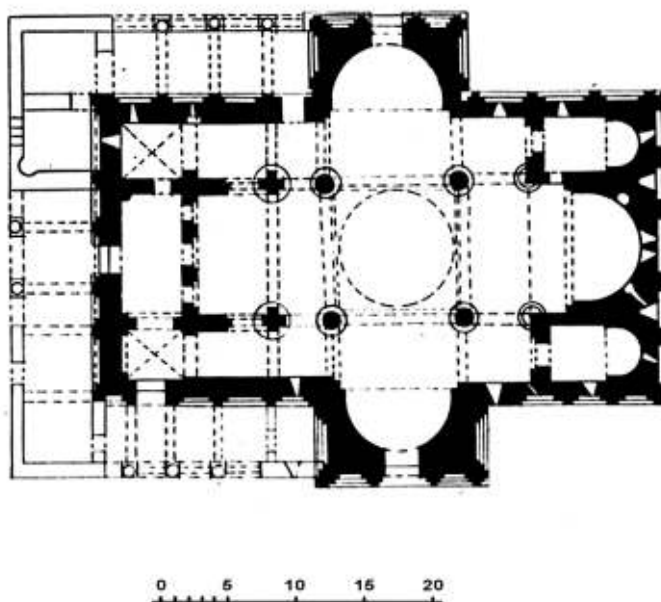
Byzantine features, such as ribbed domes and pastophoria open towards the main space of the church, can be seen in a group of churches built between 850 and 950: In the citadel church at Bzibi (Bzyb), the Church of St Simon the Canaanite in Anakopia, the first capital of Abkhazian kings, and the church at Likhne (Lykhny).¹¹² All of them are inscribed-cross structures with four free-standing piers upholding a dome on pendentives. In contrast to eastern and southern Georgian churches, they do not have stone-carved exterior adornment (except for Bzibi), though they are faced with hewn limestone blocks. The Cathedral of Mokvi built by King Leon III of Abkhazia between 957 and 967 has a similar plan, but is broadened with an ambulatory, which makes it look like a five-nave church. The plain façades are articulated by two rows of narrow windows.

King Leon's power extended far beyond Abkhazia. Apparently, he was a donor to the construction of the Cathedral of Kumurdo in the south Georgian province of Javakheti¹¹³. According to the inscription, the foundation for the Cathedral was laid in 964 by the master builder Sakotsari on the initiative of local Bishop Iovane in the reign of Leon III. Besides, the building has the images of the king and his sister Gurandukht in the squinches. However, its architecture shows no similarity with that of churches in Abkhazia. The facing of large, finely hewn pinkish ashlar and carved decoration above the windows attest to ties with the architecture of Tao-Klarjeti. The cathedral has a complex plan. Its central hexagonal bay is joined on the southern and northern sides by double apses that are parallel to each other. At the eastern end, there is one more apse

¹¹¹ E. Neubauer, "Abchasische Architektur im Spannungsfeld zwischen Georgien und Byzanz (6. bis 11. Jahrhundert)," in *Byzantinischer Kunstexport: seine gesellschaftliche und künstlerische Bedeutung für die Länder Mittel- und Osteuropas*, Herausgegeben von H. L. Nickel (Halle, 1978), 70-79.

¹¹² L. Rcheulishvili, *Kupol'naia arkhitektura VIII-X vekov v Abkhazii* (Tbilisi, 1988), 6-45; D. Tumanishvili, "Srednevekovaia tserkovnaia arkhitektura v Abkhazii," in *Razyskaniia po istorii Abkhazii / Gruzia*, ed. by G. Zhorzholiani and E. Khoshtaria-Brosset (Tbilisi, 1999), 379-382; L. Khroushkova, *Les monuments chrétiens de la côte orientale de la mer noire.*, 89-115.

¹¹³ G. Chubinashvili, *Voprosy istorii iskusstva*, vol. 1, 238-253; D. Gunia, *Kumurdo Cathedral* (Tbilisi, 2019).



49. Cathedral of Kutaisi (Church of Bagrat). Plan

with a large bema and adjoining pastophoria. The western part of the building consists of a nave and a three-sided ambulatory around it. The church is impressive in its simple dignity and clear geometry of forms.

The Formation of the United Kingdom of Georgia and the Age of Great Cathedrals

The late tenth and early eleventh centuries saw crucial events that shaped the destiny of Georgia throughout the following centuries. King Bagrat III (975-1014) united the greatest part of the country under his crown. It was the beginning of a new period of cultural and spiritual revival that witnessed a building boom in Georgia. Along with the construction of new churches and cathedrals, many earlier buildings were restored or reconstructed.

In the 990s, Kutaisi became the capital of the united kingdom of Georgia. The new centre of emerging power needed new foundations. The Dormition Cathedral of Kutaisi, popularly known as “the Church of Bagrat” after the name of its donor Bagrat III, was started at once, and was completed soon after 1000. According to the inscription carved on the northern façade of the



50. Cathedral of Kutaisi (Church of Bagrat).
Exterior from the south-west, as in 2007



51. Cathedral of Kutaisi (Church of Bagrat).
Floor of the sanctuary, as in 2010

cathedral, its floor was laid in 1003. Bagrat III consecrated the cathedral in the presence of invited kings, catholicoses, noblemen, deans and abbots, thus stressing its particular significance. It became the symbol of united Georgia and a visual manifestation of the king's power.¹¹⁴

The builders of Kutaisi Cathedral repeated the general layout of Oshki Church, which is not surprising, taking into account that royal workshops of masons followed the court from Tao to the new capital and brought their skills and experiences with them. However, despite the similarity, there are also significant differences. Kutaisi Cathedral is wider than Oshki, and its western part is divided into three naves. The eastern apse, i.e. the sanctuary, is flanked by side rooms in two storeys, while the southern and northern apses have no adjoining chapels. A gallery running high above the ground along the western wall collapsed in 1692 (now conventionally rebuilt in iron). We know from a report written by Russian ambassadors in 1640 that in that period the upper gallery was a place allotted for the queen and other noble women attending the liturgy. Perhaps it had the same function at the beginning too.

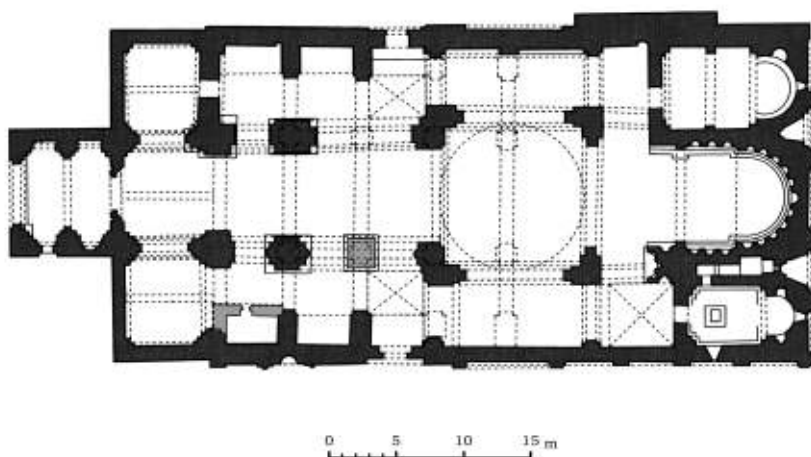
The façades of the cathedral are faced with smoothly hewn white limestone and articulated with a blind arcade. Exterior decoration includes ornamented window frames and sculptures, such as two high-relief heads facing each other and the image of a labourer lifting a block of stone on the southern façade. The capitals in the porches are particularly rich in sculptures that include foliage and animal images.

The decorative floor of the sanctuary, the exact date of which is known owing to the above-mentioned inscription, is made of lime mortar of various colours. It consists of three large rosettes framed with a rectangular ornamental band.

The Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta is the most famous religious edifice in Georgia. I have already mentioned the first wooden church erected on the site in the 330s, and the basilica which replaced the wooden church in the late fifth century. By the early eleventh century, the basilica was already badly damaged. Between 1010 and 1029, a new Svetitskhoveli Cathedral was built on the initiative of Catholicos Melchisedec I by the architect Arsukisdze. The new Cathedral incorporated the remains of the longitudinal walls and piers of the basilica.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ The dome, vaults, and upper portions of the walls of the cathedral were destroyed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From 2010 to 2012, a controversial project aiming for the full restoration of the building was carried out.

¹¹⁵ D. Khoshtaria, G. Patashuri, "svetitskhovlis tadzris arkitektura," in *Svetitskhoveli*, ed. by G. Sharashidze (Tbilisi, 2014), 182-236.

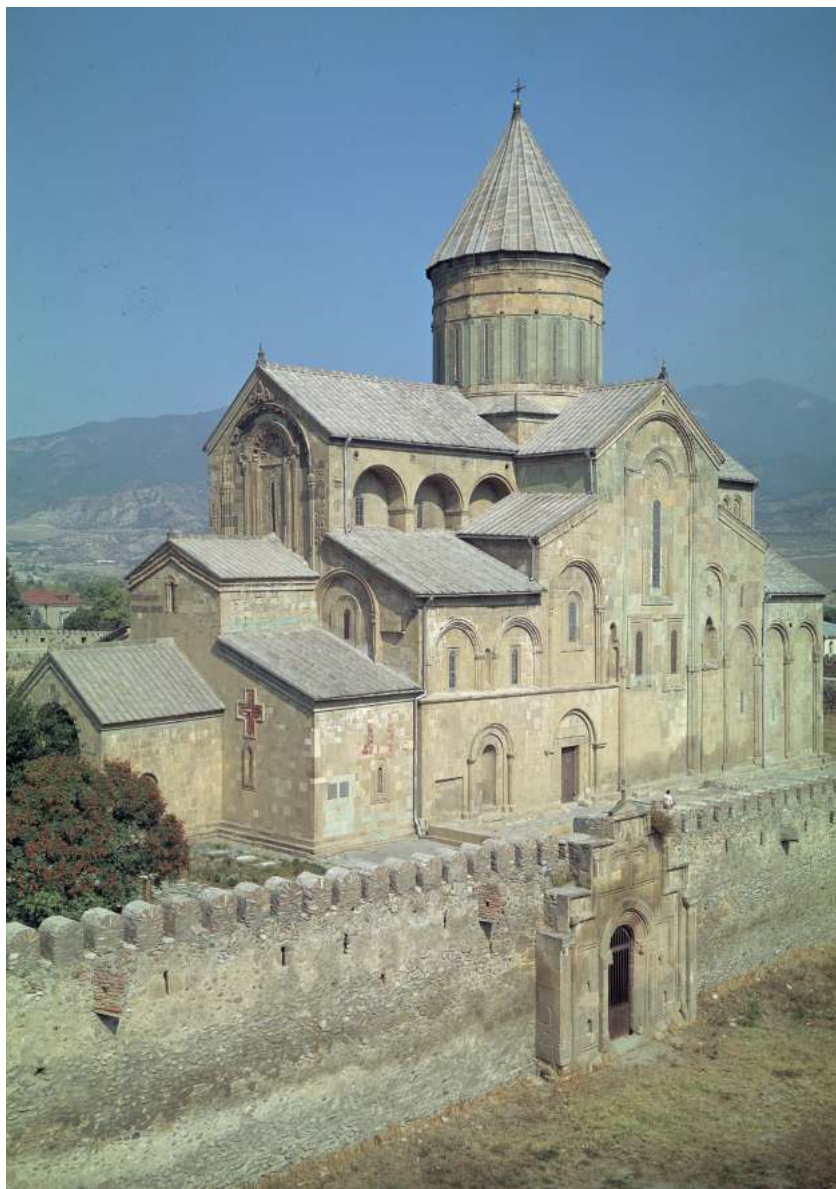


52. Svetitskhoveli Cathedral of Mtskheta. Plan

Svetitskhoveli is the largest Medieval cathedral in Georgia. It has an elongated rectangular ground plan and a dome resting on four piers. The sanctuary is very deep, with seventeen arched sitting niches in the walls of the apse and a chancel bay for the Catholicos and the bishops.

Initially, the western part of the cathedral was divided into three naves by means of three pairs of arches of equal width. The U-shape upper gallery surrounded the nave on three sides. In 1400, when the army of Tamerlane destroyed the cathedral, the western part was evidently damaged more than the rest of the building. King Alexander I restored it between 1413 and 1440. During that restoration, two pairs of arches were made of differing width, and the upper gallery was reduced to a room at the western end of the nave. The dome of Svetitskhoveli collapsed in 1656 due to an earthquake, and was restored by King Rostom and Queen Mariam, as indicated in its inscription.

The façades of the cathedral also bear the marks of numerous restorations. The initial decoration is preserved on the eastern façade. The window of the sanctuary is adorned with an ornamental frame of dark red stone. The central space of the wall, above the main window, is occupied by a fan-like composition consisting of twelve radiating segments. The inscription on the disks at the ends of the segments mentions the donor of the cathedral, Catholicos Melchisedec, and the master builder Arsukisdze. The latter is mentioned again in the memorial inscription of the northern façade, next to the symbolic image of the hand of the master holding a square.



53. Svetitskhoveli Cathedral of Mtskheta.
Exterior from the south-west



54. Svetitskhoveli Cathedral of Mtskheta. Upper part of northern façade



55. Cathedral of Alaverdi. Exterior



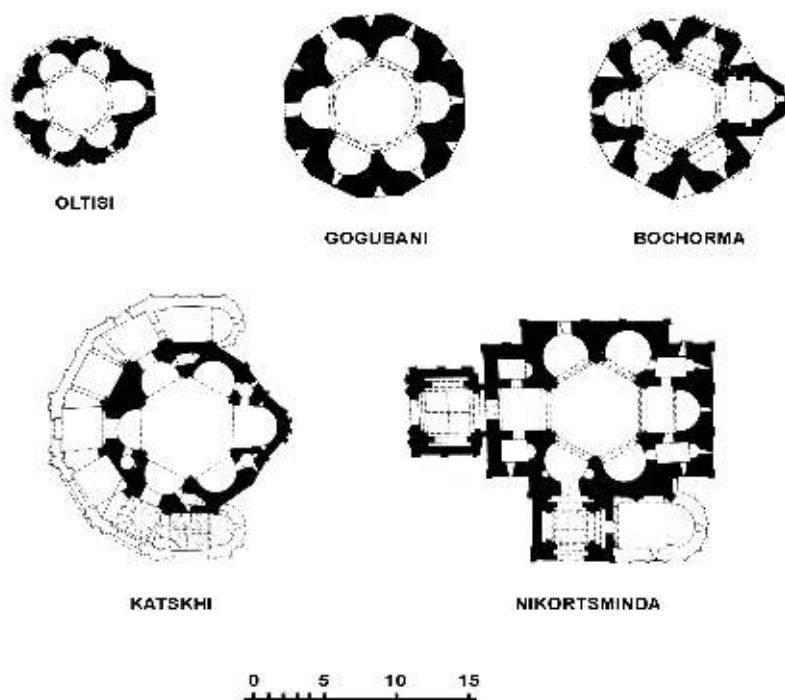
56. Cathedral of Alaverdi. Interior looking east

Svetitskhoveli Cathedral had a spacious walled courtyard from ancient times. The enclosing wall was restored many times, and was fitted with merlons in the late Middle Ages. A two-storeyed gate with a large vaulted passage in the western wall of the enclosure is contemporary to the church, as evidenced by the inscription of Catholicos Melchisedec.¹¹⁶

The Cathedral of St George at Alaverdi was erected in the early eleventh century on the site where Joseph of Alaverdi, one of the “thirteen Syrian Fathers,” founded a monastery in the 560s and was subsequently buried.¹¹⁷ The

¹¹⁶ E. Thunø in collaboration with N. Chitishvili, “Gateway to Svetitskhoveli Cathedral,” *Proceedings of the Conference “Museum and Cultural Heritage”* (Tbilisi, 2021), 698-706.

¹¹⁷ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkitektura Kakhetii*, 369-404.



57. Plans of hexafoil churches

cathedral is built to a triconch plan, and is more compact and rather simplified than those of Oshki and Kutaisi. Its façades are decorated with blind arches but have no sculptural adornment since the facing material, light porous stone, is unfit to carve.

Alaverdi Cathedral is the tallest Medieval church in Georgia. Its dome collapsed in the fifteenth century after an earthquake, and was restored in brick between 1479 and 1495; however, it most likely repeats the height and proportions of the initial dome. Standing in a plain, the cathedral is visible from many neighbouring villages and towns.

The Development of Domed Architecture

The decades around 1000 in Georgia saw several new types of domed churches. In 960s, a new cathedral built on an octofoil plan appeared at Tbeti in Shavsheti province, in the see established some 50 years earlier by Duke of



58. St Nicholas Cathedral of Nikortsminda. Exterior from the north-east

Dukes Ashot III. Soon it was reconstructed into a cruciform structure and received its final shape in the early eleventh century.¹¹⁸

The hexafoil plan inscribed in the dodecagon was first employed in the later half of the tenth century in the south-western Georgian provinces of Tao and Artani (Oltisi, Kamhis, Gogubani) and was soon adopted in Imereti (Katskhi, around 1010) and even in the easternmost Georgian province of Kakheti (Borchorma, late tenth century). In these churches, six apses radiate from a central hexagonal bay, the eastern one usually supplemented with a bema inside and projecting outside. This early plan was developed in St Nicholas Cathedral at Nikortsminda in Racha province, built between 1010 and 1014 under the patronage of local dukes. Its builders replaced the western apse with a rectangular arm and added lateral rooms on either side. From the outside, the church acquired a cruciform shape instead of dodecagonal. Nikortsminda is one of few

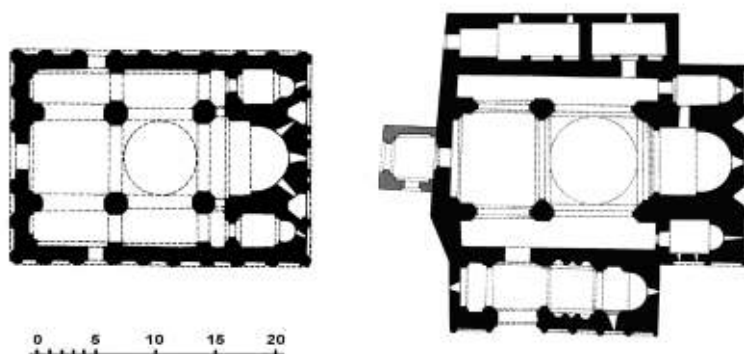
¹¹⁸ D. Khoshtaria, M. Didebulidze, N. Vacheishvili, *Graphic Documentation of the Architecture and Mural Painting of Tao-Klardjeti (North-East Turkey): Exhibition Catalogue* (Tbilisi, 1996), 7-8; N. et M. Thierry, "La cathédrale de T'beti. Nouvelles données," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 47 (1999), 77-100.



59. St Nicholas Cathedral of Nikortsminda. Upper part of eastern façade



60. St Nicholas Cathedral of Nikortsminda. Interior of dome



61. Plans of the cathedrals of Samtavisi (left) and Samtavro (right)

eleventh-century Georgian churches that has preserved its initial dome, despite its having been damaged in the past due to earthquakes.

The cathedral displays a marvellous marriage of architecture and sculpture. Its rich sculptural decoration includes scenes of the Transfiguration, the Ascension, the Last Judgment, images of angels, and frieze of animal figures running around the bottom of the drum.¹¹⁹ Cornices and window frames are lavishly embellished with carved ornamentation that consists of numerous floral and geometric motifs. Nikortsminda is perhaps the most important example of the ornate style, called “Georgian baroque” by George Chubinashvili, meaning not only a luxuriant exterior adornment, but also an interior space enlivened with a play of shadow and light.

The Cathedral of Samtavisi, completed in 1030, had particular significance for the development of façade decoration.¹²⁰ The design of its eastern façade, with the ornamental cross above and two slanting decorative squares below the framed window, gave rise to a great wave of emulation, and it came to serve as a model for many church buildings in the following period. The unusual fame of the Samtavisi design could be explained by recognition of its artistic quality. The choice of the model was most likely governed by aesthetic rather than symbolic considerations, since Samtavisi has never been known as a site of outstanding religious significance.

Even more important was the role of Samtavisi in shaping the standard structure of Georgian church building. The cathedral is built on a simplified

¹¹⁹ T. Dadiani, T. Khundadze, E. Kvachataдзе, *Medieval Georgian Sculpture*, 193-194.

¹²⁰ G. Sokhashvili, *samtavisi* (Tbilisi, 1973), 9-104.



62. Cathedral of Samtavisi. Exterior from the north-east

inscribed cross plan. It has only two free-standing piers instead of four, as the eastern piers are merged with the walls of the sanctuary. Very soon, a similar plan was used for the Cathedral of the Saviour, known as Samtavro - a building with splendidly adorned lateral façades built on the site of the early

Christian “Upper Church” in Mtskheta.¹²¹ After the mid-eleventh century, the structure of Georgian domed churches was stereotyped, repeating that of Samtavisi and Samtavro in both plan and elevation. The churches are square or slightly oblong in ground plan and cruciform above the corner compartments, which are roofed at the lowest level. Barrel-vaulted crossarms are elevated high enough to make the shape of the cross fully recognisable both inside and outside. The dome on pendentives, rising at the crossing, crowns the building. Numerous churches built between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries have these characteristics, commonly considered as the most typical to the appearance of a Georgian church. These lofty buildings with tall drums and conical roofs are a prominent feature of the Georgian landscape.

The introduction of Constantinopolitan liturgical practice in the late tenth century definitely had an impact on the development of church architecture in Georgia, however, the importance of that impact should not be overestimated. Apparently, the shift to Constantinopolitan rite resulted in some changes to the planning of the sanctuary.¹²² It may also have contributed to the spread of porch-chapels, which can be seen in many eleventh-century Georgian churches. These liminal spaces, arranged in front of the main door of the church, combined the functions of an entrance porch and a subsidiary chapel.¹²³

From the early eleventh century, architectural sculpture almost disappeared from the interior of Georgian churches, giving way to wall paintings. The exception was templons richly adorned with carved ornaments and sculptures. Sometimes, altars were also decorated.¹²⁴

In the eleventh century, Georgian masons also worked far outside Georgia. Between 1035 and 1050, along with local masters, they took part in the

¹²¹ R. Schmerling, “Samtavro – pamiatnik XI veka,” *Ars Georgica* 1 (1942), 49-76.

¹²² I. Gviashvili, “Liturgy and Architecture. Constantinopolitan Rite and Changes in the Architectural Planning of Georgian Churches,” *Convivium Supplementum, 1: Georgia as a Bridge between Cultures*, ed. by M. Studer-Karlen, N. Chitishvili, and T. Kaffenberger (2021), 64-88.

¹²³ T. Kaffenberger, “Liminal Spaces of Memory, Devotion and Feasting? Porch-Chapels in Eleventh-Century Georgia,” *ibid.*, 116-136.

¹²⁴ On the templons of Georgian churches, see R. Schmerling, *Mahe formy v arkhitekture srednevekovoi Gruzii* (Tbilisi, 1962), 40-177; N. Iamanidze, *Les installations liturgiques sculptées des églises de Géorgie (VIe–XIIIe siècles)* (Turnhout 2009), 103-242. On the altars, see *ibid.*, 45-102; N. Chitishvili, “Altars in Medieval Georgian Churches. Preliminary Notes on Their Arrangement, Decoration, and the Rite of Consecration,” in *Convivium Supplementum, 1: Georgia as a Bridge between Cultures*, ed. by M. Studer-Karlen, N. Chitishvili, and T. Kaffenberger (2021), 91-114.

construction of the Church of the Wood of Life in the Black Mountains in northern Syria. Their presence is attested by masons' marks in Georgian letters and numerous excavated architectural fragments, which have close parallels in eleventh-century Georgian churches.¹²⁵ The triconch plan of the Church of the Mother of God, built between 965 and 980 in the Georgian Monastery at Gialia (Galia) in Cyprus, might have been designed by master builders from Tao.¹²⁶ Georgian masons may also have left traces of their activities in the Holy Land.¹²⁷

Building Methods and Techniques

Stone was the main building material in Georgia throughout the centuries. Sandstone, limestone, and volcanic tuff were the types of rock most widely applied in construction. In Kakheti province, where these stones were rarely available, masons often used cobblestone and highly porous light travertine, locally known as *shirimi*. In Samtskhe and Javakheti, the majority of churches were built of basalt or andesite.

The building technique of Georgian masons is similar to the Roman *emplekton*. Stone in large, usually smoothly hewn slabs faces a mortared rubble core from both inside and outside. In early churches, facing stones may have had a thickness of 30 or even 40 cm. Later, they become thinner. However, the stone facing of Georgian churches is never just cladding, but is a structural part of the wall. In Kakheti and some other regions, the facing may consist of even courses of specially picked cobbles or roughly cut stones.

Marble similar to Proconnesian, Parian or Pentelic is not quarried in Georgia, and most probably late Antique and Medieval Georgian masons had no experience of working with it. If the donor was wealthy enough, marble

¹²⁵ W. Djobadze, *Archeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch on-the-Orontes* (Stuttgart, 1986), 117-146, 216-217.

¹²⁶ W. Djobadze, "Observations on the Georgian Monastery of Yalia (Galia) in Cyprus," *Oriens Christianus*, vol. 32 (1984) 196-209; I. Gagoshidze, D. Mindorashvili, G. Gagoshidze, *Gialia: Georgian Monastery on Cyprus* (Tbilisi, 2014), 82-87.

¹²⁷ D. Khoshtaria, N. Vacheishvili, "Building Activities of the Georgians in the Holy Land," in *Georgians in the Holy Land. The Rediscovery of a Long-Lost Christian Legacy*, ed. by T. Mgaloblishvili (London, 2014), 21-30. Although there is a more sceptical opinion on this subject. According to Y. Tchekhanovets, *The Caucasian Archaeology of the Holy Land* (Leiden-Boston, 2018), 230, "Analysis of the architectural remains from the 'nationally affiliated' sites denies the possibility of identifying the Caucasian structures in the Holy Land according to their architectural or decorative features."

pieces of church furnishing, such as columns, capitals, and panels, were ordered in Greece and delivered ready-made. As a rule, they were used in altar tables, templons, ambos, and ciboria. Some of these marble details were later reused as spolia in a number of Georgian churches (among them Jvari Church at Mtskheta, Ateni Sioni, Martvili, Mokvi, the Main Church of Gelati Monastery, Khobi, and Tsaishi).¹²⁸

Brick was known in Georgia from late Antiquity, but its wide application in church architecture began only in the eighth century. However, it remained the secondary material compared to stone until the sixteenth century. Brick was commonly used in Kakheti, usually in combination with other materials - cobblestone and travertine. In the early Middle Ages, brick was not standardised, and each kiln established its size at the producer's own discretion. In the walls of the ninth-century church at Akura in Kakheti, one can observe bricks of five different sizes, apparently produced in different kilns.¹²⁹ In the Church of St John the Baptist at Kalauri, the drum of the eight-sided dome above the western upper gallery is built of specially made trapezoid bricks, with one 135-degree angle that corresponds to the angle of a regular octagon. The trend toward standardisation of brick size became evident only from the twelfth century onwards. From the ninth century, circular and semicircular bricks were also produced for application in round decorative colonnettes.

According to *the History of Georgian Kings*, Georgian masons mastered the lime-mortared stone technique in the times of Prince Ardām,¹³⁰ the ruler of Iberia thought to have been appointed by Achaemenid King Artaxerxes I in about 430 BC. In reality, lime mortar was introduced in Georgia by the Romans in the first century BC, when Iberia became a client state of the Empire that promoted Roman cultural and technological expansion. Lime mortar was the most common binding material in Medieval construction in Georgia. In the early period, masons sometimes additionally used iron staples to hold stone blocks together. They can be seen on the northern façade of the church of Jvari due to the partial crumbling away of the stonework.

The application of wood in construction was limited. It is known from written sources that the first church in Mtskheta was built of wood, but that was a special case which did not affect the further development of construction techniques. A number of early basilicas in west Georgia were roofed

¹²⁸ D. Khoshtaria, N. Natsvlishvili, D. Tumanishvili, *msbenebeli ostatebi shua saukneebis sakartvelosbi* (Tbilisi, 2012), 229-237.

¹²⁹ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii*, 110, 113.

¹³⁰ *Rewriting Caucasian History*, 16-17.

with timber. Some early churches in eastern Georgia may also have had timber roofs, but their existence is not attested to by archaeological evidence. A few Georgian churches dated from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries had upper galleries with wooden floors (Likani, Yeni-Rabat, Ertatsminda), which is witnessed by corbels once supporting timber beams.¹³¹ Conifer beams inserted into the core of a stone wall served to prevent their cracking in case of unequal settlement or earthquakes. This method of wall reinforcement is evidenced in the Tsromi and Oshki churches.¹³² Wood served as the main material for church doors, though sometimes it happened that the door wing was made of a single large slab of stone, especially if the entrance aperture was small. Wooden doors were decorated with carvings. The art of wood carving reached its pick in the eleventh century, when numerous richly adorned doors were created.¹³³

In the late Middle Ages, the decline of building art and economic difficulties resulted in a large wave of construction of wooden churches in the villages of western Georgia, where, owing to the abundance of forests, timber was cheaper and more easily available than stone and brick.¹³⁴

The roofing tiles of Georgian churches were either ceramic or stone. Ceramic tiles were known in Georgia from Antiquity. From the tenth century, they were often coated with glaze, both for aesthetic purposes and to increase their water resistance and durability. Crimson and green glazed tiles still cover the domes of the Khakhuli and Oshki churches and Ishkhani Cathedral. Roofing tiles made of stone were used in Georgia from the seventh century, but became particularly widespread from the tenth century onwards. They are still evident on many churches, especially in the Samtskhe and Javakheti provinces in southern Georgia.

Church floors were paved with different materials, including lime mortar, ceramic tiles, and stone. Parts of the initial floors, covered with finely finished stones, are preserved in Martvili Cathedral and Mghvimevi Church. After the unification of Georgia, royal and noble Georgian patrons of church construction, competing in luxury with Constantinople, adopted the Byzantine practice of making polychromic decorative pavements. The richly decorated early eleventh-century floors of the Kutaisi and Ishkhani cathedrals have

¹³¹ D. Khoshtaria, N. Natsvlishvili, D. Tumanishvili, *mshenebeli ostatebi*., 87.

¹³² W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries*., 93.

¹³³ N. Chubinashvili, *Gruzinskaia srednevekovia khudozhestvennaia rez'ba po derevu* (Tbilisi, 1958), 15-93.

¹³⁴ M. Garaqanidze, *Gruzinskoe dereviannoe zодchestvo* (Tbilisi, 1959), 103-105.



63. Cathedral of Ruisi, northern chapel. Floor

already been mentioned. One further colourful example of the same period is preserved in the northern chapel of Ruisi Cathedral. The small size of the chapel allowed masons to use stones of various colours instead of mortar to pave the floor.¹³⁵

Window glass was a luxury available only to well-to-do donors. A piece of green glass and a fragment of its alabaster frame have been found in Tsromi Church, which, as supposed above, was built under the patronage of Emperor

¹³⁵ D. Khoshtaria, N. Natsvlishvili, D. Tumanishvili, *mshenebeli ostatebi...*, 170-177.

Heraclius. More often, windows were equipped with openwork ceramic or alabaster panels letting dim light into the church interior. Their earliest reported (now disappeared) example was in the dome of Oshki Church. More or less preserved openwork window panels can still be seen in Ertatsminda, Tsaishi, and the church of St George in Gelati Monastery.¹³⁶

We know little about the training and professional organisation of Medieval Georgian architects and masons. Apparently, among them there were both ecclesiastics and laymen. Further, it seems that in tenth- and eleventh-century Georgia, the social status of the master builder was higher than in Byzantium, as witnessed by inscriptions in the cathedrals of Mtskheta, Kutaisi, and Kumurdo, in which they are mentioned along with kings, catholicoses, and bishops.

It is thought that church building in the Caucasus was based on architectural drawings long after they had ceased to be used in Byzantium, since “the tightly fitted ashlar construction would have required a greater degree of advanced preparation than the typical brick and stone construction of Byzantium.”¹³⁷ The unique late tenth-century image in the church of the small mountain village of Korogo provides valuable evidence of the existence of drawn plans in Medieval Georgia.¹³⁸ The sculpture carved on a large rectangular stone block, which presumably once served as the capital of a column (later being reused in the roughly built southern porch) represents three donors, one of whom – obviously, the head of the family – holds in his left hand an oblong rectangular object. On the even surface of the latter, a plan of a building is incised. At its upper end, which apparently corresponds to the east side, the drawing is rounded in the form of a trefoil. Though it is not an exact plan of the existing building, it represents some of its characteristics in a peculiar way by combining a schematic ground plan and the projection of vaulting. The relief from Korogo is a telling argument in favour of the opinion that the idea of a drawn plan was familiar not only to Medieval Georgian builders and donors, but also to broader social groups.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, 179-182.

¹³⁷ A. Ghazarian, R. Ousterhout, “A Muqarnas Drawing from Thirteenth-Century Armenia and the Use of Architectural Drawings during the Middle Ages,” *Muqarnas* 18 (2001), 150-151.

¹³⁸ D. Khoshtaria, N. Natsvlshvili, D. Tumanishvili, *mshebnebeli ostatebi.*, 140-141.

¹³⁹ E. Hadjistryphonos, “Presentations and Representations of Architecture in Byzantium: the Thought behind the Image,” in *Architecture as Icon*, ed. by S. Ćurčić and E. Hadjistryphonos (New Haven and London, 2010), 119.



64. Korogo Church. Sculpture of donors

The church at Korogo is distinguished not only by this unique image. On its western façade, the church has a high cornice completely covered with scenes of the building process. The sculptures depict masons and labourers doing various jobs, including quarrying, transporting stones on a sledge and their backs, preparing mortar, shaping stones, etc.¹⁴⁰ In fact, this is a stage-by-stage account of construction. However, one can observe the emphasis on the transportation of building materials, which is illustrated in four scenes. Taking into account the mountainous topography of Georgia, transportation would require a major effort from Medieval builders. This was all the more important in the case of the Korogo Church, which stands at the top of a mountain.

¹⁴⁰ N. Thierry, "Illustration de la construction d'une église. Les sculptures de Korogo," *Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen-Age (Actes du colloque, Université de Rennes II, 2-6 mai 1983)*, II, *Commande et travail*, sous la direction de X. Barral i Altet (Paris, 1987), 321-329; R. Ousterhout, *Master Builders of Byzantium* (Princeton, 1999), 138-139; D. Khoshtaria, "Sculptural Images of Medieval Georgian Masons," *Proceedings of the 2nd International Symposium of Georgian Culture "The Caucasus: Georgia on the Crossroads. Cultural Exchange across Europe and beyond," November 2-9, 2009, Florence* (Tbilisi, 2011), 96-97.

Apparently, the practice of three-dimensional modelling was also known in Medieval Georgia. Along with numerous plastic representations of churches that served as acroteria or tombstones,¹⁴¹ there were models which may have had practical significance in the process of designing. A note in the *Dogmatikon* compiled by the twelfth-century Georgian monk Arsen of Iqalto says that when King David the Builder visited Arsen in Shiomgvi Monastery, he found the monk modelling St Sophia Church in wax.¹⁴² Along with wood and clay, wax would have been the main material for creating three-dimensional models intended for use in the construction process.

¹⁴¹ On the acroteria of Medieval Georgian churches, see N. Chitishvili, “General Overview of the Three-dimensional Architectural Models as Acroteria in Medieval Georgia,” *Studia Ceranea* 11 (2021), 531-548.

¹⁴² D. Khoshtaria, N. Natsvlishvili, D. Tumanishvili, *mshenebeli ostatebi*., 143. Plastic models were also familiar in Armenia. See C. Maranci, “The Architect Trdat. Building Practices and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Byzantium and Armenia,” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 62, no. 3 (Sep., 2003), 295-298.

CHAPTER THREE

ARCHITECTURE DURING THE GOLDEN AGE AND THE DECLINE OF THE GEORGIAN KINGDOM

The Age of David the Builder

The late tenth and eleventh centuries went down in Georgian history as the Age of Great Cathedrals, while the following period, the twelfth century, can be called the Age of Great Monasteries. The most important of them was Gelati, established in 1106 by King David IV near Kutaisi, then the capital of the Kingdom of Georgia.

David IV (1089-1125), named “the Builder,” was the most successful king of Georgia. During his 35 years in power, he managed to transform Georgia into a dominant regional power with a strong army, a centralised authority, a strong rule of law and a flourishing economy. David IV expelled the Seljuk Turks from the Caucasus and, by the end of his life, had recaptured Tbilisi, the last enclave remaining from the Arab occupation. In 1122, the Georgian court moved from Kutaisi to Tbilisi.

Gelati Monastery is the most representative foundation of David IV. He saw Gelati not merely as a monastery but as a centre of knowledge and education of the highest international standard of his times. He established an academy in the monastery and made every effort to gather there the most eminent Georgian theologians and philosophers, both living in and outside his kingdom. The royal chronicler described the foundation of Gelati in the most rapturous words: “This is now a foreshadowing of the second Jerusalem in the whole East, a school of all virtue, an academy of instruction, another Athens but much superior to it in divine doctrines.”¹⁴³ The allusion to Athens and Jerusalem must have stressed the importance of Gelati Monastery as a centre of both secular and ecclesiastical knowledge, philosophy and theology.

¹⁴³ *Rewriting Caucasian History...*, 322.



65. Gelati Monastery. General view, as in 1980s

From its foundation, Gelati was a royal monastery. It possessed vast lands and rich treasures that contained a number of marvellous icons and manuscripts. After David IV had been buried in Gelati, it became the burial place of the royal family.

The main church of the monastery, dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin, was built between 1106 and 1130 on an inscribed cross plan.¹⁴⁴ The facing of the church is of smoothly finished yellowish limestone blocks, some of which are very large. The eastern façade has three projecting five-sided apses. The façades are decorated with blind decorative arches which are echoed in the window frames. Carved ornamentation was made only on certain elements of the façades. The airy space of the church is lit up by sixteen windows in the drum and twelve large windows in the crossarms and sanctuary. To the west, the church has a narthex from which three large doors lead to the church. The apse is adorned with a mosaic image of the Virgin with Child flanked by Archangels.

In the thirteenth century, side chapels were added to the Church of the Nativity, and two other churches and a bell-tower were built.¹⁴⁵ The Church

¹⁴⁴ R. Mepisashvili, *Arkhitekturnyi ansambl' Gelati* (Tbilisi, 1966), 29-87.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 88-128.



66. Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in Gelati Monastery.
Interior looking east

of St Nicholas is a rare example of a two-storey design. The assumption was made that it is a symbolic copy of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, intended to emphasise a spiritual link between Gelati and Jerusalem.¹⁴⁶

The general layout of Gelati is a good illustration of the Georgian monastic architectural tradition of free-standing buildings in the courtyard. The same general concept can be seen in Medieval Georgian monasteries at Ikalto, Nekresi, Shiomgvime, Martvili, Otkhta Eklesia, Oshki, etc. This layout concept differs from that of the Byzantine and Armenian monasteries, which usually consist of structures that are attached to each other.¹⁴⁷

David IV took under his patronage Shiomgvime, a sixth-century foundation, and made it a royal monastery. He built the Church of the Mother of God there, a large cross-domed structure, which was reconstructed as a basilica in 1678.

David the Builder's daughter Tamar, who was married to Shirvanshah Manuchehr III, returned to Georgia while her husband was still alive, and in 1152 founded the Monastery of the Holy Cross at Tighva in Shida Kartli province (central Georgia) where she took monastic vows.¹⁴⁸ The unusually austere style of its church is a clear reflection of her ascetic personality. The upper gallery of the church is connected by means of a bridge with a two-storey palace of the professed queen standing 3.5 m northwest of the church, which would allow her to attend service without entering the church from its main door.

The Age of Queen Tamar:

The Flowering of Façade Decoration

The Kingdom of Georgia reached the peak of its power and territorial expansion in the reign of Queen Tamar (1184-1213),¹⁴⁹ the great-granddaughter of David the Builder. By the end of her life, her kingdom included most of the South Caucasus. The political influence of Georgia stretched far beyond these limits, reaching the North Caucasus, eastern Anatolia, and northern

¹⁴⁶ E. Gedevanishvili, "gelatis monastris tsm. nikolozis tadzris simboluri interpretatsiisatvis," *sakartvelos sidzveleni* 13 (2009), 93-100.

¹⁴⁷ V. Bérédzé, *Monuments de Tao-Klardjéti dans l'histoire de l'architecture géorgienne*, 268-272.

¹⁴⁸ L. Rcheulishvili, *tighva: sharvanis dedoplis tamaris aghmsbeneloba* (Tbilisi, 1960), 5-101.

¹⁴⁹ In Georgian, the queen regnants Tamar and her daughter Rusudan are traditionally referred to as kings (*mepe*), in contrast to numerous queen consorts who had the title of queen (*dedopali*).



67. Vardzia Monastery. General view

Iran. In 1204, Tamar took an active part in the foundation of the Empire of Trebizond, which became a client state of Georgia.¹⁵⁰

Tamar is the most famous and honoured sovereign in Georgian history. She was seen as the living embodiment of the ideal ruler within her lifetime, which was epitomised as Georgia's "Golden Age" for centuries. Royal chroniclers glorified her beyond all measures; court poets wrote her panegyrics and eulogies; she was mentioned as a saint in her lifetime as witnessed by a colophon of the Vani Gospels; in the inscription of Chochiani Church she is referred to as "Tamar, equal to God;"¹⁵¹ coins minted in the name of Queen Tamar proclaimed her as "the Glory of the world and faith... Champion of the Messiah."¹⁵²

Church building in the age of Tamar was not as intense as might be expected considering the wealth and prosperity of the country. The most impressive legacy of this time is Vardzia, a huge rock-cut monastery in

¹⁵⁰ A. Eastmond, *Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium. Hagia Sophia and the Empire of Trebizond* (Aldershot, Hants – Burlington, VT, 2004), 18-22.

¹⁵¹ D. Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia* ((Richmond, Surrey, 2000), 83-85; E. Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia* (University Park, PA, 1998), 95-99.

¹⁵² L. Garland, S. Rapp, "Mary 'of Alania': Women and Empress between Two Worlds," in *Byzantine Women: Varieties of Experience, 800-1200*, ed. by L. Garland (Aldershot, Hants, 2006), 93.

Javakheti.¹⁵³ Started in the 1170s by Tamar's father, King George III, the construction of Vardzia was completed by 1203.

Georgia had a long-standing tradition of rock-cut monastic architecture. In the early sixth century, David, one of the "thirteen Syrian Fathers" settled in the Gareji Desert 60 km south-east of Tbilisi. Soon, his humble hermitage developed into a monastery known as St David's Laura. Two more rock-hewn monasteries, Dodorka and Natlismtsemeli, appeared in Gareji already during the life of David.¹⁵⁴ In the following periods, the network of rock-cut monasteries in Gareji grew considerably. Several monasteries - Sabereebi,¹⁵⁵ Mravaltskaro, Tsamebuli, and Udabno were founded between the ninth and early eleventh centuries, while Bertubani was hewn into the rock in the age of Queen Tamar. Its murals painted in the reign of King George IV Lasha, Tamar's son, contain the images of both sovereigns.¹⁵⁶

But Vardzia is much larger than any of the Gareji monasteries. Thirteen rows of caves are hewn into the depths of the cliff. Their total height amounts to 60 metres and length to 500 metres. There are fifteen churches and chapels, several hundred monk's cells, a royal chamber, a refectory, a bakery, a winery, stables, barns and workshops. The main church of the monastery, dedicated to the Dormition, is cut in the centre of the complex. It is a single-nave cave of considerable size, preserving the earliest image of Queen Tamar, represented as the donor of the monastery, holding a model of the church.

With the exception of Vardzia, church building activity was mostly concentrated in Kartli. Here, the architects of Queen Tamar's age produced a surge of finely decorated domed churches, which share a number of salient characteristics.¹⁵⁷ None of them can be called innovative in the sense of planning, as their major building lines repeat Samtavisi and Samtavro. The

¹⁵³ N. Bakhtadze, "New considerations on the Architectural Structure of the Vardzia Rock-Cut Ensemble and Peculiarities of the Ongoing Monastic Life," *Proceedings of Third International Congress of Speleology in Artificial Cavities HYPOGEA* (Dobrich, Bulgaria, 2019), 131-138.

¹⁵⁴ M. Bulia, D. Tumanishvili, A. Volskaya, *Laura, Udabno. Davitgareja Monasteries* (Tbilisi, 2008), 22.

¹⁵⁵ D. Tumanishvili, "sabereebis eklesiata khurotmodzghvreb," *dzveli kbelovneba dghes* 4 (2013), 39-54.

¹⁵⁶ The most comprehensive work on Gareji monasteries, rather outdated but still useful for covering both architecture and wall-painting, is G. Chubinashvili, *Peshchernye monastiri David-Garedzhi* (Tbilisi, 1948).

¹⁵⁷ V. Beridzé, *Quelques aspects de l'architecture géorgienne à conpote de la seconde moitié du X-e siècle à la fin du XIII-e* (Tbilissi, 1976), 74-96.



68. Ikorta Church. Exterior



69. Pitareti Church. Exterior

standard domed church of this period is inscribed-cross in plan, with a dome resting on the corners of the apse walls to the east and two octagonal piers to the west. Plain pendentives serve to transition from the central square bay to the circular base of the dome. As a rule, the interior arches are slightly pointed. Unlike plan and structural elements, façade decorations show sundry variations. In the age of Queen Tamar, stone-carved ornamentation reached new heights of elaboration, featuring a wide variety of floral and geometric motifs.

The Church of Archangels in Ikorta, completed in 1172 during the reign of George III, is something of a link between the architecture of the eleventh century and that of Queen Tamar's age. Its façades are still surrounded by a slender blind arcade, a basic element of eleventh-century exterior decoration, but the vertical proportions are different. The outer height of the dome from the bottom of the drum to the top of the conical roof equals to that of the crossarms. In the Church of the Mother of God at Betania near Tbilisi, built (or rebuilt) around 1200, the dome is even more uplifted. The interior height of the drum is twice and a half more than its diameter, which makes it look like a tower. The attenuated proportions of the drum are emphasised by high and narrow windows, cut one within each of its twelve arched facets. The richly decorated convex frames of the windows fill the whole space within arches, leaving no plain surface. The façades are no more articulated by means of blind arcades. After Ikorta, this system of decoration was forgotten forever by Georgian church builders.



70. Betania Church. Exterior



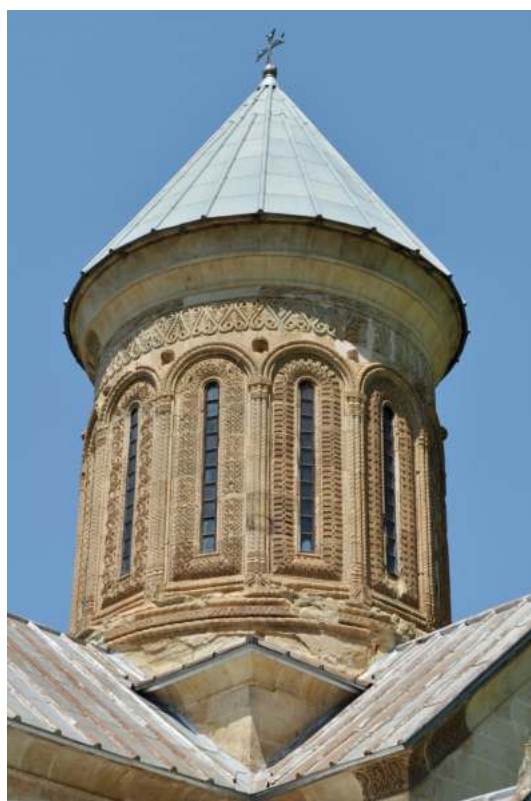
71. Qintsvisi Church. Exterior

The church in Kvatakhevi is similar to Betania in plan and elevation, but differs in adornment. The Church of the Mother of God in Pitareti, also of a similar plan but smaller than Betania and Kvatakhevi, has the most abundant carved ornamentation, distinguished for elegance and accuracy.

In Ikorta and Kvatakhevi, the design of the eastern façade replicates that of Samtavisi Cathedral, with blind arches in the former and without them in the latter. The more or less precise imitations of the Samtavisi model can also be found in a number of other late twelfth- and thirteenth-century churches in Georgia (Kabeni in Kojori near Tbilisi, Kabeni in Ksani Gorge, Metekhi in Tbilisi, Gudarekhi, etc.) and occasionally even in Armenia (Hovhannavank).

All the above-mentioned churches are built of stone. Their façades are faced with fine ashlar, while the interior facing is worse since it was intended for plastering and painting. Brick was never mixed with stone in this period. However, there are domed churches of Queen Tamar's age in Qintsvisi and Timotesubani featuring all-brick construction. Their design shows a clear resemblance to that of contemporary stone churches, though, naturally, they have no carved decoration.¹⁵⁸

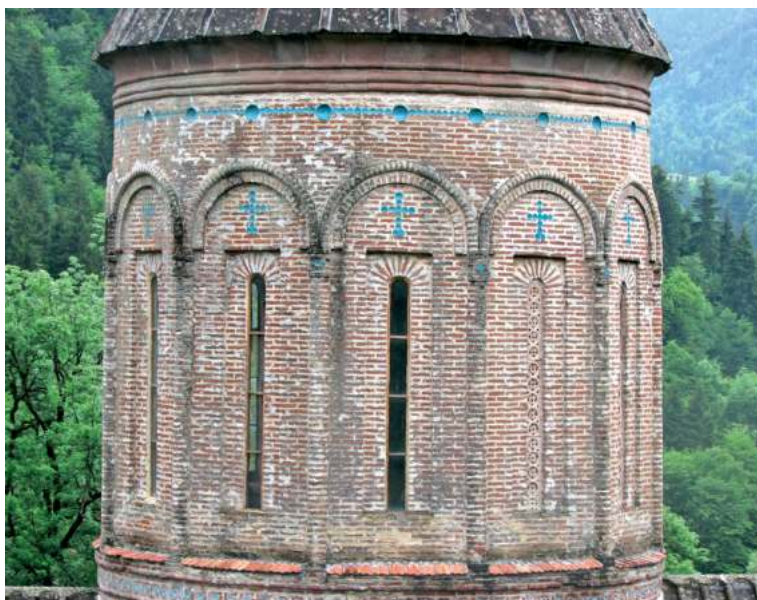
¹⁵⁸ P. Zakaraia, *ქართული ცენტრალურ-გუმბათოვანი არქიტექტურა, XI-XVIII სს., t. 2, XII-XIII სს.* (Tbilisi, 1978), 9-38 (Betania), 41-76 (Kvatakhevi), 79-95 (Qintsvisi), 99-111 (Timotesubani), 115-149 (Pitareti).



72. Kvatakhevi Church. Dome

From the twelfth century, the Georgian kingdom included a significant part of historic Armenian lands, and a number of Armenian noblemen served at Queen Tamar's court. The most eminent among them were the representatives of the Mkhargrdzeli (Yerkaynbazuk) family, brothers Ivane and Zakaria, who played a significant role in the foreign relations and wars of the kingdom. In around 1200, Ivane converted to the Chalcedonian Christianity of Georgians, and began vigorous construction in the Armenian-Georgian marchlands. The Church of the Mother of God built by him in around 1205 in Akhtala Monastery is one of the largest church buildings of Queen Tamar's age.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, 193-224; A. Eastmond, *Tamta's World. The Life and Encounters of a Medieval Noblenwoman from the Middle East to Mongolia* (Cambridge, 2017), 29-46. On cross-cultural encounters in the mentioned region, see M. Janjalia, in collaboration with M. Bulia, "The Case of the Kirants Paintings: Trend versus Cultural Context in Medieval Art," in *Convivium*, vol. 5, issue 2, ed. by I. Foletti, E. Scirocco, and M. Lešák (Brno, 2018), 33-48.



73. Timotesubani Church. Dome

Akhtala Church provides evidence of the cultural interaction between the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia. The rectangular frame and ornamental motifs of its northern entrance recall the architectural tradition which we usually call Seljuk.¹⁶⁰ The elements of Anatolian Islamic architecture penetrated first Armenia and then – apparently through Armenia – Georgia, where they can be seen in several buildings, most notably in the Church of St George at Daba built in 1333 by the chief treasurer of King George V the Illustrious. In the thirteenth century, there was also an inverse process of adoption of Caucasian techniques and decorative motifs in the architecture of eastern Anatolia. Analysis of the vaulting of the buildings at Divriği and the decoration of the Cifte Minareli Medrese in Erzurum led John M. Rogers to the conclusion that they are both to a certain extent the products of a tradition that can roughly be termed Caucasian, noting in passing that the Georgian material is more relevant for comparison.¹⁶¹ In this

¹⁶⁰ A. Durukan, “The Cultural Milieu of the Anatolian Seljuk Period I,” *Anadolu ve Çevresinde Ortaçağ* 1 (2007), 157-158, suggested using the term “the art of the Seljuk Period” instead of “Seljuk art” to cover all principalities under the suzerainty of the Seljuks, though, obviously, it does not make much difference.

¹⁶¹ J. M. Rogers, “The date of the Cifte Minare Medrese at Erzurum,” *Kunst des Orients* 8, H. 1/2 (1972), 103-104. See also A. Eastmond, *Tamtaş's World*, 293, 313-321.



74. Church of St George at Daba. Western façade

context, one can also remember the cornice of the dome of Emir Saltuk's tomb in the Uc Kumbetler (Uc Turbe) complex in Erzurum.¹⁶²

The Georgian political influence on the Empire of Trebizond was reflected in its architecture. The large open porches of Trebizond churches are often considered the most visible sign of that influence. Such porches are not a usual feature of Byzantine architecture, but have parallels in Georgia.¹⁶³ The rich figural sculpture of Hagia Sophia of Trebizond is yet another deviation from the Byzantine "norm," but it is hardly directly related to Georgian art.¹⁶⁴

After the Mongol Invasion

The Golden Age of Queen Tamar was followed by a long period of decline that started with the Mongol invasion in the late 1220s and lasted more than five hundred years. These were centuries of unceasing external aggression and internal disruptions in Georgia that devastated the country and caused an economic and cultural downturn.

¹⁶² D. Khoshtaria, "Builders of the Churches of Tao-Klarjeti: Some Preliminary Notes," 117-119.

¹⁶³ A. Eastmond, *Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium*, 34-39.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 61-76.



75. Sapara Monastery. View from the south-west

Naturally, architecture reflected the general decline of Georgia. While there were skilled masters working in different parts of the country, the creative power had vanished from their work. In the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the most notable building activity occurred in the south-western province of Samtskhe. In 1266, its rulers from the house of Jaqeli placed their principality under the direct suzerainty of the Mongols, which enabled them to enjoy relative peace and prosperity. Beka Jaqeli (1285-1306), an energetic prince who managed to stay on good terms with both the Mongols and the Georgian court, built new churches in the two most celebrated monasteries of Samtskhe – Sapara and Zarzma.

Sapara Monastery was founded before the unification of Georgia.¹⁶⁵ The late tenth-century single-nave Church of the Dormition and Chapel of St Stephen still stand in the monastery. There was also a larger church that collapsed before the thirteenth century. Apparently, fragments of its walls were

¹⁶⁵ V. Beridze, *samtskhis khurotmodzgyreba* (Tbilisi, 1955), 25-88.



76. Church of the Transfiguration in Zarzma Monastery. Southern façade

incorporated into the Beka's church dedicated to St Sabbas. It is a cross-domed structure with fine ashlar facing on the façades. The crossarms and drum are less elevated than in the lofty churches of Queen Tamar's age. The rich ornamental decoration is concentrated around the windows and doors, leaving large façade surfaces plain. The same features can be seen in the Church of the Transfiguration in Zarzma, another early Medieval monastery that experienced its heyday under the rule of the Jaqeli house.¹⁶⁶

In central Georgia, late thirteenth-century architecture is represented by the Metekhi Church of the Mother of God standing in Tbilisi, high on the edge of the precipitous cliff above the Kura River.¹⁶⁷ Apparently, the first

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 89-138. For the history of Zarzma Monastery, see also M. Studer-Karlen, "The Monastery of Transfiguration in Zarzma. At the Intersection of Biblical Narration and Liturgical Relevance," in *Convivium Supplementum, 1: Georgia as a Bridge between Cultures*, ed. by M. Studer-Karlen, N. Chitishvili, and T. Kaffenberger (2021), 139-167.

¹⁶⁷ V. Beridze, R. Mepisashvili, L. Rcheulishvili, R. Schmerling, *tbilisi metekhis tadzari* (Tbilisi, 1969).



77. Gergeti Trinity Church. View from the west

church on the site of Metekhi was constructed in the late fifth century, when King Vakhtang Gorgasali decided to make Tbilisi the capital of his kingdom. Metekhi was almost completely destroyed in a fire during the Mongol invasion in 1235. Between 1278 and 1289, King Demetrius II the Self-Sacrificer rebuilt Metekhi on the ruins of the former church, which had an impact on the design of the new church. Its plan, with three semi-circular projecting apses on the eastern façade and a dome resting on four free-standing piers, is unusual for the thirteenth century. Its façades are adorned with carved decoration that has been best preserved on the eastern façade. Its design replicates that of Samtavisi Cathedral, with an ornamental cross above and two slanting decorative squares below the framed window.

The son of Demetrius II, George V the Illustrious (1314-1346), was the last successful king of Georgia. He expelled the Mongols from the country and reunited the Georgian Kingdom. He also paid particular attention to the subjugation of the rebellious mountain regions and even compiled a special code of laws for the highlanders. Within this policy, during his reign, a sizeable church was built in the province of Khevi, on the northern slopes of the Caucasus range.¹⁶⁸ The Gergeti Church of the Holy Trinity is the only Medieval domed church in the eastern Georgian highlands. On close

¹⁶⁸ T. Sanikidze, *gergetis kburotmodzghvruli ansambli* (Tbilisi, 1975).



78. Khobi Church. Southern gallery

examination of this modestly decorated squattish building, one can find little to be excited about, but it looks amazing when seen in its natural setting, against the background of the snow-covered Mount Kazbek.

In the later half of the fourteenth century, Georgia was still one kingdom, but central royal power had been significantly weakened, and the provinces were gaining more autonomy. In about 1390, Prince Vameq Dadiani, the ruler of the Samegrelo province in western Georgia, independently led a victorious campaign in Jiketi region to punish the locals for disloyalty. Along with conquering fortresses and taking hostages, he despoiled a ruined late Antique church and removed a huge collection of Proconnesian marble details to Khobi in Samegrelo. He applied these to the southern annex of the Church of the Mother of God, making it a burial chapel for his family. The set of spolia included columns with capitals, lateral barriers and screens of an ambo, revetment slabs, and other fragments.¹⁶⁹ The fact that Vameq Dadiani decided

¹⁶⁹ W. Djobadze, "Remains of a Byzantine Ambo and Church Furnishings in Hobi," *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 4 (1984), 627-639; D. Khoshtaria, N. Natsvlishvili, and D. Tumanishvili, *mshebeli ostatebi*., 231-235.



79. Sanagire Church. Western façade, detail of brickwork

to take this heavy trophy about 150 kilometres, as well as the special mention of “marble columns and slabs” in the inscription dedicated to his victory, clearly show his appreciation for these architectural details.

It seems that Vameq Dadiani had a passion not only for late Antique marble but also for the Constantinopolitan art of his times. He invited the painter Kyr Manuel Eugenikos from the capital of the Empire and entrusted him with the murals of the cross-domed Church of the Saviour at Tsalenjikha in his principality.¹⁷⁰ According to a variant reading of the damaged Greek inscription in its interior, Eugenikos also acted as a master builder, which may be partly true, as the dome and porch of the twelfth-century church show signs of a fourteenth-century restoration.¹⁷¹

Traces of Byzantine connections can be observed in other regions as well. The Church of St George at Sanagire illustrates artistic and technological encounters in Kakheti. The church has a long, though rather obscure history. In the late Middle Ages, it was believed to have been founded in early Christian times. An eighteenth-century inscription in the narthex refers to

¹⁷⁰ H. Belting, “Le peintre Manuel Eugenikos de Constantinople, en Géorgie,” *Cahiers archéologiques* 28 (1979), 103-114.

¹⁷¹ T. Sanikidze, “tsalenjikhis matskhovris tadzris istoriisatvis,” *sakartvelos sidzveleni* 12 (2008), 169-187.

King Vakhtang Gorgasali (457-502) as the builder of the church. Indeed, this tradition reflects the real history of the site. The presence of reused marble fragments in the interior of the narthex indicates that the first structure - apparently a church - appeared here in late Antiquity. Additional evidence for the early life of the site is provided by a badly destroyed tiny tetraconch located near the extant church. Its central bay is almost completely occupied by a tombstone, which suggests that it was a memorial chapel.¹⁷²

The extant church in Sanagire is a short basilica with just one pair of piers and a tripartite sanctuary with projecting semicircular apses to the east.¹⁷³ The main space is accessible through five entrances, two of which are located in the northern and southern walls opposite each other, while the other three lead from the narthex to the nave and aisles. Judging by the soaring proportions of the church interior, it can be assigned to the period between the late tenth and mid-eleventh centuries while the horseshoe-shaped arches of the doors suggest an even earlier date. However, the façade decoration methods are more reminiscent of late Byzantine brickwork patterns. A frieze of a Π-shaped meander runs above the windows of the southern clerestory. Rhombic and X-shaped decorative motifs formed by upright bricks can be seen in the same clerestory in the walled windows and portions of the wall between them. A black rhombic pattern in the upper part of the western façade is created with the use of sooty bricks against the background of standard reddish brickwork. The outer masonry of the projecting apses, consisting of stones framed with bricks, is a unique example of the application of the Byzantine *opus cloisonné* technique in Georgia. Obviously, all these are the work of builders who were aware of the Byzantine masonry technique and decoration methods.¹⁷⁴

Perhaps the same team of masons contributed to the reconstruction of the Church of St George in the celebrated Bodbe Monastery, the burial place

¹⁷² K. Khimshiashvili, “akhladaghmochenili tetrakonki sanagires samonastro kompleksshi,” *dzveli kbelovneba dgbes* 2 (2011), 111-113.

¹⁷³ G. Chubinashvili, *Arkhitektura Kakhetii*, 123-129.

¹⁷⁴ For numerous thirteenth- and fourteenth-century parallels to Sanagire in and around Ohrid and Arta, see J. S. Čirić, “On the Imitation (Μιμήσις) of Antiquity: Opus Reticulatum at the East façade of St. John Kaneo Church in Ohrid, in *Niš and Byzantium, Seventeenth International Symposium, Niš, 3-5 June, 2018, The Collection Of Scientific Works XVII*, ed. by M. Rakocija (Niš, 2019), 273-274; *idem*, “Brickwork of St. Nicolas Church in Prilep: Reading the Texture of the Rhomb,” in *Fourth International Scientific Symposium “Days of Justinian I,” Skopje, 11-12.11.2016, Special Thematic Stand “The Byzantine Missionary Activity and its Legacy in Europe”* (Skopje, 2017), 151-152.



80. Church of St George in Bodbe Monastery. Western façade, as in 1970

of St Nino, the Apostle of Georgia. According to Georgian sources, the first church there would have been built already by the mid-fourth century. Attempts were made to identify it with a small apsed chapel located to the south of the sanctuary of the extant church, which is believed to contain the tomb of the holy woman, but at present, this assumption is considered implausible.¹⁷⁵ The extant basilica was built in the ninth century to a plan similar to that of Sanagire. In the fourteenth century, the western façade of the church and its narthex received a colourful decoration fully made of dark blue, turquoise blue, green, and white glazed bricks. The pattern of the decoration is an artistic local interpretation of the *opus reticulatum* technique and is remotely evocative of that of the western façade of the Sanagire basilica, though it would be more visually impressive owing to the bright glossy surface of the glazed bricks.

¹⁷⁵ T. Chachkhunashvili, N. Zazunishvili, “bodbis tadzris restavratsiis shedegebi,” *sakartvelos sidzveleni* 7-8 (2005), 64-80.

The western façade of Bodbe Church provided an amazing combination of Byzantine design and local building practice. Glazed bricks and tiles were in use in Georgia at least from the ninth century.¹⁷⁶ Turquoise blue glazed insets in the brickwork served to create contrasting colour accents. These are still visible in the dome and gables of Timotesubani Church built around 1200. Yet none of the Georgian churches except for Bodbe featured a full glazed-brick façade.¹⁷⁷ Such a generous application of glazed bricks can be explained by the fact that Bodbe Monastery had its own kiln for burning construction ceramics, and could produce appropriate material in large quantities immediately on site.¹⁷⁸

The Late Middle Ages

Between 1386 and 1403, Georgia was ravaged by eight disastrous invasions of Tamerlane that led to the devastation of the country and the destruction of cities and monasteries. Apparently, Georgia suffered also from Tamerlane's practice of relocating skilled craftsmen, including master builders and masons, from the invaded countries to his capital in Samarqand. The long-term economic and cultural effects of that action were profound, since the country lost not just masters, but mentors who were needed to transfer architectural and building knowledge to the next generations.

King Alexander I (1412-1442) inherited a heavy legacy. Aiming at bringing order back to his country, he undertook several legal, political and economic steps. Restoration of destroyed churches and monasteries was among the king's priorities, and he paid particular attention to the restoration of the badly damaged Svetitskhoveli Cathedral. For this purpose, he introduced a special tax which was repealed only after the cathedral was rebuilt.

¹⁷⁶ D. Khoshtaria, N. Natsvlishvili, D. Tumanishvili, *mshenebeli ostatebi*., 189-192, 216-217.

¹⁷⁷ In the South Caucasus, a more or less close compositional parallel to the design of the western façade of Bodbe can be seen in the Dvin Gate (also called the Checkered Gate) in Ani, although the material here is different. The gate dates from the early thirteenth century. See T. Jalaghania, "Defence and Adornment: the System of Fortification of Ani," in *Ani at the Crossroads, International Conference, 17-18 November, 2017*, ed. by Z. Skhirtladze, (Tbilisi, 2019), 221, 223-224.

¹⁷⁸ Therefore, it is all the more offensive that this unique decoration was completely removed and destroyed for inexplicable reasons during restoration works in Bodbe in the 1980s.



81. Akhali Shuamta Church. Exterior

In the 1460s, the united kingdom of Georgia disintegrated into several kingdoms and principalities. After the Fall of Constantinople in 1453, Georgia became isolated from the Christian world and deprived of Western support. From the sixteenth century, the country was divided by neighbouring great powers into spheres of influence. The Ottomans established a permanent military presence in the west, and the Iranian Safavids did the same in

the east. South-West Georgia was directly included in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷⁹ However, Georgians maintained the Christian faith and the Church institution. Church building remained uninterrupted in Georgia. Even the Islamised members of the royal family, such as Rostom, appointed by the Safavids as the Governor of Kartli in 1633, acted as sponsors and supporters of church building. Rostom's Christian wife, Queen Mariam, is considered the most prominent female patron in late Medieval Georgia, having contributed to the restoration of a number of churches, including the ruined cathedrals of Bolnisi, Ruisi, and Urbnisi.¹⁸⁰

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as a result of the political and cultural penetration of eastern Georgia by Safavid Iran, forms and motifs adopted from Iranian architecture appeared not only in palaces, baths, and caravanserais, but also in church buildings. Churches at Akhali Shuamta, Gremi, Chikaani, and Shikhiani commissioned by the King of Kakheti Levan (1520-1574), his wife Queen Tinatin, and their son King Alexander (1574-1605), are built on the inscribed cross plan that had become standard for Georgian domed churches since the mid-eleventh century; however, their façades, decorated with slight rectangular and arched recesses, show the obvious influence of Safavid architecture.¹⁸¹ In the interiors of the churches, this influence is revealed in blunt pointed arches and triangular decorative squinches, which resemble muqarnas.

Ananuri Castle, the residence of the Dukes of Aragvi, illustrates a new concept of palatial architecture formed in the turbulent late Middle Ages.¹⁸² Surrounded with a high circuit wall, it looks like a fortress rather than a manor house. In 1743, the castle became a royal property, and from then onwards served as a shelter to the kings of Kartl-Kakheti (eastern Georgia) in times of unrest and invasions. Along with the palace (now ruined) and towers, the castle complex includes two cross-domed churches. The Church of the Saviour, dating from the early seventeenth century, is a humble brick and stone

¹⁷⁹ The Islamised princely family of Jaqeli was made a local dynasty of the pashas of Akhaltsikhe. On their construction agency, see N. Natsvlishvili, "One town, Two Empires: Urban Planning in Late Medieval and Modern Axalc'ixe," *Historia Urbana*, vol. XXVI (2018), 143-147.

¹⁸⁰ N. Natsvlishvili, "The Queen Mariam Dadiani and Female Architectural Patronage in Late Medieval Georgia," Paper in the workshop *Staging the Ruler's Body in Medieval Cultures: a Comparative Perspective*, University of Fribourg, 23-24 November, 2020.

¹⁸¹ G. Chubinashvili, *Voprosy istorii iskusstva*, vol. 1, 316-320.

¹⁸² V. Beridze, XVI-XVIII *saukunebis kartuli saeklesio khurotmodzghvreb*a (Tbilisi, 1994), 48-68; E. Kvachatadze, M. Janjalia, *Ananuri* (Tbilisi, 2012).



82. Ananuri. General view of castle, with churches of the Saviour on the left and of the Mother of God on the right

construction. The Church of the Mother of God, laid in 1689, is faced with ashlar blocks and has a rich exterior decoration, including a huge ornate cross flanked with depictions of vines, humans, and animals on the southern façade.

The decline of engineering and technological knowledge was particularly obvious in western Georgia. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for the construction of domed churches there, master builders were usually invited from eastern Georgia. The most important example is Barakoni Church in Racha province, built in 1753 by Avtandil Shulavreli, a mason from Kartli, under the patronage of the wealthy local duke Rostom Eristavi.¹⁸³

The Aftermath

Because of a peculiar geopolitical position and historical circumstances, the Middle Ages in Georgia lasted longer than in Europe. The eighteenth century was a transitional period from the Middle Ages to early Modernity. The transition process went slowly, accompanied as it was by regular wars

¹⁸³ V. Beridze, *XVI-XVIII saukuneebis kartuli.*, 194-204.

with powerful neighbours. By the end of the century, Georgia once again found itself on the verge of a political crisis and demographic disaster. The Russian Empire, called to help by Georgian kings, took advantage of this situation. In 1801, Russian troops quartered in Tbilisi gathered the people of the city into the churches and forced them to swear allegiance to the emperor; the Kingdom of Kartl-Kakheti (eastern Georgia) was abolished and became an imperial province governed by a Russian general; the royal family of Bagrationi was deported from the country. The Kingdom of Imereti (western Georgia) was conquered and annexed to the Russian Empire in 1810. Thus, the centuries-old Georgian statehood came to an end.

Incorporation into the Russian Empire meant dramatic changes in all spheres, including architecture. Construction became an activity managed and regulated by the Russian authorities. In the early half of the nineteenth century, they paid little attention to church building, being instead busy developing administrative and military infrastructure. As a rule, churches constructed in that period followed late Medieval local traditions, both in design and building technique. From the 1850s, the Russian authorities started promoting the Byzantine and Russian Revival styles in Georgia, which symbolised Russian domination of the conquered country and served to consolidate the imperial identity. Simultaneously, the Georgian Revival style was developed that drew inspiration from Medieval Georgian church architecture. From the 1900s, it met with rapidly increasing approval among Georgian intellectuals. The most important example of Georgian Revivalism, the Kashveti Church of St George in Tbilisi (completed in 1910), is a loose copy of the well-known eleventh-century Samtavisi Cathedral.

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