CULTURAL INTERACTIONS IN THE MEDIEVAL SUBCAUCASIAN REGION:
HISTORIOGRAPHICAL AND ART-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES VOL. II

APPROACHES TO SACRED SPACE(S) IN MEDIEVAL SUBCAUCASIAN CULTURES

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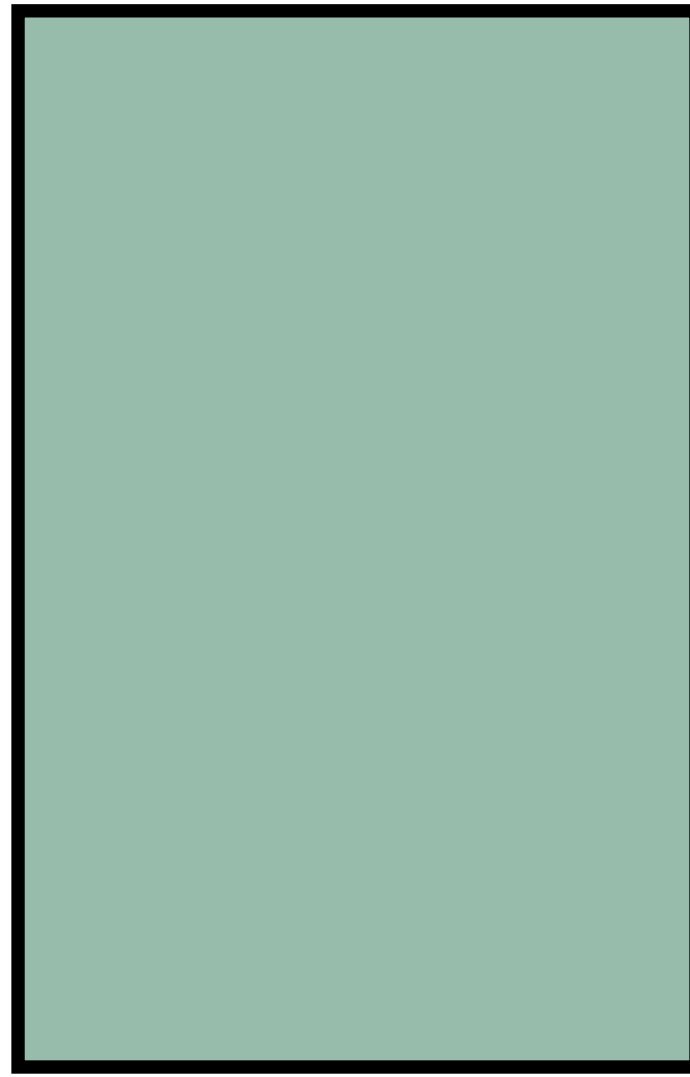

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PREFACE

The Fribourg Team[1]

This volume is the outcome of a three-years research work developed in the frame of the international project *Cultural Interactions in the Medieval Subcaucasian Region: Historiographical and Art-Historical Perspectives*, co-financed by the Swiss National Research Foundation (SNSF) and the Czech Science Foundation.[2] The latter was made possible by the constant collaboration of the two pillars on which it had been built. On the one side, the research group at the Masaryk University of Brno (Czech Republic), led by Prof. Ivan Foletti, has been committed to the investigation of the complex dynamics whereby the arts of Subcaucasian countries were construed in the historiographical debate. On the other hand, the team coordinated at Fribourg University (Switzerland) by Prof. Michele Bacci has been investigating the multiple ways in which the different groups living in the area interacted not only in their artistic and architectural manifestations, but also in the conceptualization of their specific relation to living spaces, communal shared heritages, and the human as well as the "more than human" spheres.

A major focus was placed on the investigation of sacred spaces, since this topic had the potential to raise crucial questions not only as to how cultures define the boundaries between time and eternity, or humanity and divinity, but also as to the extent to which their construction of cultural distinctiveness combines with the pursuit of a trans-denominational, trans-linguistic, and sometimes even trans-religious sense of belonging. The Fribourg team combined the expertise of scholars standing out for their different training, fields of investigation, methodologies, and linguistic skills. Together, the team members have been committed to exploit their skills in architectural history, Byzantine iconography, Armenian culture, Georgian arts, pilgrimage literature, and gender studies in the aim to have a clearer picture of the multiple ways in which the sacred, in its manifold conceptualizations, has been given a spatial, visual, and experiential dimension in premodern Subcaucasian cultures. The results of this research work are gathered and presented in this book, which comes to light after months of hard work and commitment. Special thanks from the whole team go to Thomas Kaffenberger, who took on most of the editorial work, and to Natalia Chitishvili, who was responsible for drafting the final index.

1 Michele Bacci, Natalia Chitishvili, Gohar Grigoryan, Thomas Kaffenberger, Manuela Studer-Karlen, Vesna Šćepanović.

2 Swiss National Research Foundation, project no. 100011L_197295, coordinated by Michele Bacci, in the frame of a Lead Agency collaboration between the Chair of Medieval Art at the University of Fribourg and the Centre of Early Medieval Studies at the Masaryk University of Brno, directed by Prof. Ivan Foletti.

In the first chapter, Michele Bacci offers a comparative analysis of the different strategies whereby the various human groups settled on both sides of the Caucasus between Antiquity and the later Middle Ages gave shape to their relationship with the divine sphere in spatial terms. A special emphasis is laid on the conceptual tension between open-sky and built environments, which culminates with the privileged role attributed to the latter after the introduction of Christianity. Furthermore, the text investigates the different perspectives of nomadic and sedentary peoples, considers the extent to which the impact of Biblical theorizations of sacred space had an impact on both, and shows how the gradation of holiness characterizing the Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple was imaginatively reinterpreted by Khazars converted to Judaism, non-Chalcedonian Armenians, and Byzantine-rite Georgians. At the same time, the text points out the interrelatedness of congregational and locative ways of experiencing the sacred and investigates the dynamics whereby site-bound cult-phenomena were constructed and promoted throughout the area in the Medieval period and beyond.

The second chapter, by Natalia Chitishvili, analyses the gendered distribution of spaces in a number of longitudinal-planned churches of early Christian Iberia. Relying on a wide spectrum of *comparanda* from Syria, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, and Armenia, it lays emphasis on the multiple ways in which the complex relationship between interiors and exteriors, and the embodied effort to locate the physical threshold separating those in a state of impurity from the congregation allowed to penetrate sacred spaces, came to be negotiated.

The analysis of intermediary, "liminal" spaces is also at the core of Gohar Grigoryan's essay, which focuses on the Armenian *gawit'* as an intermediary environment between the church exterior and the *stricto sensu* sacred space. This hitherto scarcely investigated structure is here seen from the viewpoint of its beholders and attendants: the text points out to what extent it was experienced as a space associated with burial practices and liturgically orchestrated acts of repentance, often emphasized by the display of imagery related to the perspective of the soul's salvation.

In the fourth chapter, by Thomas Kaffenberger, the monastic complex of Rk'oni is proposed as an exemplary case-study for the reconstruction of the complex dynamics that, in a *longue durée* perspective, led to the shaping of a sacred topography. It shows how the monastery's central building, the church of the Virgin Mary, came gradually to be integrated with annexes, burial chapels, and commemorative structures, and later transformed into the focal point of a broader

network of connected holy sites that included, most notably, a venerated tree and a hill marked on its top by a tower-like building evocative of a saintly stylite's cell.

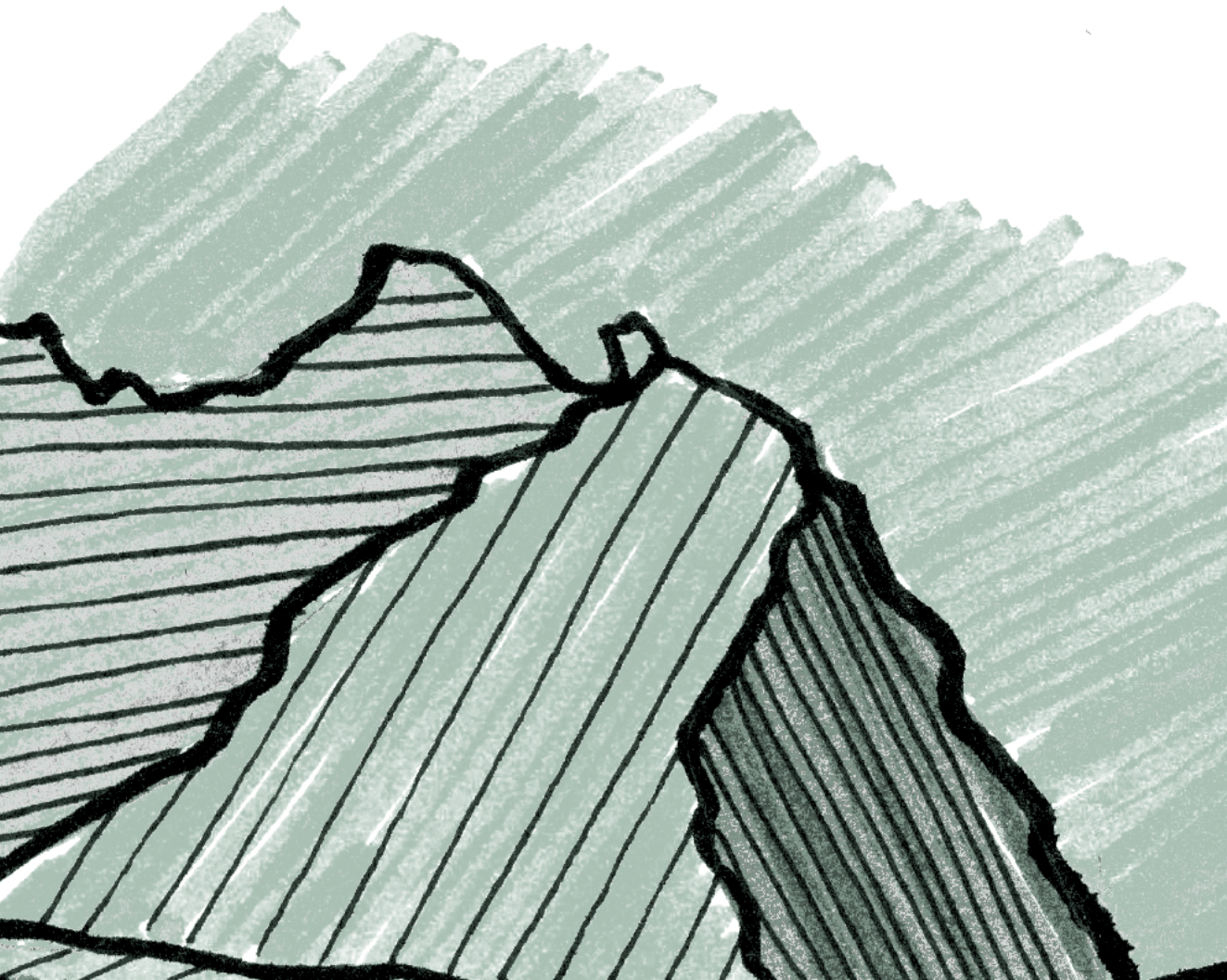
A diachronic approach is also proposed in the fifth chapter, by Ivan Foletti and Margarita Khakhanova. In an attempt to overcome the limits of a historiographical debate that tended to relegate the Sioni church in At'eni to the subordinated, derivative role of a copy of Mtskheta's Jvari church, the text proposes a deeper investigation of the monument in its contextual (spatial, environmental, cultural, and religious) dimensions and its changing functions over time. In particular, it emphasizes the important role of the building as a focus for devotional practices and reconstructs the kinetic network of pilgrimage roads it was associated with. This leads to an original interpretation of the inscriptions and images displayed on its external walls.

The last chapter, by Manuela Studer-Karlen, encourages the reader to enter the sacred space and to understand its painted decoration as one of the ways in which the experience of the divine sphere was constructed *visually*. The pictorial program of the church of the Saviour of Tsalenjikha (1384–1396), which, being the work of the Constantinopolitan painter Manuel Evgenikos, has hitherto been understood as a reflection of Byzantine Palaiologan conceptions of church decorum, is here reconsidered in the context of Georgian liturgical and devotional habits. In particular, the text points out how the display of iconic solutions, constructed in such a way as to act as supports for intense and prolonged inspection, in specific church parts could suit the needs of both individuals and groups for both ritually mediated and more direct forms of interaction with the divine.

Overall, this work is meant as an invitation to look at Subcaucasian sacred spaces from the viewpoint of their original users and beholders. If the other tome of our two-volume book proposes a state of the art on the historiographical debate on the arts of Armenia and Georgia and deconstructs its most deeply rooted stereotypes, this collection of texts aims to outline avenues for future research in a field of inquiry whose importance for our general understanding of medieval and premodern cultures can no longer be downplayed.

ON THE SPATIALIZATION OF THE SACRED IN CAUCASIAN CULTURES

Michele Bacci



THE NOMADIC WORLD AND THE DILEMMA OF GOD'S PLACEDNESS

In 1220, after fifteen days of siege, the town of Bukhara (present-day Uzbekistan) capitulated to the Mongolian army guided by Genghis Khan. After ravaging other areas, the *khagan* came back to the city and ordered its inhabitants to send him some of their sages, since he wanted to know more about Islam. A *qadi* named Ashraf and a preacher were entrusted with satisfying the conqueror's curiosity: when they explained that being a Muslim basically meant believing in only one God, praying to Him five times a day, and fasting during the day for one month, their interlocutor found these to be acceptable customs. His reaction was far less positive as he was informed about the key-role played in that tradition by the *hajj*:

> "But as they said that God had a temple in a place known as Mecca, where all Muslims who have the (economic) means go on pilgrimage, Genghis Khan refused this argument and said: 'The whole universe is the house of God, what's the point of locating a specific place to go to?'".[1]

Even if it is impossible to ascertain to what extent this story told in the seventeenth century by the khan of Khiva Abu 'l-Ghazi Bahadur may be reflective of traditions going back to Genghis Khan's times, it is certainly not at odds with the nomadic worldview, which identified the divine with the amplitude of heaven (*Tengri*) and was accustomed to access it through the interpretation of its visual and sensorial signs mediated by the shamans' embodied experience. What came closer to a form of religious materiality in such cultures was the worship-worthiness attributed to natural elements that, in their vertical prominence, clashed with the flat, endless expanse of the steppe: as remarked by the eleventh century scholar Mahmud al-Kashgari, "the Turks give the name Tengri to everything that is big to the eye, like, e.g., a big tree".[2] The same is even truer with mountains, which were viewed as material counterparts to prayers and sacrifices, i.e., as special places where the relationship of individuals and groups with the "more than human" could be anchored: Genghis himself, according to the *Secret history of the Mongols*, honoured the Burkhan-Kaldun mountain in the Kentei massif in Mongolia, as a divine protector of his tribe, worthy of prayers and daily rituals.[3]

The nomadic lifestyle, and the religious worldview associated with it, dominated the wide geographic space known as the "steppe corridor", which connected, almost without interruption, the Mongolian

1 Abu 'l-Ghazi Bahadur Khan 1665 [Desmaisons 1871–1874], vol. I (text), p. 130, vol. II (translation), p. 139.

2 Mahmud al-Kashgari [Atalay 1938–1943], vol. III, p. 377.

3 *Secret History of the Mongols* [Even/Pop 1994], chaps 1 and 103, pp. 41, 70–71. On the religious worldview of Turkic and Mongolian peoples, see the overview in Roux 1984.

pastureland to the Hungarian *puszta*. In the view of the sedentary peoples of Western Asia, such a realm inhabited by fearsome, warlike, and relentlessly moving horsemen was separated from the urban and agricultural societies of the southern part of the world by a natural barrier known as "Caucasus" or "Mount Qāf", extending from the Black Sea to the Hindu Kush and described as a belt, or spine marking the borders of the earth.[4] In both Byzantine and Arabic traditions, this range, dominated by peaks of over 5000 m like Elbruz (5642 m) or Kazbek (5047 m) was described as an insurmountable boundary wall whose main passes – the Darial Gorge and the passage of Derbend (Persian *darband*, lit. "door in the barrier") – were said to have been sealed by Alexander the Great with monumental iron gates, in the aim to keep out the barbarian hordes of Gog and Magog.[5]

Nevertheless, the reputation of the Great Caucasus as an impenetrable border was disproven on several occasions. In the course of time, different nomadic peoples, including Scythians, Sarmatians, Alans, Huns, Bulgars, Khazars, Kipchaks, and Mongols, settled in the Pontic-Caspian steppe and established relations with the peoples living in the surrounding areas, including those located beyond the mountains. Even if several efforts were made to assimilate these groups by means of missionary activities and religious conversions, they often proved unable to exert a more than superficial impact: some authors remarked, e.g., that the adoption of Christianity by the rulers did not imply that their subjects felt obliged to renounce their old "pagan" habits.[6] Undoubtedly, the religious issue became more crucial when nomads gave shape to major political and economic powers: in that case, as in the famous aphorism attributed to Great Khan Ögödei's counsellor Yelü Chucai,[7] leaders quickly understood that large countries could be conquered, but certainly not ruled on horseback.

This proves particularly true with the Khazars, whose khaganate lasted from the mid-sixth through the tenth century and quickly became a major commercial intermediary between the Muslim world, the Byzantine empire, the Varangian trade centres along the Volga and Dnepr rivers, and the northern routes of Central Asia. Although they were allied with the court of Constantinople in an anti-Arab function, the khagans refrained from adopting Christianity as a state religion. Rather, their orientation toward Judaism, first witnessed by the Frankish monk Druthmar of Aquitaine in 864, has been interpreted as a strategy to reassert their political and cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis both Byzantium and the Caliphate, and it has been disputed whether this resulted in any large-scale conversions: it seems more likely that this phenomenon remained restricted to

4 Prior 2009.

5 On the "Iron Gates" or "Caspian Gates", their shifting location and associated traditions see esp. Anderson 1928; Anderson 1932; Meserve 1982, pp. 77–82.

6 In ca. 903, Ibn Rusteh remarked that the king of the Alans, despite being Christian, ruled over a people of idol-worshippers: cf. Kouznetsov/Lebedynsky 1999, pp. 29–30.

7 Khazanov 2015, p. 379.

military élites, who otherwise fostered a rather tolerant approach in religious matters.[8]

According to some narratives, the khagans' decision was prompted by a miraculous sign and their faith came to be focused on a very distinctive "holy place". Unlike diaspora Jews who had been forced to thoroughly renegotiate their relation to old Israelite ritual habits after the final destruction of the Jerusalem Temple under Hadrian in 135 CE., the Khazars promoted a form of religious materiality that sought to re-establish the experience of "divine presence" (*shekinah*) described in the book of *Exodus*. The capture of Ardabīl, in the Iranian Azerbaidjan, during the second Khazar-Arab war in 730, was described, and justified, as the outcome of a divinely guided expedition whose basic aim was to provide gold and silver for the construction of a new House of God. As witnessed by the tenth century *Reply of King Joseph to Ḥisday b. Shaphrut of Cordoba,* an angel appeared to the khagan and offered him divine protection and victory against all enemies. The Lord had decided to establish a new Covenant with an elected people, among whom He wished to dwell within a terrestrial abode. His celestial messenger had to declare that, contrary to the nomads' worldview, it was possible for Him to be "more" present in a specific place: "Ay my son", said the angel, "the heavens and earth cannot contain Me. Yet, build a House for My Name so that I can inhabit it".[9]

The expedition against Ardabīl was a triumph, and the ruler came back with precious materials in a quantity sufficient to build the holy dwelling and decorate it with "the Ark, and the Menorah, and the Table, and the Altars, and the Holy Vessels".[10] As inferred by the Jewish writer Judah Halevy (1075–1141) in his *Kuzari* (ca 1120–1140), this House of God, which was constantly kept with the Khazar rulers, was not a built structure, but rather "a tabernacle in the shape of the one built by Moses".[11] It was rather evident that its components corresponded to the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting fashioned on Sinai according to God's instructions (Exodus 25–30), rather than to the décors of either the large building erected by Solomon on the Ophel hill or its post-exilic reconstructions: the structure did not house any of the more monumental objects, such as the "bronze sea" or the Jachin and Boaz columns, and stood out for including the Ark, the gold-covered chest housing the tablets of the Law and viewed as the *locus* of God's presence, whose disappearance from the Lord's dwelling in Jerusalem was lamented by Prophet Jeremiah (3:16). Furthermore, its interior was lit by only one lampstand, as described in Exodus 25:31–40, instead of the ten *menorot* mentioned in 1 Kings (7:48–49).

8 Pritsak 1978. Cf. also Dunlop 1967.
9 See the translation of the text in Shapira 2015, p. 324.
10 *Ibidem*, p. 325.
11 Translation of the passage in Pritsak 1978, p. 271.

It can be assumed that the choice to erect a new Tabernacle (Hebr. *mishkan*, "residence") proved to be particularly attractive for a nomadic or semi-nomadic people who had been forced to leave their inner Asian pastures and move westwards with their movable tents **[1]** until they won possession of the lands to the north of the Great Caucasus, while expelling or subjugating the tribes that had previously settled there. In many respects, they could easily interpret their historical vicissitudes as indicative of a divine design like the one that had led the Jewish people from slavery and misery to richness and dominance. The setting of the Ark in the royal shrine materialized the khagans' wish to establish a new Covenant, that was to be understood as a privileged relationship between them and God. Furthermore, the portable Tent of Meeting easily suited their habits, since it enabled an experience of the divine sphere that was not site-bound and could therefore follow the rulers' displacements, in much the same way as, in the thirteenth century, yurts used for Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist rites were included in the movable camps of Mongol rulers.[12]

It is also possible that, in so doing, the Khazar rulers conformed to habits widespread in the neighbouring South Caucasian kingdoms, where movable cultic structures, mounted on carts, are known to have followed the rulers in their military campaigns. A "tent-church" was present in the camp of Arshak II of Armenia (probably 338/339–368/369), whereas the king of Albania Vach'agan III (ca. 485–523) owned a large structure whose canvas walls delimited three different rooms: a larger space where the army heard mass, a nave reserved for the court, and a pavilion-like *bema* with an altar housing the relics of Prophet Zachariah and the holy martyr Pantaleon.[13] In much the same way, the new, movable Tabernacle enabled the lord of the North Caucasian steppes to carry God's presence with him in his war expeditions, and profit from a privileged, uninterrupted interchange with his divine protector. Similar, *palladium*-like functions were attributed to its Biblical archetype, which had led the way before the Israelites in their conquest of the land of Canaan.[14]

THE SHIFT FROM PORTABLE TO SITE-BOUND SANCTITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Unlike the Khazar *khagans*, some modern Bible scholars interpreted the description of the Tabernacle in Exodus 25–30 as a narrative strategy, fostered by "Deuteronomist" authors from the post-exilic period, that retrojected the architectural model of the Jerusalem sacred area into the mythical times preceding the Israelites' sedentarization: such an approach has been met with increasing criticism, as it basically

12 Prazniak 2019, p. 60.
13 On both tent-churches cf. Mahé 2013, p. 123.
14 For a detailed analysis of the scriptural interpretations of the Ark and the Tabernacle, including their warlike uses, cf. Deuk-il Shin 2012.

[1] Traditional nomadic yurt, Ethnographic Museum, Saint Petersburg

overlooked such factors as the incongruences of the two structures in terms of dimensions, functions, and visual features.[15] On the one hand, the historical existence of an Israelite "tent-shrine" cannot be easily dismissed, since similar structures are known to have existed in different ancient Eastern societies.[16] On the other hand, it can be surmised that the strictly graded access of individuals to the divine sphere and the hierarchical arrangement of spaces described in the Bible could be more efficaciously achieved within a stone structure than in a portable tent.

Nevertheless, it must be stressed that, despite their differences, the Tabernacle and the Temple did share one basic feature, i.e., their being structured in such a way as to juxtapose, and associate, two different ways of experiencing the divine sphere. Both staged the contrast of open-sky versus built environments, with courtyards reserved for the lay people and the performance of sacrifices, and an inner space that only Levites could penetrate. The latter was divided into an inner "sanctum" (*hekhal*) and an innermost "sancta sanctorum" (*debir*), marked by different gradations of holiness. The interiors of both the Tent of Meeting and the majestic building erected by Solomon consisted in a wider space reserved for the performance of priestly rituals and a smaller, restricted room, constantly concealed by the *parokhet* veil,

15 See the overview of scholarship by Crawford 2011. Cf. also Zevit 1992.

16 Cross 1998, pp. 84–95; Kitchen 1993; Homan 2002; Hess 2007, pp. 202–203.

which was regarded as the place privileged by God for his manifestations in the earthly dimension. In their combination, they gave shape to a relational environment where human beings interacted with their heavenly protector in much the same way as courtiers honoured and served their ruler in his own presence.

Unlike the holy spot at Bethel (Genesis 28) or the Burning Bush on Sinai (Exodus 3), which marked the spots on the earthly surface where a divine revelation had breached the boundaries of human history, the Tabernacle enabled the wandering Israelites to give a spatial dimension to their constant dialogue with their protector YHWH wherever they decided to camp. After the settling in the land of Canaan, the structure was permanently installed at Shiloh (Joshua 28:1), and later, in the times of King David, it was mounted on Jerusalem's Ophel hill (1 Chronicles 15). Following the sedentarization of the nomadic tribes, which culminated with the establishment of the monarchy, the tent-shrine was attributed a permanent location, thus paving the way for its substitution with a built Temple under Solomon. The *kavod* (God's glory) came then to be experienced in its strict association not only with a space that was instrumental to establishing a ritual, prophetic, and oracular communication with the divine, but also with a precise geographic location. The House of the Lord could no longer be translocated: it was firmly inscribed in the city that the kings of Israel had chosen as their capital, in the immediacy of their palatial residence. In the course of time, this inscription came to be perceived as an exclusive association of the one God with one specific site, thus making any sacrifices offered in alternative locations illegitimate.[17]

The Biblical narrative indicates that the "mono-cultic" model of Solomon's Temple was far from being universally accepted, especially in the earliest times. Its identification as YHWH's exclusive dwelling on earth was not only opposed by the Samaritans, who located it on Mount Gerizim, but was also viewed as problematic by part of the people who still preferred, at least under some special circumstances, to offer sacrifices on the major heights. As eye-catching elements of landscapes, whose vertical elevation could easily be regarded as a metaphorical indicator of mankind's wish for contact with the heavenly sphere, mountains were often used as foci of communal worship in many ancient cultures. In Achaemenid Iran, most cultic activities took place in the open, and especially on mountain tops, as remarked by Herodotus (1:131).[18] In the Subcaucasian area, the perception of peaks as dwellings of supernatural beings dated back to prehistorical times: most of the megalithic monuments known as *vishaps* were erected in the mountain areas of Armenia, usually within groves or near water

17 For an excellent introduction to such topics, cf. Keel 2007.
18 Canepa 2018, pp. 155–156.

springs.[19] In the times of Persian rule, as Mazdeism emerged as the country's main form of worship, its most prominent mountains were invested with so many religious associations that even nine days of the month were named after them.[20] After the Christianization of Iberia, earlier Kartvelian cults were compared to the rituals performed on heights by heterodox Israelites:

> "Instead of Him, who sits in the cherub's chariot, our fathers worshipped the high mountains, Gebela and Gerizim, and upon them was neither God nor Moses nor any sign of them, but only soulless stone idols".[21]

If an image erected in an open-air context worked as cultic focus by visualizing the deity's association with the site, it was basically perceived of as a synecdochical signifier of a "more than human" status attributed to the heights as such. Therefore, according to the parts of the *Life of Saint Nino* that are believed to rely on earlier traditions, the destruction of idols, the erection of crosses, and the construction of churches were not sufficient to fully eradicate heathen worship in the royal town of Mtskheta: this eventually happened as the local landscape was thoroughly altered by the collapse of the two mountains formerly reserved for sacrifices. The latter ceased to act as barriers separating the Aragvi and Mt'k'vari rivers, which immediately began to flow into each other.[22]

There is some evidence that open-air sanctuaries were also frequent in pre-Christian Armenia, and that mountains were commonly attributed supernatural qualities. The stylised image of one or two peaks, flown over by an eagle, appears on some Artacid coins: the reference could be to the two-peaked Mount Masis **[2]**, whose distinctive status was traced back to the legend of Artawazd, the hero imprisoned by evil spirits in a cave located on its slopes. Sometimes in the early Middle Ages, probably on account of its geographic closeness to the holy city of Vagharshapat, it came to be identified with Mount Ararat, the place where Noah's ark had landed after the flood, and from where he and his family had later descended to the location known as Nakhijevan, "the First Descent". Earlier on, the site of the Patriarch's disembarkation, described in the Bible as either "the mountains" (Genesis 8:3–4) or "the land of Ararat" (Isaiah 37:38) had been situated in the district of Gordyene, whereas other sources spoke of a mysterious Lubar or Baris.[23]

Wherever it may have been located, Mount Ararat, where Noah had erected an altar to God, came to be regarded by Jewish authors as the archetypal cultic site in a concatenation of holy mountains that, via

19 See the survey in Petrosyan/Bobokyan 2015.
20 Russell 1987, p. 221.
21 *Life of Saint Nino* [Lerner 2004], p. 168.
22 *Ibidem*, p. 177. On the text, whose core may date back to the fourth century, cf. *Ibidem*, p. 76.
23 Garibian 2021; Stone/Topchyan 2022, pp. 1–18.

Sinai, culminated with the Temple Mount. On its turn, the latter came to be identified with the site of Isaac's binding (*'aqedah*), which was described simply as the "land of Moriah" in the book of Genesis (22:2). The symbolization of the worship-place of the one God in David's city as a mountain entailed the transformation of the scenario of Abraham's sacrifice from a generic geographic indication into a specific location. In this way, the characterization of the Temple as a *locus sanctus* was strongly emphasized: the traditions coalescing around it claimed that it stood on the very spot where multiple divine revelations had taken place, from the *vox Dei* that had stopped the Patriarch's hand to the apparition of the angel of death on Araunah's threshing floor (1 Chronicles 21:15) and, eventually, the installation of the Ark into a new tent erected on the top of Zion (2 Samuel 6:17; 1 Chronicles 16:1).[24] By analogy with the House of God, even Mount Ararat, being the latter's primeval anticipation, needed to be perceived as corresponding to one single mountain, rather than working as a generic reference to the region (the old "land of Urartu") as a whole.[25] Unsurprisingly, later Islamic traditions made attempts to associate Ararat, identified with Mount Judi according to the Qur'an (11:44), with the Noble Shrine of Mecca, where the "mountain" of Ka'ba was said to have been made of up to five glorious mountains, including the one on which Noah's ark came to rest.[26]

[2] (previous page) View of Mount Masis, identified with the Biblical Ararat

DIVINE DWELLINGS

With the construction of the Temple, the *kavod* came to be anchored to a specific spot on the earthly surface, corresponding to a height already invested with religious associations. Like the Tabernacle, the new built structure enabled the community to perform sacrifices in front of God's dwelling, which was permanently located in a distinctive place. The Biblical narratives make clear that, at an early stage, this novelty did not prevent the Israelites from venerating the Lord, and occasionally also other deities, in different places. The centuries-old process that marked the shift from the pursuit of a distinctive interaction with YHWH to a henotheist or monolatrist and eventually monotheistic worship was paralleled by an increasing perception of the structure reserved for the community's encounter with God as an earthly, divine abode, invested with distinctive attributes of sanctity. In principle, the relational function attributed to the Temple was not dissimilar from the one found in ancient Near Eastern and later Hellenistic cult-spaces: the latter were also conceived of as divine dwellings and were likely accessible only to priests during rituals. Nevertheless, contact with each of the many gods of Antiquity

24 Kalimi 1990.
25 Stone/Topchyan 2022, p. 2.
26 Wessels 2020, p. 44.

could be established in a multiplicity of temples consecrated to them, where divine presence was materialized in and through cultic images kept in the inner cell. For the Israelites, the exclusive worship of the one God gradually led to the belief that all relationship with the Lord may exclusively take place, through the mediation of the Levites, in one site deemed to be overwhelmingly imbued with supernatural qualities, and deprived of any figural focus: worshippers did not need visual surrogates of their heavenly protector, since they knew that, albeit hidden in the innermost chamber of his terrestrial residence, he could be approached in only one privileged place in this world.[27]

As Jewish exegetes often emphasized, already the Tabernacle, despite its being portable and movable, was characterized by the shifting tension between its use as a sacred space, intended for the performance of ritual activities, and its simultaneous perception as a holy site, i.e., a material spot in which a divine presence, or energy, was deemed to be at least temporarily inscribed.[28] Once the *shekinah* was attributed a permanent and exclusive location in Jerusalem, this tension became even more evident and was monumentally transcribed in the hierarchical structuring of the architectural frame of the Temple, where prayers and sacrifices were meant to be held in front of the inner chamber where the Lord was said to be hidden. The Holy of Holies, which could be entered by the High Priest only on the yearly Yom Kippur feast, was the visually and sensorially inaccessible focal point of the whole sacred area: before and around it, space was generated through the rituals performed by the priests in the sanctum and the offerings and sacrifices that took place in the external courts. The entire environment around the House of God was deemed to be to some degree sanctified: the many lush, fruit-laden trees in the open spaces of the sacred area were regarded as owing their beauty to their proximity to the holy site (cf. Psalms 52:10; 80:11; 92:13–14; 104:16).

The gradation of holiness implied by this structuring of spaces corresponded to a kinetic approach from an open to a built environment that culminated in front of a material focus, whose sight and sensorial apprehension was taboo, and could be achieved only by consecrated people, since it relied on a basically asymmetrical and hierarchical experience of the divine dimension, based on the opposition between purity and impurity. Accordingly, women, regarded in the Bible as less "pure", stopped in the first open court, whereas lay men were allowed to the following court of Israel and priests to the one located before the vestibule of the Temple and marked with the altar of burnt offerings and the sea of bronze. Similar restrictions were normative in many other religious traditions of the ancient Near East, including

27 Good surveys of the history of the Temple Mount are provided by Eliav 2005 and Grabar/Kedar 2009.

28 See, e.g., Shapiro 2004, p. 66.

Babylon and Elam.[29] Visually, the perception of increasing holiness was encouraged by the display of increasingly precious, and awe-inspiring, decorations.[30]

In Western Asian cultures, the use of built environments consisting in sequences of decreasingly accessible sacred spaces was widespread, but not universally accepted. In the Iranian context, open-air sacred precincts with towers and fire-altars were preferred to temples until the Seleucid period.[31] In the Persianate Subcaucasian region, the scant archaeological evidence discovered until our days indicates a relatively late introduction of covered religious structures: the large complex discovered at Dedoplis Mindori in Shida Kartli and deemed to date from the late second or first century BCE, includes two similarly structured buildings, with an *iwan*, or portico, preceding a square, four-columned, and originally domed *cella* that housed the central altar, which was made invisible to the non-officiants by a wall with a small side entrance.[32] It has been assumed that similar structures may have existed also in Armenia, even if the available archaeological evidence is scant.[33] Under the Arsacids, the main "dwelling of the Gods" (*Bagawan*), associated with the royal family, was located in an open-air area on the slopes of Mount Npat.[34] According to the fifth century historian Agat'angełos, the pagan cult-places destroyed by Saint Gregory the Enlightener included free-standing altars, whereas covered structures, housing cult-images, could be made not only of stone, but also of much more perishable materials, such as wood.[35] The same text seems to suggest that the inner chamber was walled and mostly inaccessible, given that the evangelizer of Armenia was prevented by demons from even locating its doors.[36]

A case in point is the famous Ionic temple in the royal fortress of Gaṛni **[3]**, whose exact function and chronology (shifting from the second half of the first to the early third century CE.) are still debated: undoubtedly, this unique building bears witness to the Arsacids' interest in appropriating a Hellenistic model of sacred space in its sumptuous architectural appearance.[37] For all that it looks like a Roman pedestal temple, with a central *cella* surrounded by a columned portico, it stands out for some unparalleled features. One is the elevation of the podium, whose steps are so high as to make the ascent quite challenging: it can be assumed that this unusual stairway was meant to both emphasize physical distance of the resident god from his/her worshippers and characterize the structure as a built and visual surrogate of the vertical dominance that was associated with the country's major heights and the latter's role as cultic places. The wish to visually integrate the temple in the surrounding mountainous landscape also

[3] View of the Temple of Gaṛni, in its environmental setting, Armenia

29 Hurowitz 1992.
30 Milgrom 1980–1981, pp. 90–91.
31 Canepa 2018, pp. 149–209.
32 Gagoshidze 1992; Furtwängler *et al*. 2008.
33 Tirats'yan 2003, p. 137.
34 Petrosyan 2007.
35 Canepa 2018, pp. 200–201.
36 Agat'angełos [Thomson 2010], p. 420.
37 On the site, its archaeological evidence, and its multiple interpretations cf. Wilkinson 1982; Sahinyan 1989; Ter-Martirossov 1996; Tamanyan 2014.

probably explains its north-south orientation: constructed on a triangular promontory overlooking the Azar River gorge, it was probably meant to be contemplated as one of the peaks of the ridge framing the whole area. Another distinctive feature is its narrow interior, and the absence of a vestibule, which suggests that it was intended to work less as a penetrable space than as a focal point for rituals performed before it.

From the third century CE onwards, a different vision of sacred space was introduced by the Sasanians. Even if their characterization as "iconoclasts" is certainly misleading,[38] they became committed to fostering a type of worship that viewed ever-burning fires as exclusive cultic foci. Located at the centre of a square, domed structure, known as *chahar taq* and often included within wider architectural complexes,[39] they worked, in much the same way as cult-statues in Hellenistic temples, as the privileged addressees of ritualized prayers and offerings: they were the relational counterparts of the priestly intermediary's stereotyped gestures and the architectural structure housing them functioned as a monumental frame that staged and emphasized the notions of purity and power they were associated with.

38 On Zoroastrian "iconoclasm" cf. Boyce 1975. This idea has been strongly criticised by Shenkar 2015.

39 On Sasanian fire temples and their interpretation cf. Erdmann 1941; Schippmann 1971; Keall 1972; Yamamoto 1979; *Idem* 1981; Boucharlat 1999; *Idem* 2014.

The altar, erected in the middle of a privileged space, was viewed as a throne on which the divine *dynamis* was seated before its priestly servants performing sacrifices.[40] In keeping with a strategy of centralization of worship that was instrumental to the enforcement of their domination, the new Persian rulers engaged in subverting the cultic landscape, especially in contested regions. According to the Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi, the defeat of the Arsacids by the army of Ardashir I in 224 CE was followed by the destruction of statues and the construction or renovation of fire temples.[41]

Material evidence about fire temples in Armenia is scant and mostly dating from the fifth century, when the Sasanians attempted to impose Zoroastrianism on the subjected population. Nevertheless, it appears that the erection of new built structures was less common than the conversion of earlier Christian buildings, and their reconversion after the Persians' defeat. Both traditions relied on approaches to sacred space that could be easily superimposed: the basement of a probably fifth century structure, identified by some scholars as a fire altar, has been rediscovered in the bema of Vagharshapat Cathedral,[42] and a pit full with clean wood ashes has been found in the immediacy of the three-aisled church in Dvin.[43] The latter has been identified with the "temple of Ormizd" (*Ahura Mazda*) that, according to Kat'oghikos John of Drasxanakert (897–925), had been consecrated to fire worship by renegade noblemen (*nakharar*). The leader of the Armenian rebellion to the Persians, Vartan Mamikonian, burnt one of the traitors in the fire altar and hanged his son, who had been appointed high priest, over it. Later, he erected there a church dedicated to Saint Gregory the Enlightener.[44]

A later, still extant Zoroastrian structure is the so-called *atesh-gah* (from Middle Persian *ātaxs-kadag*, hinting at a structure housing an ever-burning fire), in the Kala quarter of Tbilisi's old town. Despite its multiple alterations in the course of time and its ruined appearance, the square plan of a domed *chahar taq* can still be easily detected **[4]**. It stands on a rocky platform with a deep hole in the middle, which may have originally housed the foundations of the fire altar, which, as it has been assumed, may have been made of iron as in many present-day Parsi temples in Iran and India. According to a recent interpretation, the building may have been constructed under the rule of the pro-Sassanian *Eristavi* of Kartli Stepanoz I (591–605 or 627), whereas it was eventually converted into a mosque in the period of Islamic domination in the area (ca. 730s–1122).[45] Once again, the newcomers found that a cult-space belonging to another religious tradition may be unproblematically adapted, with only a few adjustments, to the behavioural practices of their own faith.

[4] Zoroastrian fire-temple (Atesh-Gah), Tbilisi, late 6th – early 7th century

40 Yamamoto 1981, p. 72.
41 Russell 1987, p. 484.
42 Sahinyan 1966; Gandolfo 1982, pp. 15–17.
43 *Ibidem*, p. 36; Russell 1987, pp. 486–490.
44 John of Drasxanakert [Maksoudian 1987], p. 90.
45 Kipiani 2009.

SACRED SPACES AS PENETRABLE BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

In the year 70 CE the Jerusalem Temple of the one God was destroyed by the Romans – apparently only ruins of its western wall stood up until the whole area was razed to the ground by Hadrian in 135.[46] The consequences of this catastrophic event can hardly be downplayed: for Jews, who were prevented from reconstructing the building, this destruction implied that they were no longer in a condition to regularly fulfil many of the ritual prescriptions established in the Pentateuch. For centuries, rabbis disputed about the extent to which God's presence (*shekinah*) could be assumed to still dwell in the deserted

46 On Hadrian's reshaping of Jerusalem into Aelia Capitolina cf. Heyden/Lissek 2021, especially the essays in Part 1.

Temple Mount, and this eventually led to the belief that the blessing of the Lord may be immediately attainable in the Western Wall.[47] Otherwise, the focus of Jewish worship was re-oriented toward the Torah, its interpretation, and communal prayers performed in synagogues.[48]

Unlike the Temple, the use of synagogues did not imply any site-bound form of worship. On the contrary, they could be erected everywhere, including the many far-away regions where diaspora Jewish communities settled in Late Antiquity. After centuries of belief in the "placed-ness" of the group's encounter with the Lord, the status of divine dwelling could not be delocalized to any other geographic context. The bound that ancient Israelites established through the performance of sacrifices could no longer take place, since it could only happen before the now destroyed House of God. The two poles of the implicit tension between "sacred space" and "holy site", which had been inherited from the Exodus Tabernacle, were dramatically disassociated: for Christians, this happened in the very moment as the Son of God died on the cross and the *parokhet* was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:50–51), thus showing that the Holy of Holies was empty and no longer inhabited by the *kavod*.

The "abomination of desolation" announced by Christ (Mark 13:2, 14) marked a turning point in the experience of the "more than human" dimension: since God was no longer deemed to be present, and therefore directly approachable, in distinctive spots on the earthly surface, efforts were made to dismiss the *locative* approach and focus mainly on the other, ritual-performative pole, where the meeting with the divine was mediated by an active participation in shared, supra-individual, and collective forms of worship. The American anthropologist Jonathan Z. Smith made use of the adjective *utopian* to define the latter: by this, he hinted at the shaping of congregational environments which could be replicated through ritual activity wherever they were needed.[49] Synagogues, churches, and mosques largely corresponded to this model: they owed their significance not to where they were located, but to the ways in which they were used. Unlike ancient temples, they were not only accessible to priests and other "professional" mediators of the community's encounter with the divine, but also to all other believers without distinction. Ritual practices generated sacred spaces, when needed, even in open-air contexts, as implied by Christian stational liturgies or Islamic prayers performed in open-sky precincts (such as the *musallah)*. Nevertheless, built structures were largely employed and soon came to be codified in recurrent architectural schemes.

Instead of *utopian*, it is perhaps more correct to speak of *allo-topian* environments. They described spaces whose sacredness was not

47 Schäfer 1978, pp. 122–133; Eliav 2003; Küchler 2010.
48 Fine 1997.
49 Smith 1987. Cf. also Dupront 1987.

perceived as inherent, but came to be shaped, at least in their promoters' intentions, through the agency of a group's active participation in ritual activity. This agency entailed a sense of belonging, or better being – physically and spiritually – related to God through an individual involvement in communal rites, that was materialized by the community occupying the material space of synagogues, churches, and mosques. This experience came to be framed, and therefore oriented, by the architectural devices worked out in the course of history to evoke the supernatural dimension and encourage believers to feel connected with their divine counterparts. The monumentalization of such spaces, which was altogether unnecessary for the simple performance of prayers and liturgies, was certainly meant to enhance the people's sensation of establishing a dialogue with the Lord. Upon entering a sumptuously decorated synagogue, church, or mosque, they were transported into a different, "other" dimension. This happened *metaphorically*, but the impact it had on the users of such spaces was far from negligible.

In premodern cultures, metaphors were much more than simple rhetorical devices: rather, they worked as material, or sensibly acknowledgeable indicators of multiple and simultaneous levels of reality. Sacred spaces were materially and metaphorically shaped by the interpersonal exchange of believers with the officiants of prayers and rituals and, through the latter, with God. Inasmuch as they were occupied by the bodies of people longing for contact with the divine, they could be perceived as shared, liminal environments between the two dimensions, as both embodied anticipations of heaven and dematerialized fragments of the earthly world. To some extent, the in-betweenity of sacred spaces was a corollary of their relational nature. They connected the *hic et nunc* of everyday life with the atemporal "there", and at the same time they associated the present time with the Biblical roots of the three "Abrahamic" faiths. In different ways, the new sacred spaces were conceived of as alternatives to the authoritative model of the Old Testament Temple that God had chosen as His earthly dwelling. They variously reinterpreted its *locative* function as foreshadowing the de-localized, universal worship enabled by the religious traditions that had emerged after its destruction. In synagogues, the niches housing the Torah were soon described as symbolic equivalents of the lost Temple, thus suggesting that their use as visual foci for the assembly should to some extent surrogate the old rituals associated with it. In a concatenation of metaphorical overlaps, Christians followed Saint Paul's understanding of the Son of God's incarnated person as the new "House of God", which found

its material embodiment in the community of believers, or *ecclesia* – a word that, unsurprisingly, came to be used as a metonymy for the spaces where Christians gathered for the performance of the mass. Islam described the Haram al-Sharif as the "far-away mosque" and the first *qibla*, whose function had been translocated to Mecca: in praying toward the Arabian holy city, symbolized within mosques by the *mihrab*, believers perpetuated a behavioural gesture that had its roots in the locative approach to the sacred first established in Jerusalem.[50]

For Jews and Christians, the gradation of sacredness that characterized the Temple was worth imitating, as it was instrumental to convey notions of ritual hierarchy. Undoubtedly, the outside areas adjoining the buildings lost the central role they had been attributed in Antiquity, but they were still regarded as invested with some degree of holiness. In several Subcaucasian areas, such as Svaneti, the open courtyards before the churches still play a very crucial role as

50 For more on the tension between "congregational/ritual" and "locative" forms of experiencing the sacred cf. Bacci 2021b.

[5] *Yereruyk'*, basilica, Armenia, 5th century

secluded environments reserved for the performance of sacrifices and communal meals on a saint's yearly feast.[51] In the early Christian period, intermediary spaces between open-sky exteriors and indoor spaces are known from multiple examples: a particularly sumptuous one being the fifth century basilica in Yereruyk', Armenia, whose side-annexes, opening toward the outside through majestic arcades and decorated with apses, probably worked as foci for the prayer of people, such as unbaptized catechumens or repentant sinners, who were not allowed to enter the church **[5]**.[52]

The semantic development of the Armenian word *gawit'* describes a gradual, centuries-long process whereby church exteriors were thoroughly substituted by built environments in their role as places reserved for people who, both in reality and metaphorically, were permanently or temporarily "out of the *ecclesia*".[53] In early Christian times, the term hinted at the open space located before or adjoining the walls of a church building: all people who, on various grounds, were not allowed to enter but could attend the rites on the threshold to the consecrated building. Those individuals who had not yet been accepted or reintegrated as members of the community were prevented from experiencing the sacred in the revolutionary way introduced by the new faith, where built interiors were made accessible not only to priests, as in the pagan past, but also to common believers. Their physical attendance in the courtyard reminded these people of their imperfect status and enhanced their desire to fully participate in the sacred mysteries. From the ninth century onwards, with the decline of the catechumenate and the diffusion of monastic architecture, this open-sky space was substituted by a built vestibule or portico. In the fully developed form that is encountered in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the latter is frequently of quadrangular shape with a large opening in the middle.[54] It was conceived of as an intermediary, liminal environment between the outer, 'profane' world, and the *stricto sensu* sacred space, which believers had to go through before entering the nave. Its kinetic experience worked as a signifier of the transformational power of mass attendance: in this space, sinners were expected to repent and became aware of their imperfect spiritual status, before encountering the divine through participation in the liturgy.

Accordingly, a *gawit'* was also perceived as the perfect location for displaying one's desire for salvation through devotional inscriptions, graffiti, devotional *khach'k'ars*, and tombs. A good example is the narthex of the main church of Hovanavank' Monastery, whose pillars and walls are thoroughly inscribed with written prayers and requests for commemoration **[6]**. The lunette of the main door to the church

51 Bacci/Foletti 2023.
52 Gandolfo 1982, pp. 67–76; Cuneo 1988, pp. 234–237; Donabédian 2008, pp. 45–49; Hasratian 2010, pp. 58–59; Donabédian 2014; Maranci 2018, pp. 33–35; Donabédian 2021.
53 Garibian 2018.
54 Mnats'akanyan 1952; Vardanyan 2015b; cf. Gohar Grigoryan's essay in this volume.

interior, decorated with a sculpted relief representing the parable of the *Wise and Unwise Women*, worked as a very explicit visual reminder of the provisions under which eternal life could be attained.[55] It can also be wondered whether the development of this space as a wide, extended vestibule may have been encouraged by the liturgical practice, well witnessed in the Armenia Maior in the twelfth through the fourteenth century, of segregating the assembly from the church for the entire duration of Lent: in this period, the main doors of the nave were closed and both the people and the non-presiding clergy attended the mass outside. Bereaved of their access to the sacred space, believers were encouraged to meditate on their condition of sinners and nurture the hope that they may be readmitted into the *ecclesia* on

55 Thierry/Donabédian 1987, pp. 591–592; Zakarian 1986–1987; Rapti 2015b, pp. 107–108. In Armenian hymnography, the wise women are frequently evoked as metaphors of Christian pure souls: cf. Janashian 1973, pp. 4, 107, 207.

[6] View of the *gawit'*, Hovanavank' Monastery, Armenia

the Easter day in the same way as Adam and Eve were taken back to Paradise after Christ's Resurrection.[56]

In Georgian tradition, churches were much more rarely equipped with intermediary environments between the interiors and the outside courtyards. The practice of enriching the main entrances with longitudinal porches became widespread especially from the eleventh century onwards, but their use was never deemed to be normative.[57] Nevertheless, the habit of decorating façades and exterior walls with both sculpted and painted images indicates that the outer surface of churches was invested with some specific visual function: crosses, figures of holy knights, sacred symbols, lavish foliate decorations were often meant to simultaneously serve as apotropaic signs, embellishments, and evocations of the paradisiacal dimension. A moral/anagogical function can also be frequently detected: the display of the epic hero Amiran's battle with the monster Baqbaq-Devi on the outside walls of the church of the Archangels in Lashtkhveri, Svaneti **[7]**, should not be understood as a concession to folk or lay taste, but rather as an encouragement to interpret the story as a metaphor of the Christian soul's fight against evil and sin.[58]

SACRED AND MOST SACRED INTERIORS

In the new congregational spaces emerged after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the latter's most evident legacy was the constant distinction between "sacred" and "most sacred" interior spaces. In synagogues, the *bemah* with the Torah niche was reserved for the officiants and separated from the assembly with chancels and barriers.[59] A similar demarcation became soon commonplace also in Christian churches. In Armenia, it consisted in a raised and apsed altar space which was separated from the nave by a curtain. The latter was reminiscent of the Tabernacle and Temple veil that concealed the Ark of the Covenant and God's *kavod* from human sight. In the age of Grace, divinity could no longer be perceived as inaccessible to the senses, given that God had circumscribed Himself into a human body. Nevertheless, questions were soon raised as to whether, and to what extent, the mystery of Incarnation, repeated in the Eucharist, could be fully or partly contemplated by profane eyes. In early Byzantine buildings, the distinctiveness of the altar zone was certainly emphasized through architectural and decorative devices, including marble enclosures (*templa*), but it is doubtful whether the latter may have also been instrumental, at least in the first millennium, to preventing the assembly from visually interacting with the rites performed in the sanctuary.[60]

56 Findikyan 2010b.
57 Eastmond 2004, pp. 24–39; Kaffenberger 2018, pp. 222–226; *Idem* 2021.
58 Kenia 2010, p. 11.
59 Fine 1997, pp. 112–117.
60 Taft 2006; Jensen 2023.

Other Christian traditions soon felt the need to regulate the people's sensorial access to the mass. In Syriac-rite areas, the choir (*qestrōmō*) was separated from the sanctuary (*madebḥō*) by a built enclosure, whose door was closed with a veil: according to the ninth century Iraqi author John of Dara, it symbolized "the separation and distance between God and the angels".[61] In Armenian tradition, preference was given to large curtains **[8]** used to separate the elevated platform of the *khoran* – literally "tent", with a clear hint at the Biblical Tent of Meeting – from the *das* or *atean*, an intermediary, normally quite narrow space interposed between the altar space and the nave. First witnessed in the seventh century, it was similarly interpreted as a partition between two parts of heaven: one occupied by the Lord's glory and another one inhabited by celestial bodiless beings.[62]

In this way, the *khoran* was conceived of as a visual focus which was either concealed or revealed through the closing and opening of a

61 Sader 1983, pp. 45–49.
62 Findikyan 2016, pp. 30–35.

[7] The epic hero Amiran fighting the monster Baqbaq-Devi, mural painting, church of the Archangels, Lashtkhveri (Svaneti), Georgia, late 14th – early 15th century

[8] View of the interior with the altar curtain, church of Saint George, Garnahovit, Armenia

curtain hanging before it. The most solemn moments of the celebration could not be contemplated by non-officiants: rather, the ritual aimed at frustrating the community's wish to appropriate through their eyes the on-going miracle of Christ's transubstantiation in the holy bread and wine. The expectations sparked in the beholders by the removal of the rites from sight encouraged them to both exercise other senses, like hearing, and perform devotional practices, such as kneeling, praying, and lighting candles, that were deemed to be not only appropriate, but even particularly fruitful in terms of spiritual advantages, since they took place in the same moment as the most important parts of the performance.

The curtain was certainly much worthier of the beholders' attention than a simple church décor and worked as a material metaphor of the Incarnation re-enacted in the mass. It prevented visual access to the liturgical action, but it could visually surrogate the sight of the holy sacrament by displaying religious images associated with the Eucharistic mystery it was meant to conceal. Even if the earliest extant altar curtains, standing out for their imagery variously related to Christ's Passion and Resurrection, date from the seventeenth century, their long-standing use is witnessed by Medieval sources: the seventh century author Vrtanes Kertogh, in his *Defense of Images*, described its model, the Biblical *parokhet*, as a carrier of religious imagery, and the aristocratic commission of richly embroidered textiles for such a purpose is mentioned since the thirteenth century.[63]

If Armenia remained loyal to the use of such large hangings as markers of the holiest part of the church, Georgia adopted another approach. In local buildings, the threshold between the *naos* and the *bema* was marked by a built device that looked much like the Byzantine *templon*, i.e., as an open marble or stone enclosure with colonnettes supporting an architrave and closed in its lower part by slabs or transennas: their diffusion in the Georgian lowlands since the sixth to seventh centuries is indicated by several sculpted plaques, displaying a wide spectrum of iconic and narrative themes, that have been preserved up to our days.[64] Extant *in-situ* chancel barriers are mainly known from the region of Svaneti, where they were often rendered as much more massive masonry structures.[65] In some early cases – as in the Nezguni church in Mest'ia or the Tetrimatskhovari church in Zhamushi (Mulaq'i community) – they looked like triple arcades with arches of same height **[9]**. In many other examples, the lower portions of the two lateral arches were closed with walled parapets, often associated with quadrangular blocks of masonry used as supports for religious objects. Veils were fixed to the back side and used to conceal the intercolumnia during the most solemn parts of the mass. In such moments, the attention of onlookers was captured by the images that either decorated the barrier permanently or were temporarily displayed in front of or above it. In many cases, such structures were painted in the same way as the nearby walls, with either aniconic (floral and/or geometric) motifs or religious figures. In Zhamushi, the choice to display holy bishops emphasized the association of the altar space with the consecrated status of the officiant clergy. In other cases, as in the Holy Archangels in Iprari, Saint George in Nak'ipari, or the Holy Saviour in Ts'virmi, the barrier was decorated with images of martyrs and ascetics. The one in Saint Barbara in Khe was embellished

[9] Chancel screen with images of holy bishops, Tetrimatskhovari church, Zhamushi (Svaneti), Georgia, 11th century

63 Kouymjian 2015.
64 Iamanidzé 2010; Dadiani 2017a.
65 Shmerling 1962.

with heads of angels that visually interacted with, and expanded, the glory of Christ surrounded by heavenly hosts that was displayed in the conch **[10]**.[66]

In Georgia, *templa* never really evolved into walls of icons, as in other Orthodox countries, or at least not until very late, under the influence of the Russian church's own conceptualization of sacred space, where a central role was played by the high iconostasis. The apparently chaotic way in which images and crosses are clustered today before the barrier in Svan churches is probably very close to the "cumulative" approach that prevailed in the Middle Ages: depending on multiple factors, including liturgical time, the degree of solemnity attributed locally to specific feast days, or the assembly's devotional preferences, icons and other precious objects could be leant against the enclosure,

66 In general on the decoration of *templa* in Svaneti see Kenia 2010, p. 11.

[10] View of the apse and the chancel screen with epistyle icon, church of Saint Barbara, Khe (Svaneti), Georgia, 13th century

[11] View of the chancel screen with cross-supports, church of Saint George Svipi (Svaneti), Georgia

included in its intercolumnia, or set above its architrave. A case in point is the slightly elevated bema in the church of Saint George at Svipi (Tskhomari community, Svaneti), which is preceded by socles serving as supports for metal-reveted crosses and painted panels **[11]**. A much more rudimental solution is encountered in the tiny church of the Saviour at Murq'meli (Ushguli community): if smaller icons are set on shelves embedded in the masonry enclosure, larger ones – including some dating back to the thirteenth century and showing the Virgin, Christ, and Saint George – are displayed on its top, leaning against a wooden structure **[12]**.

In the Byzantine sphere, the habit of setting up temporary sequences of icons on the epistyles of chancel barriers is known from the twelfth century onwards. In the same period, attempts were made at standardizing such usages by creating images of angels and saints that renounced the traditional frontal pose and turned their bodies and gestures toward the space outside the icon-frame: juxtaposed the one after the other on the top of barriers they gave shape to a representation of the Deesis, the communal intercessory prayer led by John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary before the Lord.[67] Two icons dating from ca. 1100, now respectively in the Svaneti Museum in Mest'ia and in the Lagurk'a church in Khe (K'ala community) and representing two archangels standing and gesturing in mirrored postures, have been assumed to have originally belonged to a similar set of icons.[68] Another incomplete Deesis group is represented by three fourteenth

67 Grabar 1961; Lazarev 1964–1965; Chatzidakis 1979; Epstein 1981; Weitzmann 1984; Walter 1993; Gerstel 2006b.

68 Chichinadze 2011, pp. 27 and 111–112; Burchuladze 2016, pp. 114–115.

[12] Chancel screen supporting icons, church of the Saviour, Murq'meli (Svaneti), Georgia

[13] Epistyle icon with Deesis, church of Saint Barbara, Khe (Svaneti), Georgia, 13th century

century panels of the same size, style, and shape with the interceding Virgin, Christ Pantokrator, and Saint Paul that are preserved in the church of Pkhot'reri (Etseri community).[69]

Starting from the twelfth century, new panel-types, expressly meant for a permanent display on the architrave, became widespread: they were horizontal in format and represented almost exclusively the Deesis theme, in either its abbreviated or extended versions, and sometimes in association with scenes from Christ's or a famous saint's life. Of the two preserved in Svaneti, the one in the church of Saint Barbara in Khe, dating from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, is particularly interesting, since it still plays its original

69 Chichinadze 2011, pp. 27, 116; Burchuladze 2016, pp. 292–293. For further evidence cf. also Chichinadze 2014, p. 154.

function as an *in-situ* church item **[13].**[70] Its most striking feature is its perfect integration into the decorative program of the sacred space: painted in the same style as the nearby mural paintings, it both epitomizes the main theme evoked in the apse décor (the theophanic, atemporal glory of God) and reinterprets it as the focus of the heavenly community's intercessory efforts to back their beholders' hope for salvation in the afterlife.[71]

Georgian *templa* were meant to demarcate, but certainly not to thoroughly conceal the altar and the mysteries taking place in and around it. The visual experience of beholders standing in the *naos* was dominated by the Lord's majesty displayed in the conch, whose sight was not hampered by the chancel screen. In keeping with Eastern Christian traditions, the hemispheric space of the apse, which was symbolically understood as an evocation of heaven, was reserved for images variously inspired from Biblical descriptions of divine visions

70 Chichinadze 2023 . Another epistyle icon dating from the second half of the thirteenth century is preserved in the church of the Saviour in Matskhvarishi (Latali community): cf. Burchuladze 2016, pp. 288–289.

71 Velmans 1979.

(Isaiah 6:1–2; Ezekiel 1:1–28; Revelation 1:1–11): the representations of Christ seating within the *kavod* on a throne of Cherubim and assisted by angels, which were more common in the earlier centuries, came to be almost regularly substituted by the Deesis from the eleventh century onwards.[72] A similar *mise-en-scène* of Christ's theophanic imagery in the altar space is encountered also in Armenia in the pre-Islamic period: if the apse murals at Aruch' **[14]**, Lmbat, and Kosh are meant to convey theophanic messages through different solutions (shifting from a special rendering of the *Ascension* to a more explicit evocation of the *Vision of Ezekiel*), the one at T'alin stands out for the unparalleled visual emphasis placed on the book laying on an empty throne and symbolizing the source of orthodox belief that stems from the wisdom of God.[73]

Unlike in Georgia, whose church interiors came, at least from the tenth century onwards, to be thoroughly covered with narrative and iconic images,[74] painted décors never became normative in Armenian sacred spaces. Even if their use never really disappeared, they were not considered indispensable tools to either stimulate or enhance the people's feeling of accessing the divine through participation in rituals. Indeed, some theologians manifested anxieties as to the legitimacy of image worship and especially of anthropomorphic representations of Christ and did not recommend that churches be ornamented with religious figural themes.[75] On account of this suspicious attitude, the presence of pictorial decorations in an overall restricted number of buildings has sometimes been interpreted as a clue to an original affiliation of the latter to pro-Chalcedonian communities.[76] Undoubtedly, the recurrent absence of any painted ornaments was noticed with surprise by external viewers, such as the early fifteenth century German traveller Johann Schildtberger, and described as a distinctive feature of Armenian churches.[77] In such bare spaces, the assembly's attention could be hardly distracted from their visual focus in the altar space: such somber environments, illuminated only by small windows opened in the thick walls of the naos and by the fires of candles, aroused the emotion-laden response of beholders by overemphasizing the contrast of their modest appearance vis-à-vis the splendour of multi-coloured curtains, liturgical vestments, and *vasa sacra*.

The liturgy was meant to raise the souls towards heaven: the placement of the *khoran* at a higher level immediately signposted the superior dignity of the environment meant for the performance of the liturgy and encouraged viewers to feel the desire to be spiritually elevated. If the attendants looked up, they had the sensation of being dominated by the infinity of heaven, symbolized by the circularity

[14] *Theophanic image of Christ*, cathedral, Aruch', Armenia, 7th century

72 *Eadem* 1981; *Eadem* 1983; *Eadem*/Alpago Novello 1996, pp. 19–42; Vardanyan 2014.

73 Kotanjian 2017. Cf. also Durnovo 1979, pp. 137–154; Kotandjian 2007, pp. 137–144. On the book image in T'alin, cf. Foletti 2021a.

74 Skhirtladze 1997.

75 Mahé 1993, p. 485; *Idem* 2007, p. 116; Ramazyan 2013.

76 Durnovo 1957, pp. 8–9; Lidov 1990; *Idem* 2014, pp. 323–331.

77 Johann Schildtberger [Langmantel 1885], pp. 107–108.

of the dome – an almost ever-present feature of Armenian churches since Late Antiquity. Since heaven itself was conceived of as a hemispherical dome, the presence of this element transformed the sacred space into a cosmological metaphor.[78] A number of both structural and decorative elements contributed to emphasize this celestial association: several windows opened in the drum orchestrated the dramatic light contrast between the lower and upper zones of the nave; the circle-motifs iterated at the base of the dome could be read as evocative of the concentric spheres that composed the universe; and slightly protruding ribs descending from the top toward the cornice formed bundles of four to twelve rays, which could be easily understood as hints at the "tongues of fire" of the Pentecost (Acts 2:3), but also as stylized visual conveyors of the divine light permeating the community of believers.[79] In some cases, the bundles were grouped in

78 Thomson 1979, pp. 103–106.
79 Donabédian 2008, pp. 268–271.

such a way as to shape a cross **[15]**: such a formula occurs in seventh century churches in both Armenia and Iberia, whereas later Georgian churches, starting from the tenth century, privilege the pictorial medium to stage the dome as the site of a theophanic irruption of the triumphal, eschatological cross into the area occupied by the religious-motivated assembly **[16]**.[80]

The hierarchical distribution of "sacred" and "most sacred" spaces was so strong in the Subcaucasian lands, that it even survived the decline of Christianity in some highland regions of Georgia, albeit in an "extroverted" form. In Pshavi and Khevsureti, the experience of the holy was disassociated from the penetrable, built structures of Christian worship, and the gradation of holiness underlying the basic structure of churches was projected onto open-sky environments. The latter, known as *khat'i* ("icons") and *jvari* ("crosses"), were outdoor areas delimited by low enclosures in prominent mountain locations, reserved for the performance of rituals before the *k'vrivi* – ruined and inaccessible buildings or even heaps of ancient stones which were regarded as points of contact between the earthly and divine dimensions.[81]

[15] Dome with bundles of rays, church of Saint Hṛipsimē, Vagharshapat, Armenia, 7th century

[16] *Eschatological Cross*, mural painting, church of the Mother of God, Timotesubani Monastery, Georgia, ca. 1207–1215

THE AUTHORITY OF JERUSALEM

"The Most High", said Stephen the Protomartyr to the Sanhedrin, "does not live in houses made by human hands" (Acts 7:48). In the Age of Grace, it was no longer admittable that the divine sphere may be experienced in specific locations on the earthly surface: Christ dwells spiritually in heaven, sacramentally in the eucharistic bread, and morally in the community of believers. Therefore, the encounter with Him can happen only through faith and participation in the liturgy.

Nevertheless, "locative" forms of worship, though dissociated from the notion of God's dwelling on earth, soon reemerged in Christian practice. This had much less to do with theology than with lived religion, and with the associated need to focus devotion on material objects. Christians developed a sense of belonging that united all members in a community of faith that transcended traditional social bonds and was expected to pay tribute to martyrs – the brothers having lost their lives during persecutions – in much the same way as families did with their dead. In so doing, they were certainly not especially original: precedents can be recognized in the ancient cult of heroes and, even more, in the Jewish custom of venerating the burial sites of prophets and famous rabbis. In any case, the more the graves of saints were used as foci of collective prayers, offerings, and rituals, the more they came to be perceived as exceptional places, worthy of special

80 Thierry/Thierry 1975, pp. 88–94 (the publication is not in the list); Velmans 1996, pp. 45–47; Skhirtladze 1997, p. 194.

81 Manning 2008.

honours, including their inclusion within sumptuous architectural frames that efficaciously visualized their distinctive status.

The first Christian holy sites were basically *loca sanctorum*, burial places where the collective memory of a martyr's sacrifice was anchored. Far from engaging believers in simply recalling a saint's exemplary merits, the practices associated with commemoration implied an embodied effort to mentally evoke the dead's presence and simulate a physical interaction with them. Viewed as privileged intercessors between mankind and the heavenly court, they were increasingly approached with expectations of both spiritual and material favours. Architecture and decorations contributed to orchestrate the emotional experience of visitors through the enshrinement of tombs within built, often central-planned structures reminiscent of ancient mausolea. Since martyrs – and later also other people, like ascetics, whose spiritual merits were not connected to the circumstances of their death – were believed to already belong to the supernatural dimension of Paradise, and their corpses were more and more considered to participate in their sanctity, the buildings housing them were viewed as monumental markers of hallowed bodies which were, by the way, mostly inaccessible to sight and the other senses.[82]

Be it by ascesis or martyrdom, saints were Christian believers who had followed so closely in Christ's footsteps to re-enact his sacrifice and thus closely identify with him: at the end, venerating them, who were with him in Paradise, meant establishing a connection with God and the heavenly dimension. The built environments housing them were associated with sacred spaces reserved for the performance of sacramental liturgy mostly via a vertical or horizontal juxtaposition: corresponding to different, locative vs congregational or ritual functions, they could easily superimpose or combine, but not totally merge. Undoubtedly, performing prayers and participating in the mass in the vicinity of venerated tombs was met with expectations of extraordinary spiritual advantages, and, on the other hand, the erection of liturgical spaces close to *martyria* proclaimed their legitimacy and worship-worthiness. By the way, the proximity of churches and tombs worked as a metaphoric indicator of the intimate relation between the living and dead members of the *ecclesia* – a symbolic connection that was pushed a step further, at the end of the fourth century, with the practice of consecrating altars with relics, or small fragments of hallowed bodies.

The emergence of the *loca sanctorum* was paralleled by the establishment of a network of holy sites associated with Christ himself. This was achieved especially with the initiative of Emperor Constantine,

82 Among the most relevant studies, cf. Hermann-Mascard 1975; Brown 1981; Duval 1982; Maraval 1985; Frankfurter 1998; Canetti 2002; Castelli 2004; Elsner/Rutherford 2005; Canella 2016.

probably with the advice of Eusebius of Caesarea, aimed at locating and monumentalizing the scenarios of the Son of God's birth, death, resurrection, and ascension. This effort was followed by an increasing tendency to interpret Palestinian landscape as interspersed with spots carrying narrative associations with both the Gospels and the Old Testament. The *loca sancta* could be simultaneously understood as *mnemotopoi*, or material indicators of specific scriptural events, and as metonymic surrogates of Christ's incarnational body, which had once occupied (and blessed) those places, before being transported into the otherworldly dimension of the Heavenly Jerusalem.[83] The emergence of this new notion of site-bound sanctity, laying emphasis on the spots hallowed by the Lord's presence during His passage on earth, entailed a new conceptualization of the Holy City's distinctive role, which resulted in an overall rethinking of the metaphoric implications of its cityscape: significantly named *Martyrium*, the complex including a five-aisled basilica, an open portico housing the Rock of Golgotha and a monumental mausoleum encircling the Lord's empty tomb inherited the attributes of sanctity previously associated with the Temple and was described as the new Moriah and the new House of God. It offered an approach to the divine sphere that pointed to, and at the same time conflated, different temporalities.[84]

In Christian Jerusalem, the *locative* and *ritual* functions, once united in YHWH's earthly dwelling, were relocated to two different sites on the western ridge of hills that dominated in their height the deserted area of the ancient Temple Mount. If the Holy Sepulchre became the most important place where believers engaged in an embodied encounter with the divine, assisted by a mental reenactment of the events there commemorated, the enormous, five-aisled basilica of the Holy Zion, erected on the southwestern hill at the turn of the fourth century, was viewed as the archetype of all Christian sacred, i.e., congregational spaces: it marked the place where the disciples had participated in the Last Supper, the "upper room" where they had received the grace of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and also the place of the Virgin Mary's Dormition. Praised as the "mother of all churches", it was described as a monumental embodiment of the *ecclesia*-notion that had been – imperfectly – foreshadowed by the Sinai tabernacle and Solomon's Temple. It was the New, and definitive Zion, that rose triumphally above the old one as a holy mountain and was invested with the wide spectrum of spatial, memorial, ritual, and typological meanings associated with the Biblical Zion.[85]

Many studies have emphasized the impact played by the sacred topography of Jerusalem in multiple manifestations of both Armenian and

83 On the early Christian conceptualization of the "holy site"-notion see esp. Walker 1990; Wilken 1992; Markus 1994; Bitton-Ashkelony 2005; Sághy 2006.

84 On the architectural vicissitudes of the Constantinian Martyrium in the light of recent archaeological investigations cf. Tucci 2019. On the construction of the Holy Sepulchre's attributes of sanctity in both association with and opposition to the ancient Temple cf. Busse/Kretschmar 1987.

85 Clausen 2016.

Georgian spiritual life. Facilitated by the early settlement of Caucasian communities in Palestine,[86] it found its most evident expression in the adoption of the *Hagiapolite* liturgy of Saint James, where a key-role was played by stational rites performed in the different holy sites.[87] Among the latter, the most important was the *encaenia* octave on September 13–20, which commemorated the dedication of the two main Christian shrines (the complex of Golgotha and Anastasis on the 13th and the Holy Zion church on the 15th) and the exaltation of the Holy Cross on the 14th.[88] As witnessed in the tenth century by the Georgian author John of Bolnisi, such yearly feasts were celebrated with great solemnity,[89] and probably had even greater significance when performed in churches and on altars consecrated to the Jerusalem holy sites, as in the case of the tower-like complex of chapels erected in Van by Prince Gagik Artsruni in ca. 901–902: known as "the Holy Zion that is in Jerusalem", it enabled, with its multiple altars dedicated to Golgotha, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the "Upper room", the staging of a procession that simulated the kinetic movement between the *loca sancta* (Calvary, Anastasis, Eleona, Mount Zion) prescribed in the Jerusalem rite.[90]

In this case, the main stopovers of the holy city's topographic network were subsumed into the Zion-notion, which stood out for its multiple semantic nuances: it worked both metonymically and synecdochically, as an inextricable chain of metaphoric hints at the terrestrial Jerusalem, its heavenly double, the *ecclesia* as community and institution, its spiritual embodiment in the Virgin Mary, its built materialization in the "mother of all churches", the hill on which the latter stood, the Old Temple that had prefigured it, and all the other Biblical mountains (from Sinai to Tabor) chosen by God for His revelations to mankind. Such a complexity is visualized in the tenth century painted program of the Otkhta church, in T'ao-K'larjeti, where the personification of Zion, wearing a turreted diadem and holding the model of basilica-type building, dominates both Mount Sinai and the Temple Mount, evoked by an odd, mountain-like rendering of the Tent of the Covenant.[91]

In both Armenian and Georgian traditions, the Jerusalem *loca sancta* were often invoked as rhetorical devices to emphasize the special dignity attributed to some distinctive places. The monastery of Mount Varag, which could boast of a precious fragment of the Holy Cross, was celebrated in a seventh or early eighth century text as a "veritable second Zion and Upper Jerusalem, greater than Sinai".[92] Dedications of churches to the Holy Zion (*Surb Siown*), but also to the "Holy Anastasis" (*Surb Harutyun*) and the "Holy Sign", i.e., "Cross" (*Surb Nshan*), became frequent,[93] and a thirteenth century author witnesses that

86 Tchekhanovets 2018.
87 For a survey, cf. Seppälä 2019.
88 On the rite, as described in the Georgian and Armenian versions of the Jerusalem lectionary, cf. Jerusalem Lectionary [Tarchnishvili 1960], pp. 36–40, and Renoux 1971, pp. 361–363.
89 John of Bolnisi [Verhalst 2015], pp. 508–509.
90 Tovma Arcruni [Thomson 1985], pp. 315–316, and 320. Cf. Jones 2016, p. 101–102; Pogossian 2017, pp. 210–212.
91 Bacci 2022. On the church and its decoration, the basic study is Skhirtladze 2009.
92 Pogossian 2019, p. 139.
93 Renoux 1987, p. 187.

a mountain in the region of Vayots Dzor, dominating an area sanctified by many monastic settlements, was known under the title of Holy Zion.[94] According to the *Life of Vakthang Gorgasali*, written in two phases during the eighth century, *Sioni* (Zion) dedications were attributed to the main churches of Tbilisi and Samshvilde and the Svet'itskhoveli cathedral in Mtskheta.[95] Similar titles were later mentioned in connection with old churches in Urbnisi, Dmanisi, Shilda, At'eni, Erts'o, Khevi, Uts'era, and other places.[96]

In the art historical debate, questions were sometimes raised as to whether the proliferation of such topographic dedications may have entailed any effort to mimetically evoke the Jerusalem sites, i.e., via the architectural imitation of their monumental frames. The typological reading of Medieval Georgian church buildings proposed by Giorgi Chubinashvili tended to derive central-planned structures from the Anastasis, via the intermediary of the Jvari church in Mtskheta,[97] and large, longitudinal basilicas from the Holy Zion.[98] This idea was grounded in the assumption that both terms – *sioni* (სიონი) and *jvari* (ჯვარი) – gradually lost their toponymic connotation and came to be used in a technical sense. Such a semantic shift is witnessed by the thirteenth century, when the Georgian translator of the Byzantine *Diegesis* on the foundation of Saint Sophia in Constantinople made use of *sioni* to render the Greek word δρομικήν, which described the longitudinal plan said to have characterized the earliest building erected by Emperor Constantine.[99] In a less evident way, *jvari*, the common word for "cross", came to be used as a metonymy for the building enshrining the monumental cross erected by Saint Nino on the top of the hill dominating the confluence of Aragvi and Mt'k'vari rivers, but it is doubtful that its use to denote a specific architectural type may have become widespread before the nineteenth century.[100]

The rather mechanic association of "model" and "copy" formulated by Chubinashvili was paralleled, in the same years, by the approach fostered by André Grabar and theorized by Richard Krautheimer, who were making efforts to overcome the limits of a discipline exclusively oriented toward the analysis of "form" by emphasizing the need to consider the functional and symbolic aspects of built structures.[101] The assumption that distinctive functions shall inescapably correspond to specific, standardized plans has been rightly criticized: even a superficial comparison of the buildings bearing a *Sioni* title indicates that not all of them were of longitudinal type, and that the original dedications are not clearly witnessed in sources: nor can a simple association with the Virgin Mary, as in Samshvilde, be taken as a proof of an *ab antiquo* connection with the Jerusalem site of the Dormition.[102]

94 Mathews/Sanjian 1990, p. 20.
95 Anonymous writer and Anonymous and Juansher Juansheriani [Jones 2014], pp. 78, 103, 109, 110. On the dating cf. Rapp 2003.
96 Skhirtladze 2009, pp. 139–140.
97 Chubinashvili 1948.
98 *Ibidem* 1940, pp. 83–86.
99 Džavakhov 1914, pp. 22–23. Cf. Diegesis [Preger 1901–1907], vol. 1, pp. 74–108, and 2, pp. 284–289; cf. also Vitti 1986. For the Georgian translation, cf. Beridze 1982, pp. 9–12.
100 Džavakhov 1914, pp. 21–22, who refers to a passage in the Life of Saint Evstat'i of Mtskheta (Evstat'i of Mtskheta [Lang 1976], pp. 100–101) where the saint names "Jvari" the hilltop church he apparently contemplates from a distance. Anyway, it must be stressed that the cross was still in an open-sky location in Evstat'i's lifetime (first half of the sixth century). On the text, cf. Rapp 2014, pp. 31–166.
101 Krautheimer 1942; Grabar 1943–1946.
102 Kazaryan 2012–2013, vol. III, p. 354.

[17] Jvari church, Mtskheta, Georgia, 7th century

Topographic denominations were basically instrumental to signpost the distinctive status attributed to some specific churches and orientate their perception: as the "mother of all churches", the huge, five-aisled basilica on Mount Zion could be viewed as a suitable source of inspiration for cathedrals and other major sacred spaces meant for the performance of complex rituals, whereas the central-planned, domed, and mausoleum-like structure of the Anastasis could be viewed as an especially efficacious device to focus devotion on a single cult-object and manifest the latter's exceptional status. In Mtskheta's landscape, the Jvari tetraconch **[17]** and the Svet'itskhoveli basilica **[18]** stood out, in their architectural distinctiveness and their differently prominent locations, as the two main visual and material poles of the majestic scenario in which processional rites inspired by the Hagiapolite liturgy took place: on Tuesdays in the city's "Great Zion" and on Fridays before the place of the cross.[103] In many cases, the adoption of different plans, irrespective of the associated dedications, depended on where more emphasis was placed: either on a congregational-ritual or locative experience of the holy, or on a combination of both.

103 Anonymous and Juansher Juansheriani [Jones 2014], p. 110.

[18] Svet'itskhoveli cathedral, Mtskheta, Georgia, founded 4th–5th century, reconstructed in ca. 1010–1029

SUB-CAUCASIAN *LOCA SANCTA*

The *imitatio Hierusalem* developed in Armenian and Georgian traditions was basically instrumental to efficaciously staging ritual actions specific to the Jerusalemite liturgy of Saint James. This phenomenon entailed the emergence of artistic expressions which variously evoked the Holy City in both visual and material terms. A case in point are the big-size, cross-shaped objects – stelae, *khach'k'ar*, monumental crosses – encountered throughout the Subcaucasian lands, whose imagery often reflects iconographic features associated with the Holy Land and even includes details inspired from the decorative and architectural setting of the holy sites, such as the golden canopy of the Golgotha chapel evoked by the "caps" of Svan pre-altar crosses,[104] or the arcaded designs so frequently encountered on the top of both Armenian and Iberian stelae from the sixth through the eighth century **[19]**,[105] and reproduced occasionally also in later works, such as the hitherto undated (eleventh century?) cross-basement in the Lagurk'a church near Khe **[20]**. Such motifs, displaying one to three arched doors supporting a higher, roof- or dome-like level, have been

104 Bacci 2021b.

105 Machabeli 2008, p. 37; Grigoryan 2012, pp. 49–50; Kakhiani *et al*. 2012, pp. 117–120; Machabeli 2013, pp. 128–144; Gagoshidze 2014, pp. 133–134; Tchakerian 2016, pp. 135–142; Dadiani 2017b, pp. 45–46; Eastmond 2018, pp. 230–231; Studer-Karlen 2022a, p. 62.

[19] Stela with architectural upper element, T'alin, Armenia, 7th–8th century

[20] Cross-support with arcaded decoration, Lagurk'a church, Khe (Svaneti), Georgia, 11th century (?)

[21] *Khach'k'ar* in the cemetery of Noratus, Armenia

interpreted as either generic hints at a church façade or, more specifically, as evocations of the Holy Sepulchre. These two hypotheses are not mutually excluding: it is possible, and even likely, that similar solutions, originally inspired by stylized reproductions of the Jerusalem Aedicula, may have been dissociated at some point from their original, topographic meaning and understood as generic hints at the church-like appearance attributed to the Holy City's heavenly double. The primary visual source can perhaps be identified in early Byzantine pilgrims' tokens such as the seventh-century reliquary ring preserved in the Archaeological Museum of Córdoba, where a sequence of double arcades is used to evoke the Tomb of Christ.[106]

Crosses and cross-bearing stones, erected in open-sky environments and especially on heights, were the first and long privileged channels through which the Subcaucasian landscape was sanctified. They both manifested a community's relation to its living space, and its individual members' quest for a direct interaction with the divine sphere: variously used as markers of supernatural signs, burial sites, or expressions of piety, they were perceived as points of contact between the human and the otherworldly dimensions. In Armenia, *khach'k'ars* became the focus of the most common form of devotion, which literally petrified each devotee's gesture of self-dedication to God by erecting, or publicly displaying, a material symbol that simultaneously hinted at Christ's death, resurrection, and redemption of mankind **[21]**.[107] In the narratives on the conversion of Armenia and Iberia, the setting up of monumental crosses in prominent places

106 Santos Gener 1944; Gómez Muñoz 2011; Chavarría Arnau 2023. In general on Terrasanta tokens cf. Vikan 2010.

107 Petrosyan 2015.

entailed the latter's sanctification: they marked sites previously occupied by heathenish temples, which holy people – like Saint Gregory the Enlightener or Saint Nino – had purified from devilish presence, and signposted the portions of ground on which martyrs – the most exemplary believers – had been buried and heavenly signs had been manifested. Furthermore, they visualized the distinctive status of locations that were later used for the construction of church buildings.[108]

The use of monumental crosses as landmarks was rooted in Jerusalemite tradition: one – the so-called *tropaion* – was set up on the Mount of Olives, another one on the top of the Rock of Golgotha, and another on the column that marked the centre of the world in the square facing the Northern gate of the city walls.[109] They evoked the instrument of Christ's passion as both a material presence and a theophanic sign, reminiscent of the famous apparition of a "cross of light" in the sky of the Holy City on the 7th of May, 351. This episode, narrated by Cyril of Jerusalem, described a staurophany that revealed, through its miraculous movement from the Calvary to the place of the Ascension,

108 Garibian 2009, pp. 207, 222–223.
109 Bacci 2021b.

the special status and interconnectedness of two holy spots marking the cityscape.[110] Its widespread renown had a special impact on the rhetorical construction of the sacred authority that was attributed to the main spiritual (and political) centres of Armenia and Iberia – Vagharshapat and Mtskheta.[111] Both were said to be worthier of worship than other places and to owe their distinctive status to forms of site-bound holiness that had been revealed through epiphanies of heavenly light.

According to the fifth century text attributed to Agatʻangełos, known in multiple versions and several languages, Saint Gregory the Enlightener was shown in a vision the future locations of the main *loca sancta* in Vagharshapat. A column of fire, standing on a golden pedestal, surmounted by a luminous, *kavod*-like cloud, and topped with a cross of light, stood in the town centre, in the very spot where the Holy Ējmiatsin cathedral was to be erected. Similar columns appeared on the sites where the holy virgins Hṛipsimē and Gayanē had been martyred by King Trdat, who, for this reason, had been transformed into a boar. A fourth one stood in the place known as the "winepress", where the holy women had been hidden before being put to death.[112] The message was clear: once again crosses were set up in fulfilment of the prophecy (Isaiah 11:12) that foresaw a sign triumphing over the Gentiles, "that is", as Gregory himself explained to Trdat, "the saving cross on which the Lord Himself hung and from which He effects life for the world".[113]

The sites were first marked with open-sky crosses and, after the saint's consecration as a bishop, with built structures that framed and orchestrated different cultic phenomena. The first one was the town main church and see of the highest ecclesiastical authorities, located close to the royal residence. Reconstructed many times between the fourth and the fifteenth century, it owed its special dignity to its designation as the "holy Katʻoghikē" and the "mother church" of the Armenians, whence the new faith had been transmitted throughout the country: in its foundational role, it appropriated attributes that were proper to the Jerusalem Holy Zion.[114] The three further spots that gave shape to Vagharshapat's topographic network were, according to Agatʻangeghos, monumental markers of the women martyrs' exemplary deeds: they signposted where they had been arrested and where they had been sentenced to death, in much the same way as the Gethsemani garden and the Rock of Golgotha reminded believers of Christ's Passion. Unfortunately, no details are given in old texts about the spatial-architectural, sensorial, and performative ways in which such memorial associations were conveyed to visitors. Some specific

110 Heid 2001, pp. 106–168; cf. Gassmann 2016.

111 Garibian de Vartavan 2009, pp. 159–167, 251–256; Mgaloblishvili/Gagoshidze 1998, pp. 44–45; Gagoshidze 2012, p. 58; Hoffmann/Wolf 2018, pp. 22–30.

112 Agatʻangełos [Thomson 2010], pp. 337–352.

113 *The Teaching of Saint Gregory*, i.e., the Enlightener's explanation of Christian faith to King Trdat occupies a long chapter in Agatʻangełos' *History*. See the passage in Thomson 2001, p. 201.

114 Kazaryan 2007; Garibian de Vartavan 2009, pp. 283–346.

form of *mise-en-scène* must have been worked out, especially if the places did not originally include tombs, as some sources, hinting at a common burial located elsewhere, seem to imply.[115] Consequently, the reconstruction of Saint Ḥṛipsimē – and probably also Saint Gayanē – promoted by Catholicos Sahak (387–438) can be suspected to have been instrumental to the translation of the saints' relics to the corresponding places of martyrdom. In this way, worship was refocused towards underground burial chambers **[22]**, made accessible through the upper church buildings, which, in their present, central-planned shape, date from the seventh century.[116] As in many Palestinian *loca sancta*, the sensation of facing the sacred was enhanced by the contrast between the dark, tiny dimensions of lower, cave-like environments and the sumptuous appearance of the sacred spaces giving access to them.

Epiphanies of divine light and heavenly signs also revealed the holiness of Mtskheta, whose network of *loca sancta* was established, according to the traditions transmitted by the corpus of texts relating the conversion of Georgia (*kartlis tskhovreba*), by Saint Nino, the evangelizer of the country. A central position was given to Svet'itskhoveli Cathedral, the mother-church erected in the royal gardens and designed as the town's "Holy of Holies" and "Great Zion". It was said to stand on a site whose ground had been sanctified by the superlatively holy relic – the chiton of Christ – that had been buried in it by the Jew Elioz with the corpse of his sister Sidonia. The supernatural virtue that the cloth had acquired by contact with the Lord's incarnated body was transmitted to the soil, which gave birth to a Biblical tree, a cedar of Lebanon which was used for the construction of the first Christian sacred space in Georgia. The seventh pillar carved out of this tree was the protagonist of a miracle: animated by Nino's prayers, it rose upwards as a column of fire and then re-descended to its base.[117] Thus, it came to be viewed as a vertical axis connecting earth and heaven in much the same way as the pillars seen by Gregory the Enlightener, but unlike its Armenian parallels it was also a material object and a topographic marker, which was soon transformed into a focus of worship. Since its hallowed wood had the power to heal sick people through touch, it became immediately evident that its physical accessibility had to be limited: therefore, it was concealed in a wooden structure, whose function is currently perpetuated by the tower-like masonry building **[23]** erected on the site by Catholicos Nikoloz VII (1678–1688).[118]

The other *loca sancta* included the Jvari hill, marked by a monumental cross whose open-sky, dominating location was divinely revealed through unusual astronomic signs: it drew pilgrims, who believed

115 This is hinted at by the fifth century *Buzandaran*, ed. Garsoïan 1989, pp. 86–87, and the historic work by Movses Khorenatsi, variously dated between the fifth and the eighth century, ed. Mahé 1993, p. 271.

116 Donabédian 2008, p. 25; Kazaryan 2012–2013, vol. I, pp. 290–324, vol. II, pp. 138–163.

117 *Life of Saint Nino* [Lerner 2004], pp. 176–180. In the late fourth century, Bishop Gelasius of Caesarea (Gelasius of Caesarea [Wallraff *et al*. 2018], pp. 152–153) describes the miracle as the simple levitation of a wooden column, without any epiphany of light. Cf. Bulia/Janjalia 2006, pp. 91–94; Plontke-Lüning 2007, pp. 156–161; Chkhartishvili 2009; Gagoshidze 2012; Mgaloblishvili 2013, pp. 15–23; *Eadem* 2014; Hoffmann/Wolf 2018.

118 *Life of Saint Nino* [Lerner 2004], pp. 179–180. On the present structure cf. Bulia/Janjalia 2006, p. 93.

[22] Burial chamber of Saint Hṛipsimē, church of Saint Hṛipsimē, Vagharshapat, Armenia, 5th century

in its miraculous efficacy, from both Armenia and Iberia.[119] Another major focus of worship was the suburban site where Saint Nino had lived in a thorny bramble bush and performed healings: there she had made a cross from a branch of vine, tied with her own hair, which she erected below the bush.[120] The latter's site, now included in the enclosure of the Samtavro Monastery, was marked with a quadrangular, domed chapel **[24]** which, despite its later restorations, may date back to an early phase of Christian architectural activity in the country. The nearby church housed the saint's cross as its most important

119 Plontke-Lüning 2007, p. 142; Mgaloblishvili 2013, pp. 25–33; Bacci 2016, pp. 210–213; Schrade 2018, pp. 121–123.

120 Leont'i Mroveli [Jones 2014], pp. 52, 62.

[23] Tower-like structure marking the site of the "Life-Giving Pillar", Svet'itskhoveli Cathedral, Mtskheta, 17th century

relic (now preserved in the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi).[121] If compared to Vagharshapat, this sacred topography, which was later enriched by minor spots whose denominations explicitly hinted at the Holy Land (e.g., Bet'lehem or Gethsemani), was characterized by cult-phenomena focused much more on hallowed objects and memorial indicators of sacred events, than on the sanctified bodies of martyrs, which were nevertheless introduced in a later phase.

Neither Vagharshapat nor Mtskheta were meant to rival or replace the Holy City in its role as the main goal of Christian pilgrimage: rather,

121 Bulia/Janjalia 2006, pp. 94–96; Donabédian 2008, p. 29.

they gave shape to local networks of holy sites whose cultic authority was rhetorically vested with, and legitimized through, Jerusalemite associations. Occasionally, such associations could be reinforced through the display of visual, architectural, and topomimetic devices evoking material features of the Holy City: it has been suggested that the placement of the four major *loca sancta* in the urban plan of both the Armenian and Iberian capitals may have been intended to mirror that of the Holy Sepulchre, Holy Zion, Gethsemani and Eleona churches,[122] and the Albanian king Vach'agan III is assumed to have promoted the construction of underground graves of saints structured like the Tomb of Christ.[123] Be this as it may, such developments bear witness to the widespread belief that special spiritual advantages may be gained only in some distinctive places, which owed their sanctity to either theophanic irruptions of the divine or physical contact with living or dead holy people. It has been assumed that *martyria* and other memorial structures dotted so much the territory of early Christian Armenia, that the mostly central-planned and domed church-types associated with them eventually became common even for buildings deprived of any "locative" function.[124]

The success of the monastic movement entailed an increasing perception of landscape as carrier of distinctive meanings. Valleys, deserts, and mountains chosen as permanent dwellings by hermits and monks were turned into material metaphors of the Heavenly Zion.[125] Hallowed by their holy inhabitants, such areas were perceived as anticipations of Paradise on earth, and, since they quite often preserved the hallowed bodies of the most illustrious among the community members, they were also often regarded as important goals for pilgrimage by both religious and lay people. An exemplary case is the rock-hewn laura founded by David of Gareja in the desertic mountains of Eastern K'akheti in the sixth century, whose cultic focus was, from the ninth century onwards, the saint's burial chamber annexed to the main church of the lower monastery building, close to the cave where he had spent his life. Going there meant enacting a kinetic, embodied experience that involved all the five senses: visitors approached the site not without a big physical stress, penetrated the church space, prostrated before the grave, inserted their arms into a hole in the hope of touching the saint's body, glanced at the space, and literally incorporated the site's blessing, as reported in hagiographic literature, by inhaling the dust deposited on the tomb.[126] A special status was also attributed to the dwellings of saintly ascetics, as in the notable case of the tower-like "pillars", elevated in open-sky environments, which signposted the abodes of old Georgian stylites.[127]

[24] Memorial chapel of Saint Nino, with later additions, Samtavro Monastery, Mtskheta, Georgia, 4th–5th century (?)

122 Garibian de Vartavan 2009, pp. 276–280.
123 Petrosyan 2021.
124 Garibian 2023. Cf. the characterization of "classical" seventh-century Armenian architecture as "the realm of the dome" in Donabédian 2008, pp. 101–204. See also Kazaryan 2012–2013, vol. III, pp. 8–70.
125 Bacci 2022.
126 Skhirtladze 2006, *passim* and p. 107 on the ancient pilgrims' experience of the site.
127 Gagoshidze 2015; Loosley 2018, pp. 85–102. Cf. also Thomas Kaffenberger's essay in the present book.

Locative approaches to the holy were not alien to Islam, the other major religious tradition in the Caucasus. Everyday practice requested only spatial structures – the mosques – enabling prayers correctly oriented toward Mecca, which was viewed by many thinkers as the only *stricto sensu* holy site. Nevertheless, the charismatic aura surrounding people who distinguished themselves for their teachings, preaching activities, and ascetic life, especially in the many Sufi circles diffused in the Turkish and Iranian lands, convinced many believers that paying honour to their tombs was not only legitimate, but also spiritually advantageous. The territory of Azerbaijan came thus to be dotted with *pirs*, tombs of honourable people which were not infrequently marked with central-planned, domed buildings.[128] A much more radical commitment to promote site-bound worship characterized some of the Kurdish tribes that settled in Eastern Armenia, especially in Aragatsotn, from the fifteenth century onwards, and adhered to the Yezidi faith. In this tradition, no exclusively congregational spaces were ever made use of. Rather, devotion, both individual and collective, is regularly addressed to either burial or memorial places, usually marked with central-planned mausolea covered with conical domes,

128 Ne'met 1992.

which are expected to be physically experienced through touch, kisses, and prostrations. Worship is also focused on the houses of sheikhs and pious people, as well as elements of nature, such as caves, trees, and springs. Furthermore, every believer hopes to fulfil a pilgrimage to the valley of Lalish, in Northern Iraq, at least once in life. The latter is understood as a semi-divine environment, whose major focus is the shrine of Sheikh ʿAdī, a twelfth-century Sufi master venerated as the spiritual founder of the community: the most important yearly festivals are performed in the vicinity of his tomb.[129]

In 2021 an Iraqi sheikh promoted the construction of a new place of worship in the small village of Rya Taza, near Alagyaz in the Aragatsotn province of Armenia **[25]**. In the absence of a saint's body, the place was consecrated with earth from the Yezidi holy land, preserved as a relic in a glass case behind the altar. Such a *translatio Lalish* enabled the local community to transform a simple building, by virtue of synecdoche, into a place worthy of extraordinary devotion. In this case, as in many others before it, the locative approach prevailed on the ritual one in the experience of the "more than human" sphere that human cultures constantly seek to achieve.

[25] Yezidi temple, Rya Taza, Armenia, 2021

129 Açıkyıldız 2010.

GENDERING SACRED SPACE IN EARLY GEORGIAN CHURCHES

Natalia Chitishvili

From the earliest period of Christianity, the church interior was divided into sectors to provide separate space for the congregation based on secular and ecclesiastical status, gender, or other factors, such as catechumens and penitents. The eastern portion of the church, in particular the sanctuary, was unequivocally reserved for the clergy. The congregational space of the church was mainly divided among laymen, and assigned to separate groups. Some parts of the worship required the presence of clergy in the main space of the church, mainly in front of the sanctuary, and thus, during the service, the clergy also occupied certain segments of the space which were not accessible to the parish. Accordingly, the laity was given a place in the western section of the church, in the upper gallery (if the building had one), and in the northern and southern parts, depending on the architectural type of the building.

Segregation of parish by gender is a more or less well-studied subject in Byzantine scholarship, especially for the examples of Constantinople and Syria, for which there is more textual and archaeological material. Regarding late Antique or Medieval Georgia, the division of the congregational space in this region is more difficult to discuss.[1] Therefore, the evidence from different parts of Christendom – both written and archaeological sources – is essential to make comparisons and conclusions regarding the situation in Georgia, especially material coming from the regions which had strong political, religious, and cultural connections with the South Caucasus.

The aim of this article is to investigate how congregational space was arranged during the liturgy and to assess the diversity of liturgical planning in the early churches of the Kingdom of Iberia (East Georgia). The main focus will be on domeless architecture (single-nave churches and basilicas) dated to the fifth and sixth centuries. Before starting my discussion of the Georgian churches, I will first briefly discuss relevant written sources and archaeological evidence.[2]

"SINCE YE ARE NOT SO MINDED, OUR FATHERS THOUGHT IT NECESSARY BY THESE BOARDS TO WALL YOU OFF"

In one of his homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, delivered while he was still serving as a presbyter in Antioch, John Chrysostom addresses his male congregation to point out that there was no segregation by gender in the Church of Christ during the times of the Apostles, when both men and women gathered and prayed together. He tells his audience that the barriers dividing the parish were introduced sometime later in order to prevent the members from being distracted by the opposite sex and to discourage inappropriate behaviour in the church:

1 On the division of congregational space in Georgia in the Middle Ages, see: Chitishvili 2013; *Eadem* 2014.

2 For discussion and literary sources on gender segregation in church space, see: Taft 1998; Berger 2011, pp. 52–66.

> "It were meet indeed that ye had within you the wall to part you from the women; but since ye are not so minded, our fathers thought it necessary by these boards to wall you off; since I hear from the elder ones, that of old there were not so much as these partitions; 'For in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female'. And in the apostle's time also both men and women were together. Because the men were men, and the women women, but now altogether the contrary; the women have urged themselves into the manners of courtezans, but the men are in no better state than frantic horses."[3]

This passage clearly indicates that the tradition of gender segregation in Antioch was already accepted practice, and the interior of churches in that region had been arranged with proper dividing tools. Whether the Antiochian practice of using barriers for division was introduced by John Chrysostom in Constantinople, when he became a bishop there, is unknown; but these divisions are archaeologically confirmed by the mid-fifth-century basilica of St John Studios, as well as the mid-sixth-century Bayazit Basilica A, with aisles separated from the nave by barriers.[4]

The earliest evidence of the practice of gender segregation, as preached by John Chrysostom, goes back to the early third century: namely, the text known as *Apostolic Tradition* (217–235) clearly says that women – both baptized and unbaptized – should gather separately from men. It further decrees that, after the prayer, the baptism candidates are not allowed to exchange the kiss of peace; only the baptized are allowed to kiss each other, but even in this case, "men with men and women with women. But let not men embrace women".[5] A more detailed division is reflected in the Syriac text of the end of the third century, *Didaskalia Apostolorum*. According to the text, women should stand behind men. Moreover, it gives instructions on the placement of people in the space of the building according to age and marital status:

> "It should be, that in the eastern part of the house the presbyters sit with the bishops, and next the laymen, and then the women [...] And let the children stand on one side, or let their fathers and mothers take them to them [...] And let the young girls also sit apart; but if there be no room, let them stand up behind the women. And let the young women who are married and have

3 John Chrysostom, *Homilies*, ed. Schaff 1908, p. 443.
4 Peschlow 2006, p. 55.
5 White 1997, p. 64.

children stand apart, and the aged women and widows sit apart."[6]

Neither do the *Apostolic Tradition or Didaskalia* describe the situation in any particular building used by Christians at the time, nor do they tell us how ecclesiastical space was divided in any particular church. Instead they rather give general instructions on what separation should entail. This is important because how and in what way these instructions were actually implemented in a particular church, with its specific architectural design, remains a key question.

Teresa Berger, in her book dedicated to gender and liturgical life in the Early Christian church, mentions among other sources the *Procatechesis* of Cyril of Jerusalem, who speaks about separation by gender and uses Noah's ark as an example.[7] The text says:

> "Let men be with men, and women with women. For now, I need the example of Noah's ark: in which were Noah and his sons, and his wife and his sons' wives. For though the ark was one, and the door was shut, yet had things been suitably arranged. If the Church is shut, and you are all inside, yet let there be a separation, men with men, and women with women: lest the pretext of salvation become an occasion of destruction. Even if there be a fair pretext for sitting near each other, let passions be put away."[8]

Berger discusses another, more elaborate apocryphal Syrian text known as the 'Cave of Treasures', which also mentions gender division in the Noah's Ark as a blueprint for segregating church congregations. The text's exact date of creation is unknown: presumably, it was written in the sixth century, and based on an earlier fourth-century text.[9] According to the text, Noah's ark had two entries from one side: one door to the east was assigned to men and another one to the west for women:

> "At sunset Noah and his sons went into the Ark, on the east side of [the third storey], and his wife and the wives of his sons went to the west side. And the body of Adam was deposited in the middle of the Ark, wherein also all the mysteries of the Church were deposited. Thus, women in church shall be on the west [side], and men on the east [side], so that the men may not see the

6 *Ibidem*, p. 82.
7 For more discussion, see Berger 2011, sp. pp. 58–60.
8 Cyril of Jerusalem, ed. Schaff 1894, p. 4.
9 For an overview of differing opinions about the date of the text, see Minov 2016. Since its creation, the Syrian text has been translated into a range of languages (Armenian, Coptic, Arabic, Ethiopian), including Georgian. The earliest surviving Georgian manuscript dates back to the fifteenth or sixteenth century (see K-128, Kutaisi State Historical Museum, in Gloveli 2015, p. 100); but as a linguistic analysis of the text shows, the Georgian text was translated in the ninth or tenth century from the Arabic version, which was translated in turn from the Syriac. Kurtsikidze 2007, pp. 23–24.

> faces of the women, and the women may not see the faces of the men. Thus, also was it in the Ark; the women were on the west [side], and the men on the east [side], and the body of our father Adam was placed between [them] like a raised stand (or throne). And as quietness reigneth in the Church between men and women, so also peace reigned in the Ark between the wild beasts, and the feathered fowl, and the creeping things (or reptiles)."[10]

Next to the sources which speak clearly about the transverse division of the liturgical space, there are sources showing a different arrangement of congregational space, attesting to the existence of different traditions and solutions at the same time, which is also confirmed archaeologically. The fifth-century work entitled *Testamentum Domini* proposes a different solution for grouping congregations by gender. The provenance of the text is uncertain: it has been suggested that it originates from Syria, Asia Minor, or Egypt, and as Paul Bradshaw notes, "it has usually been regarded as the last of the church orders to have been written".[11] The text describes the longitudinal division of the church spaces and, based on the sequence of instructions mentioning the positions and gender, we can assume that 'on the right' refers to men's place in the south aisle and "on the left" – meaning the north aisle – for women:

> "Let the house [church] have two porches [aisles], on the right and on the left, for men and for women."[12]

The transversal division by sexes of the congregational space described in the above-mentioned sources, mostly derived from Syria, is perfectly in line with the architectural design of churches found in the region of Syria Prima, as well as some of those in Mesopotamia.

Around 415, the Roman province of Coele-Syria was subdivided into the Byzantine province of Syria Prima, with its centre in Antioch, and Syria Secunda, with its centre at Apamea on the Orontes. Syria Prima was one of the strongest and most important provinces within the Byzantine Empire from a political, religious, social, and economic points of view. By 640, after the battle of the Iron Bridge between the Muslim Rashidun and the Byzantine armies and several other military campaigns, Syria was conquered by the Arabs, and the importance of the region began to decline.[13] Most of the Syrian churches, abandoned after the Arab conquest, fell into disuse instead of being remodelled,

10 Kurtsikidze 1993, pp. 48–49; Kurtsikidze 2007, pp. 86–87.
11 Bradshaw 1992, p. 96.
12 *Testamentum Domini*, ed. Cooper 1902, p. 63.
13 Nicholson 2018, pp. 1440–1442.

and as a result, their architecture and liturgical furnishings have been relatively well preserved.

Syrian ecclesiastical architecture and its liturgical disposition is one of the best-studied subjects.[14] My following analysis, based on these studies, will briefly discuss the churches relevant to our research, with particular attention to the division of congregational space. The group of early basilicas and aisleless churches in Syria Prima share a distinctive arrangement in placing the main doors on one of the longitudinal façades (usually the south wall), as well as a specific organization of the congregational space.

It must be noted that having two doors on the south façade was common for local domestic architecture from which most likely was also applied to Christian architecture of the region.[15] Earlier, from the end of the fourth century onwards, doors had appeared on the west façade, but doors on the south façade were still the main entrances.[16] Widad Khoury and Bertrand Riba, comparing the architecture of Syria Prima and Syria Secunda, observed that one of the main distinctions between the architecture of these two regions is the principle of the door openings. While the very early churches in Syria Prima had doors only on the longitudinal façades, those in Syria Secunda adopted a typical, standardized three-nave basilican plan from the beginning; that is, they had typical door arrangement.[17] Based on the planning of churches in Apamea, which have three doors in the west wall, Sodini has suggested that the parish occupied the space longitudinally, in the aisles, or women occupied the galleries (galleries were an unknown architectural element in the churches of Antioch, but very common in the churches of Apamea).[18]

In Antiochean churches, where there are two doors on the longitudinal façades, the eastern doors are typically wider and higher than those to the west. Furthermore, the door openings cut in the walls coincide with the division of the interior into sections. From reconstructions based on archaeological data (remnants of stone slabs, as well as hollows for fixing the barriers), it appears that the congregational space was divided by barriers into two transverse parts, with each door serving as an entrance into these separate spaces.

As was mentioned above, a door in the centre of the west wall appeared in Syrian churches from the late fourth century onwards. One of the first examples can be considered the church of Fafertin (372). On the one hand, a new architectural arrangement emerged in the vocabulary of Syrian ecclesiastical architecture reflecting the new spacial dynamics of the interior; on the other hand, other elements alongside this door remain unchanged: the two doors on the longitudinal

14 A select bibliography on Syrian architecture and its liturgical disposition includes: Butler 1929; Lassus/Tchalenko 1951; Tchalenko 1953; Kleinbauer 1974; Tchalenko 1979–1980; Descoeudres 1983; Tchalenko 1990; Taft 1995; Pena 1997; Loosley 2003; Sodini 2006; Khoury/Riba 2013; Khoury 2019.

15 Khoury/Riba 2013, p. 47.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 47.

17 *Ibidem*, p. 47.

18 Sodini 1988.

façade, as well as the transversal division of the congregational space, with barriers. Moreover, the importance of the longitudinal doors was not diminished with the appearance of the central western door. They continued to be used as the main entrances; as John Lassus pointed out, this is clear from the intensity of the decoration of these door frames along with their larger size in most cases.[19] One of the examples Lassus brings to illustrate this distinction is the East Church of Kalota (492), where the southern doors are more elaborate and decorated than the western door.[20]

This new architectural detail raises some further questions regarding the circumstances that required it. Since there is not a shred of a written source that could be relevant for understanding how the door was used during the service, there is plenty of space for speculation. My assessment of the evidence begins with the following observation: as the reconstruction of the interiors shows, the western door was accessible only for women, for those who stood in the western part of the church.[21] It seems that the appearance of the west door created an extra area outside the church for those members of the congregation (female catechumens, and penitents) who were usually obliged to leave the service after the reading of the gospel and spend the time outside the building until the liturgy finished. For that function, there existed a gallery attached to the longitudinal façade, where the catechumens and penitents, both men and women, stayed until the end. But in this case, women could stay separately from men in front of the west door, while males could stay in the gallery in front of the longitudinal façade.

The Syrian tradition of arranging two doors on a longitudinal façade and creating a transverse division of the faithful by sex also appeared in the neighbouring region of Mesopotamia. A few examples of such churches show the same arrangement and the same division as the one typical in Syria Prima.

Elif Keser-Kayaalp, in her book on the late antique churches in Northern Mesopotamia, also addresses this issue bringing new archaeological material. One of the most interesting examples was discovered in 2019 in Goktaş (Mardin Province, south-east Turkey), where archaeology has yielded a late Antique hall-type church.[22] Of particular interest in the context of spatial division are the low stone barriers located almost in the middle of the church, dividing the sacred space into two units transversally; these correspond with two door openings cut into the south wall, which would have allowed the congregation to enter separately into the spaces allotted for them. Keser-Kayaalp additionally supports her argument by citing the

19 Lassus 1944, p. 188.
20 *Ibidem*, p. 188. The photos of the church can be seen at https://images.hollis.harvard.edu/permalink/f/100kie6/HVD_VIA8001563360.
21 See the reconstructions by Georges Tchalenko: Tchalenko 1990.
22 Kayaalp 2021, pp. 143–146, Fig. 2.7.8.

church of Mor Dimet in Zaz, where wooden trellises used for the same purpose survived in situ until 2005.[23] The date of these wooden panels is unknown, but even if they were a later addition to the original church, their existence was a testament to a long-lasting tradition.

Two similar hall-type churches in northern Mesopotamia – Mor Azazael at Kefr Zeh, and Mar Cyriacus in Arnas (ca. 700) – feature two doors on the south façade, evidently for gender separation.[24] In these cases, instead of the open side galleries with pillars typical of Syrian churches, one can see an elongated southern compartment with only one entrance, facing the doors allotted for male participants. The parish would have entered the compartment together, as one group, and individuals were then directed towards the doors leading to either the western or eastern parts of the church. Henri Pognon, who visited and described the church of Mor Azazael before Gertrude Bell, noted that in the middle of the congregational space, there was an ambo accessed by stairs from the east and supported by four pillars; he also witnessed a low stone barrier, "à peu près jusqu'aux genoux d'un homme", which accordingly divided the space transversally into two parts to accommodate male and female parishioners.[25]

My last example from the Tur Abdin region is the basilica of Silvan (Mayâfârqin, ca. 410–420, now destroyed). Keser-Kayaalp compares the arrangement of the doors at Silvan with those in Syrian churches.[26] The design solutions found in this case and in the cases of Syrian churches are different, however, not only architecturally but also conceptually. In the Syrian churches, the doors are not next to each other, whereas in the basilica of Silvan the double doors are arranged on the eastern part of the south wall. The Syrian churches are arranged like this to give the parish access into separate parts of the church; but the doors of Silvan Basilica do not provide this separation because they are adjacent (and very close) to one another. The parish entering through these doors would emerge in the same eastern part of the church, close to the sanctuary. To make an argument that this basilica was used in the same way as the Syrian churches, there would need to be doors at some distance from each other, and they would need to lead the parish into different parts of the church. In reading the planning and the spatial division of this basilica from the point of gender segregation, one should instead pay attention to the western wall, where there are two doors leading to the aisles. It may be that in this specific case, a longitudinal division of the church was applied, with each gender group having their own door leading to aisles where they stayed during the liturgy. As for the double doors on the east part of the south wall, these might have been used for special guests or for

23 *Ibidem*, p. 145, Fig. 3.2.6.

24 For Mor Azazael, see Bell 1982, pp. 13–17, 44–47 (wooden bars p. 45), 82, 120–121, Figs 8, 29, pl. 158. For Mar Cyriacus, see Bell 1982, pp. 13–17, 47–50, 82, 99, Figs 9, 34.

25 Pognon 1907, pp. 91–94, sp. p. 91. See also Bell 1982, p. 45, pl. 155; Palmer 1990, p. 135.

26 Bell 1982, pp. 58–60, 124–126, Fig. 40. The date is suggested by Marlia Mundell Mango, who contributed an introduction and notes to Bell's book (Bell 1982, p. 124); Kayaalp 2021, pp. 119–120, Fig. 2.6.2.

clergy who would enter the church very close to the sanctuary, especially as the church most probably served as a cathedral.[27]
Generally speaking, the written sources and archaeological evidence from different regions of Christendom indicate that there was no single established guideline for all churches. Each church had its own solution for distributing the parish within the church according to local traditions and the building's layout. According to the general practice of separation, different parts of the space were arranged and separated by various means, such as stone parapets or wooden bars. The women could have been located in various spaces: first, in the western part of the church, behind the men, a transverse space; second, longitudinally, in the north or south nave; or third, on the upper gallery if the building had one, which does not preclude the presence of female participants on the first floor as well, as sources brought by Robert F. Taft indicate.[28]

[1] View from the north-west, Bolnisi Sioni, Georgia

DIVIDING CONGREGATIONAL SPACE: TRANSVERSE SEPARATION

Domeless plans prevailed in the church architecture of Georgia until the mid-sixth century. Parish churches were mostly aisleless buildings, sometimes basilicas. For cathedrals, the design of the basilica was almost always used.[29] The only exception – late fifth-century domed tetraconch in Manglisi should be explained by its particular function as a martyrium and a pilgrimage church along with its serving as a cathedral.[30] A few other preserved early domed structures are very small and most probably were not intended for regular service.

The majority of the churches have never been thoroughly excavated and studied, which prevents us from investigating their architecture, especially from the liturgical point of view, in depth. As not all of them survived (and even fewer survive intact), it is difficult to speak about their original planning; but the evidence we have allows us to discuss the general liturgical layout of the early churches.

Starting from basilicas, one should note that, obviously, the number of surviving churches does not reflect the original picture. Basilicas were intensively built during Late Antiquity, although, unlike those designing churches in neighbouring Armenia, Georgian builders continued sporadically to use this type throughout the Middle Ages.

The first group of churches I will discuss are located in the region of Lower Kartli (south-east Georgia), in close vicinity to each other: Bolnisi cathedral, and three parish churches in Kvemo Bolnisi, Vanati, and Ak'aurta. All these churches were built in the fifth century (with the latest at the beginning of the sixth century), and are considered among the earliest surviving churches in Georgia. The area where the

27 Bell 1982, p. 124.
28 Taft 1998. For more about galleries, see Zomer 1995.
29 For basilicas and aisleless churches in Armenia, see: Cuneo 1973; Gandolfo 1982; Donabédian 2008, pp. 33–50. For basilicas and aisleless churches in Georgia with earlier bibliography, see: Jabua 2009; *Idem* 2012; Khoshtaria 2023, pp. 14–27.
30 For Manglisi see: Kaffenberger 2018, sp. pp. 210–217; Khoshtaria 2023, pp. 32–35.

churches are located, historically known as Gugark or Gugareti, has a very rich and complicated history. The marchland between Iberia and Armenia was a bilingual and bicultural borderland, with an ethnically mixed population shifting between the two kingdoms.[31] The region is dotted with a vast number of Medieval churches.

BOLNISI SIONI CATHEDRAL

Bolnisi Cathedral is considered the earliest precisely dated church in Georgian architecture **[1]**.[32] According to the main dedicatory inscription located on the lintel above the north-eastern entrance, construction of the church commenced in 478 and was completed in 493. It was initiated by Bishop David, who is mentioned twice on the church's façades. The damaged inscription is reconstructed as follows:

> "With the help of the holy Trinity, in the 20 years of the reign of King Peroz, the construction of this church was

31 For more on the history of the region, see Toumanoff 1963, pp. 467–499, sp. p. 472.
32 Khoshtaria 2023, pp. 15–21.

started, and after 15 years, it was completed. God have mercy on all who show reverence herein, and on the builder of this church David the Bishop, and on all who pray for you, O God, have mercy. Amen."[33]

Bolnisi Cathedral is a three-nave basilica, with five pairs of piers and a projecting semi-circular apse. To the north, the church has an arched gallery with an apse, and to the south a smaller open gallery reconstructed in subsequent periods. The north gallery is connected to the church through two doors, and the south gallery through one door. On the south-east part of the church, there is a two-apse chamber, identified as a baptistery,[34] although it might have served as a multifunctional diaconicon, for keeping liturgical vessels and books necessary for the services, especially if considered that the room has no door from the outside being accessible only from the eastern part of the interior of the church.[35]

The capitals and bases of Bolnisi Cathedral have stone-carved decoration, featuring images of animals (including a bear, hare, bull, lions, birds, peacocks), as well as vegetal and geometric motifs (interlaced circles, crosses). Some of these decorative motifs are well known from the visual vocabulary of Sasanian Iran: the so-called fluttering or floating ribbons, as well as interlaced circles, were widely used in Sasanian coinage and reliefs, revealing the close cultural connections between these two regions.[36]

Through the centuries, the church underwent several renewals and restorations.[37] One of the most extensive restorations, which significantly changed the original design of the church from the liturgical planning point of view, took place in the seventeenth century with financial support from Queen Mariam and King Rostom of Kartli (r. 1633–1658), following heavy damage during the Persian invasion of the region in 1634. The vaults and the upper portions of walls collapsed as well as the galleries on the north and south sides; and the west wall of the church was also severely damaged. The church was restored using bricks for the vaults and hewn stone blocks for the façades that were smaller than the originals, so the repaired parts are clearly distinguishable. One of the main changes made during this restoration was the addition of a new door, cut into the west wall. In the 1680s, according to the inscription on the bell tower, Bishop Nikoloz of Bolnisi commissioned the painting of the church and the construction of a bell tower. With his financial support, the church was also furnished with liturgical installations, such as a chancel barrier, a pulpit for reading scriptures, and an altar canopy, and he donated icons, crosses,

33 On the inscriptions of Bolnisi cathedral see Silogava 1994.

34 Chubinashvili 1940, pp. 128–130.

35 For diaconica and their multifunctionality, see: Mailis 2011.

36 For more about the reliefs, see Dadiani/Khundadze/Kvatchatadze 2017, pp. 12–13, Figs 1–8.

37 In the eighth century, for example, a small chapel was added to the north-east side of the church. Chubinashvili 1940, pp. 59–60.

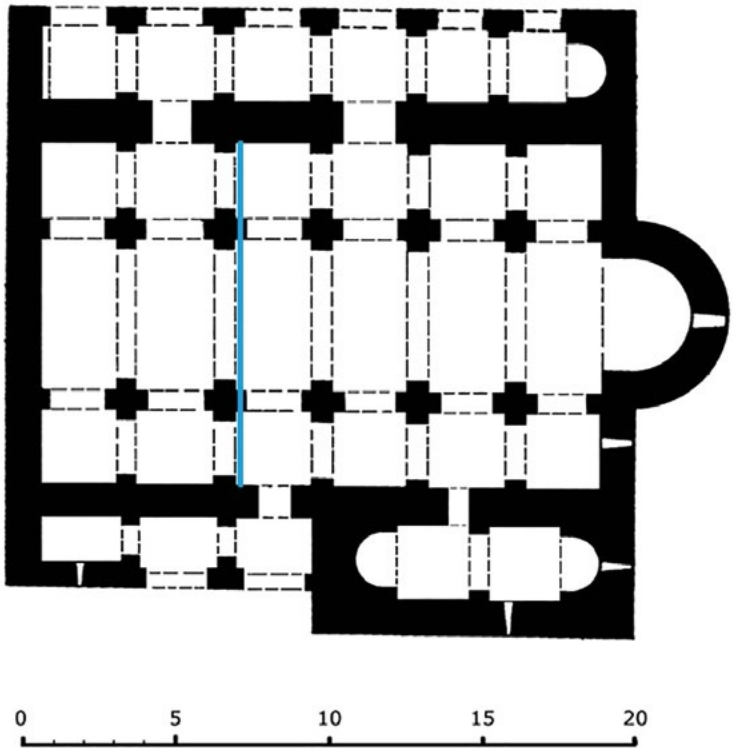
a processional cross, and other liturgical equipment to the church. Unfortunately, none of these liturgical furnishings has survived, although the painting is still visible inside the church, including the image of Bishop Nikoloz himself. In the eighteenth century, the region was under constant threat of invasion by the Lezgins, and this led to the cathedral falling into disuse and ruin. In 1936–1937, the church was cleaned and restored; the most recent restoration was carried out in 1970–1971.

Giorgi Chubinashvili was the first scholar to study the architecture of Bolnisi Cathedral and two other churches – Kvemo Bolnisi and Vanati (see below) – in the context of their interior divisions. He devoted certain passages to this topic in his book on Bolnisi, where he highlighted that the cathedral was initially accessible only from the longitudinal façades and correctly pointed out that the much later (seventeenth-century) addition of a door in the western façade "radically changes the perception of the building and the placement of the parish in its separate naves".[38]

Chubinashvili's perspective on the spatial arrangement of Bolnisi Cathedral can be summarized as follows. First, the north aisle was intended for parishioners of high social status, namely for nobles, because the main entrance was arranged on this side.[39] Second, the south aisle was designed for lower-class members as, in comparison to the arrangement of the north façade, the south door is much lower and is less embellished.[40] Third, the central nave of the church was occupied by the clergy only rarely, and during the service it would have been completely empty, while the parish would have been distributed in the aisles.[41] Fourth, the north and south galleries of the church were intended for baptism candidates, who usually stood in the western narthex – which we do not have in Bolnisi Sioni, so this function was to be performed by the galleries.[42] In addition, the apse in the north gallery was kept for the liturgical needs of the bishop.[43] In other words, Chubinashvili focuses on the division of parish space according to social status and pays a little attention to gender segregation.[44]

Based on my own observation, I want to suggest that the church was bisected by special barriers, along the transverse rather than the longitudinal axis **[2]**. My suggestion is based on the interpretation of archaeological evidence, which helps us imagine the boundary between the spaces for women and men in this particular case. During my observations of the interior, I found rectangular cavities in the western part of the church, both on the longitudinal walls and on the second set of pillars at the west end **[3]**. These cavities are arranged on one level at the height of about 125 cm from the floor (with small variations)[45]

38 *Ibidem*, pp. 22, 143.
39 *Ibidem*, pp. 140–141.
40 *Ibidem*, p. 141.
41 *Ibidem*, p. 189.
42 *Ibidem*, pp. 130–131, 141, 146.
43 *Ibidem*, p. 151.
44 Beridze 2014, p. 59.
45 The shape of the partitions is unknown: they might have looked like crossbeams, but for the central nave, a much larger space would have to be covered. It is uncertain whether there were any brackets on the church floor that would have helped to support the wooden barriers.



[2] Plan, Bolnisi Sioni, Georgia

and are best preserved in the southern aisle and nave. The two hollows in the northern aisle are poorly visible due to the substantial damage sustained on the stones' surface, but the outline is still distinguishable. It should be noted that there are two cavities, one positioned slightly above the other, in the north facet of the southwest pillar, directed towards the central nave. My explanation for this is that the height was changed during the cutting of the lower cavity, and the mason cut a new hole above it at the same level as the others. These rectangular hollows would have been used for fixing wooden barriers, which transversely bisected the congregational space. The only access to this secluded western part of the church was through a door cut into the western part of the northern wall. It is also worth noting that, according to the contemporary inscription carved on the architrave of this door, the door was commissioned by a woman – Azarukht, together with a certain Parnavaz.[46] Chubinashvili considers them a married couple, although the nature of their partnership is not mentioned in the inscription.

In the case of Bolnisi Cathedral, one can talk not only about the division of the congregational space but also about the earliest tradition

46 Shoshiashvili 1980, pp. 69–70. The inscription says: "With the help of Christ, I, Pharnavaz, and Azarukht have attached/hung this door for the prayer of our souls." On women's agency and building activities in late Medieval Georgia, see Natsvlishvili 2020.

[3] Rectangular cavity, Bolnisi Sioni, Georgia

of arranging galleries for different groups of parish members, such as catechumens and penitents. In Bolnisi, this is the gallery stretched all along the north wall, which, as I have mentioned, is connected by two doors specifically arranged to divide the sexes into different spaces. Across both sexes, there were groups of catechumens and penitents who, according to the general rule, were excluded from attending the liturgy after the reading of the Holy Scripture. Grouping them served a purely practical function: on command of the clergy, they would leave the church together, without creating a disturbance among the other faithful, and wait in a nearby space allotted to them (either a

[4] Southern façade, church of St George in Kvemo Bolnisi, Georgia

narthex or gallery) for the end of the liturgy. One can surmise from these dynamics that this group in Bolnisi would stay close to the entrances while remaining inside the church, that is, in the northern aisle, close to the doors. As for the function of the southern door of Bolnisi Cathedral, I suggest its purpose is clear from its location: the door allowed people to enter the central area of the church, which was accessible, as explained above, only to clergy and male members of the congregation, as the barriers dividing the west part of the church from the eastern part would have excluded women's movement from this side. It is difficult to be sure whether the door was used during the liturgy for male baptism candidates and penitents or was somehow connected with the south-eastern diaconicon.

PARISH CHURCHES OF KVEMO BOLNISI AND VANATI

The church of St George is located in the village of Kvemo Bolnisi less than 2 km from the cathedral and about another 2.5 km to the north-east of this church there is another one, called Vanati (dedication

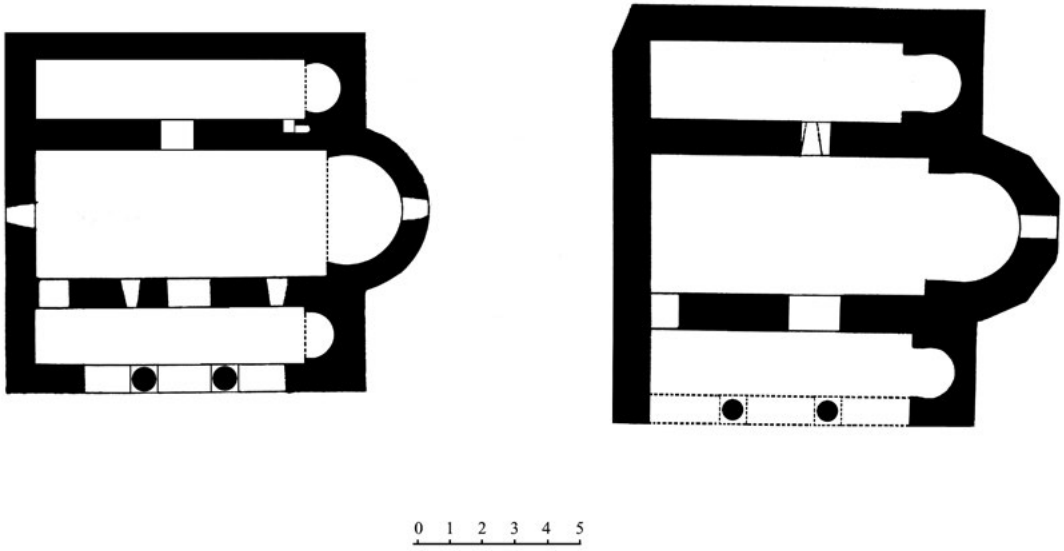
[5] View from the south-east, church of Vanati, Georgia

unknown).[47] The two churches are in different physical conditions **[4, 5]**. Vanati Church is in an extremely poor state: most of the masonry is lost; the barrel vaults are entirely collapsed; the upper parts of the walls are destroyed; and none of the decorative ornaments have survived. The ruined church is partially buried, and it has never been cleaned. In contrast, Kvemo Bolnisi Church is located close to the village; it has survived better and received more attention. In 1938–1939, archaeological works were conducted on the church: its ruins were restored, and several interesting architectural decorative elements were found.[48] The vault and the roofing of the church were entirely restored in the 2010s when the parish church became part of a monastery. Vanati Church still awaits its turn for cleaning and restoration, with the hope that archaeological excavations will unearth important data for further study.

Both churches are very similar in planning, and both are built of green and yellow tufa and sandstone, but they have different architectural elements **[6]**. Both churches have horseshoe-shaped forms,

47 For Vanati, see Beridze 2014, vol. 1, pp. 69–70, and vol. 2, p. 50. For Kvemo Bolnisi, see Beridze 2014, p. 135, tab. 32.1, 33. See also: Khoshtaria 2023, p. 26.

48 Chubinashvili 1970, p. 114.



widely used in the South Caucasus from the fifth to the tenth centuries, after which priority was given to semicircular forms. Kvemo Bolnisi Church has a semicircular protruding apse, while Vanati's apse has a polygonal shape. Based on the architectural remnants, it seems that Kvemo Bolnisi had a dentil cornice, as was typical in late Antique architecture, and that it was illuminated by wide window openings: single windows are cut in the east and west walls, and two windows in the south wall. It is likely that the same arrangement of the windows was also used in Vanati Church.

Subsidiary compartments are attached along the whole length of each church from the south and north sides. The south compartment in both cases was an open gallery (similar to the one in Bolnisi Cathedral), with three arches resting on two columns. The south gallery and the narrow northern room have apses towards the east, without windows.

The main architectural features reflecting the liturgical dynamics of the sacred space are two doors cut in the south walls, the only doors through which this space is accessible. In Kvemo Bolnisi, the doors have horizontal lintels, whereas in Vanati the lintel of the south-east door was finished with a lunette (this architectural element, also used in Bolnisi Cathedral, was one of the main traits of early religious buildings in the South Caucasus). The different door sizes in Bolnisi Cathedral are also repeated in the two churches: the eastern openings are relatively higher and wider than the western doors. Chubinashvili correctly assumed that Kvemo Bolnisi and Vanati churches adopted

[6] Plans of the Churches of Kvemo Bolnisi and Vanati, Georgia

[7] Christ in Glory, lintel of the south-eastern door, Kvemo Bolnisi Church, ca. 500

[8] Glorification of the Virgin and the Child, lintel of the south-western door, Kvemo Bolnisi Church, ca. 500

a transverse division of the congregational space, with the entrances arranged to segregate the sexes within the parish: the big south-east door for men, and the small south-west door for women.[49]

The decoration of the lintels is noteworthy in Kvemo Bolnisi Church.[50] A theophanic composition of Christ in Glory is carved on the eastern architrave: Christ enthroned in a central medallion flanked by two angels (this has been deliberately damaged, and only small parts of the angels' wings have survived) **[7]**.[51] Above the left entrance, there is the Glorification of the Virgin and the Child **[8]**. These reliefs are the earliest depictions of figurative compositions featuring Christ and the Virgin Mary, creating a group of façade decorations with other sixth-century churches (Aiazma Church, Edzani Sioni, and Anchiskhat'i Church), in contrast with the group of other fifth- and sixth-century churches whose decoration is mostly comprised of foliate and animal images (Bolnisi Cathedral, Ak'aurta Church, Ak'vaneba Church, Ts'opi, and Erts'o Sioni).[52]

Besides being the earliest relief images of Christ and the Virgin Mary on the façades of a Georgian church, the location of this ornamentation is also important in connection with the main topic of this article. It is obvious that the two compositions are arranged according to a hierarchy of the figures represented, with the image of Christ on the eastern part and the Virgin Mary on the western. At the same time, this arrangement might also relate to the segregation of male and female groups.[53]

In the 1930s, when Chubinashvili studied a particular group of domeless churches in Georgia, he, based on the shared architectural features, developed a theory regarding the existence of a certain type of churches, which he named *Drei kirchen basilika*,[54] considering Kvemo Bolnisi and Vanati churches as the earliest examples of this typology. Chubinashvili tried to explain the functional purpose of northern and southern "naves" and offered such a supposition:

> "Architecturally, these are just three churches built in a row, which inside are not completely united into a single compositional whole. This form might be explained by the needs of the cult – they had to conduct Divine Liturgy several times a day, and a separate altar was needed for each service."[55]

It might be that these two churches in question served as a model in developing certain architectural type, but it is problematic to extrapolate liturgical practice based on the available evidence. These

49 *Ibidem*, sp. p. 110.

50 For the reliefs, see: *ibidem*, p. 114, tab. 26–27; Dadiani/Khundadze/Kvatchatadze 2017, p. 14, Figs 22, 23.

51 Chubinashvili 1970, p. 114.

52 For these reliefs, see Dadiani/Khundadze/Kvatchatadze 2017, pp. 13–14, Figs 12–26.

53 In relation to Kvemo Bolnisi, the sixth-century mosaic below the clerestory windows of Saint Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna provides an interesting comparison. To the south, a group of male martyrs is represented heading towards the enthroned Christ, while on the north wall a group of female martyrs is walking towards the enthroned Virgin and Child. For more on this composition and others exploring the placement of men and women across artworks of different periods and geographical areas, see Schleif 2005, pp. 207–249.

54 More about this type see: Chubinashvili 1936, pp. 65–68; Baltrušaitis 1941; Chubinashvili 1959, pp. 141–200; Villard 1950; Tumanishvili 2022, pp. 64–67.

55 Chubinashvili 1936, p. 67.

northern windowless rooms each end with an apse to the east, to which the only access is located in the south wall, through which the space is connected with the nave, so the compartments have no separate entrance from outside. My main argument for ruling out the function of this space as a church is the placement of the door and the extremely small size of the apses creating almost no space for clergy to move inside, as it also needed space for an altar table, even if it would have been the smallest one.[56] In Kvemo Bolnisi and Vanati churches, the door connecting the church with the compartment to the north is located across from the main entrance of the church, designated for clergy and male members of the congregation. Considering the strict separation by sex in the churches discussed above, a question emerges. If the northern rooms had served to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, would it not be logical to build two doors there, so as to keep the strict segregation so clearly shown in the main space? Most likely, northern rooms in Vanati and Kvemo Bolnisi had an auxiliary function as a multipurpose *diaconicon*, the size and location of which varied widely in the early period, depending on the liturgical traditions and architectural peculiarities of a given region.

AK'AURTA PARISH CHURCH

The last church from this group is located in Ak'aurta **[9–10]**, approximately 16 km to the north-west of the churches I discussed above (or approx. 10 km linear distance). This parish church has sustained several restorations over the centuries, losing its original roofing, the upper portion of the walls, and, most importantly, the whole western wall, including the western portion of the southern and northern walls. The church was restored at the very end of the nineteenth century, during which the lost western portion of the church was rebuilt without any trace of the previous structure.[57]

The earliest scholarly evaluation of the church was published by Levan Rcheulishvili in 1948.[58] By that time, due to several restorations over the centuries, the church's original architectural concept had already been lost. It was in an advanced state of dilapidation (the roofing had disintegrated, as had the piers dividing the space into three naves). In his study, Rcheulishvili did not question the planning of the building and perceived it as an aisleless church, drawing parallels with the same type of Syrian churches, such as N1, 3, 4, and 6 in Il-Umtaiyeh, and the church in Umm is-Sneneh.[59] Later, in the 1970s, small archaeological excavations took place inside the church (under the direction of the architect-restorer Rusudan Gverdtsiteli), yielding three pairs of rectangular piers, which confirmed the original basilical planning

56 I am strongly convinced that this factor must be considered when discussing the function of the spaces in this group of churches, which might be treated and grouped as different variations of an aisleless church, with several examples also known in the neighbouring northern part of Armenia. Moreover, one should take into account that not in all cases of this type of church is a table preserved, and even if there is a table, the identification of it with an altar is debatable. Most likely, these spaces arranged around the main core of a church were used as subsidiary rooms for minor rituals when there was no need to enter the sanctuary and perform the liturgy and bloodless sacrifice over the altar table.

57 Ak'aurta Church was already in a poor condition and abandoned by the end of the nineteenth century. The initiator of the restoration was Nikoloz Arghunishvili-Mkhargrdzeli, a local landowner, and founder member of the Society for the Spreading of Literacy among Georgians. Ak'aurta Church, which he restored around 1900, was in the possession of local ethnic Armenians who served the liturgy there.

58 Rcheulishvili 1948, pp. 28–34, tab. 13–19. See also Mepisashvili/Schrade/Tsintsadze 1987, p. 87, tab. 237; Beridze 2014, vol. 1, pp. 64–65, vol. 2, pp. 64–65, tab. 14; Plontke-Lüning 2007, pp. 248–250, taf. 3.

59 Rcheulishvili 1948, p. 34, note 2.

of the building.[60] It has been suggested that the church originally had round columns, although nothing has survived.[61] Most scholars have dated the construction as having taken place after the Bolnisi Sioni: Levan Rcheulishvili and Vakhtang Beridze date the church to the turn of the fifth to the sixth century; Annegret Plontke-Lüning has suggested the early sixth century.[62] Rusudan Gvertsiteli gives the date as the second half of the fifth century. Dimitri Tumanishvili has proposed the third quarter of the fifth century for the construction of the church.[63] Considering the architectural elements of Ak'aurta Church, I agree with Tumanishvili in placing the construction of Ak'aurta before Bolnisi.

Thus, Ak'aurta Church was a basilica divided by three pairs of piers into three naves **[11–12]**. On the east end, the church has a protruding polygonal apse, with a horseshoe plan in the interior. Based on a surviving trace of the spring of the arch on the north wall of the apse, it is obvious that the horseshoe shape was also used for the arches dividing the space into naves. Of the interior decoration, only two imposts in the apse have survived, with decoration featuring interlacing circles,

60 The drawings by I. Kalmakhelidze, T. Nemsadze, and A. Tsiklauri dating from the works in 1976 are kept in the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation (Tbilisi, Georgia). I would like to thank archaeologist Ketevan Digmelashvili for sharing information regarding these drawings.

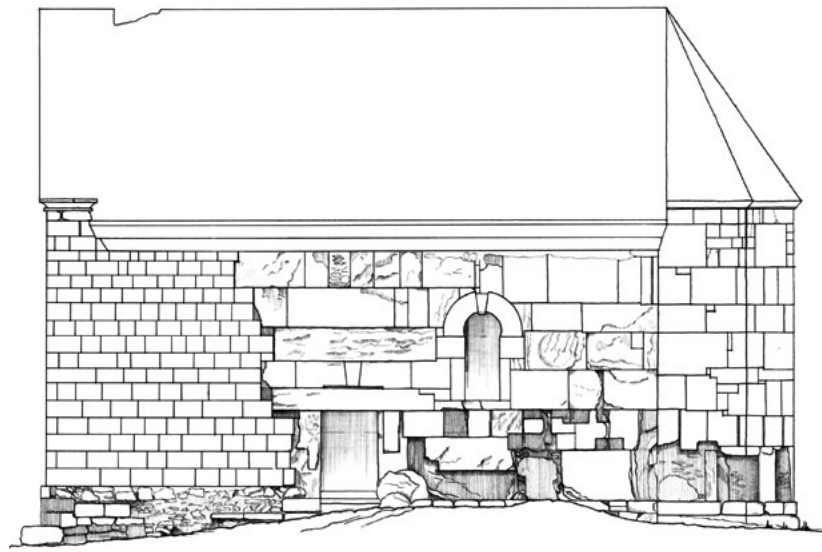
61 Beridze 2014, vol. 1, p. 64.

62 Rcheulishvili 1948, p. 34; Plontke-Lüning 2007, Katalog 2, p. 9; Beridze 2014, vol. 1, pp. 64–65; Gverdtsiteli 2017, p. 68.

63 Tumanishvili 2001, p. 63; *Idem* 2008, p. 105–106.

[9] View from the south-east, Ak'aurta church, Georgia

[10] South façade, drawing by T. Nemsadze, L. Kalmakhelidze, A. Tchikaidze, 1976, Ak'aurta church, Georgia

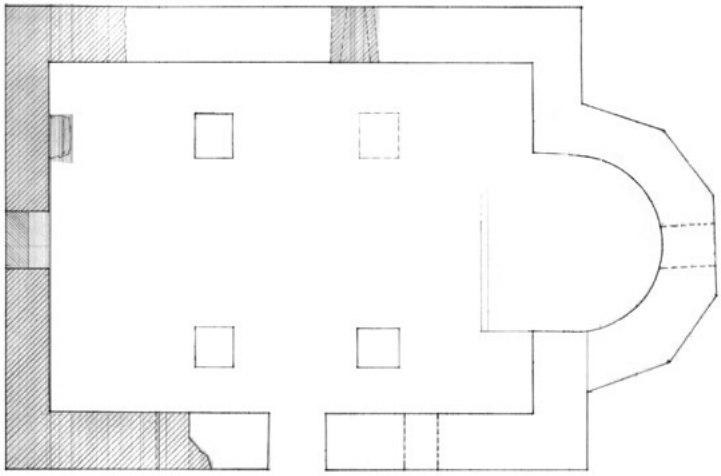


a popular motif at this time. Single windows are cut in all four walls, two of which, the southern and the eastern, are original, wide and horseshoe-shaped. The south façade, from the outset, had two windows, but the one in the western part of the south wall can only be traced by a part of its rounded form.[64]

The façades of the church are mainly plain, but on the main south façade one can still see the relief of a peacock next to the south-eastern window, and the large lintel (337 × 48 cm) above the south entrance is decorated with images of deer and other animals eating fruits from the trees **[13]**.[65] A vertical vine decoration is still visible on the door jambs. Animals and birds eating fruits from the Tree of Life is a popular subject, deeply rooted in pre-Christian beliefs, and venerated and depicted in the visual arts of many cultures. The animals flanking the tree or a cross have the same connotation: salvation and paradise, a favoured theme everywhere, especially in the early Christian period, and the South Caucasus was no exception. One of the best examples to compare with the Ak'aurta relief is in the fifth-century Aparan Basilica (Armenia), where the lintels of the south and west doors are decorated

64 The existence of the south-western window is confirmed by the outer outline of the arch stone that can be seen on the adjacent stone. This detail was pointed out in Rcheulishvili 1948, p. 31.

65 For more on the reliefs, see *ibidem*, pp. 31–33, Figs 18–19. Tamar Khundadze has suggested a different interpretation of Daniel in the Lion's Den for the central image of the lintel. Khundadze 2002; Dadiani/Khundadze/Kvatchatadze 2017, p. 14, Figs 18–21.



[11] Plan, by T. Nemsadze, L. Kalmakhelidze, A. Tchikaidze, 1976, Ak'aurta church, Georgia

[12] Interior looking east, Ak'aurta church, Georgia

[13] Door on the south façade, Ak'aurta church, Georgia

with images of deer and other animals flanking the True Cross, and the background is embellished with fruiting vines in relief **[14]**.

For our research, the most important detail is the original location of the doors; but because of the subsequent restoration works, there is no way of ascertaining this. The original appearance of the western portion of the church is a matter for debate, and as the archaeological excavations did not reveal anything relevant it remains open to discussion.

The fact that the original design of the façades included an additional entrance is based on a surviving lintel stone (237 × 43 cm) now incorporated into the north wall, the masonry of which shows some rough alterations during the centuries. Rcheulishvili thought that the stone had been kept in its initial setting on the north wall, and that the opening had been filled in later.[66] I think, on the contrary, that the lintel was inserted in this place during one of the restorations (the date for this cannot be determined). The surface of the architrave is covered with floral decoration, with remnants of an Asomtavruli inscription carved on the upper frame of the lintel. Most of the inscription has been lost, and only several letters on the left side (the beginning of the inscription) are visible.[67]

The question regarding the original entrances of Ak'aurta Church has never been raised, so this is the first attempt to start a discussion on this topic. Two possible reconstructions might be suggested. Either the south wall had only one entrance, with another located on the west wall, and the nineteenth-century rebuilding repeats the original position of the door; or two doors might have been cut on the south façade. From these two options, I incline towards the latter. As we

66 Rcheulishvili 1948, p. 33. Annegret Plontke-Lüning agrees that the door was on the north façade: she mentions three entrances, one on each side of the southern, northern, and western walls. Plontke-Lüning 2007, Kat. 2, p. 9.

67 The paleography of the letters finds close similarities with the earliest inscriptions from Bolnisi and Urbnisi Cathedrals, which suggests a date in the fifth century: *u(fal)o SeÁwyale ron...d...* [God have mercy on ron... d...]. Shoshiashvili 1980, pp. 71–72.

have seen above, the churches of Bolnisi, Kvemo Bolnisi, and Vanati have a similar disposition on the façades. In the liturgical context, this means that there was a firm tradition of transverse gender separation in this region. The tendency, which is reflected in the abovementioned churches, suggests that Ak'aurta was no exception, and that the south façade featured the same architectonic solution. In this case, there would have been two doors on the main south façade, covered with decorated lintels.

Whatever architectural solution was applied, however, I would infer that the functional aspects of the door arrangement would have been the same. The doors would have served as a tool for the bisection of men and women, relegating men to the eastern part of the sacred space, and women to the west.

DIVIDING CONGREGATIONAL SPACE: LONGITUDINAL SEPARATION

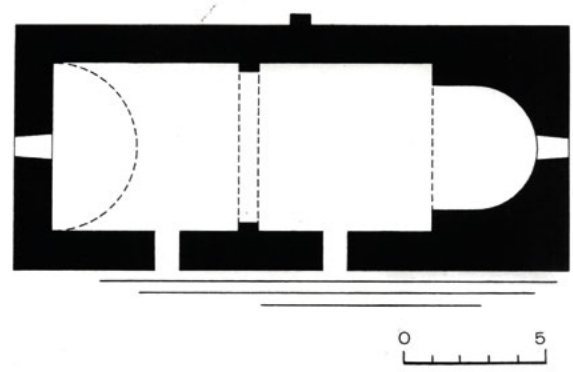
As I have shown, the earliest surviving churches of Ak'aurta (after 450), Bolnisi (478–493), Kvemo Bolnisi, and Vanati (ca. 500), all located in a small area within the southern region of the Kingdom of Iberia, share a similar architectural solution for the liturgical arrangement

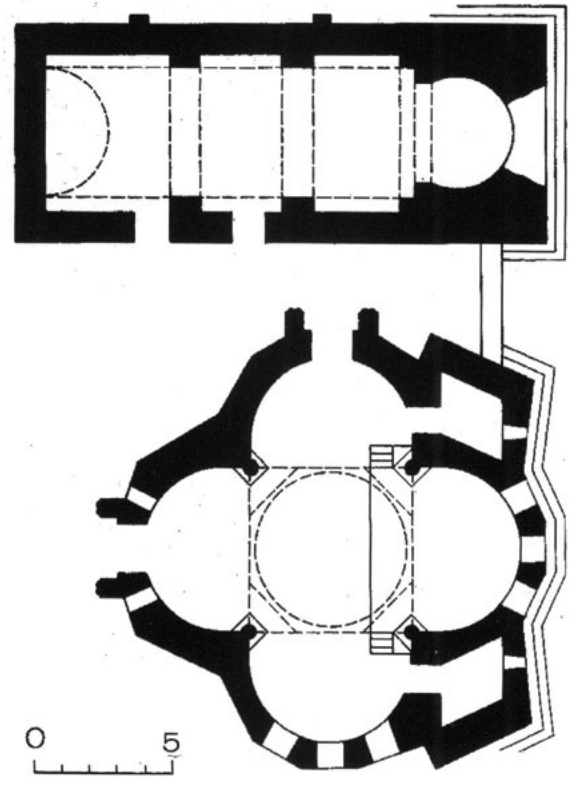
[14] Lintel of the western door, Aparan church, Armenia

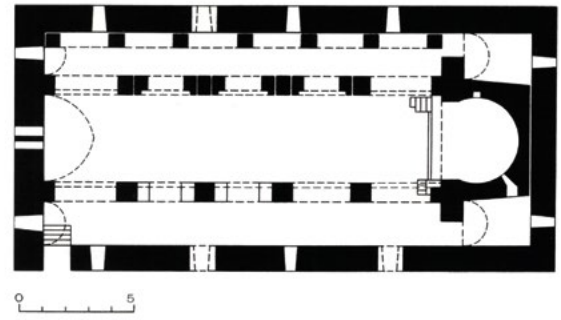
[15] Plan, Church of the Virgin Mary, Avan, Armenia

[16] Plan, Agrak, Turkey

[17] Plan, Tsitsernavank′ church, Azerbaijan







[18] View from the south-west, Church of the Holy Cross, Aparan, Armenia

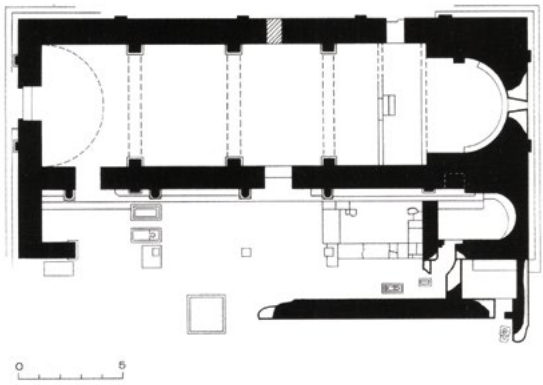
[19] View from the south-west, Yereruykʻ basilica, Armenia

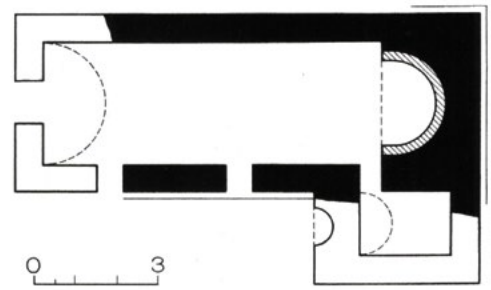
of doors leading the parish and clergy into the congregational space. This door arrangement is also shared with many of the churches in northern Syria. Based on the archaeological evidence at hand, I would say that this particular solution – a longitudinal façade with two doors – was not prevalent in the other regions around Bolnisi. Of course, this does not exclude the existence of the tradition of separation in other parts of the kingdom (see below), but here I am referring to a type of church with a specific façade design: the lack of a door opening in the west wall, and entrances only on the longitudinal wall.

Like the Georgian architectural repertoire, Armenian architecture also features a variety of models for spatial division. For this study, churches with several openings on the longitudinal façade are of particular interest, among them the fifth-century single-nave churches in Avan (dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Ashtarak region, Armenia) and Agrak (Kars region, Turkey) with only two doors on the south façade; and Tsitseṛnavankʻ (now in Azerbaijan), dated to the fifth or sixth centuries **[15–17]**.[68] The latter is distinctive for having three doors on the south wall. The first two openings are located not far from each other, entering into the western portion of the church; the third is closer to the sanctuary, giving direct access to the easternmost part of the church (perhaps intended mainly for clergy). These architectural features allow us to associate these two fifth- and sixth-century Armenian churches with the group of buildings discussed above.

Regarding Syrian church architecture, I mentioned above that a door in the centre of the west wall appeared in domeless churches from the second half of the fourth century, while preserving the same arrangement of doors on the south (and very rarely the north) façade

68 Cuneo 1988, p. 184 (Avan), pp. 440–442 (Tsitseṛnavankʻ), p. 637 (Agrak) (with further bibliography).





[20] Plan, Gaṛni church, Armenia

[21] Plan, Kaṛnut church, Armenia

and the same spatial division of the interior with transverse barriers. Based on surviving sources, it seems that this type was introduced to the South Caucasus in the fifth century. In Armenia, the basilicas of the Holy Cross in Aparan (the so-called K'asagh Basilica) and Yereruyk', and the hall-type churches at Gaṛni and Kaṛnut share this same feature **[18–21]**. In Georgia, only one example, the sixth-century Doloch'op'i Basilica, is known; but this was only discovered in 2004, and of course, there may be more new discoveries in the future, both in Armenia and in Georgia.

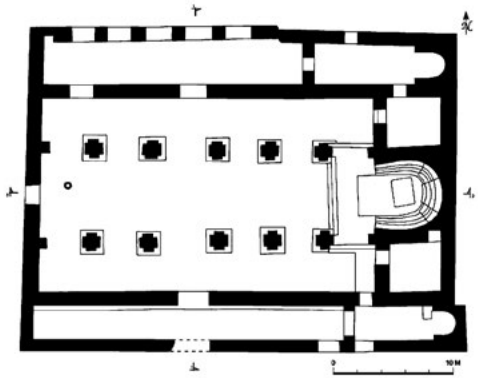
DOLOCH'OP'I BASILICA

The impressive size of Doloch'op'i Basilica[69] clearly indicates that the construction was intended for a large number of parishioners (the length of the building reaches 36 metres, making it the longest basilica known in Georgia) **[22–23]**; it has been suggested that the church served as the cathedral of the Nek'resi eparchy.[70] It is likely that the church was destroyed and abandoned after the Arab invasion of the region sometime in the eighth century.[71] The interior is divided into three naves by five pairs of cruciform piers. What is noteworthy from a liturgical planning standpoint is the arrangement of the eastern part of the church: it shows several architectural solutions which appeared in Eastern Georgian architecture in the sixth century. Parallel with the curvature of the horseshoe-shaped apse runs a synthronon, providing seating for the clergy. This synthronon is elevated by four steps at the sides, and the number of steps increases towards the centre to create an uppermost six-step central tier, presumably designated as the bishop's seat. Furthermore, unlike fifth-century architecture

69 Bakhtadze *et al*. 2018, p. 75. This study suggests that the basilica was constructed in the fourth-fifth centuries. For an alternative date, see Aronishidze 2017. Nodar Aronishidze, based on an extensive analysis of architecture, dates the Dolotchopi Basilica to the middle of the sixth century. See also: Khoshtaria 2023, pp. 23–24.

70 Bakhtadze *et al*. 2018, p. 70.

71 *Ibidem*, p. 89.



[22] Plan, Doloch'op'i basilica, Georgia

[23] View from the south-west, Doloch'op'i basilica, Georgia

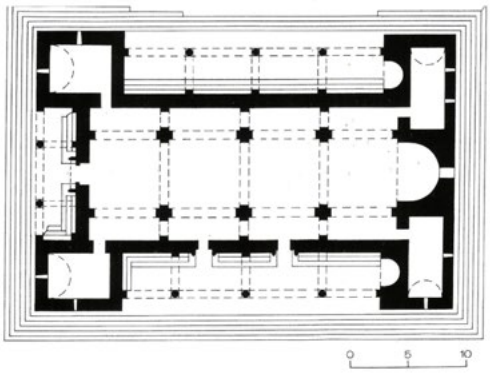
but in common with other later churches, the Doloch'op'i Basilica has a tripartite sanctuary, that is, the apse is flanked with rectangular subsidiary rooms, or pastophories; although during the archaeological excavations, no evidence was revealed to define the specific function of either of them.[72] Doloch'op'i Basilica has five entrances in total: two are located on the north façade, which, as in the case of Bolnisi Cathedral, might have served as the main entrances; in front of these entrances an open gallery with five arches was attached.[73] Along with the abovementioned churches, the north-west door of Doloch'op'i is smaller than the north-east one. There is one door in the centre of the west wall, and two doors on the south wall; one of these is cut opposite the north-eastern door, and the other is located in the extreme south-eastern part of the church, next to a raised stepped platform, or bema, in front of the sanctuary. This suggests that the opening was probably used by the clergy for liturgical needs. A similar arrangement, close to the sanctuary, can be traced in other churches such as the abovementioned Tsitseṛnavankʿ and Eghvard Basilica (ca. 660, Armenia).[74]

Considering the interior space in relation to these entrances and in the context of the abovementioned written and archaeological data, one can assume that the two entrances in the western part of the church (one on the north façade and the other on the west) were intended for women who would have occupied that part of the congregational space, probably including the first two pillars (like the division in Bolnisi Sioni), while men entered through the north-western door cut in the central part and took their place in the interior of the church in front of the womens', closer to the altar. Such a division

72 For more on pastophoria, see Descoeudres 1983.

73 Bakhtadze *et al*. 2018, p. 68, Fig. 56.

74 Kazaryan 2012–2013, vol. 2, pp. 623–635.



[24] Plan, Yereruykʿ basilica, Armenia

[25] Floor elevation of the northern aisle, Yereruykʿ basilica, Armenia

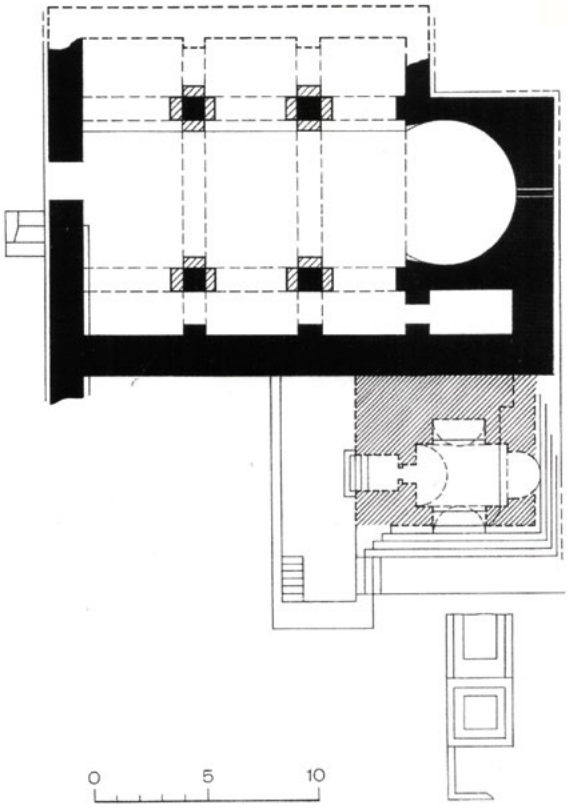
would primarily facilitate the free movement of large numbers of people within the church and prevent interaction between the sexes. It must be emphasized that we do not have any additional archaeological evidence to confirm that there was a transverse division of the space with barriers (as in the Syrian churches, those at Tur-Abdin, and in Bolnisi Cathedral), in the form of cavities cut into the walls, piers, or surviving barriers. From this point of view, the case of Yereruykʿ Basilica (Armenia) is noteworthy.

Many studies have been conducted on Yereruykʿ Basilica, one of the most outstanding and unique monuments in the South Caucasus region **[24]**. These studies have emphasized a strong connection with churches in Syria, in relation to planning, sculpted decoration, and façade design.[75] The date of this basilica is not certain: periods from the late fifth century through the sixth century have been proposed.[76] The basilica most likely featured four tower-like structures, one at each corner. To the north and south, two galleries stretched along the whole length of the façades, terminating with apses at the east. The south gallery is connected to the basilica by two doors, whereas the north one is completely isolated from it, with no entrance into the church from the north façade. The west wall has one more door leading to the central nave of the basilica.

Thus, in Yereruykʿ one can see a typical arrangement for the doors (two on the south wall and one on the west), similar to the group of Syrian churches, which is usually associated with the transverse bisection of the congregation inside the church. What is peculiar in this church, though, is the floor elevation of the aisles **[25]**. Compared with the central nave, both the northern and southern aisles are raised by

75 Cuneo 1988, pp. 234–237; Donabédian 2008; Maranci 2018, pp. 33–35; Donabédian 2021.

76 Patrik Donabédian considers the building to date from the sixth century. *Ibidem*, p. 84.



[26] Plan, Aghts'k' basilica, Armenia

[27] View towards the sanctuary, Aghts'k' basilica, Armenia

34 to 36 cm. In Yereruyk', therefore, despite the exact topography of the entrances also seen in the abovementioned Syrian, Armenian, and Georgian churches, the existence of the elevated side aisles precludes a transverse division of the congregational space. This archaeological evidence leads me to speculate that a different tradition for arranging the congregational areas and, accordingly, different liturgical and spatial dynamics existed here.

Yereruyk' is not the only example of a building with elevated aisles in the South Caucasus. Among the early churches in Armenia, the same solution can be traced in the Aghts'k' Basilica (fifth or sixth centuries), located next to the Arshakid kings' Mausoleum (364) **[26]**. The basilica features only one southern subsidiary room at the eastern end, next to the apse, while to the north, it lacks the *pastophoria*, which is very atypical; at the same time, the northern aisle was raised by around 18 cm compared with the nave **[27]**; there was only one entrance from the west.[77] This arrangement raises questions regarding the importance of the northern aisle, which was not terminated with

77 Due to the disappearance of the original floors from Medieval churches, it is difficult to know how widespread the tradition of raising the floors in churches in Georgia and Armenia was. The case of the church of Holy Sion of Makaravank' (Pemzashen, 1001) indicates that there was a custom for using this technique in later periods as well. The domed church features two peculiar architectural elements that played an essential role in the spatial and liturgical dynamics of the church: the projections of the longitudinal walls on which the dome rests have semi-circular niches looking to the east; additionally, the floors in front of these niches (that is, the floors of the north

a subsidiary room, and was wider in comparison with the southern aisle, thus leaving the aisle exclusively for specific purposes, where the movement from the main space was limited.

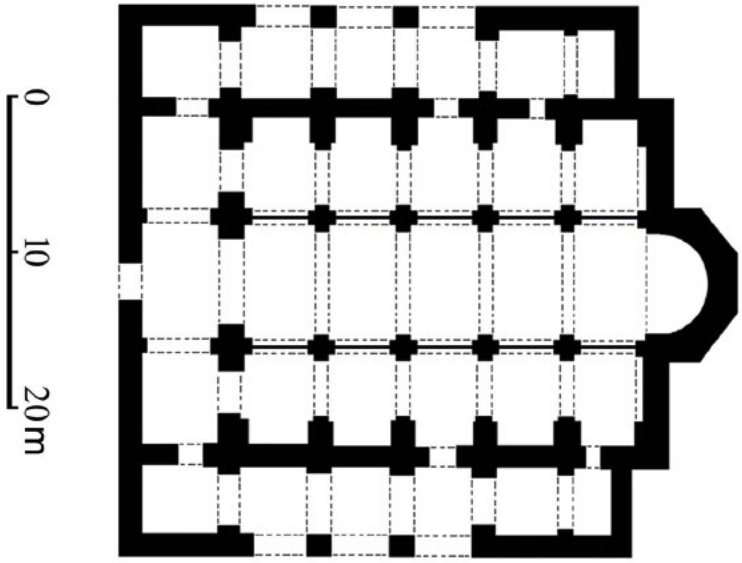
It seems that the elevation of aisles was not unknown for Georgian churches, where the same solution was applied to two churches that have been archaeologically confirmed: Svet'itskhoveli Cathedral (fifth century) and Samtavisi Basilica (sixth century).

SVET'ITSKHOVELI CATHEDRAL AND SAMTAVISI CHURCH

According to Greek and Georgian written sources, the first church in the Kingdom of Iberia was built directly after the introduction of Christianity.[78] These sources narrate the conversion of Iberia (Kartli), and describe the arrival of a captive woman from Jerusalem, named Nino in Georgian sources, in Mtskheta, and her service there. St Nino, seeking the robe of Christ, came to Iberia, settled there, and as a result of her endeavour, the royal court led by King Mirian and his wife Nana, adopted the Christian faith. After that, through the efforts of

and south bays), are elevated compared to the pavement of the main space (by 20 cm). The synthesis of these two architectural and liturgical elements created a specific impression and probably defined designated areas for special members of clergy or laity. The floor elevation of the northern and southern arms of the cross-domed church can be traced also in the church of St Astvatsatsin in Yeghipatrush (thirteenth century).

78 About the conversion of Iberia (Kartli) see: Thomson 2002; Rapp 2003; Lerner 2004.



[28] Plan, Svet'itskhoveli cathedral, Georgia

[29] View from the west, Samtavisi basilica, Georgia

King Mirian, so the story goes, the construction of Christian churches began in the capital city of Mtskheta, and this work was actively continued by his descendants. The very first church, built by order of King Mirian, was erected in Mtskheta in the royal garden; later Georgian sources identify this church as Svet'itskhoveli Cathedral. The most interesting of these sources for our topic is Gelasius of Caesaria. He recounts:

> "During the building, as they were erecting the walls of the house and it remained for the columns to be placed in the middle of the house in order to separate the men and the women who would come [...]"[79]

From the information given by Gelasius, the buiding was a basilica-type church, with the interior divided by means of pillars, and it is noteworthy that he specifically mentions the separation of men and women.

From 1970 to 1972, archaeological works led by the architect Vakhtang Tsintsadze were carried out in Svet'itskhoveli Cathedral, revealing several construction layers beneath the existing building. At some point, the archaeologists also came across to some remnants of the walls, column sockets and ceramic pavement, very close to the so-called Life-Giving Pillar. Given the Georgian written sources describing the first wooden church, these newly revealed data

79 Gelasius of Caesarea [Wallraff *et al*. eds, 2018], p. 151.

made it extremely tempting to connect literary and visual evidence. Tsintsadze dated these newly excavated evidence to the fourth century, identifying them as remnants from the first wooden church built by King Mirian; based on archaeological and textual material Tsintsadze created a detailed reconstruction of what the Mirian church should have looked like.[80] Further archaeological excavations in 2006, however, revealed the fifth-century floor below this layer; which confirmed that the archaeological material could not have dated from the fourth century, and the column sockets were rather the remnants of scaffolding erected during the restoration work carried out on the church in the late Middle Ages. The first church built by King Mirian and described in written sources has therefore not been confirmed during the two archaeological campaigns.[81]

The first archaeological excavation of 1970–1972 uncovered a three-nave basilica with protruding polygonal apse built by King Vakhtang Gorgasali in the late fifth century, and called "Mother of all Churches" in written sources.[82] The church had no pastophories next to the main apse **[28]**. The works revealed original bases for piers, decorated with interlacing circles and floral imagery typical of the period and resembling the ornamentation in other contemporaneous churches such as Bolnisi Cathedral and Ak'aurta. Most notably, the second archaeological campaign revealed that the north and south aisles were raised by one step compared to the nave.

80 Mepisashvili/Tsintsadze 1977, p. 60; Tsintsadze 1987; *Idem* 2011, pp. 9–12; Tchanishvili 2016, p. 42.
81 *Ibidem*, p. 42.
82 Tsintsadze 1991; Khoshtaria 2000; *Idem* 2023, p. 21.

Similar evidence was revealed during the 2005 archaeological excavations carried out in Samtavisi. Next to the extant eleventh-century cathedral, the excavation unearthed a much earlier basilica, where the north and south aisles were slightly raised by one step **[29]**. At both Svet'itskhoveli and Samtavisi, therefore, as in Yereruykʻ and Aghtsʻkʻ basilicas, we are dealing with elevated side aisles. This group of churches shows that there existed a different tradition that implied arranging the congregational space longitudinally. However, due to insufficient archaeological data, it is impossible to determine whether the aisles were separated from the central nave by physical barriers (wooden or stone parapets, as was the custom in other parts of Christendom), or the elevation alone played the role of a notional barrier.

The longitudinal division of the congregational space is also confirmed archaeologically, as well as textually, in other parts of Byzantium.[83] Urs Peschlow, who dedicated an article to the separation of aisles and naves in early Byzantine churches, has assessed a vast amount of archaeological material on the subject.[84] He discusses various arrangements, such as a division with high stylobates (sometimes 50 cm or even more in height), or using barriers inserted in the intercolumniation, or a combination of stylobates and barriers. As Peschlow observed, the division of nave and aisles can be traced through Greece, Asia Minor, Macedonia, the Aegean islands, and also Constantinople.[85] Furthermore, Peschlow considers some cases where the different levels of the floors of the aisles and naves are confirmed. The most relevant example for our case is Basilica B at Latrun, where both northern and southern aisles were raised 19 cm above the central nave.[86] While discussing individual cases to understand the need for separation, Peschlow has additionally addressed the issue of gender division in the space, although, as he notes, the lack of written sources makes "any discussion of the liturgical function of the barriers [...] purely speculative".[87]

From this point of view, the so-called Red Church in Sivrihisar (Cappadocia) is of special interest, a mid-sixth century domed building whose plan is based on a Latin cross.[88] To the north of the west arm, there is a small lateral nave separated from the west arm by three arches resting on two piers. Notably, the church has two doors on the west façade, one leading into the main west arm, and the other leading into the small northern nave. The former is wider and higher than the latter. The abovementioned piers have cuttings which, according to Robert Ousterhout, originally held panels separating this secluded northern part from the main space. The function of this space is a matter for debate, as there is no clear indication of its purpose. It has

83 For textual sources and varieties of the division see: Taft 1998.

84 Peschlow 2006.

85 *Ibidem*. Peschlow disagreed with Thomas Mathews's conclusion that the mid-sixth-century Bayazit Basilica A in Constantinople was the only church in the capital ("an anomalous occurrence") where such a method for division was used. See Mathews 1971, pp. 72–73, 105. Peschlow found confirmation in the mid-fifth-century Basilica of St John of Studios, showing "that the Beyazit church was not unique" in the capital. Peschlow 2006, pp. 55, 69.

86 *Ibidem*. See also Widrig 1978, p. 112.

87 Peschlow 2006, p. 70.

88 Ousterhout 2017, pp. 32, 35; *Idem* 2019, pp. 233, 237.

been proposed that the church served as a memorial church, with a tomb placed in the north arm. According to Robert Ousterhout, "scholars have suggested an association with St Gregory of Nazianzus (who lived ca. 329–390), whose country estate lay somewhere near here, although there is nothing to substantiate this".[89] In this case, I would also suggest that the space was divided to allow the congregation to be segregated by gender.

CONCLUSION

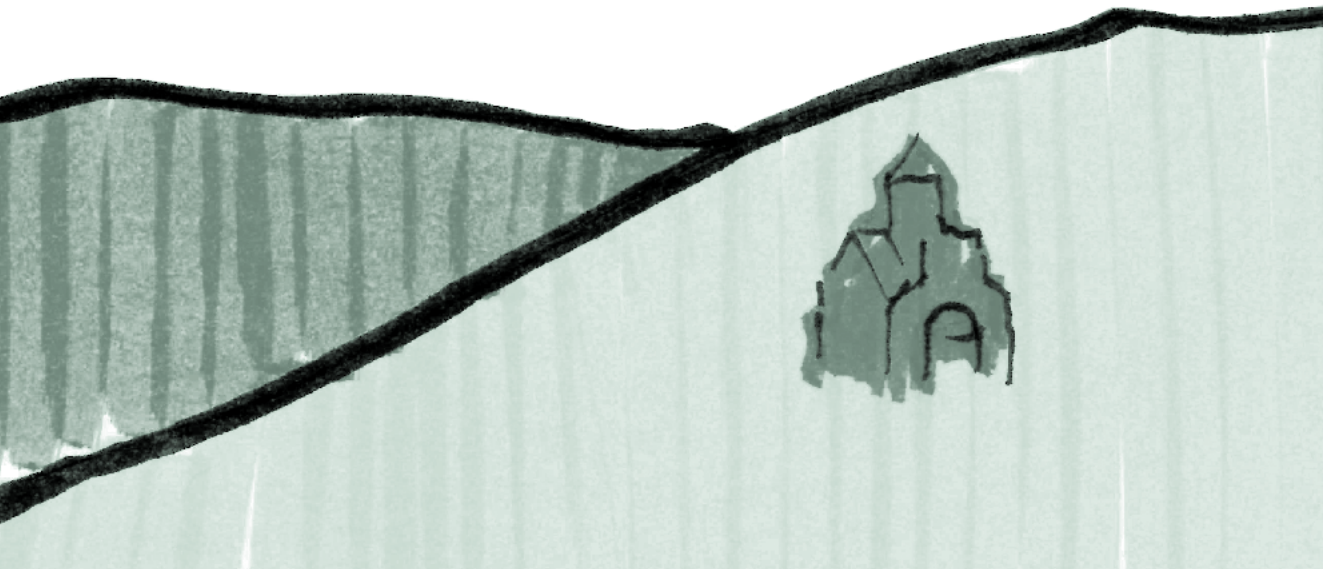
To conclude, this group of early Georgian basilicas and aisleless churches shows two distinct customs for the division of the congregational space. There are, of course, other varieties of door arrangements, depending on a building's size, function, and period of construction, but I concentrate on these cases, supported by the written sources and archaeological evidence from neighbouring regions, because they show an obvious pattern. The picture received from the extant archaeological material demonstrates that the liturgical space of this group of early churches was arranged in two ways, transversely and longitudinally, to allow separation of the genders. The tradition of a transverse division of the congregation by gender in the Gogareni region of the Kingdom of Iberia must have derived from Syria, namely from the region of Antioch. This is no surprise as it is well known that Georgia had tight cultural and religious connections with Antioch in that early period.[90] Built very close to each other in this specific region, these churches show an affinity with the strong Syrian tradition of liturgical gender-segregated practice. On the other hand, the architectural and decorative elements reveal a resemblance to other regions as well, such as Asia Minor or Sasanian Iran, showing that the picture is not so simple and homogeneous. More puzzling is the provenance of the longitudinal division of the space, as this type of division was the most widespread type of arrangement for the faithful inside churches, and was achieved in some cases by a slight elevation of the aisles, which can also be seen in Georgia and in Armenia.

89 *Idem* 2017, pp. 32, 35; *Idem* 2019, p. 237.

90 On the Georgian-Antiochean connections see: Djobadze 1976.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SACRED SPACES IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ARMENIA: LIMINAL EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL EXPECTATIONS WITHIN THE *GAWIT'*

Gohar Grigoryan



I: INTRODUCTION

In Armenian ecclesiastical architecture, a *gawit‘* or *zhamatun* refers to the hall that is adjacent to the west side of the church **[1–5, 14, 19, 31, 33–34]**.[1] In term of its ground plan, the *gawit‘* is a square or rectangular structure. The most common type has four massive columns that support the weight of the interconnected arches and occupy the central space, which is topped by a dome that is not necessarily round in shape.[2] Similar columned halls are widespread in medieval Armenian architecture, and as a result the definitions and interpretations of *gawit‘*s varied in early scholarship. It is by now well established that the *gawit‘* was never a free-standing structure but was always connected to the church. Constructed at the same time or immediately after the church to which it corresponded, the *gawit‘* formed an integral component of the entire church, for which it served as a forehall or antechamber.[3] While the size of the *gawit‘* was comparable to or might even exceed that of the principal church, the latter appears – unsurprisingly enough – as the dominant edifice, having a much higher dome than that of the adjacent *gawit‘*.

What was the purpose of these spacious *gawit‘*s? Since the beginning of the twentieth century, this question has sparked the curiosity of many scholars, who made significant contributions to our understanding of the forms and functions of this element of Armenian church architecture. In his pioneering article of 1911, Toros T‘oramanean called these halls *penitential gawit‘*s (ապաշխարութեան գաւիթներ), referring to the catechumens and unrepentant who gathered there.[4] T‘oramanean, however, left his argument speculative due to the lack of evidence regarding the actual performance of the Armenian rite of penance and because the etymology and simultaneous use of the terms *gawit‘* and *zhamatun*, among other questions, required further research. In the following decades, many of T‘oramanean’s hypotheses were either confirmed or challenged – sometimes independently though – in studies by such scholars as Jean-Michel Thierry, Patrick Donabédian, Paolo Cuneo, Paul Mylonas, Elke Hamacher, and Armen Kazaryan.[5] The only monographic study, authored by Step‘an Mnats‘akanyan in 1952, remains to this day the most comprehensive guide to the architectural development and typological classification of *gawit‘*s.[6] More recently, Edda Vardanyan has approached the subject from architectural, epigraphical, and iconographic perspectives and highlighted the funerary function of *gawit‘*s, tying them to the dynastic interests

* All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. I thank Thomas Kaffenberger for reading and commenting on this article, Julia Oswald for proof-reading it, and Hrair Hawk Khatcherian for sharing his photographs. This article is dedicated to Hrair for his passionate dedication to Armenian cultural heritage and as a token of our decade-long friendship and collaboration.

1 For the use of the terms *gawit‘* and *zhamatun*, see Vardanyan 2015b, pp. 207–224; Garibian 2018. For earlier discussions, see Mnats‘akanyan 1952, pp. 18–22; Mylonas 1990, p. 118.

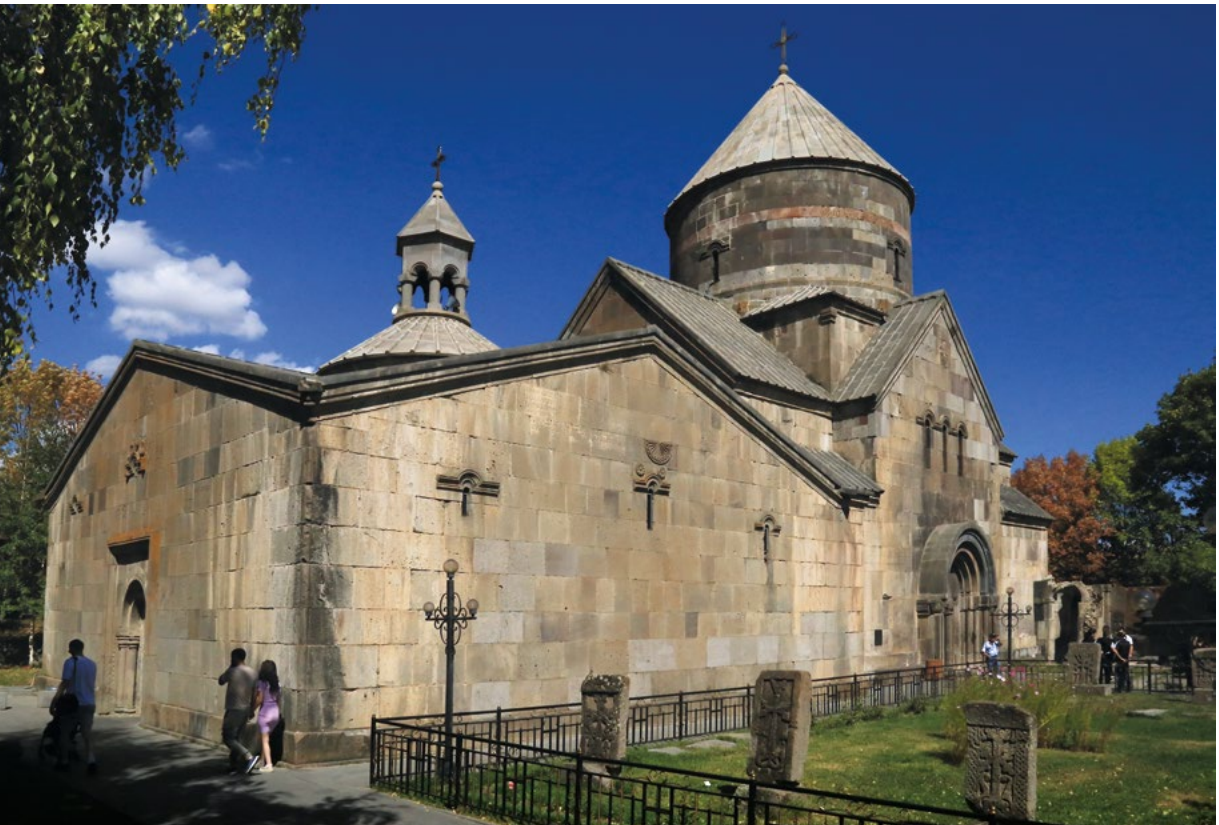
2 See below, n. 6.

3 In this respect, Armenian *gawit‘*s have been compared with Byzantine and Western narthexes. See, e.g., Goss 1984, pp. 237–238; Mylonas 1990; Hamacher 2001, pp. 63, 69–70, 73–74; Kazaryan 2014, pp. 7–8 (draws comparisons also with the columned halls of eastern Iranian mosques); Kazaryan 2015, pp. 147–148; Foletti 2018, pp. 110–112. For comparisons with Georgian architecture, see Thomas Kaffenberger’s contribution in this volume.

4 T‘oramanean 1911, pp. 11–22.

5 As quoted in notes 3 and 6–9. See also Costa 1968; Hovhannisyan 1978, p. 139; Brentjes/Mnazakanjan/Stepanjan 1981, pp. 78–79; Harutyunyan 1992, pp. 263, 267–270; Maranci 2018, pp. 67–69, 133–144; Ousterhout 2019, pp. 587–590.

6 Mnats‘akanyan 1952. For typological classifications of *gawit‘*s, along with their ground plans, see also Thierry/Donabédian 1987, pp. 197–198; Cuneo 1988, II, pp. 734–741; Hamacher 2001, pp. 63–65.



[1] Church of John the Baptist (1240) and *gawit'*, northern view, Gandzasar

[2] *Gawit'* (before 1214) and church of Grigor *Lusaworich'* (1033), south-eastern view, Kech'aṛis

of their commissioners and to the growing demand for individualized rituals.[7] Among newer studies are Michael Daniel Findikyan's and Gevorg Kazaryan's articles, in which the liturgical dimension of the question is examined, with consideration to textual sources that mention or hint at the dismissal of "unworthies", including especially the catechumens and penitents, from the liturgy to the *gawit'*.[8] The results brought forth by Vardanyan, Findikyan, and Kazaryan on the functional peculiarities of these ante-ecclesial structures are particularly useful for investigating the subject from an art-historical point of view, with which I am presently concerned.

Still unexplored are other functional aspects of *gawit'*s that pertain to social-civil and educational practices; indeed, some of the monasteries with distinctive *gawit'*s functioned also as *vardapetarans*, that is, monastic universities.[9] Consideration of these aspects – which falls beyond the scope of the present article – might draw a fuller picture of the multi-functionality of Armenian *gawit'*s not only during the time of their construction but also in the subsequent decades of their use. What I propose here is to treat the question art historically, namely, to examine the sculptural evidence available in churches with a *gawit'* and to explore the role of images in the construction of sacred spaces. The chronological focus of this inquiry will be on the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, which mark the heyday of the *gawit'*, including especially the monasteries of Hovanavank', Aghjots' Surb Step'anos, Khoranashat, and Noravank'. As we shall see, the biblical scenes carved on these monuments have eschatological and apocalyptic intentions, which reflect not only the theological knowledge available in medieval Armenia but also liturgical practices, funerary rites, celebrations of great feasts, and tendencies of personal spirituality. Based on this and other evidence, the article analyses how this multifaceted use of the *gawit'* or *zhamatun* motivated the incorporation of visual images that were universal in their nature and could be evoked on various occasions to enhance the eschatological and apocalyptic sentiments of the faithful – a permanent concern in high and late medieval Armenia. Before tackling the meanings and functions of these images in § III–V, the discussion will develop around the spatial organization as it would be experienced by the worshipper (§ II–III), whose progression into the sacred space was carefully planned, even controlled, by ritual-liturgical *ordos* and by the hierarchically ordered interiors of the church, including architectural and sculptural settings that required pauses as dictated by a certain rite or devotional practice.

7 Vardanyan 2015b; Eadem 2015c; *Eadem* 2020.

8 Findikyan 2010a, p. 294; *Idem* 2018, pp. 163, 168–178; Kazaryan 2022.

9 An exception is Eastmond 2014, p. 81, which, based on the example of Holy Apostles' Church in Ani, highlights how the taxation deals of the citizens were made public through inscriptions in the *gawit'*.

II: LIMINAL EXPERIENCE AND SPIRITUAL EXPECTATIONS WITHIN THE *GAWIT'*

Although the architectural evidence suggests that *gawit'*s became commonplace for Armenian ecclesiastical architecture between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, earlier textual sources already mention the *gawit'* in reference to the space outside of the church where the catechumens and unrepentant, being barred from entering, would gather. This means that the *gawit'* existed as a term and function before its architectural appearance was shaped and standardized. In little-known early theological writings that have come down to us under the title *Mystery of the Church* (Խորհուրդ եկեղեցւոյ), we read, e.g., that:[10]

> [The church is] the dwelling place of angels and those like holy persons, who come together in front of Christ's bema; whereas outside of the church, in the *gawit'*, the unclean unrepentant, the sinners, (gather) to only listen to the saying and to contemplate the honour of the righteous.

Another little-known treatise, the *Analysis of the Universal Church* (Վերլուծութիւն կաթողիկէ եկեղեցւոյ), authored by Yovhan Mayravanets'i in the seventh century, similarly deals with the theology of church architecture and mentions, in this respect, the reward of the righteous with the eternal kingdom as the ultimate fulfilment of the divine promise.[11] For those unworthies who remained outside of the church, Grigor Narekats'i wrote, three centuries later, that "spurning such persons from our midst, we expel them [...] and shut in their faces the door to life of the church *gawit'*".[12] In his intimate conversation with God, Narekats'i also addresses his own spiritual expectations to be fulfilled when the closed door is opened:

> Your victory is exhibited when you open the shut door to life in anticipation of my breath. Your magnificent grace is there when you forget my evil and remember your goodness.[13]

Elsewhere, the same mystic writes in self-deprecation that, at the moment of the Judgement, "knocking at the door will have no effect then, for my share of mercy will have expired".[14]

If we admit that public penitence existed in thirteenth-century Armenia in the form in which it is described in the tenth/eleventh-century

10 *Mystery of the Church* [K'ēosēean 2007], p. 496: Իսկ ի տաճարին բնակութիւն հրեշտակաց եւ սուրբ մարդկան նմանութիւն, որ ժողովին առաջի բեմին Քրիստոսի: Իսկ արտաքոյ տաճարին ի գաւիթն, որք ոչ մաքրեալք են ապաշխարութեամբ, մեղաւորք, միայն լսեն զբարբառն եւ տեսանեն զպատիւ արժանաւորացն.

11 *Analysis of the Universal Church* [K'ēosēean 2005], p. 351. The first English translation of this work, which came to my attention after the submission of the present article, is available in Terian 2020, pp. 229–238.

12 Findikyan 2010a, p. 294.

13 Gregory of Narek [Terian 2021], p. 331 (prayer 74.1).

14 *Ibidem*, pp. 367–368 (prayer 79.4).

[3] Astuatsatsin church (consecrated in 1240) and (collapsed) *gawit‘*, eastern view, Nor Varagavank‘

[4] Church and (collapsed) *gawit‘*, eastern view, Khorakert, before 1251

[5] *Gawit‘* (1232, with two upper-storey chapels) and Astuatsatsin church (1213), south-eastern view, Tegher

[6] Doorway between *gawit‘* (before 1224) and the old church, Makaravank‘

Grand mashtots‘,[15] then the lengthy rite of penitence, composed of admission and reconciliation, would have mostly taken place at the door of the church, that is, in the *gawit‘*.[16] The reconciliation ceremony, enacted at the end of the period of penance, entails that the penitent – or the group of penitents[17] – before being conducted to the church, shall turn to the west to renounce Satan (as during the rite of baptism) and shall turn to the east to face again the door of the church. The entry into the church culminates with Psalm 117(118):19, which is said to be sung in a tone of lamentation: "Open to me the doors of righteousness that I enter into (them and praise God)."[18]

These and many other theological and liturgical writings clearly underscore the idea that the faithful gathered in front of the (shut) *door* – both in the ceremonial and metaphorical meanings of this word – was in hopeful anticipation of admission to the sacred and, ultimately, of being rewarded with the heavenly kingdom. With the emergence of the *gawit‘* structures, the hierarchical organization of the ecclesiastical space became more distinct, increasing the meaning and importance of the church, which hosted the main altar.[19] "The front of Christ's bema", as the *Mystery of the Church* characterizes the place of the righteous inside the church, was the "phenomenological focus" – to borrow the term from the philosophy of religion – towards which the medieval worshipper's mind, gaze, and body were directed.[20] Encompassing the principal entrance of its respective church, the *gawit‘*

15 *Mashtots‘* is the name of the principal ritual book of the Armenian Church, equivalent to Greek *euchologion*.

16 The critical text is available in *Grand mashtots‘* [Tēr-Vardanean 2012], pp. 361–380. For the rite of penitence among the Armenians, see Raes 1947, pp. 649–650; Carr 1976; Findikyan 2018.

17 For collective penitence, see Raes 1947, p. 654. For the twelfth century, the following observation is made in Carr 1976, p. 77: "Although the system of public penance was still in full vigour, the confession of sins was then by no means public".

18 *Grand mashtots‘* [Tēr-Vardanean 2012], p. 367 (Բացէք ինձ դրունս արդարութեան, եւ մտից). See also Raes 1947, p. 650; Carr 1976, pp. 84, 90–91, which also states that the rites of public penance are preserved in manuscripts dating from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries – a sign of continuity of tradition.

19 A similar "spatial" organization can be discerned in several tenth-century Gospel manuscripts, classified within the group of the Ējmiatsin Gospel and considered the closest extant specimens to the fourth-century Eusebian archetype. In these illustrated codices, when progressing down through the arched canon tables, the visual experience

[7] Doorway between *gawit'* and the Holy Sign church (1244), Astuatsěnkal

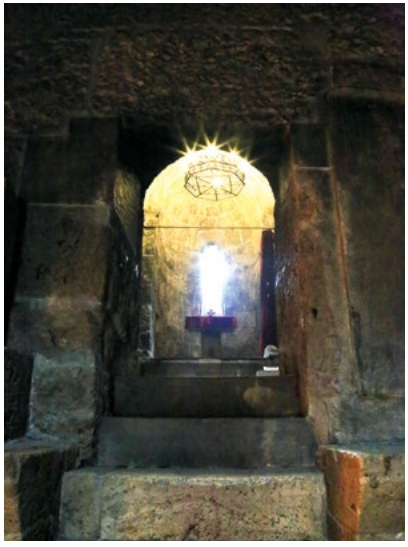
of the faithful concludes with the full-page image of a curtained tempietto, which bears eloquent allusions to the "Christianized" Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple. See Grigoryan 2014. For the role of artistic images in the conception of the sacred space, see the contributions in Olovsdotter 2019, esp. the chapter authored by Cecilia Olovsdotter.

20 For the focus of worship, see especially Smart 1972. Mayravanets'i's symbolic division of the church "orders" (as he describes the interior of the church) is thus not very different from how sacred spaces were constructed and perceived in late antique and early Christian societies, in the sense of a gradual increase in sacredness when approaching the sanctuary. Most useful in this context is the collection of interdisciplinary studies gathered in Gerstel 2006. For Mayravanets'i's sources, see Terian 2020, p. 227. For other Armenian authors writing about the symbolic (threefold) division of the church, see Thomson 1979.

21 For the liminality in sacred spaces, including especially the role of doors, see the collective volumes Van Opstall 2018; Doležalová/Foletti 2019. The concept of liminality is implemented more broadly in Andrews/Roberts 2012.

came to control and regulate – in both architectural and ritual terms – the transitional state of the yet unperfected faithful, whose liminal experience was now shaped and defined by the thresholds, portals, and visual *mise-en-scènes* that prescribed a pause before advancing any further.

By enclosing a *gawit'*, the church's western entrance naturally turned into a liminal instrument *par excellence*, marking the dramatic passage from the transitional sphere of the *gawit'* to the more sacred area of the church itself.[21] Some physical efforts could even be required of the worshipper (and are still required today) in order to exercise



[8] Doorway between *gawit'* and church, Mshkavank', before 1247

[9a] Doorway between *gawit'* (late 12th century) and church of Grigor Lusavorich' (restored in 1184), Haghartsin

[9b] (detail) Doorway between *gawit'* (late 12th century) and church of Grigor Lusavorich' (restored in 1184), Haghartsin

his/her *rite de passage* – to apply the Van Gennepian concept – into the more sacred space. Indeed, the thresholds of the central doorways leading from the *gawit'* to the church are usually elevated such that the worshipper must bend his or her body and then bow the head to pass through it **[6–8, 9a–b, 16, 24]**. The involvement of bodily movements – to generalize the phenomenon – is a focal part of religious worship, affirming the presence of the divine and disposing the worshipper towards an efficacious communication with God.[22] Particular attention to the doors is also a feature of the Armenian divine liturgy, in which the deacon bids: "The doors, the doors! With all wisdom and good heed lift up your minds in the fear of God."[23]

Yet, the way towards the altar was not straightforward, and, if we take some of the textual sources literally, some people could terminate their liturgical experience inside the *gawit'*, without being allowed to enter the church and to regain their worthiness for the eucharist.[24] Scholars of liturgical theology have studied numerous instances in which a person, in anticipation of remission of sins, could be prevented from entering the church. The list of these "unworthies" is long but to impart an idea of the severity and length of penitential practices in medieval Armenia, a few examples based on Ephrem Carr's study shall suffice. Thus, a life-long penance would await voluntary murderers and married persons guilty of bestiality, whereas unmarried ones guilty of the same sin were "considered worthy of the grace of communion after fifteen years of penance, only the first three of which are spent outside the church in tears and mourning [...] thereafter they may participate in public prayer."[25] For lighter transgressions as well, such as for rash swearing or for eating anything polluted, the penitential discipline would be fully considered, as attested in many penitential writings composed in Armenian.[26] The Jacobite patriarch Johannan x bar Shushan (1064–1073) famously criticized the Armenian clergy for going to extremes with their penitential practices and for excluding the faithful from the vitalizing mysteries of the Church.[27] One century later, Dionysius Bar Salibi (d. 1171) would write polemically that the Armenian faithful "are in a continual state of sin", for their clergy withhold communion for long periods.[28] These polemical writings surely contain a certain degree of exaggeration, but the conditions of entering the church and receiving communion apparently remained severe also in subsequent centuries, as can be gleaned from other sources.[29]

Whether one was prevented from entering the church or was rewarded with such permission, the role of the doorway that both divided and connected the spaces between the *gawit'* and the church

22 Smart 1972, pp. 6–7; Hazony Levi 2022, pp. 493–494.

23 Findikyan 2018, p. 171, n. 51, which observes the similarity with the analogous rite in Byzantine liturgy.

24 Renoux 1973 shows that, in Armenian and other Eastern churches, the absolution of sins, even serious ones, could be obtained through the celebration of the eucharist.

25 This is preserved in the Armenian text of the canons of the Second Council of Nicea. See Carr 1976, pp. 72–73.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 88 (for the quoted examples).

27 This is preserved in the patriarch's letter addressed to Catholicos Grigor. For the text, see Yovhannēs x Bar-Shushan [Vardanean 1923], pp. 85–89. The letter is discussed in Raes 1947, pp. 652–654; Renoux 1973, p. 212; Carr 1976, pp. 73, 87; Findikyan 2018, pp. 162–163.

28 Kazaryan 2022, p. 265. For the text, see Dionysius Barṣalībi [Mingana 1931], p. 528.

29 Apart from Carr's mentioned study, some important sources are discussed in Findikyan 2018; Kazaryan 2022.

was crucial to underscoring the promise that awaited the worshippers "in front of Christ's bema" and thus to enhancing their spiritual capacities. Most of the doorways, if not all of them, are so meticulously carved and multiply framed that the altar space, visible from the rectangular opening of the *gawit'*, is rendered as a carefully framed screen. If we rely on the centuries-old explanation given in the *Mystery of the Church*, the door was left open during the liturgy so that the unrepentant who gathered inside the *gawit'* may "only listen to the saying and contemplate the honour of the righteous" (see above). The "unclean unrepentant", though not allowed inside the church, were thus offered a glimpse of the focus of their worship. Through the heavily framed inner doors of the thirteenth/fourteenth-century *gawit's*, the worshipper could have observed the altar space with the massive bema, the front of which was usually decorated to imitate the starry heavens **[38, 25, 35]**.[30] Within the minimally adorned interiors of the Armenian churches that were erected in this period, the tympana and the doorframes, along with the ceilings and the front of the bema, absorbed the largest decorative concentration with their star-laden, stony surfaces.[31] The domes of several *gawit's* and of some churches also take the form of a large star, as we see it at Neghuts'i vank', Khoranashat, Khorakert, and, moving westwards to the Holy Land, at the Armenian monastery of Saints James in Jerusalem **[10–13]**.[32] "Domed like heaven" – as several newly built churches were described by Armenian chroniclers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries[33] – these star-shaped domes all allude to the promise of the heavenly kingdom.

This promise was regularly renewed by liturgical services that were performed within the hierarchically ordered interiors of the church, beginning with the ritual-meditative experience inside the *gawit'* and culminating – for the perfected ones – in front of the bema with the consumption of the eucharist. For a society constantly concerned with eschatological glory, the acts of penance – such as prayer, fasting, and almsgiving – gained increasing importance, as is well attested, and even exhibited, in epigraphic, visual, and textual sources.[34] Coming to the concerns of the present article, it is noteworthy that a *khach'k'ar* inscription in the dome of the gawit' of Surb Sion Church in Saghmosavank' (1215) refers to the *khach'k'ar* as "a place of expiation (քաւարան) for Vach'ē".[35] This is the Vach'utean prince Vach'ē, who left another inscription with similar wording ("place of expiation") on the northern wall of the Hovanavank' Church. Dating to the year 1217 – by which point the *gawit'* had not yet been adjacent to the church – this second inscription is written in the first person but on behalf of

30 The front of the bema of the Astuatsatsin church in Khoranashat appears now undecorated but, according to a pre-restoration report published in 1987, it originally consisted of star-shaped plaques. For the restoration project, which has yet to be realized, see K'artashyan 1987.

31 More examples of portals and doorframes with star-like decorations can be found in Azatyan 1987, pp. 32–35 (plates 33–36), nos. 49, 60–61, 74, figs 84–86, 88–89, etc.

32 This group of Armenian churches with a distinctive star-shaped dome have been compared with similar-looking examples from the Holy Land and from the Spanish architecture, both Islamic and Christian. See Thierry/Donabédian 1987, pp. 589–590; Cuneo 1988, I, pp. 150, 323; Kenaan-Kedar 1998, pp. 81–83; Hamacher 2001, figs 22, 30–31; Kazaryan 2018. The ceilings of the listed Armenian churches and *gawit's* are also discussed in Jakobson 1950. A preliminary study on the chronological and artistic issues regarding the star-like domes of the mentioned monuments has been presented in Gohar Grigoryan, "Vanakan Vardapet's Monastery and the Holy Land", *Artistic Networks in the Caucasian Space: New Researches and Perspectives*, Workshop, 10–11 May 2022, University of Fribourg.

33 For references to sources and discussion, see Thomson 1979, pp. 108–109.

34 For fasting practices, see Findikyan 2018, pp. 162–163. For almsgiving as an act of penance recognized by Armenian theologians, see Carr 1976, p. 78. It was widely practiced, not without socio-political interests, by Armenian sovereigns and ruling aristocracy. See, e.g., Grigoryan 2021, pp. 246–248.

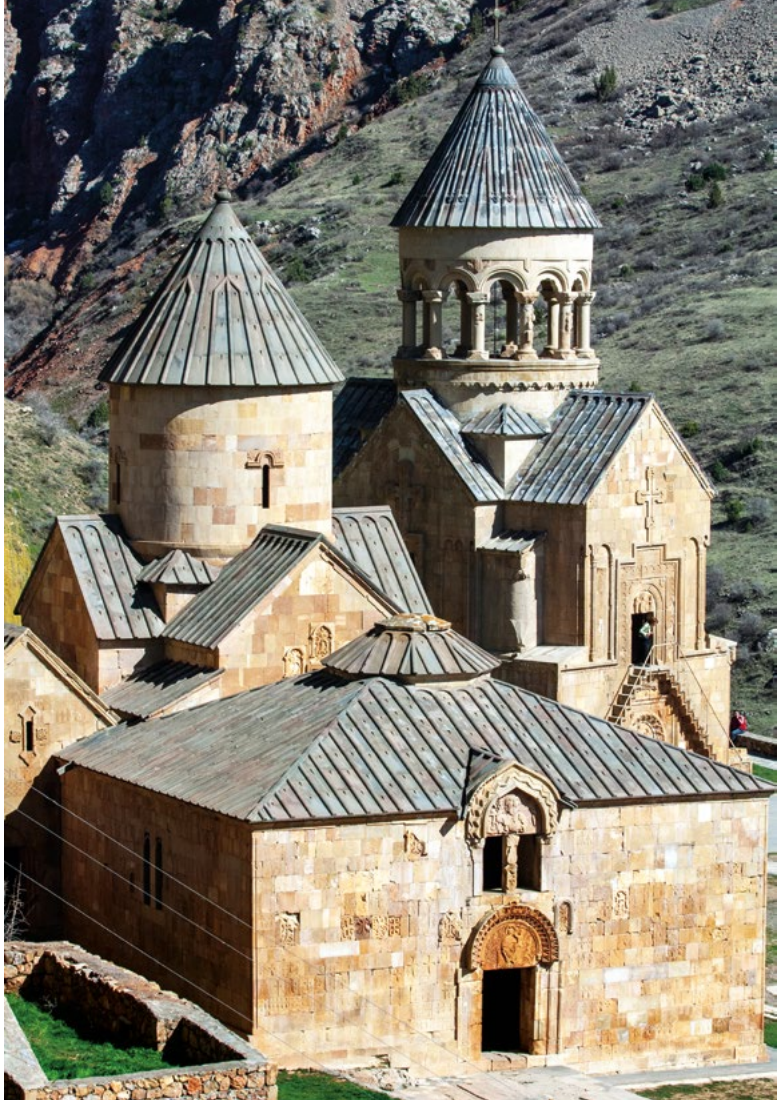
35 Vardanyan 2015c, p. 299, fig. IV–35.

[10] *Gawit'*, interior (northern view), Neghuts'i vank', 13th century

[11] Dome of the *gawit'*, Khoranashat, 1220s

[12] Dome of the church, Khorakert, before 1251

[13] Dome of the main church, Sts James monastery, Jerusalem



Vach‘ē and his spouse, reflecting the donors’ confident expectations of the Second Coming:[36]

> […] I [Vach‘ē Vach‘utean], together with my spouse Mamakhat‘un, became affiliated to this holy congregation, the monastery of Yovhan. With many donations and presents, we contributed to the construction of this glorious, newly built place of expiation. And the prelates of this holy congregation established a yearly mass in Christ on the feast of Lazarus (to be celebrated) in my name in all the churches, old and new. And on the day of

36 One more similar inscription, written in 1229 by Vach‘ē Vach‘utean on behalf of himself and Mamakhat‘un, was once extant in Hoṛomos. See Karapetyan/Mahé 2015, p. 475 (no. 70). The transcription of the above-translated inscription of Hovhanavank‘ is available in Ghafadaryan 1948, pp. 65, 82–83 (no. 15, fig. 32): Միաբանեցա հանդերձ զուգակցաւ իմով Մամախաթունիւ ս(ուր)բ ուխտիս վանացս Յովհաննու, բազում տրաւք եւ ընծաիւք աւգնական եղաք շինութե(ան) մեծափառ նորակերտ քաւարանիս: Եւ առաջնորդք ս(ուր)բ ուխտիս հաստատեցին յամենայն ամի պատարագել զՔ(րիստո)ս յանուն իմ, զտաւն Ղազարու զամենայն եկեղեցիքս՝ զհին եւ զնոր. եւ զաւր խաչգիւտին՝ Մամախաթունին պատարագել զՔ(րիստո)ս զհին եւ նոր եկեղեցիս անխափան, մինչեւ ի գալուստ Որդւոյն Աստուծոյ: Եւ որք չառնեն՝ դատին ի Ք(րիստոս) է. ամէն.
Another English translation of the Hovhanavank‘ inscription, considerably different from mine, is to be found in Franklin 2021, p. 76: “In union I am coupled together with my Mamaxatun for the holy oath of our St. Hovhannes, in laying a foundation with gifts and offerings and have built an illustrious new-built purgatorium. And may the leaders within the holy oath be sure in every month to say a Mass to Christ in my name, for the festival of Lazarus in every church, new and old. And for the pious Mamaxatun Mass shall be said to Christ in the old and new churches, until the coming of the Son of God. And he who shall not do so, let Christ judge him, Amen.”

[14] *Gawit‘* and the principal church (in the first plan), and Burt‘elashen church (in the second plan), eastern view, Noravank‘, 13th–14th centuries

[15] Tympana of the *gawit‘* entrance, eastern view, Noravank‘, early 14th century

> the Discovery of the Cross, a mass in Christ (shall be celebrated) for Mamakhat‘un in the old and new churches without interruption until the Coming of the Son of God. And those who do not effectuate (this), may they be judged by Christ. Amen.

As we shall see further below, sin and salvation are intertwined inside the church and even more so inside the *gawit‘*, a penitential place *par excellence*, where sculpted images constantly reminded the faithful about their forthcoming encounter with Christ. Before we explore these images in § IV–V, one more relevant aspect must be highlighted:

the functionality of the *gawit'* as a funerary site and the related perception of time through the lens of the life-death paradigm.

III: THE *GAWIT'* AND THE ANTICIPATION OF "THE EVERLASTING DOMINION"

Anyone entering a medieval Armenian *gawit'* would immediately notice the abundance of tombstones covering nearly the entire floor of the hall **[9a, 10, 16, 24]**. These tombstones are usually contemporaneous or near contemporaneous to the construction of the ecclesiastic complex, meaning that the intended usage of the space of the *gawit'* included funeral practices. Leaving aside the class differences that were certainly decisive in who could be buried within the building,[37] I would like to focus here on the phenomenon that, inside the *gawit'*, the faithful were regularly reunited with the deceased, not least through liturgical services and commemorative rites.[38] The liminal experience of these two categories of people – alive and dead – was defined by the anticipation of the Second Coming and of expected salvation. Contesting the notion of time, the past and present were thus mingled within the transitional sphere of the *gawit'*, which was characterized by its own strong sense of temporality. The hierarchical division of the church relied not only on the level of sacredness of its various areas but also on their capacities for symbolically conveying temporality and eternity. This idea, omnipresent in Christian spirituality and inspired especially by patristic writings, is variously expressed in Mayravanets'i's above-quoted treatise *Analysis of the Universal Church*.[39] The inner compartment of the church, it says, "resembles the heaven to come, where the Most Holy Trinity abides with the worthy ones".[40]

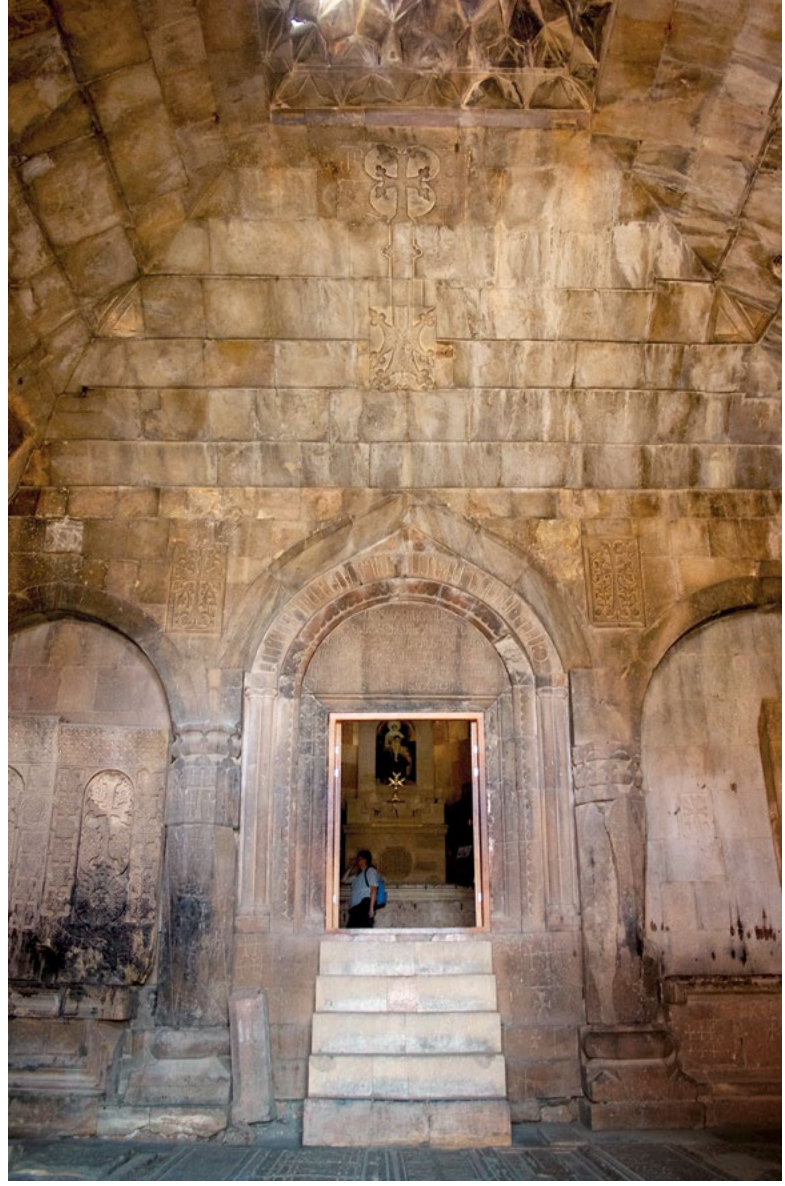
Taking up the theme of the urgency of salvation, Vardan Aygekts'i (twelfth/thirteenth centuries) highlighted the imminent Coming of the Judge, advising proper preparation, for "what shall come is closer than the time that was before us".[41] The constant presence of liturgical and cosmic time within the church – numerous sundials visible on medieval Armenian churches and *gawit'*s make a strong statement on this **[2, 31, 33]** – also underscored the divine promise for everlasting eternity fulfillable upon the Coming of the Son.[42]

This concept is perfectly visualized on the two sculpted tympana of the *gawit'* of the principal church in Noravank' **[14–15]**.[43] The upper tympanum depicts the conception of Adam by God, the Crucifixion, and, no less remarkably, an inscribed image of Daniel, whose prophecy about the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man served as the source for this sculpted composition (Daniel 7:13–14):[44]

37 In the case of Khoranashat, e.g., we know that the poor were buried outside of the church, while the interior was normally reserved for clergy and donors. This is indirectly indicated by Kirakos Gandzakets'i who, when praising his teacher Vanakan's humility, gives the following details on his burial in Khoranashat: "They took and buried him at the head of the monastery on the eastern side, close to the smaller church where the graves of the poor were located, for [Vanakan] himself had so ordered." Robert Bedrosian's translation, available online: https://www.attalus.org/armenian/kg11.htm#53 (consulted 19.04.2023). The original text in Armenian, as published in Kirakos Gandzakets'i [Melik'-Ohanjanyan 1961], p. 348, reads as follows: Եւ տարեալ թաղեցին զնա ի գլուխ վանիցն յարևելից կուսէ, մօտ ի փոքրագոյն եկեղեցին, ուր էին գերեզմանք աղքատացն, զի ինքն այսպէս հրամայեաց. This does not confirm the assumption expressed in Vardanyan 2015b, p. 212, n. 19, that Vanakan was buried in the *zhamatun* of Khornashat.

38 The frequent funerary and commemorative services in Armenian churches also became a subject of criticism, such that the archbishop Nersēs Lambronats'i of Tarsus (d. 1198) would write ironically that it is an "unbearable madness" to believe that the liturgies are foremost for the deceased rather than for the living. See Kazaryan 2022, pp. 263–264. The text is reproduced in Nersēs Lambronats'i 1847, pp. 430–431.

39 *Analysis of the Universal Church* [K'ēosēean 2005] and K'ēosēean 2021, pp. 153–155, for discussion. For English translation, see Terian 2020, pp. 230–231: "The lower (orders) point to past, present, and future orders that are temporal,



[16] Doorway between *gawit'* (1261) and the principal church (1216–1221), Noravank'

conveying to us the intelligible and heavenly things through sense-perceptible and earthly things, making readily perceptible the structure of the orders that are there and are to come." And slightly later: "As for the church with its two compartments of the sanctuary, to me they seem to be (likewise connoting the past), the current (or present reality), and the things to come. History shows us the veracity of that which is from the beginning, and that which moves into the future."

40 Terian 2020, pp. 232–233.

41 Vardan Aygekts'i [Hayrapetyan 2008], p. 86. Aygekts'i's apocalyptic writing is discussed in La Porta 2014.

42 For medieval Armenian sundials as signalling liturgical and cosmic time and for their connotation with apocalyptic ideas, see Maranci 2014.

43 This *gawit'* was completed in 1261, but the two tympana were likely executed in the early fourteenth century by Momik. The most complete study on Noravank', with previous bibliography, is Matevosyan 2017.

44 For the Armenian text, see Armenian Version of Daniel [Cowe 1992], p. 197. For the theological background of the relationship between the "Ancient of Days" and the "Son of Man", as mentioned in Daniel 7, see Bucur 2017, pp. 1–17.

> I saw in the night visions, and, behold, [one] like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and [...] his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away.

Shifting our gaze to the lower tympanum of the *gawit'*, we notice that the Danielic vision of the eternal kingdom is further disclosed

[17] Doorway between *gawit‘* and church (1240), Gandzasar

through the sculptor's explanatory inscription, which proceeds above and below the image of the Virgin and Child – an obvious hint at the Incarnation that would become a preferred scene in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This is what the Noravank‘ master's inscription reminds the visitors entering through the sculpted door of the *gawit‘* **[15]**:[45]

45 ԱՅՍ Է ԱՌ ԻՄ: ԱՒՐՀՆԵԱԼ Է ԱՀԵՂ ԱՆՈՒՆՆ Ա(ՍՏՈՒԱ)Ծ Ի ԾԱԳԱՑ ՄԻՆՉ Ի ԾԱԳՍ ԾԱԳԻՆ, ՈՐ ՈՉ ՀԼԱՏ ԵՒ ՈՉ ՎՃ(ԱՐ). The last section (որ ոչ հատ եւ ոչ վճար) translates literally as follows: "which neither divides nor comes to an end". Transcription from Matevosyan 2017, pp. 109–112, also pp. 57–58, which corrects several errors admitted in previous readings. For earlier reproductions and discussions of this tympanum, see Corpus Inscriptionum [Barkhudaryan 1967], p. 222 (no. 705); Der Nersessian 1976; Avagyan 1975; Rapti 2015a, pp. 194–195, which opts for a different translation than given above: "This is in my stead. Blessed is the fearful name of God from the ends to the ends (who is without seed and without compensation)."

> This is (what is depicted) in my (image): Blessed is the fearful name of God from one end to the end of ends, which neither interrupts nor passes away.

The anticipation of the Second Coming and of the "everlasting dominion" promised in Daniel 7 also inspired the iconographic programme of funeral *khach'k'ars* on which the apocalyptic Christ is shown surrounded by the four beasts. In these monuments, as Hamlet Petrosyan has shown based on epigraphic and theological evidence, the sign of the cross is implemented as symbolic of Christ's Second Coming, with a double function to protect the deceased until the Coming and to intercede on their behalf during the Last Judgement.[46] From this eschatological perspective should also be understood the single monumental crosses carved on the ceilings of several *gawit'*s, usually aligned with the doorway **[16–17]**. These must be none other than the visualization of "the sign of the Son of Man that shall appear in heaven" shortly before Christ himself comes (Matthew 24:30). Some of these large crosses are accompanied by legends that indeed associate and identify the sign of the cross with Christ, as we find, e.g., in Noravank'. There, the following inscription is carved inside the aniconic central cross that is situated between the *gawit'* dome and the church door **[16]**: ՏԷՐ ԱՍՏՈՒԱԾ ՅԻՍՈՒՍ ՔՐԻՍՏՈՍ ("Lord God, Jesus Christ").[47] Vardan Aygekts'i, when referring to the sign of the Son of Man mentioned in Matthew 24:30, took care that the faithful not misconstrue its meaning materially: "Not the stone nor the wood nor the other substances (of the Cross) will exalt, but the blessing and the glory, the light and the power, and the unspeakable mystery."[48] Upon the appearance of the Cross, which Aygekts'i calls "the precursor and sign of the Coming", Satan will be destroyed, and the light of the Cross – he continues to prophesize – will remain for three days, to the great fear of sinners and to the joy of the righteous.[49] An inscribed *khach'k'ar* to the right of the door of Aghjots' Surb Step'anos Church summarizes the omnipresent hope for salvation by identifying Jesus Christ as saviour who is depicted above the monumental cross **[18]**.

IV: THE ESCHATOLOGICAL INTENTIONS AND CEREMONIAL *MISE-EN-SCÈNES* OF THE IMAGES IN THE *GAWIT'*: THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS AND THE SECOND COMING

In high and late medieval Armenia, being stopped in front of the shut door of the church was not only an archaic practice for the unrepentant but could involve anyone who partook in the celebration of the great feasts. As a result, the ceremony of the Opening of the

46 Petrosyan 2008, pp. 358–360, also pp. 156–157 (figs 212–213), 175 (figs 241–242) for case studies. The importance of the sign of the cross for the Second Coming is also explored in Rapti 2015b, pp. 114–115, on the example of illustrated manuscripts.

47 For another example of an elevated single cross with this very inscription, see Grigoryan 2017, pp. 133–134.

48 Vardan Aygekts'i [Hayrapetyan 2008], p. 252.

49 *Ibidem*, pp. 252–254. This echoes Matthew 12:38-40, where the Pharisees ask Christ for a sign proving His being the Messiah, to which He replies: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonah, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

[18] "Jesus Christ Savior", *khach'k'ar* (fragment), Aghjots' Surb Step'anos, *gawit'*, interior

Door, celebrated on the evening of Palm Sunday, caused debates among several churchmen, who criticized the practice of leaving people outside the church during much of the liturgy.[50] The door was opened, a fourteenth-century source claims, only "when the Body of the Lord is elevated, [...] so that the people may see".[51] This, however, referred likely to those who were allowed to partake in the Divine Liturgy inside the church. For others gathered in the *gawit'* – be it a walled edifice or simply the area outside of the church – the liturgical experience could be limited "to only listen to the saying and to contemplate the honour of the righteous", as indirectly instructed in the above-quoted treatise *Mystery of the Church*.

Michael Daniel Findikyan has observed that the Armenian celebration of the Opening of the Door, like the West Syrian Rite of Lights, has "strong eschatological themes drawn from the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) and Psalm 117 (118)".[52] In this respect, one comes to understand why the principal portal of the thirteenth-century Hovanavank' Church, to which a contemporaneous

50 For this ceremony, see Findikyan 2010b, pp. 22–26; *Idem* 2018, p. 163; Kazaryan 2022.

51 Findikyan 2010b, p. 24. See also Kazaryan 2022, p. 278.

52 Findikyan 2010b.

[19] *Gawit‘* (completed in 1250) and church (1216–1221), southern view, Hovanavank‘

gawit‘ stands adjacent, is adorned with an impressive scene of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, thereby creating the visual *mise-en-scène* for the ceremony of the Opening of the Door **[20–21]**. This observation suits well the eschatological interpretations that art historians have proposed for the theme of the Ten Virgins – so widespread in Armenian art – and its correlation with the ideas of the Second Coming and the Last Judgement.[53] Among these images is a Cilician miniature of the Second Coming, created by T‘oros Ṛoslin in 1262, which depicts the Foolish Virgins standing outside of the closed door and, no less remarkably, of the miniature's frame **[22]**. Excluding the Foolish Virgins from the glory of Christ, Ṛoslin's miniature delineates the promised paradise, where only the elect will be gathered by trumpeting angels (Matthew 24:31). Not only in this image but in others of the Just Judgement, such as in the *Malatya Gospels* (Matenadaran 10675, fol. 89v), the miniaturist implements the motif of the angel blowing a trumpet.[54] More relevant to our inquiry is the artist's application of the motif in yet another scene of the Ten Virgins (Gospel MS 1932.18, Freer Gallery

53 Der Nersessian 1963, p. 40; *Eadem* 1973, p. 20; *Eadem* 1993, pp. 62–63, figs 221–223; Zakarian 1986–1987, pp. 421–424; Rapti 2015b, pp. 105–109; Mantas 2015.

54 Trumpeting angels accompanying the scene of the Second Coming are also depicted on the southern façade of the eleventh-century Church of Nikorcminda, in Georgia. See Iamanidzé 2015, p. 63, fig. 8.

[20] *Gawit‘*, interior (eastern view), Hovanavank‘, completed in 1250

[21] Wise and Foolish Virgins, tympanum of the church door, Hovanavank‘, 1216–1221

[22] Second Coming with the Foolish Virgins (in the left margin), T‘oros Ṛoslin, Gospel manuscript, parchment, Hṛomklay (Cilicia), 1262 / Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Cod. 539, fol. 109v

of Art, fol. 159), clearly stressing the connection of the parable with the Last Judgement.[55]

An unusual feature of the Wise and Foolish Virgins on the Hovanavank‘ portal is their bearded appearance. Drawing attention to these bearded images, Lilit Zakarian has suggested that they echo theological writings in which the word “virgin” is used to indicate spiritual cleanliness in general.[56] This gender-bending approach evident on the portal was likely intended to underscore the universality of the topic in the context of the Second Coming, effacing thus the possibility of a solely female-oriented interpretation of the scene. An early fourteenth-century miniature shows the Wise and Foolish Virgins, some with beards and others without **[23]**, affirming that neither men nor women are favoured before God (Galatians 3:28).[57] If one were to reconstruct the ritual *mise-en-scène* of the Opening of the Door in the architectural setting of Hovanavank‘, the sculpted images of the bearded virgins could be understood to have assisted the celebrating faithful – men and women alike – in their efficacious engagement with the rite. If so, Zakarian’s view that the Hovanavank‘ scene served didactic purposes addressed to the local clergy can be reconsidered,[58] for this element may in actuality evoke performances of religious rituals that involved all members – and genders – of the community rather than merely the clergy.

Indeed, the eschatological messages conveyed by the story of the Ten Virgins are discernible in other ritual and devotional practices as well, such as funerals or penitential prayers. In the Armenian funerary rite of a lay person, the final prayer before the burial is constructed around the Second Coming, with particular reference to the episode of the Ten Virgins, grouped according to those who rejoice (positioned to Christ’s right side) and those who lament (to His left). The prayer is addressed to Christ, upon whose “wonderful Coming the deceased will wake up by the sound of the trumpet and the dead will resurrect”. The text vividly describes the Terrible Judgement (ահեղ դատաստան), which everyone, like the Wise and Foolish Virgins, will “receive according to his/her deeds”.[59] Written in the same spirit is Grigor Narekats‘i’s penitential prayer 65.3, whereby “the keeper of the vigil” (as Narekats‘i refers to himself in his prayer book), when imagining his departure from this life, hopes to meet the glorious Bridegroom, as did the Wise Virgins:[60]

> When my miserable body is dissolved, may your anointing grace stay with me, that I might on the day of renewal meet you, O glorious Bridegroom; that by it I may be recognized as one of yours; […] be pardoned with mercy.

55 For the mentioned three miniatures authored by or attributed to Ṛoslin, see Der Nersessian 1963, p. 40, fig. 95; *Eadem* 1973, pp. 19–20, fig. 80; *Eadem* 1993, pp. 62–63, figs 221–223.

56 Zakarian 1986–1987, pp. 422–424; *Idem* 1973, pp. 294–296. It is indeed from this point of view that Vardan Aygekts‘i defines the notion of ‘virginity’. See Vardan Aygekts‘i [Hayrapetyan 2008], pp. 133–135.

57 This idea is often expressed in patristic and Armenian exegesis. See, e.g., Vardan Aygekts‘i [Hayrapetyan 2008], p. 233.

58 Zakarian 2007, p. 77; *Idem* 1973, p. 295. A similar opinion about the Hovanavank‘ scene being addressed to the monastic community was expressed by Lucy Der Manuelian, who, based on private communication with Fr. Krikor Maksoudian, added the following as a second option: “The scene may also be related to the present-day liturgical practice in Armenian churches of having young boys enact the story of the Wise and Foolish Virgins on Holy Thursday during the reading of the Gospel”. See Der Manuelian 1984, pp. 99–100.

59 For the Armenian text of this pre-burial prayer and its German translation, see Schmidt 1994, pp. 201–205, 244–247.

60 Gregory of Narek [Terian 2021], pp. 286–287 (prayer 65.3)

[23] Wise and Foolish Virgins, Yovsian, Gospel manuscript, paper, Berdak in Tarberuni (Vaspurakan), 1308 / Matenadaran Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Yerevan, Cod. 4806, fol. 9r.

Shifting again the focus of this discussion to the architectural frameworks, we notice that the idea of the Second Coming is visualized, in a most direct way, on the principal portal of another thirteenth-century church, that of Aghjots' Surb Step'anos **[24–26]**.[61] As at Hovanavank', a contemporaneous *gawit'* (now collapsed) was added to the west side of the church, rendering its portal a liminal zone between the *gawit'* and the church. Completed in 1217, the sculpted scene of the tympanum was executed with consideration to the soon-to-be adjacent *gawit'*, which materialized sometime before 1234. Though damaged by wind erosion, the scene is still recognizable, including especially the enthroned Christ, whose mandorla seems to be held by two angels. Two sets of four haloed figures, holding cross-staffs in their hands and symmetrically flanking the enthroned Christ, are portrayed across three horizontal registers. The scene is most likely inspired from the Book of Revelation, which makes several references to the twenty-four saintly elders who are first seated around the heavenly throne (Revelation 4:4, 9–10, and 5:8), before falling on their faces to worship God in preparation for His imminent judgement of the dead and rewarding of His servants (Revelation 11:16–18).[62] The images of the twenty-four elders would have reminded the worshippers gathered at Aghjots' of the apocalypse, inciting feelings of anticipation, fear, and warning – similar to those experienced by the young monk Adso in *The Name of the Rose*, when he recalls the doorway inscriptions of the labyrinth-like library and the figuration of

61 On this church, see Yovsēp'ean 1942, pp. 136–158; Zakarian 2007. See also Saghumyan 1986; Harutyunyan 1992, pp. 307–308.

62 According to Zakarian 2007, pp. 74–75, the representation of the righteous reflects an abbreviated combination of Revelation 4:1–4 and Matthew 25:34–35.

[24] Doorway between (collapsed) *gawit'* (before 1234) and church (1217), south-eastern view, Aghjots' Surb Step'anos

[25] Principal portal, Aghjots' Surb Step'anos, 1217

[26] Second Coming, tympanum of the principal portal, Aghjots' Surb Step'anos, 1217

the Apocalyptic Elders (Revelation 4:4), which cause him to avert his gaze from the terrifying image of the Last Judgement sculpted on the tympanum of the church door.[63]

Although the Revelation of John is attested in Armenian historiographical writings as early as the fifth century, it was not until the twelfth century that the Armenian Church – with its catholicosate now situated in Cilicia – assigned it an authoritative status. It was the new translation of the Book of Revelation and an accompanying commentary – both prepared by Nersēs Lambronats'i (d. 1198), the erudite archbishop of Tarsus – that fostered the circulation of this text, the previous use of which had occasionally caused theological and political controversies.[64] Placed in this context, the sculpted scene of the Second Coming at Aghjots' Surb Step'anos seems to present an interpretation of the Revelation that is independent of the previous biases.

The artistic representation of the Second Coming was not new to Armenian art,[65] yet its manifestation in the *gawit'* of Aghjots' Monastery can be compared more favourably with the sculpted dome of the earliest extant *gawit'*, that at Hoṛomos, where the scene, similarly inspired by the Book of Revelation, encompasses the salvific expectations of those gathered below – whether alive or dead. Indeed, an inscription at the *zhamatun* of Hoṛomos dating from 1201 requests the priests to commemorate the donor "every year, until the Coming of Christ, [...] one quarantine of masses".[66] Some of the inscriptions on the walls of Aghjots' Surb Step'anos Church, registering requests for individual masses endowed in the hopes of softening the divine will towards the donors and their relatives, refer similarly to the Second Coming and the Last Judgement.[67] The reminder of Judgement Day issued in these epigraphic texts often takes the form of an anathema – a not uncommon practice in Armenian spirituality – addressed to those who would dare to disrespect or oppose these stone-carved pacts to commemorate the donor. Their malicious intentions, it is specified, will be considered by Christ during His Second Coming, and the opposers will give account not only for their own sins but also for those of other individuals named in the text. Thus, the foundation inscription, written on the southern façade **[31]**, after listing twenty-six donors who contributed to the construction of the church, concludes with the following threat:[68]

> [...] If anyone, a prayer-sayer or a servant of this church, opposes the fulfilment of what is written (in this inscription), it will be him/her who will take responsibility for all our sins in front of Christ on the day of

63 Eco 2014, p. 190, also pp. 184, 44–49.

64 On which see Thomson 2014; Vardanyan 2015c, pp. 295–296, 298. Thomson 2014, p. 248, also observes that there exist over one hundred extant manuscripts containing Lambronats'i's Commentary on the Book of Revelation – a telling fact of its popularity since the late twelfth century on.

65 An earlier scene of the Second Coming appears in the wall paintings of Aght'amar. See Der Nersessian 1965, pp. 47–48, fig. 70; Zakarian 2007, p. 75. The artistic evocations of the Second Coming, based on the Book of Revelation and other sources, would remain actual in Armenian art and funerary monuments up until the seventeenth century. See, e.g., Baltrušaitis/Kouymjian 1986, pp. 43–44, figs 23a–f; Petrosyan 2008, figs 326, 328–329; Vardanyan 2014; Merian 2014.

66 Vardanyan 2015c, p. 300. For the full transcription and translation of this inscription, see Karapetyan/Mahé 2015, pp. 421–422 (no. 21).

67 Similar wishes are expressed by donors in manuscript colophons as well. See Grigoryan forthcoming.

68 The inscription is damaged. The full transcription is available in Saghumyan 1986, pp. 199–200, and Zakarian 2007, pp. 131–132, 249–250, on which is based my English translation.

Judgement. This (agreement) begins on the New Sunday[69] and is valid until the end of what is promised.

The iconographic details of the apocalyptic scene at Aghjots‘ do not, however, exclude the influence of sources beyond the Book of Revelation. On the left side of the enthroned Christ, a haloed eagle is visible, which, if we compare it with contemporaneous images of the tetramorph throne, can be interpreted as one of the four apocalyptic beasts that surround Christ **[27–30]**. Yet, the prominent position and the grandeur of the eagle discourage such an interpretation, for there is practically no space available for three other beasts to have been comparably depicted. It cannot, therefore, be ruled out that the eagle was initially the only beast carved inside Christ’s mandorla – yet all the same echoing the Coming of the Son of Man as mentioned in Matthew 24:28 (cf. Luke 17:37): “[…] so the coming of the Son of Man will be, for wheresoever the carcass [the body] is, there will the eagles be gathered”. Alexandria Frisch recently suggested a reading of this correlation between the eagles and the body in connection with imperial rule and thus as symbolic of the downfall of the Roman Empire. She explores the eschatological focus of Matthew 24:28 in the framework of Daniel 7, the allusions of which

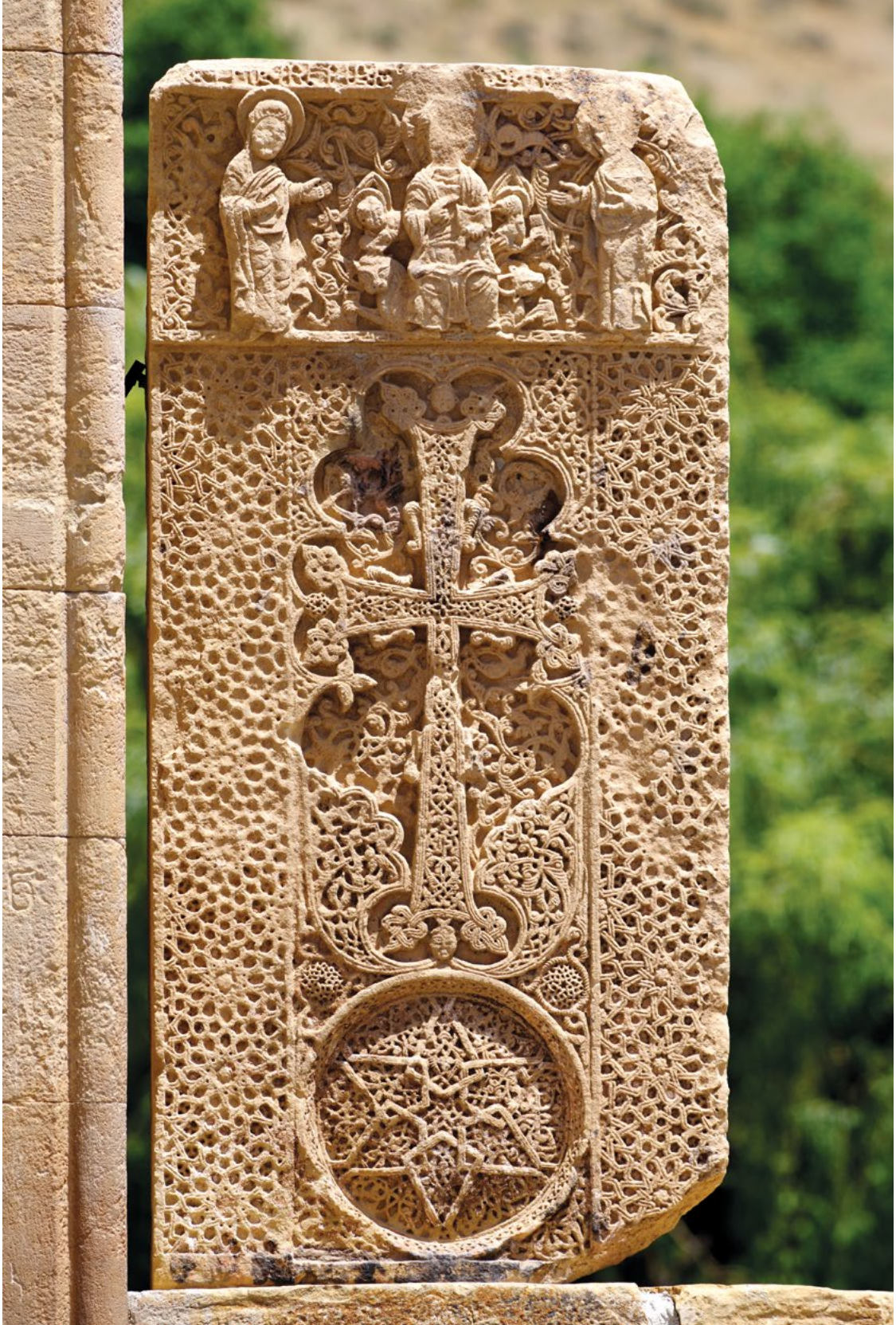
[27] Christ with apocalyptic beasts, above the principal portal of the Astuatsatsin church (1301), Monastery of John the Baptist, Urts, early 14th century

[28] Christ with apocalyptic beasts, Momik, *khach‘k‘ar*, 1304, Noravank‘, inside *gawit‘*, now in the Treasury of Ējmiatsin

[29] Christ with apocalyptic beasts and the twelve apostles, Momik, *khach‘k‘ar* of T‘amt‘a khat‘un, early 14th century, Noravank‘, now in the Regional Museum of Yeghegnadzor

[30] Christ with apocalyptic beasts, flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist (Deesis), Momik, *khach‘k‘ar*, 14th century, Noravank‘, near Burt‘elashen church

69 The second Sunday of Easter, called also Կրկնազատիկ (Second Easter) in Armenian tradition.



allow her to qualify the former as an apocalyptic text that foretells the downfall of an empire.[70] If we extend this secular interpretation to thirteenth-century Armenia – where we indeed find much apocalyptic speculation in theological and historiographical writings – possible political connotations emerge from the contemporaneous eschatological images, including the one at Aghjots'. Though the practice of explaining socio-political precarities in apocalyptic terms is a characteristic feature of Armenian historiography of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Mongol incursions into the Caucasus in the first decades of the thirteenth century reshaped Armenian apocalyptic discourse.[71] When describing the rise of the Mongols, Kirakos Gandzakets'i and other authors of his time dramatized that "the end of the world is near", framing this as a sign of God's wrath on account of the multiple sins of the Armenians (or of the Christians – depending on the source).[72]

70 Frisch 2013.

71 The political dimension of the use and creation of apocalyptic literature in medieval Armenia is tackled in many studies. Most relevant to the present discussion are Zaroui Pogossian's studies focusing on the eschatological reflections of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See Pogossian 2012; *Eadem* 2014.

72 *Eadem* 2012. A similar rhetoric is applied by other authors too witnessing the fall and rise of an empire or a kingdom. Compare, e.g., how the fall of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia in 1375 is described by contemporaries

[31] *Gawit‘* (before 1234) and church (1217), southern view, Aghjots‘ Surb Step‘anos

[32] Daniel in the Lions’ Den, southern façade of the Aghjots‘ Surb Step‘anos church, 1217

Most remarkable for the purposes of this article, however, is the iconographic evidence available at Aghjots‘ Surb Step‘anos, for it not only displays the promised Coming of Christ but also the end-time prophet Daniel. Best known for his miraculous salvation from the persecution of secular authorities and credited for foretelling Christ’s next arrival and everlasting dominion, the image of Daniel, widespread in the art of the first millennium, experienced a new revival in thirteenth-century Armenia, to which I shall turn next.

V: THE STORY OF DANIEL IN THE LIONS’ DEN IN THIRTEENTH-CENTURY ARMENIA

The eschatological and funerary connotations of the story of Daniel in the Lions’ Den are well known from early medieval art, and the Armenian evidence does not deviate from these general tendencies.[73] In the thirteenth century, the theme reappears in ecclesiastical art at least

in Armenian colophons see Grigoryan 2021–2022.

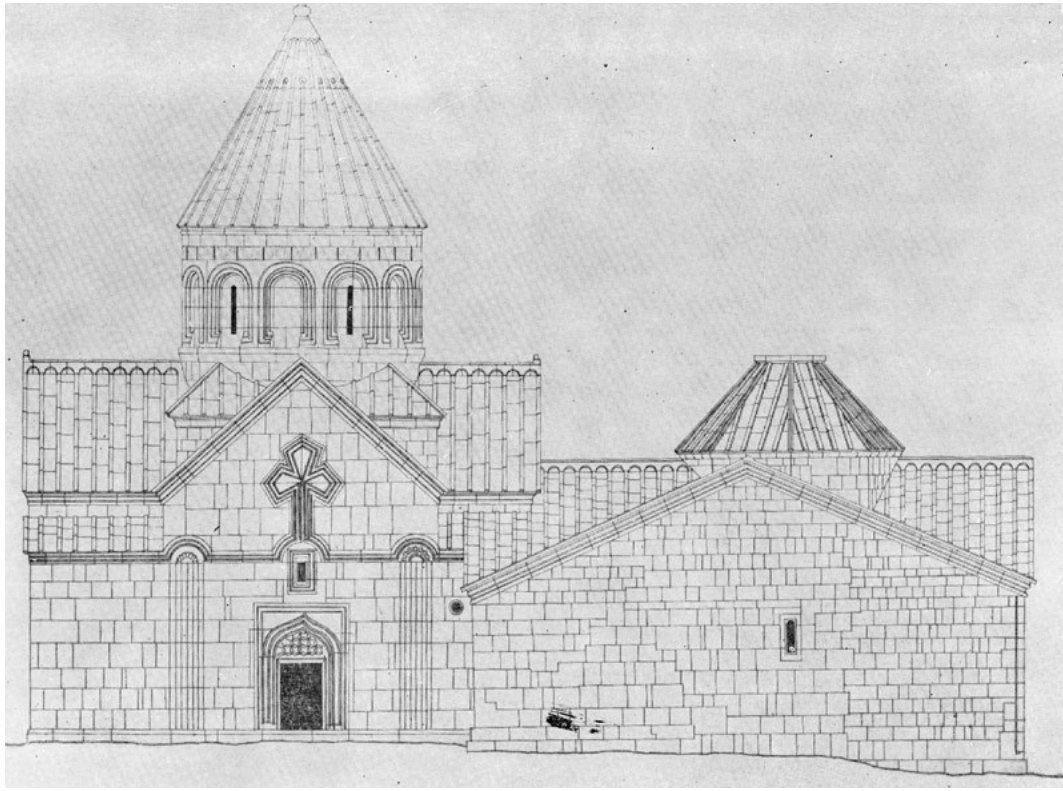
73 The early Armenian images of Daniel in the Lions’ Den are discussed in Mnats‘akanyan 1977; Der Manuelian 1982 pp. 182–184; Donabédian 1990–1991, pp. 262–264; Grigoryan 2012, p. 68; Maranci 2018, p. 32. For the tenth-century example of Aght‘amar, see Der Nersessian 1965, pp. 19–20; Jones 2007, pp. 89–91, fig. 4.28. But see also Hakobyan 2021, which argues that some of the early Armenian images identified as Daniel might in fact represent Saint Thecla with lions.

[33] *Gawit‘* (1220s), Astuatsatsin church (ca 1206–1210) and Surb Kiraki chapel (on the right), southern view, Khoranashat

twice: above the small window in the southern façade of the Aghjots‘ Surb Step‘anos Church **[31–32]**, and inside the *gawit‘* of Khoranashat, where it is positioned above the western entrance, directly facing the principal door of the church **[36, 37a–b]**. We have already seen in the previous sections that both the church exterior and the space within the *gawit‘* could be used to host the faithful for penitential and other purposes. The two thirteenth-century images of Daniel were ostensibly executed with similar intentions, exemplifying the type of the suffering faithful whose patience and steadfastness would guarantee salvation and glory. In his penitential prayer 20.1, Grigor Narekats‘i indeed recalls Daniel and "his dedicated pleas" in (futile) hope of validating his own entreaties before God:[74]

> When I join Daniel, the blessed, holy, and great prophet from among your kin belonging to the lineage of Judah, in repeating his acceptable words and dedicated pleas, even then my punishable utterances reverberate with my sighing.

74 Gregory of Narek [Terian 2021], pp. 84–85 (prayer 20.1)



[34] Astuatsatsin church and *gawit'*, Khoranashat, northern view as reconstructed in K'artashyan 1987, p. 17

The significant literary impact of the Book of Daniel on medieval Armenian authors and its constant inclusion in liturgical codices speak to the popularity of Daniel.[75] Peter S. Cowe has argued, moreover, that certain utilizations of Danielic episodes may be seen "not as a rhetorical embellishment, but as an essential prism through which to view and present the events".[76] The choice of Daniel's salvation story in the *gawit'* of Khoranashat offers a particularly good occasion to verify the socio-political valences that theologians and historians traditionally ascribe to the use of the Book of Daniel.

In the eventful decades that marked the Mongol conquest of the Caucasus, we find Vanakan Vardapet, the founder of the Khoranashat Monastery and of its renowned *vardapetaran*, actively involved in various negotiations with local Mongol rulers, one of whom would actually take him captive. Kirakos Gandzakets'i, a pupil and companion of Vanakan, twice parallels him to Daniel when praising his teacher's patience and virtuous qualities while in Mongol captivity.[77] Khoranashat was constructed – not without interruptions and regressions – in this politically unstable period, at times becoming the very centre of these

75 Cowe 2014; *Idem* 2020.

76 *Idem* 2014, p. 90. There is a vast scholarly literature on Daniel as a historical type; for the Armenian tradition, see also DiTommaso 2014, p. 131–132.

77 Kirakos Gandzakets'i [Melik'-Ohanjanyan 1961], pp. 250, 346.

[35] *Gawit‘*, interior (eastern view), Khoranashat, 1220s

[36] *Gawit‘*, interior (western view), Khoranashat, 1220s

[37a] Daniel in the Lions’ Den, *gawit‘* (interior), above the western portal, Khoranashat, 1220s

[37b] Daniel in the Lions’ Den, *gawit‘* (interior), above the western portal, Khoranashat, 1220s

78 “In the monastery – which he himself had built – named Khoranashat because of the numerous churches there – which is located opposite Ergevank‘ fortress and by the side of Gardman – he made a venerable structure, creating a *gawit‘* out of polished stones at the door of the great church he himself had built. And he taught doctrine to those who came to him from all districts.” Adapted from Robert Bedrosian’s translation, available online: https://www.attalus.org/armenian/kg11.htm#53 (consulted 19.04.2023). The original text in Armenian, as published in Kirakos Gandzakets‘i [Melik‘-Ohanjanyan 1961], pp. 346–437, reads as follows: Ի վանսն՝ զոր իւր իսկ շինեալ էր, որ կոչի Խորանաշատ, և վասն յոլով եկեղեցեացն, որ ի նմա, ընկալաւ զանունն, որ կայ հանդէպ Երգեվանից բերդին և ի թիկանց Գարդմանայ, առնէր նա շինուածս երևելիս, գաւիթ շինելով ի կոփածոյ վիմաց ի դուռն մեծ եկեղեցւոյն, զոր իւր իսկ շինեալ էր. և զբան վարդապետութեանն ուսուցանէր այնոցիկ, որ ժողովեալ էին առ նա յամենայն գաւառաց:

79 Zakarian 2007, pp. 65–73.

80 *Daniel the Prophet* [Stone 2021], p. 237: “Daniel was handsome to the eye, like Christ and thin-bearded and in appearance dry, full of the grace of God.”

tensions due to its energetic leader Vanakan. The latter’s name is so bound to the site that Khoranashat is also referred to as the *Monastery of Vanakan Vardapet*. Gandzakets‘i does not disclose the choice of the Danielic episode found in the *gawit‘* of Khoranashat, but he makes particular reference to the construction of the “*gawit‘* from polished stones at the door of the great church that Vanakan himself had built”.[78]

To further appreciate the popularity of Daniel in the intellectual circles around Vanakan, one must note that Vardan Arewelts‘i, another pupil of Vanakan, composed in Aghjots‘ Monastery a *Commentary on Daniel*.[79] This work was completed in 1268 when the two images of Daniel were already extant at Aghjots‘ and Khoranashat. The position and iconography of these two images call for art-historical analysis, which may further elucidate the intended meanings of artistic images in the construction of sacred spaces more broadly.

Despite the tradition claims that Daniel was a youthful man when thrown into the lions’ den, the two thirteenth-century Armenian images depict him as an elderly, bearded man – an element that echoes an apocryphal writing.[80] This is, however, the most substantial similarity discernible between the Aghjots‘ and Khoranashat images. In Aghjots‘, the scene is positioned on an exterior wall, as are the

analogous examples extant in tenth-century Aght'amar and seventh-century Mren.[81] The haloed Daniel is shown praying in an *oranta* posture, while the two beasts move towards him with open mouths – perhaps "licking the dust of his feet," as the same apocryphon says.[82] Contrary to this, the two lions of Khoranashat are depicted with firmly closed mouths and in a static pose as though submitting themselves to Daniel, whose raised left hand confidently touches the nearby lion. Unlike the other examples that emphasize Daniel's hopeful praying, in the case of Khoranashat Daniel is presented as having superiority over the beasts and as already having been rewarded with victorious salvation. Moreover, the posture of these lions – seated on their hind legs with their forepaws on the ground – emphasizes their role as Daniel's guardians and protectors **[38b]**.[83]

Apart from the biblical account (Daniel 6:16–23), the story of Daniel in the Lions' Den was known to Armenians through the apocryphal text *The Names, Works and Deaths of the Holy Prophets*, which, however, does not elucidate the iconographic peculiarities found at Khoranashat.[84]

81 For the Aght'amar image, see above, n. 73. The Mren example, depicted around the eastern window, can however be identified with Daniel with some reservations. I thank Christina Maranci for sending me a recent image for verification. The image is discussed in Donabédian 1990–1991, pp. 262, 264, fig. 25; *Idem* 2008, pp. 109–110, fig. 169.

82 *Daniel the Prophet* [Stone 2021], p. 236: "And the beasts, (though) hungry, did not approach the prophet, but were licking the dust of (his) feet".

83 Another sculpted lion with a protective function is to be seen on the entrance of the Khornashat *gawit'*. Here, the lion, together with a horned animal, each carved from a

[38a] The front of the bema of the principal church, Makaravank‘, 1205

Some of these idiosyncrasies can now be elucidated with reference to another apocryphal text available in Armenian: *Daniel the Prophet and the Three Young Man*, which recently saw its first publication thanks to Michael E. Stone.[85] The text includes the story of Daniel in the Lions' Den, interpolated with episodes from the *Bel and the Dragon*, which is an extension of the Book of Daniel.[86] The Armenian apocryphal account, which draws largely upon *Bel and the Dragon*, deviates from it in the number of lions (and of the days spent in the den). The text of *Bel and the Dragon* relays that there were seven lions, whereas the newly published apocryphon speaks of "two man-eating lions", as reflected in all extant Armenian images of Daniel in the Lions' Den.[87] Shortly before this, Daniel's vision of the return and "terrible judgement of Christ" is mentioned, as well as how he continually prayed to God, openly mentioning His fearful name (զահեղ անունն Աստուծոյ, cf. the wording of the Noravank‘ inscription given above).[88] Next, the leonine episode unfolds, with Habakkuk bringing food for Daniel, who shares it with the "hungry beasts". After coming out unharmed from the den of the two lions, Daniel is immediately said to have "killed the dragon to which the Chaldeans were sacrificing".[89] Although the narrative of Bel states that Daniel wished to kill the dragon (venerated by the Babylonians!) with the use of neither sword and nor sceptre,[90] at Khoranashat the elongated object that appears in Daniel's right hand may be taken as an apotropaic weapon. I am aware of no Armenian source that mentions Daniel holding a beast-harming instrument, but a comparative view to non-Armenian evidence may offer an interpretative ground for the sword-like attribute, the power of which has humbled the colossal – "man-eating" – lions of Khoranashat. For example, two Latin liturgical dramas, *Historia de Daniel Representanda* and *Ludus Danielis*, composed respectively in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, speak of an angel armed with a sword, who suddenly appeared to Daniel "in order to shut the mouth of the lions".[91] In the absence of corroborating evidence, it cannot be determined whether the Armenians would have been familiar with these mystic plays, but the knowledge of an apotropaic weapon capable of silencing and submitting lions is clearly demonstrated in the Khoranashat sculpture. It is also remarkable that both the Latin texts and the recently published Armenian apocryphon represent the episodes of Daniel in the Lions' Den and of *Bel and the Dragon* in a hybrid way and both place special emphasis on Christ's Coming.

Thus, the Khoranashat image of Daniel encapsulates the multifaceted yet increasingly interconnected meanings – pious, salvific, eschatological, apocalyptic, and apotropaic – that were regularly evoked during devotional and liturgical practices enacted inside the *gawit‘*.

single piece of stone, serve as capitals supporting the lintel of the pointed tympanum. The bodies of these guardian beasts are inscribed, naming Vanakan (on the lion) and Grigor (on the horned animal), and requesting Christ's mercy for both of them. For images and inscriptions, see Grigoryan 2023, p. 64, figs 3.2a–c.

84 This text is reproduced, translated, and discussed in Stone 1982, pp. 158–173, sp. pp. 164–165.

85 *Daniel the Prophet* [Stone 2021].

86 For its relation to the Armenian *Daniel the Prophet and the Three Young Men*, see Stone's study (n. supra). For bibliographical references about *Bel and the Dragon*, see DiTommaso 2005, p. 335. For the Armenian text, see Armenian Version of Daniel [Cowe 1992], pp. 221–227.

87 *Daniel the Prophet* [Stone 2021], p. 237, also n. 78.

88 *Ibidem*, pp. 227, 235–236.

89 *Ibidem*, p. 237.

90 Armenian Version of Daniel [Cowe 1992], p. 225: «Բայց դու, արքայ, տուր ինձ իշխանութիւն և սպանից զվիշապն առաջի քո առանց սրոյ և գաւազանի» (Bel 26).

91 Wright 2014, pp. 16, 18 (n. 38). On these two mystic plays, accompanied with an extensive bibliography, see DiTommaso 2005, pp. 446–448.

Directly facing the principal door of the church, the scene is positioned on the western wall **[36]** in such a way that it is only visible when turning one's back to the church door **[35]** – a position that could occur, e.g., when renouncing Satan and declaring one's faith, as prescribed in the Armenian rite of penitence before admitting the faithful to the church (§ 11). Even if the choice of this scene may have had a personalized significance related to the captivity of the monastery's founder, Vanakan, its re-appearance in the contemporaneous Aghjots' Surb Step'anos speaks for a new revival of Daniel's leonine story – a tendency that is discernible in the artistic and liturgical practices of other Christian societies as well.

[38b] The salvation of Jonah, the front of the bema (fragment) of the principal church, Makaravank', 1205

VI: CONCLUSIONS

One may indeed question whether the liturgical services and the much-debated penitential practices preventing the faithful from entering the church were actualized with the same severity and archaism with which they are described in polemical writings and in official *mashtots'* books. Indeed, the textual and material documentation we have at hand expresses prescribed purposes rather than unquestionable matters of fact. It is from this point of view that I would like to conclude the present inquiry, which supports and expands the liturgical arguments raised thus far about the intended functionality of Armenian *gawit's*.

The multiply framed and often elevated inner doors, the 'heaven-like' domes, and the sculptural *mise-en-scène*s installed inside the *gawit'* called for meditative contemplation and required, moreover, physical and aesthetic engagement. Preventing the faithful from entering the church and ceremonially rewarding with such permission was a sort of psychological device aimed at enhancing the worshippers' spiritual capacities and salvific aspirations, thereby highlighting the promise that awaited them "in front of Christ's bema". In this respect, it is noticeable that, in the early thirteenth-century church of Makaravank', the "front of Christ's bema" contains an image of Jonah expelled from the whale[92] – a salvation story that would likely have incited analogous associations for those righteous standing in front of the bema **[38a–b]**.[93]

The dramatic passage from the *gawit'* allowed one to partake in the vitalizing mysteries of the Church; yet, the ultimate hope was to secure a place in the heavenly kingdom, as visual and epigraphic sources make clear. The search for eschatological glory was a permanent concern in medieval Armenian spirituality, and this concern was regularly formulated theologically, commented upon exegetically,

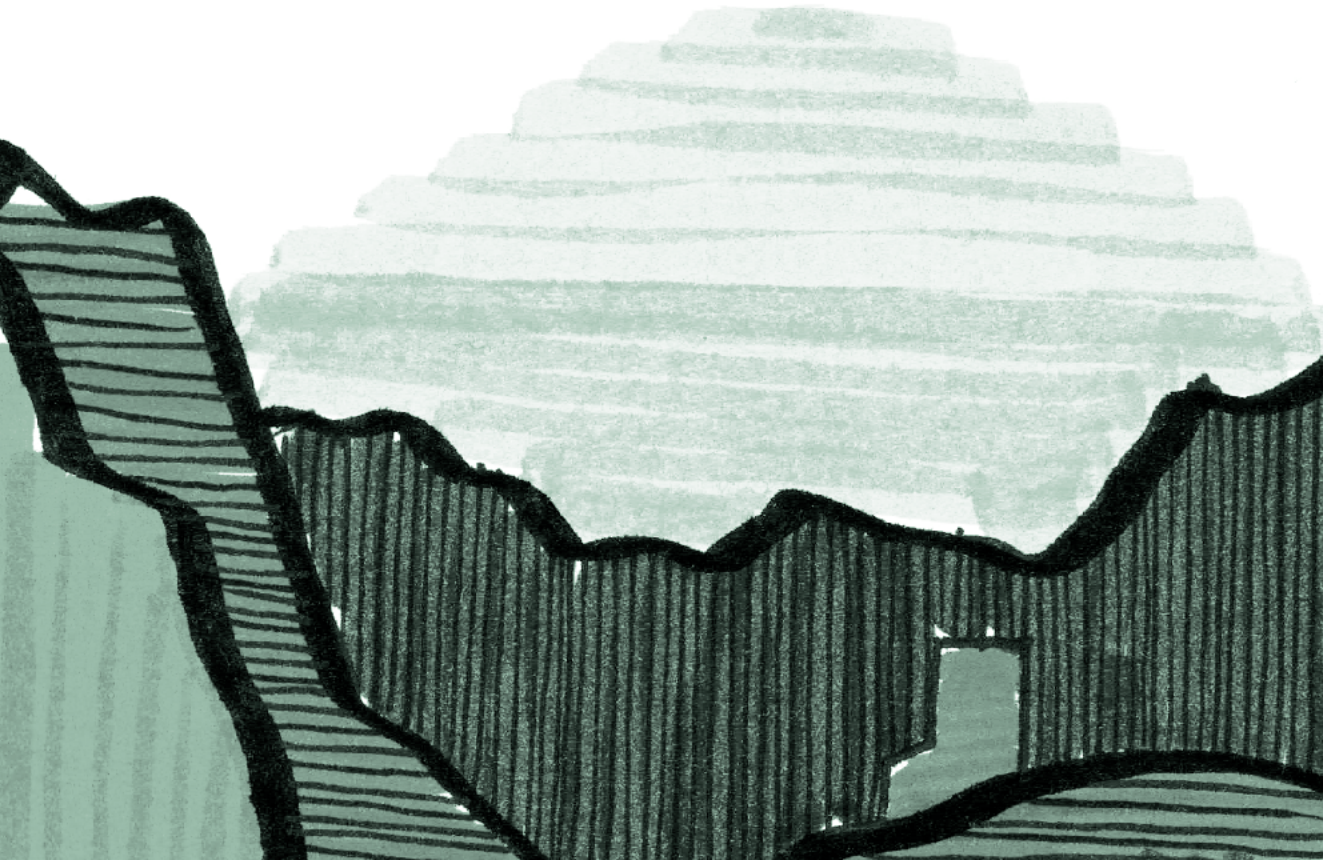
92 Karakhanyan 1974, p. 106, misidentifies the Makaravank' image of Jonah as a female figure.

93 To be clear, the Makaravank' *gawit'* completed by 1224 was adjusted to the west façade of the oldest church dating from the tenth/eleventh centuries and not to the nearby church, which is often labelled "the principal church" owing to its remarkable size and sculptural decoration. Because of this, the spacious *gawit'* appears to be connected to both churches: to the small church from the west and to the principal church from the north. For the plan and construction of the monastic complex of Makaravank', see Thierry/Donabédian 1987, pp. 552–553; Cuneo 1988, I, p. 146 (no. 39); Harutyunyan 1992, pp. 316–318, 306, fig. 93/6.

enacted liturgically, experienced in private devotion, and continually visualized in artistic images. The biblical scenes found in Armenian *gawit'*s and their respective churches – all pertaining to salvific, eschatological, or apocalyptic dimensions – were nevertheless addressed to a prepared faithful, given that understanding the visual information demanded as much literacy and experience as was required to comprehend the verbal content. Rather than merely enchanting their beholders, these sculpted images were meant to take part in the worshipper's meditative and ritual experience, for they materialized concrete themes that were evoked parallelly in liturgical celebrations, penitential prayers, private devotion, and funerary rites. No wonder, therefore, that the careful selection of figurative images – extremely limited in number and in thematic repertoire – conveys eschatological and apocalyptic ideas that were universal in their nature and applicable to various occasions.

MONASTIC LANDSCAPE(S).
RK'ONI AS EXAMPLE OF A CAUCASIAN MULTI-CHURCH MONASTERY

Thomas Kaffenberger



Many monastic communities chose the northern foothills of the Trialeti mountains, ranging from the western outskirts of Tbilisi to Boch'orma, to settle – surrounded by dense forests, close to natural water sources, sheltered and at the same time often close to important connecting mountain roads. Among those, one of the least explored is the Rk'oni monastery of the Virgin, in the Tedzami valley, about 25 km south-east of Gori.

Today's approach of the monastery is through a drivable path starting in Ertats'minda, with a large thirteenth century church dedicated to St Evstat'e Plakida and passing by the village of Chachubeti with a smaller medieval church. In Rk'oni village, the journey continues by foot for another 2–3 km along the shore of Tedzami river, through forests. The topography of the site is remarkable: situated in a rather wide valley-bottom, Rk'oni village is surrounded by high mountains and several side valleys, all harbouring smaller and mid-sized churches of the medieval period (most prominently St George of Ik'vi, some km north-west). The main river valley extends southwards **[1]** and gets rather narrow a few hundred metres south of the village, where the entrance to the gorge is guarded by Rk'oni fortress – Vakhushti Bagrationi describes the monastery as located in an "extremely strong and inaccessible place" ("ფრიად მაგარსა და შეუვალს") in the eighteenth century.[1] The geographical situation indicates the importance of the valley and the road leading through it in the medieval period; it was presumably one of the mountain passes between Shida and Kvemo Kartli, its southern end being guarded by the fortress of K'ldek'ari.[2]

While the extant buildings, ranging from the seventh to seventeenth century, might not be the biggest and most prominent ones of their respective period, the interest of the site lies in its complex sacral topography, embedded in the very particular surrounding geographical topography, blending architecture, ritual and nature into a veritable monastic landscape created throughout a millennium of building activities. This chapter intends to use the example of Rk'oni in a *longue-durée* approach, in order to elucidate the construction and shaping of such particular monastic landscapes in medieval Georgia, followed by thoughts on the convergences and divergences in the shaping of multi-church monastic sites in Georgia.

THE MONASTIC NUCLEUS: FROM THE ORIGINS IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY TO THE REDISCOVERY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The monastic nucleus, placed on the northern shore of the river, consists of a gate-tower, the main church of the Virgin with a western porch and an adjoining but independent southern chapel, the smaller

1 Bagrationi 1745 [Brosset 1842], p. 199.

2 On the topography of the Tedzami valley recently Bibiluri *et al*. 2020.

[1] Tedzami River Valley near Rk'oni

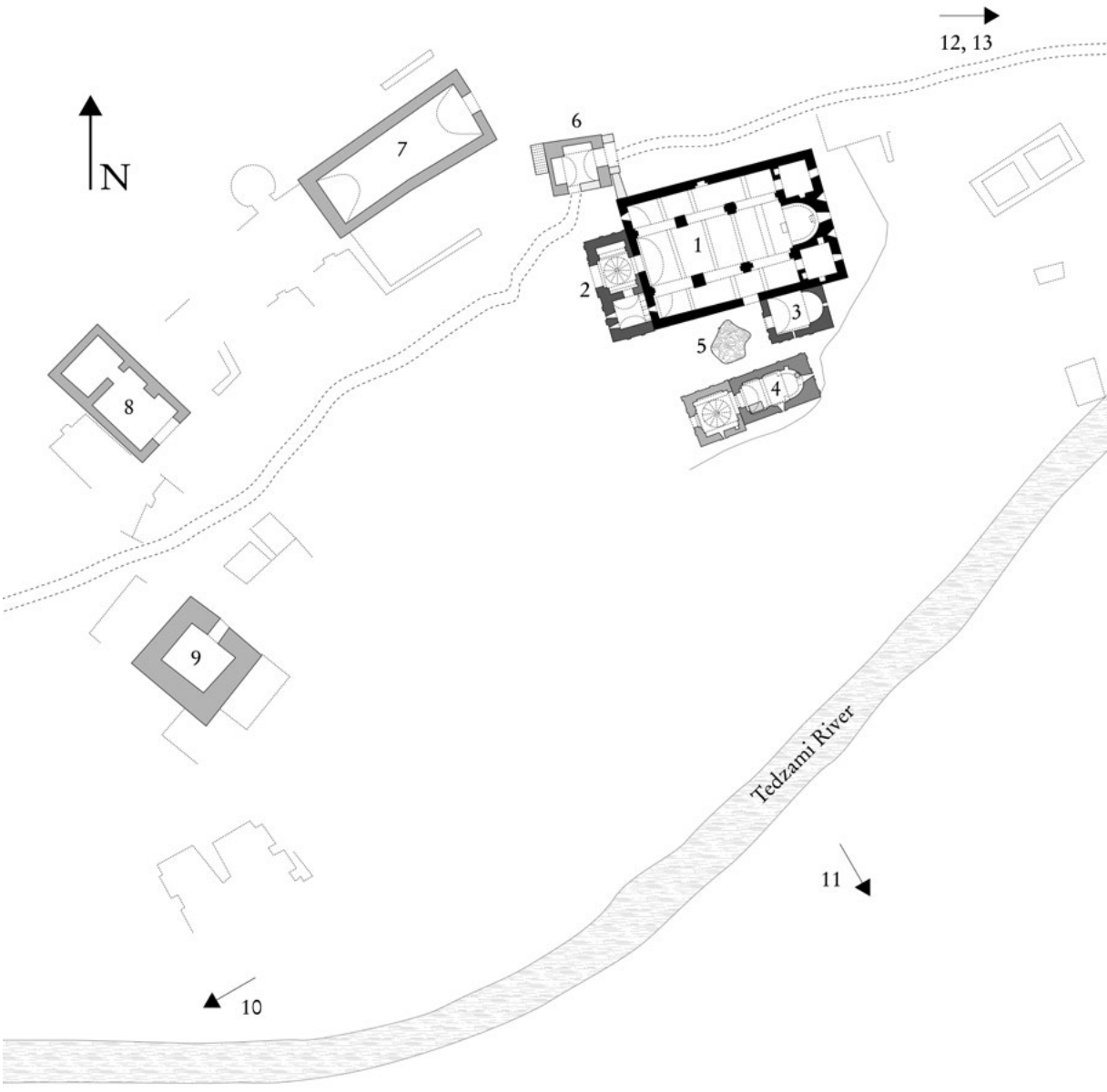
church of St John Natlismtsemeli (the Baptist) and a number of mostly ruined monastic buildings (among which a large refectory and a massive tower) **[2]**. There are no early mentions of the monastery in written sources: as we will see below, the material evidence alone gives us the information that the monastery goes back to at least the seventh century. Early inscriptions, datable through palaeographic specificities, indicate an intense phase of activities in the tenth century.[3] The monastery reached its peak importance relatively late, it appears. A charter from 1260 documents the donation of considerable goods, namely nearby villages and their income, to the "Mother of God of Rk'oni".[4] This coincides with the evidence of large-scale building activities undertaken throughout the thirteenth century, in subsequent phases and by varying teams of artists but presumably in rather short sequence – again we will discuss this in more detail below. An important inscription, placed at the southern corner of the smaller church's western entrance, then mentions the destruction

3 Otkhmezuri 1997.

4 "Dats'erili Kakha Torelisa rk'onis ghmrtismshoblisadmi" [Written by Kakha Toreli to the Mother of God of Rk'oni], in Enukidze/Silogava/Shoshiashvili 1984, pp. 145–160.

[2] Plan of the Monastery with indication of surrounding historic sites, Rk'oni

1: Church of the Mother of God, 7th–10th century
2: Porch, 13th century
3: Memorial Chapel, 13th century
4: Saint John Natlismtsemeli, early 14th century
5: Old Lindentree
6: Gatehouse with Belltower, medieval/17th century
7: Refectory, medieval
8: Monastic building with cellar, medieval
9: Tower, medieval
10: Bridge, 12th/13th century
11: Hermitage of Saint Simeon Stylites, medieval/17th century
12: Venerated Lindentree
13: "Naqoshari" of Saint George



of the monastery by the troops of Tamerlan (Temür ibn Taraghai Barlas, 1336–1405) in the year 1400: “Here came Timur the Lang and destroyed churches and he also destroyed Rk’oni. Koronikon was 88 [1312−88=1400].”[5] This event is, according to Otkhmezuri, commemorated in another brief inscription placed on the eastern wall of the same church: “Here Rk’oni was wiped out on the eighth month.”[6] It appears that this major misfortune in the monastery’s history rather than ending the use of the buildings was followed by rebuilding and a subsequent reappropriation of the site. Fragmentary inscriptions from later centuries, such as the lost sixteenth century inscription referring to the construction of the bell tower, show the ongoing modifications and at least local importance.

Mentions of the monastery remain exceedingly rare before the twentieth century. After Vakhushti Bagrationi, it is only in 1936 that Giorgi Chubinashvili approaches the site, mainly focusing on the earliest construction stage of the seventh century.[7] Restorations to the buildings happen in 1938–1939 and 1972–1974, and the complex gets mentioned in a handful of more general academic publications and brief articles, mostly referring to the general layout.[8] The information used in these presumably goes back to an unpublished manuscript on the monastery compiled by Rene Schmerling of the 1940s and a short mention in Niko Chubinashvili’s book on Ts’erovani of 1976.[9] While Chubinashvili deplores already in 1976 that the complex is still not well studied, to this date only one monographic article, investigating the hermitage tower to the south of the complex (see further below) has been published.[10]

A TALE OF MANY RENOVATIONS: THE CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN

If we approach the complex in chronological order, starting with the oldest extant parts of masonry, we at the same time begin the investigation with the first building the beholder approaching from north through the river valley is able to discern between the dense trees: the eastern end of the church of the Virgin **[3]**. The church is a compact building of one nave and two aisles developed over a rectangular plan of approximately 12 by 18.5 m. Nave and aisles are separated by two piers on each side, separating nave and aisles into three bays. The apse, slightly off-centre towards south, is flanked by two square pastophoria, which communicate with the aisles by means of small rectangular doorways in the respective eastern walls.

In the typical shape developed in the Caucasian architecture of the seventh century, pastophoria and apse are covered towards the outside with a straight eastern wall, interrupted by triangular niches

[3] Eastern Façade, Church of the Mother of God, Rk’oni, 7th century

5 Reading after Otkhmezuri 1997, p. 10: “Ⴕ. ႠႵႠ ႫႭႥႨႣႠ Ⴊ(Ⴀ)ႬႢႧႤႫႭ(Ⴓ)Ⴐ ႣႠ ႣႠ(Ⴀ)ႵႺႨႥႬ[Ⴀ] ႤႩႪႤႱႨႠႬ[Ⴈ] ႣႠ ႰႩ’ႭႬႨႺႠ ႣႠ(Ⴀ)ႵႺႨႠ. Ⴕ(ႰႭႬႨ)Ⴉ(Ⴍ)ႬႨ ႨႷႭ ႯႡ”; transl. Natalia Chitishvili. See also Javakhishvili 1982, 204.

6 Reading after Otkhmezuri 1997, p. 11: “ႠႵ(Ⴀ) Ⴢ ႠႫႭႱႼႷ(Ⴓ)Ⴃ(Ⴀ) ႰႩ(Ⴍ)ႬႨ, ႧႥ(Ⴄ)Ⴑ(Ⴀ) Ⴋ(Ⴄ)ႰႥ(ႤႱ)Ⴀ”; transl. Natalia Chitishvili.

7 Chubinashvili 1936, pp. 199–202.

8 Makalatia 1959, pp. 28–33; Bagrationi 1982; Javakhishvili 1982, p. 204; Kintsurashvili 1984; Kazaryan 2012–2013, vol. III, pp. 497–499. More detailed entry in the monument topography of Georgia: Devdariani/Zakaraia/Shevjakova 1990; here also further plan material of the churches.

9 The author was not able to consult this manuscript before the publication of this article. See also Chubinashvili 1976, p. 36.

10 Ghavtadze 2010.

marking the connection between apse and pastophoria. Already Chubinashvili proposes this to be modelled on the example of Ts'romi (Shida Kartli, 626–634?), presumably one of the earliest examples of combining a façade with raised middle part and lower side wings with such niches.[11] However, Kazaryan raises some doubt about a direct connection due to the diverging proportions and decorative features.[12] Indeed, the niches in Rk'oni are relatively slender and low, reaching only a little higher than the pastophoria windows. The central apse window is on the same height as the niches but receives a slight accentuation through a hood-mould above. The latter is an altogether common feature for the seventh/eighth century architecture of Georgia but remains in use far into the eleventh century. Nevertheless, the hitherto proposed date of the later seventh century seems plausible for the original construction of the church. This evidence is corroborated by the unusual fragments of a painted decoration in the semicones at the top of the niches. Here, one can still distinguish a radial alternation of red and white stripes rather alike those of the window arches and diagonal niches of the first decoration phase of the Sioni Church of At'eni (Shida Kartli). While the latter's date is heavily disputed as well, an inscription on the first painting layer mentions the death of Stepanoz Mampal in 739, presumably fixing the execution of

11 Chubinashvili 1936, p. 201. On Ts'romi Chubinashvili 1969; Beridze 1974, pp. 112–113; Donabédian 2008, pp. 115–118 (who suggests a corrected dating in the 640s).

12 Kazaryan 2012–2013, vol. III, p. 497.

this layer in the early days of the eighth century.[13] Another possible link could be drawn to the bi-coloured decorations of the tenth century monasteries in the T'ao region, thus the Rk'oni exterior paintings might also belong to a slightly later decoration phase.

Already a brief glance at the eastern end shows us, though, that there were multiple phases of renovation and rebuilding. The lower central parts, including the central and southern windows, is made from reddish limestone ashlars, which show heavy signs of weathering. The upper central gable uses a grey-greenish ashlar masonry, which appears to be historic as well, as the weathered relief-decorated cornice is made from the same type of stone. The cornices of the side gables are entirely new, while the gables themselves are treated differently. That in the south shows light and dark grey ashlar layers in irregular alternation, that in the north rather modern looking red (and a few light grey) ashlars. Evidently, these ruptures and repairs in the masonry bear testimony to the multiple phases of renovation

13 On the inscription Abramishvili 1977; the debate including comments on the plausibility of this date summed up in Plontke-Lüning 2007, cat. pp. 52–66. On the paintings most importantly Virsaladze 1984 and Eastmond 1998, pp. 43–58, 235–237.

[4] Church of the Mother of God (7th–10th century) with Porch (13th century), Memorial Chapel (13th century) and Church of St John Natlismtsemeli (early 14th century), Rk'oni

ranging from the tenth century to most recent years. Unfortunately, the oldest pictorial evidence of this building side, published in Chubinashvili's book of 1936, only shows the central window and the adjoining northern niche, nevertheless confirming that the restorations of the late 1930s and 1970s did not change this area.[14]

The side walls and pseudo-clerestory (there are no windows illuminating the central nave) of the church are largely unstructured, at least in today's state. More or less in the centre of both aisle walls, a bit further west for the northern one, we can find (former) portals. They are only more visible as semi-circular imprint of their large undecorated tympana, embedded into the (later) ashlar masonry. In the northern wall, a vertical line more or less at the level of the portal divides the eastern part, executed in red ashlars similar to the regular, modern ones used for the north-eastern lower gable, and the western part made from white/grey ashlars. The latter's irregular placement with many small filling stones would indicate a reuse of older building materials. In the clerestory, the evidence indicates a different story for eastern and western half as well, the eastern part showing a remarkable curve in the relatively irregular ashlar wall, indicating a need for realignment during the (re)construction phase, while the western half is a rather random mix of ashlars of different characteristics. The southern front's exterior stonework is largely renewed, with exception of a few conspicuous ashlars in the centre of the clerestory.

At this point we might try to disentangle as well as possible the phases of the exterior walls, which – as we are dealing with shell masonry – are to a certain extent independent from the state of the interior walls (i.e., the external cladding might have been renewed independently from destructions of the respective interior wall). Interesting evidence helping with the dating of certain phases appears on the western façade, the central part of which is hidden by the later added porch **[4]**. Its southern third is entirely rebuilt in rubble masonry, while the ashlars of the central gable and northern window are in large parts authentic and contain a considerable number of inscriptions and reliefs in seemingly random arrangement. The gable is crowned by a cornice made from repetitive horseshoe ornament – presumably in secondary use, as the size differs between northern and southern side and the blocks meet rather randomly at the top of the gable **[5]**. Similar ornament can be found at buildings of the sixth century already, for example the well-known church of Samts'evrisi (Shida Kartli, first half of seventh century), so that we can attribute these frieze-fragments to the first building phase of the seventh century.[15] Already Chubinashvili's photo of the early 1930s shows the frieze in the current state, so

14 Chubinashvili 1936, p. 202, fig. 160.

15 Plontke-Lüning 2007, p. 201, 205, 247 points out that the horseshoe-frieze does not appear before the late sixth century, first in Armenia. On Santervisi, *Ibidem*, cat. p. 277–278. On this cornice form in general Donabédian 2008, p. 254.

that we can exclude its placement here during one of the twentieth century restoration phases, which in turn are responsible for the most modern areas of stonework (particularly the southern aisle wall and considerable parts of the northern and eastern walls). Similarly interesting is a long inscription, placed right next to the central window, which has been interpreted and dated by Otkhmezuri.[16] It mentions a certain Ezoskhutsesi Mikael, by whose hand the inscription was written, and a Mariam and her parents – allegedly the responsible donors for the rebuilding of the church. On palaeographic grounds, the inscription can be dated to the tenth century, a rather plausible date for the first renewal of the by then presumably already decaying seventh century church.[17] A second inscription on an ashlar to the left of the long donor inscription, calling the Virgin to have mercy for a certain Iovane, seems to belong to the same phase – and so might the relief of a standing frontal figure and a relief cross with the abbreviated name "Thevdore", both placed right above the long inscription. Othkmezuri sees in the figure a craftsman and dates it to the tenth century. While the figure indeed holds an object, it is not a craftsman tool, so we are rather inclined to follow the recent interpretation of Khundadze. Due to the clergyman's clothing and beardlessness of the man, she suggests that he is a "reader", once belonging to a larger composition, and dates the relief to the eighth/ninth century.[18] The name Theodore, connected to the figure by Otkhmezuri, is not placed on the slab with the figure but next to the upper part of the cross relief. It is not impossible that both reliefs were part of a larger composition and indeed belong together, but it seems more likely that they were placed here in one or the other remodelling phase. It is here, where a previously unpublished inscription above the northern façade window, leading into the aisle, might shed more light on the complex development of the building. The three-line inscription reads:

> Holy Mother of God, accept [this] from Modistozi; the upper parts of the windows of both aisles have been repaired/adorned [?] by him.[19]

Modistos – a rather unusual name of apparently Latin origin - might be tentatively identified with early twelfth century bishop Modistos Abuletisdze, a controversial cleric that together with his brother Dzagan opposed the policy of King David the Builder (r. 1089–1125) and subsequently was removed from office.[20] Yet, as the Abuletisdze were feudal lords in Mukhrani, Modistos bishop of Ts'ilk'ani, some 30 km east of Rk'oni, the precise connections to the monastery cannot

16 Otkhmezuri 1997, pp. 13–14: "Ⴜ(ႫႨႣႠ)Ⴍ ႤႩႪ(Ⴄ)Ⴑ(ႨႠ)Ⴍ, Ⴋ(ႠႰႨႠ)Ⴋ ႣႠ ႫႸ(Ⴍ)Ⴁ(Ⴄ) ႪႨ ႫႠႧႨ Ⴘ(ႤႤ)ႼႷ(Ⴀ)[Ⴊ]Ⴄ ႣႠ Ⴋ[ႤႭ]Ⴞ ႤႵႫႤႬ Ⴜ(ႨႬႠႸ)Ⴄ ႻႨႱ[Ⴀ] ႸႤႬႨႱႠ ႣႠ Ⴖ(ႫႰ)ႧႨႱႠ Ⴙ(ႭႤ) [ႬႨႱ]Ⴀ Ⴋ(Ⴀ)ႸႤ[Ⴌ]ႤႡ(Ⴄ)Ⴊ(ႱႠ) Ⴑ(Ⴀ)Ⴗ(Ⴍ)[Ⴔ]ႪႨႱ Ⴘ(Ⴄ)ႬႨႱႠ. ႣႠႫႢႤႰႠ ႾႤႪႨႧႠ Ⴋ(Ⴄ)[Ⴕ] (ႠႤ)Ⴊ ႤႪ(Ⴍ)ႱႫ(Ⴍ)Ⴚ(Ⴄ)Ⴑ(ႨႱ) ႠႣႧႠ. Ⴍ(ႫႧႠႪ)Ⴍ Ⴘ(ႤႤႼႷႠႪ)Ⴄ"; transl. Natalia Chitishvili: "Holy Church, have mercy on Mariam and her parents and be a protector in front of your Son and our God to the builder of your staying. It has been written by the hand of Mikael Ezoskhutsesi. God have mercy."

17 Otkhmezuri 1997, p. 14.

18 *Ibidem*; Khundadze 2017b, pp. 97–98, fig. 186.

19 "ⴜ(ⴋⴈⴃⴀ)ⴍ ⴖⴋ(ⴐⴇⴑ)ⴋ ⴘⴍ(ⴁⴄⴊ)ⴍ ⴘⴄⴈⴜⴈⴐⴄ ⴋⴍⴃⴈⴑⴒⴍⴆⴈⴑⴂⴀⴌ ⴍⴐⴈⴂⴄ ⴑⴀⴋⴗⴀⴐⴀⴌⴈ ⴑⴀⴐ(sic!)-ⴉⴋⴄ[ⴊ]ⴇⴀ ⴆⴄⴃⴀⴈⴇⴈ ⴋⴈⴑ-ⴂ(ⴀ)ⴌ ⴘⴄⴈ[...]ⴀ [...]ⴀ."; reading and transl. by Natalia Chitishvili.

20 This is mentioned in a deed written in 1123/1124 by David the Builder and given to the monastery of Shio-Mgvime: "Anderdzi davit mefisa mghvimisadmi" [The Deed given by the King David to Mghvime], in Enukidze/Silogava/Shoshiashvili 1984, pp. 52–59, sp. p. 54; see also Kldiashvili *et al*. 1991, p. 65.

[5] Reliefs and Inscriptions of the Western Gable, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni

be established – maybe this was the place where he found refuge after his removal from office? In any case, the inscription's style seems to corroborate the twelfth century date, which might be a plausible moment of the final rearrangement of the gable ashlars: then, the older inscriptions and the reliefs, including two different but symmetrical crosses above the central window, would have been moved into their current place.

The church interior shows a similarly complex picture of an ongoing remodelling of the seventh century nucleus **[6]**.[21] To the latter belong the arcades over rectangular piers. The eastern piers and arcade responds possess rectangular pilasters carrying the stepped intrados of the arches, while the western piers are slightly larger and rectangular. The crude capital blocks show stacked roll mouldings (only the south-eastern one was decorated with a repeating centralized

21 On the interior structure most comprehensively Chubinashvili 1936, 200.

[6] Interior, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni

[7] Clergyman's relief, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 8th–9th century (?)

ornament), the interruptions of which in the fronts indicate later changes to the support system. The walls above the piers and the vault are highly irregular, indicating at least one if not several collapses of the vaults. Rubble masonry above each pier shows that it was necessary to replace a disturbed ashlar shell here, which points towards the original presence of wall supports for transversal arches aligned with the piers. The current vault, a flat lopsided barrel, is supported by randomly placed transversal arches springing at the top of the (in other parts original) pseudo-clerestory. The vaults of the aisles are of the same phase of reconstruction and present equally wonky attempts, here at creating half-tons. The central apse in the east was originally lower: the curved springer is still visible on the northern jamb, at about the level of the nave arcade. The vault, to which paintings of the twelfth/thirteenth century adhere (see below) bears testimony to countless attempts at repairing the masonry, the oldest of which certainly go back to the same phases of rebuilding commemorated in the façade inscriptions. Above the apse arch, the lunette is decorated with two ornamented panels, apparently reused from an eleventh century chancel screen, making this part of a later remodelling as well. The apse itself still shows a synthronon-like bench (which, however, appears also in parts of the aisles) and an old altar block; a second altar block of uncertain age is preserved on the eastern wall of the northern aisle, next to the door into the northern pastophorium. The eastern ends of both aisles show simple doorways with semi-circular undecorated tympana, which lead into the square pastophoria. The latter don't show any architectural particularities but both harbour fragmentary paintings of different periods, to which we will come back below.

A peculiarity can be found on the base of the north-eastern pier: a relief of a crudely carved clergyman in a circle, holding a cross and a staff and flanked by further crosses as well as a tree **[7]**. The figure is turned by 90 degrees. This is astonishing as we would assume this part of the pier to belong to the initial building, so that a reuse of the relief – dated to the eighth/ninth century by Khundadze – is chronologically unlikely. Was only this slab replaced – and if yes, why was the image turned? Or was it carved like this on purpose? We might hypothesize that the relief marks the burial place of the clergyman, perhaps indeed the Abott of the monastery as proposed by Khundadze, and his horizontal depiction in an aureole-like frame was intended to visualize his moving forward from the earthly sphere into afterlife, perhaps indicated by the tree next to him.[22] The latter might be a paradisiac tree or even stand for the venerated linden tree of the monastery, to which we will come back below.

22 Khundadze 2017b, pp. 97–98. For an example of a monk's depiction in horizontal orientation see the Rydan-relief of the Schottenkirche Regensburg, the original intentions of which are admittedly not entirely certain as well. The relief has rather been subject of folkloric tales (describing him as keykeeper of the church) than of academic research (Enders 1903, pp. 74–75); a stylistic evaluation in Stocker 2001, pp. 98, 106–107.

A FASHIONABLE NEW ENTRANCE: THE WESTERN PORCH OF THE CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN

In the thirteenth century, a western porch was added to the façade of the church **[8]**. It is asymmetric, with a rectangular semi-open central space, vaulted with an umbrella dome, in front of the (also renewed) inner portal and a funerary chapel to the south. Porches of this kind become very common in the Georgian architecture from around the late tenth/early eleventh century onwards, so that we can speak of a relatively late example of an already long-established artistic formula.[23] Typical aspects of the Rk'oni porch include the exterior decoration by means of a continuous blind arcade and the somewhat tripartite nature of the central porch space, with a square central bay and shallow lateral niches (structurally similar to e.g. the eleventh century western porch in Manglisi or the twelfth century southern porch at Gelati Monastery).

23 On porches in medieval Georgia most recently Kaffenberger 2021, with comprehensive bibliography, and Shneuerson 2022.

[8] Porch of the Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 13th century

The exterior decoration, despite following more ancient overall ideals, shows a few peculiarities typical for a certain "mannerism" of the thirteenth century ornament-work.[24] The blind arcade was once composed of thirteen arcades (twelve plus the large central arch of the main doorway). Three arcades each were on the northern and southern facades, the latter almost entirely destroyed, four on the western façade. Two arcades were placed exactly on the porch corners (a fragment remains in the north-west), so that instead of a column, the arcade itself marked the building corner. This highly unusual arrangement was later repeated at the small church of St John Natlismtsemeli. The arcade columns are arranged in triplets; accordingly, the arches are doubled (the lateral colonettes correspond to the inner arch, the central one to the common springer for the outer arch). That this systematic approach of a correspondence between support and arch was well-understood is shown by the north-eastern corner, where a double colonette, corresponding to the double arch on top of the capital, marks the end of the blind arcade.[25] Interlace ornaments cover the square bases and capitals of the blind arcade as well as the jambs and archivolt of the central western doorway, surmounted by an ornamented cross. The high degree of ornamental variation is unsurprising for the thirteenth century, and so is the use of both, repetitive interlace patterns developed from earlier models, and centralized ornaments with interlace crosses or discs. Despite some difference in the execution, the range of ornaments used for the capitals and bases approaches the Rk'oni porch to buildings such as the apse of Khobi Monastery, datable to the second half of the thirteenth century as well.

The interior shows a rich use of interlace ornaments on the arches framing the exterior and interior doorways as well as on the engaged piers carrying the dome **[9]**. Remarkably, the arch forming the portal into the church is slightly pointed, a shape appearing in particular in the thirteenth century architecture (such as the eastern niches of nearby Ertats'minda Church).[26] The richly ornamented umbrella dome sits somewhat awkwardly over what one might consider a combination of squinches and pendentives.[27] Decorated with a fluted ornament, they recall early medieval squinch solutions for octagonal dome bases, which clashes with the actual round dome base. Among the varied ornaments of the dome segments, we might point out the one in the north-east, which starts off as a regular cross interlace towards the outside but then loses any coherence towards the dome centre, indicating a certain inexperience with the treatment of the complicated, curved and sloping surface of dome compartments. The latter are separated by rib-like ornaments that, upon closer inspection, have

24 In general, on the development of Georgian architectural ornament Baltrušaitis 1929; Schmerling 1954; Yazar 2021, pp. 322–344 (for Tao-Klarjeti).

25 An odd observation can be made at the second column group from east, though: here the very common column decoration consisting of a bulbous part, usually connected to the base/capital and an ornamented band, is placed upside down. As the block seems to be in original position, this error is most likely due to an inattentive mason.

26 Apparently, during the creation of the porch, an older wooden door with ornamental relief was integrated into the design – the frame remained apparently in situ until the mid-twentieth century. See Chubinashvili 1958, pp. 75–80.

27 On umbrella domes in Georgia Kaffenberger forthcoming-a.

the shape of small colonettes. While deprived of their (theoretically) load bearing role in an arcade, they nevertheless indicate the wish to turn the dome into a fictive open pavilion, some kind of 'ornamented heaven' surmounted by the central symbol of the cross.[28]

While the survival of written evidence is always bound to be coincidental, and thus connecting the scarce sources directly with building endeavours might turn into a rather hazardous way of interpretation, we should have a closer look at one of the few written documents mentioning the monastery, a charter of around 1260. The document, first published and translated in 1857 by Brosset, describes in detail the donation of the village of Khovle to the Mother of God of Rk'oni by a certain K'akha and his wife Khatuta, who had remained childless.[29] K'akha, *Eristav of Eristavs*, had made a fortune as member of the Royal troops of David VII, part of which he used to acquire the village, the previous owners of which had to sell it due to the rising tribunal payments to the advancing Mongols. A most interesting passage of the charter mentions the payment of "one white" per day for that masses should be read for him in "his chapel" (ეკუტერსა /ek'ut'ersa). As the text speaks about donations to Met'ekhi and Vardzia before as well, it is not entirely clear if he returns to Rk'oni in this passage, but it seems likely, considering that the entire charter is dedicated to the donation in favour of Rk'oni. Several aspects follow from the information given in the source. The monastery was of high importance in the later thirteenth century, and presumably the documented donation was not the only of its kind in this period. The possession of an entire village with its revenues (and potential further similar goods) provided the financial means necessary to embellish the complex during a period generally not considered one of flourishing wealth. Finally, it is probable that K'akha was directly responsible for the installation of one of the multiple spaces of private memory in the monastery.

One of the spaces clearly conceived as a private memorial chapel is the southern annexe of the western porch **[12–13]**. It is reached through a rather inconspicuous rectangular doorway in the southern wall of the porch; presumably the wall was once covered with paintings. The chapel itself is rectangular and has windows to the south and west. It appears to have received a painted decoration from the beginning, as the walls are made of rubble here and did not receive any decorative finishing under the flaking layer of paintings – with the exception of the eastern wall, where the regular ashlars that formed the former western façade of the seventh century church shine through. Here, a large blind arch spans across the entire width of the space, creating some sort of orientation in the otherwise unstructured space. Under

[9] Interior, porch of the Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 13th century

28 On the implication of the "Heavenly Jerusalem" in such dome decorations with reference to the example of Geghard Monastery see Vardanyan 2015c, pp. 277–279.

29 Brosset 1857, pp. 452–460; Enukidze/Silogava/Shoshiashvili 1984, pp. 145–160.

the arch, a half-high step with the rectangular openings stretches the entire length of the wall – this feature presumably served as table to place icons or hold memorial services.

SEVEN CENTURIES OF (RE)EMBELLISHMENT: THE PAINTED DECORATION OF THE CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN

Thus far, we only briefly mentioned the existence of fragmentary paintings in several areas of the building. Evidently, they form an important part of the donation practice and memorial strategies and should also be seen in the context of the phases of remodelling indicated by written and built evidence. The potentially oldest remainder of a pictorial decoration – apart from the red and white decoration of the exterior niches in the east - is considered to be a graffito-like head of a male layperson in the doorway, dated to the tenth century

by Shevjakova.[30] However, the timeless nature of such graffiti and the lack of a stratigraphic study of the plaster makes this at least conjectural. The oldest more tangible phase encompasses, again according to Shevjakova and Devdariani, who date it to the twelfth century, all rests in the main nave of the church as well as those in the southern pastophorium (called here "diaconicon").[31] Highly fragmented but well preserved in terms of colour and final paint layers is the decoration of the main apse. Of the enthroned Christ in the conch mainly parts of his dark red, pearl-embellished gown and the open book he holds, as well as his left foot remain. Here, as well as in the intrados of the apse window (with the heads of the deacon saints Leontios and Stephen), the most striking aspect is the dark *lapis* (imitating?) blue of the background. This feature lets us think of monuments such as Q'ints'visi (after 1207), which makes an early thirteenth century date a plausible suggestion for this phase of decoration in Rk'oni as well.[32] The western wall retains larger plaster surfaces; however, the state of the paintings is worse as they lost most of their upper paint layers **[10]**. They are arranged in three horizontal zones. In the first register, we can identify standing saints: on the arcade respond in the south a stylite, next to the doorway on each side two female saints (in the north only one remains). In the second register, narrative scenes unfold, which are hard to identify in their current state. The lunette

30 Shevjakova 1983, pl. 119.
31 Devdariani/Zakaraia/Shevjakova 1990, pp. 186–187.
32 On the paintings of Q'ints'visi Eastmond 1998, pp. 141–154; Didebulidze 2007; Schellewald 2012.

[10] Paintings of the western wall, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 13th century

[11] Paintings, southern pastophorium, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 13th century

of the wall is filled with an ascension: Christ in the Mandorla, held by two angels. An ornamental zigzag-pattern fills the intrados of the western window.

This ornament forms a link to the paintings of the southern pastophorium: here, a very similar pattern (with blue instead of red as contrast colour) separates the lower from the upper painting zone **[11]**. The latter is completely lost, while in the lower zone a row of standing figures remain. On the western wall we see an unidentified female saint and, presumably, a Maria Aegyptiaca. Meanwhile, the standing figures of the northern wall are the most interesting: three laywomen, clad in richly embroidered garments (in brown, red and ochre), their hands raised in an orants gesture. The woman in the centre holds the model of a basilica, which, in addition to the eminently dignified position of the paintings in the church (on the wall closest to the sanctuary possible) testifies to the high social status and considerable contribution to the embellishment of the church.[33] Despite this evidence, an identification of these donors has not been possible up to now. The presumed phase of execution of the paintings in the early thirteenth century (or late twelfth, if we follow previous propositions) does not coincide with any of the renovation activities or documented donations we have discussed so far. Hence, we can assume that the act of the donation consisted in the payment for an all-encompassing painted program in the church and the southern pastophorium, which the donor family received as private chapel in return for the "investment".

Unlike this unusually prominent place for a private memorial space (usually, chapels in this area are outside of the church adjoining to the south), the above-mentioned chapel next to the porch occupies a relatively common place – there are plenty of examples for private memorial spaces installed at some point during the medieval period and occupying the southern or northern end of a western porch (e.g. Q'ints'visi). The painted decoration of this space is, as indicated above, fragmentary and barely readable – Devdariani/Shevjakova date it vaguely to the "feudal period" **[12, 13]**.[34] Nevertheless, the main aspects of the program – indeed the decoration seems to have followed a coherent concept – can be reconstructed. In the wall niche in the east, five standing saints were displayed. The face of the southernmost is partly preserved; it shows a white-haired male figure. Clearly, we only see the preparatory layer today: the face is made of yellow with red lined defining eyes and nose as well as the outlines of hair and face. The left spandrel above the arched niche shows a standing angel, which retains the inscription of his name, Michael. Presumably, a symmetrically placed counterpart (Gabriel?) would have occupied the southern

33 On donors with church models Didebulidze 2021, p. 68.

34 Devdariani/Zakaraia/Shevjakova 1990, p. 188. As of 2022, the remaining plaster is rapidly detaching from the underlying wall and many fragments are in immediate danger of vanishing entirely. There are still considerable surfaces preserved, but covered in thick residue, so that a restoration might also enhance the readability.

spandrel, even if in a funerary context of course Michael plays a key role. The northern wall is divided in two registers. The upper register retains fragments of a narrative cycle with smaller scale figures. In the left scene, one can make out the omophorion of a standing bishop and the outlines of other figures apparently lying on a bedstead. In the right scene an equally standing figure wears a garment with richly embroidered decorative band. Didebulidze identifies these scenes as St Nicholas with the three Maidens and the Sea Miracle.[35] The figures in the lower zone, except for two partly preserved saints in the tympanum and intrados of the doorway, are of larger scale. A deacon is placed between the doorway and the eastern wall. To the west of the doorway and on the western wall, two large donor scenes can be made out. They follow the same composition with the layman standing diagonally, the hands raised and looking towards a bust of Christ appearing in the upper right corner of the image. This type of donor image is widespread chronologically as well as geographically; prominent examples are the royal donor images of c. 1090 in nearby At'eni Sioni or the image of David IV in Boch'orma.[36] This evidence confirms the function of the space - not that there was much doubt, considering the typical place for a memorial chapel – and indicates a certain social confidence of the donor. The erection of the porch in the second half of

35 Didebulidze 2007, p. 68.
36 Eastmond 1998, pp. 43–49.

[12] South-western memorial chapel towards east, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 13th century

[13] South-western memorial chapel towards north, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 13th century

the thirteenth century provides us with a firm *terminus post quem*, and indeed the rough wall surface indicates a relatively quick embellishment with paintings. While the bad state of preservation complicates any attempt of dating the paintings based on their style, the second half of the thirteenth century is a plausible suggestion for their date of creation.[37] Thus, this chapel might be connected to K'akha, *Eristav of Eristav*'s generous donation of 1260.

Presumably in the same period or slightly later, the tympanum of the main portal received an interesting image of the Virgin with child **[14]**. The painting is barely visible due to thick soot residue. We can recognize the outlines of a bust of the Virgin, holding Christ on her right arm, following in general the *Dexiokratousa* type. Due to the Virgin's bowed head, Christ is relatively close to his mother's cheek, indicating a certain tenderness usually found in *Eleousa or Glykophilousa* icons (even if in Rk'oni his head is separated from his mother's cheek by his halo).[38] The presence of rather intimate *Dexiokratousa* icons in Georgia is attested by a twelfth century example from Chazashi (Svaneti, today in the Ushguli Museum), albeit with a less strongly bowed head of the mother.[39] A floral tendril ornament frames the image, further underlining its iconic character. The decoration of the main portal's tympanum with an image of the Virgin is relatively common, but most extant examples rather show her enthroned with Christ, flanked by Archangels, as in the more or less contemporary tympanum of the memorial chapel of Rk'oni discussed below, or the prominent sixteenth century western tympanum of Gelati. The choice of an intimate image formula rather used for devotional practice might hint towards the importance of the "Mother of God of Rk'oni", to whom the large 1260s donation was made. Might it be that the tympanum painting was replicating a specific icon venerated within the church, whose power was in this way displayed already for the entering beholder? It is in any case part of the large-scale works of the late thirteenth century at the complex, which were mostly connected to private memorial structures using this particular Virgin's alleged power as intercessor for the defunct.

A final stage of paintings was executed in the seventeenth century in the northern pastophorium **[15]**. Where the plaster did not fall victim to the partial collapse of the room (necessitating the replacement of the ashlars in the north-eastern corner of the church), the paintings are relatively well preserved. The entire room was divided into three zones; the decoration of the vault is uncertain. The lower zone shows a painted curtain. The second register is occupied by individual figures: on the eastern wall, an enthroned Christ remains to the south of the window (would an enthroned virgin have been his counterpart in the

37 Didebulidze 2007, p. 68, suggests the twelfth century, but this clashes with the certainly later erection of the porch. That the porch would have included an older memorial chapel seems unlikely and there is no material evidence in the building's fabric to support such hypothesis.

38 On Eleousa Icons in Georgia see Volskaja 1991. The Glykophilousa type is represented most prominently in Georgian icon production by the eleventh century Laklakidze Icon, a silver-plated image created for Zarzma Monastery, later kept in Shemokmedi and today in the State Museum of Art in Tbilisi (Bentchev 1995, pp. 243–244).

39 Kenia/Silogava 1986, cat. no. 32, pp. 52–53.

[14] Virgin in the tympanum of the western portal, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 13th century

north?); on the western wall a row of female martyrs includes St Catherine, identifiable through a large wheel. The southern wall, adjoining the bema, is once more home to a large donor image with a male figure to the left, a female figure to the right and a child placed above a niche in the centre of the wall. On this wall, the upper, narrative zone contains the nativity of Christ, underlining the Virgin's role as intercessor in particular for the donor's child. The eastern wall contained an annunciation, while the baptism is visible in the west. Nothing remains on the northern wall. The decorative program stands in the tradition of the several centuries older southern pastophorium and underlines the ongoing importance of the Monastery as veneration site.

AN INDIVIDUAL MEMORIAL CHAPEL: THE SOUTHERN ANNEXE OF THE CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN

Another part of the large-scale enhancement of the monastery in the late thirteenth century was the erection of a small, independently

[15] Paintings, northern pastophorium, Church of the Mother of God, Rk'oni, 17th century

[16] Western façade, memorial chapel, Rk'oni, 13th century

functioning barrel-vaulted single nave church of less than 4 by 6 m, adjoining the old *katholikon* to the south-east **[16]**.[40] Today, it is wedged between the Church of the Virgin and the later Church of St John, forming in front of it an open courtyard occupied by the remains of a centuries-old linden tree (we will return to this below). The facades of the church are decorated with ornamented doorway, window frames and cornice in a "classic" tradition. The western façade shows a doorway with interlace ornament on jambs, capitals and archivolt, framed by a second blind arch spanning almost the width of the façade and resting on engaged coupled colonettes of the type we already know from the church porch. The left, northern side of this arch ends in an odd assemblage of randomly placed, partly broken ornamented ashlars, indicating a massive rebuilding in this area. However, the large ashlars occupying the place, where the northern couple of colonettes should be, reach over up until the doorway jamb. Were they placed here in a secondary stage as well? Or was the arch

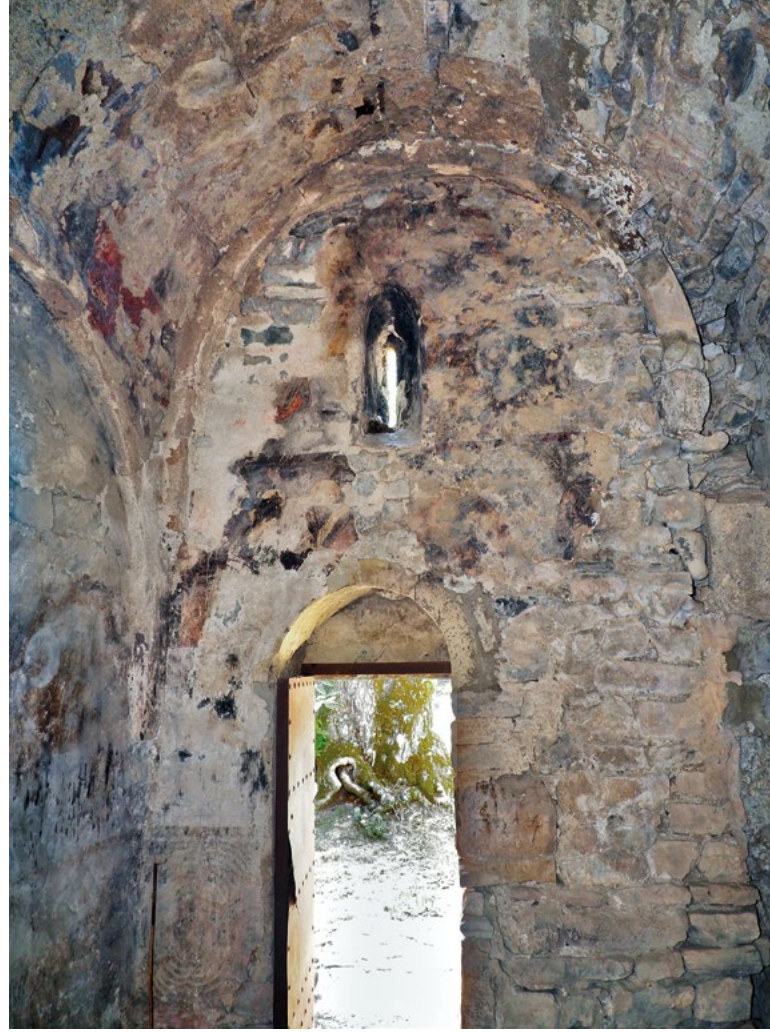
40 The chapel is only mentioned in Devdariani/Zakaraia/Shevjakova 1990, pp. 188–189 and otherwise ignored.

never symmetrically conceived and this wall instead occupied by another feature? The situation is further complicated by the evidence of two corbels placed at not exactly the same level halfway up the blind arch on both ends of the façade. They indicate the presence, at some later point, of an open porch covering the area between the southern portal of the main church and the western chapel entrance. This is corroborated by a wall fragment protruding from the church aisle wall between the renewed ashlars to the west of the portal. However, the porch roof would have cut through the upper part of the blind arch or the western window of the chapel, with a richly ornamented frame. Astonishingly, both show no signs of a horizontal incision for a later roof. Notwithstanding, the façade gable shows clear traces of fire damage: red discolouring of the limestones and strong cracking and flaking. This indicates that a fire destroyed the assumed porch roof at some point.[41]

On the southern and eastern side, further ornamental decorations appear. In the south, oddly only the western half shows a blind arcade of three arches, a round arched window with wide ornamental frame occupying the central arch. We might wonder if this in itself symmetrical solution was chosen on purpose to highlight this front as second main façade, or if the lack of blind arches in the eastern half is due to an (ancient) reconstruction phase. Particularly the last, easternmost couple of engaged columns is designed in a strange way: the two colonettes do not use up the entire space of the capital above but sit asymmetrically under it as if a third colonette once existed - yet, no trace of it can be seen. The capital itself is not aligned with the arch above, which ends even further east. Indeed, not only the western front but also the other sides appear to have suffered significant damage at some point (perhaps in 1400? We will speak about this further below). The lack of blind arches on the eastern façade, which only shows an ornamented frame to the central window, would speak for either a conscious solution or a change of plans already in the original building process. Be this as it may, the portfolio of ornaments used is relatively close to what we saw at the western porch and the purposeful variation similarly rich. A rather unconventional solution was found for the window frames. They are surrounded by single or double rope mouldings serving as outer limit for the large interlace bands. In most buildings of the thirteenth century, these mouldings had been transformed into engaged colonettes with small capitals and bases. At the early thirteenth century church of Betania Monastery, this type of framing is applied for all round-arched windows, where vertical colonettes flank the window, while horizontal ones connect the bases

[17] Interior, memorial chapel, Rk'oni, 13th century

41 For a parallel case see the western façade of nearby Ertats'minda Church, where the gable-shaped incision for the porch roof is clearly visible and the stones right above also show a reddish discolouring.



of the former, defying the original function of columns yet retaining their formal shape. The rectangular windows in the triangular niches of the eastern façade, in turn, use the same continuous frame as the windows of the chapel in Rk'oni. If the latter now don't make use of frames with engaged colonettes, this might just be another quirky mannerism, an artistic freedom of a workshop interested in finding creative solutions, or on the contrary a rather conscious return to models of the Bagratid period, where continuous outer mouldings framing the interlace ornaments were the norm.

The chapel interior is simple and shows no architectural structuring except for a large blind arch spanning the southern wall **[17]**. As northern wall, the builders used the exterior wall of the older church.[42] Parts of the vault were clearly repaired later, but also the

42 This creates an odd asymmetry of the main entrance. It is centred in the outside façade but about 60 cm off-centre from the inside, due to the non-existing wall thickness where the older wall was reused.

original parts of the chapel walls show mainly irregular rubble and small rough ashlars – a masonry destined to be painted shortly after the erection. And indeed, feeble traces of the original paintings, dated to the thirteenth/fourteenth century by Devdariani and Shevjakova, remain.[43] Already on the outside, above the entrance, the shadows of four halos are visible. They belong to a Virgin with child in the centre, flanked presumably by archangels. In the apse conch, the lower parts of two figures remain, one centred with a richly folded gown, one to the right with what seems to be imperial dressing. It is likely that it was the Saviour or again the Virgin flanked by the archangels, but this needs to remain hypothetical. In the lower zone, three haloed figures are depicted on the sole preserved southern half; ornaments occupy the window jambs. Further fragments adhere to the southern wall, within the large blind arch and the southern half of the barrel vault. The former was separated in three registers: a large scene in the right half of the middle register remains – here, a haloed figure in bowed posture appears shadow-like in front of an altar. In the vault, with more narrative scenes, it is mainly possible to make out the head of a female figure in front of a large red background in the lower zone, bowing down to what seems to be a washing basin with a child in it. While this confirms a nativity scene, it is not possible to narrow down whose nativity it might be. The western wall was divided into three registers as well. Here, we can make out the original design of the lowest, non-figural zone, which apparently imitated stone plaques in a stylized, ornamental way. The middle zone contains, in the southern half, two large haloed figures moving towards the centre of the wall – while this lets us think of a Koimesis or similar scene bemoaning the death of a saint, the reddish fragments in the centre of the wall don't appear to be part of a bedstead but rather of a hill or mound. A standing saint in the northern half, larger but apparently on the same background, is identified as warrior saint through his almost vanished sword. A haloed figure in warrior's attire with a sword also appears in the narrative scene directly above, oddly identified as Rescue of St John the Baptist by an Angel by Devdariani and Shevjakova. Another figure was placed on the southern side of the window, as well as a scene above the window. While it is tempting to interpret the halo-like shape here as an ascension, this would be purely hypothetical. Overall, there is not enough evidence to determine a coherent program – even if some of the scenes (birth scene, the saint at the altar) show elements from the vita of St Nicholas – and thus not much evidence to make assumptions about the original function of the space. It is not unlikely that it was founded as private memorial chapel, even if

43 Devdariani/Zakaraia/Shevjakova 1990, p. 187.

the autonomous conception and lack of direct connection to the main church is slightly unusual in this context.

In the chapel are kept several fragments of decorated stonework, among which the top and bottom of a rectangular pier with rope moulding. The capital zone shows a frieze dedicated to an inscription made of large regular letters, which is unfortunately too fragmentary to be read. Unlike the other, graffiti-like inscriptions recording even important events around the complex, this one reminds of the very carefully carved cornice inscriptions commonly known from the Byzantine world. The original place of display would have been of some importance, but in lack of further evidence, all we can do is guesswork. Was it a part of an older gate to the complex? Of the lost open gallery in front of the memorial chapel? Or brought here from a lost building in the surroundings?

A FUNERARY BUILDING DEDICATED TO THE BAPTIST? THE SEPULCHRAL CHURCH OF ST JOHN NATLISMTSEMELI

The next addition to the complex was the southern church, slightly larger than the memorial chapel but smaller than the old main church **[18]**. It is a single nave building with a slightly later porch, together measuring about 12 by 5 m. It is built further west than the previous buildings, owing to the cliff above the river valley, onto which the southern wall is placed. The distance between the chapel and the church of St John is only about 50 cm, which resulted in the later building covering up parts of the former's external decoration – a rather good indicator of the chronological succession. The dedication to St John Natlismtsemeli, the Baptist, is corroborated in oral tradition, but there seems to be no written source to confirm this.[44]

The exterior of both church and porch are decorated with blind arcades and ornamented window frames, cornices. On the original chapel, the blind arcades cover the western, northern and eastern walls, while the southern wall, towards the river, remained unstructured (with exception of the ornamented window frames). Like at the western church porch, the arcades end with half arches at the building corners, a particularly odd solution in the south-east, where the arch does not wrap around the corner but just ends mid-air. The relatively simple blind arcade of the northern wall shows a high level of technical sophistication, the ornamented parts being cut out as part of the extremely large ashlars. This contrasts with the slightly insecure treatment of many of the interlace patterns on capitals and friezes, which also do not reach the same level of complexity that was visible on the previous building stages. In turn, the creativity in particular

44 On this building only briefly Bagrationi 1982, p. 18; Devdariani/Zakaraia/Shevjakova 1990, p. 190, both dating it to the thirteenth/fourteenth century.

concerning citations of eleventh and twelfth century motives is even higher. On the northern wall, every other colonette triplet shows a hanging grape motive most famously known from the eastern façade of Samtavisi (1030). The eastern façade of the St John church shows further elements indicating a creative inspiration from the Samtavisi eastern façade type: the central window is surmounted by a monumental ornamented cross, below it we see the imprint of a destroyed lozenge element, in which the vertical colonettes of both blind arcades and window frame end **[19]**. While there are plenty of idiosyncrasies like the fact that the colonettes bend into malleable mouldings in order to avoid the window and then meet the lozenge below, it is

[18] St John Natlismtsemeli, Rk'oni, early 14th century, to the left, the several centuries-old linden tree

[19] Eastern façade, St John Natlismtsemeli, Rk'oni, early 14th century

evident that the citation of the much-respected older monuments is all but coincidental.

The porch, clearly added in a second step (it cuts through the western chapel window and covers the façade blind arcade) picks up on the same decorative models (such as the hanging grape motive on the western façade). The arcades are aligned on the façades: three in the north, three (with an enlarged central one, harbouring the portal) in the west. Unlike in the previous phases, the colonettes do not have capitals anymore, which emphasizes their treatment as mouldings rather than structurally separate elements. On the north-western corner, this leads to a veritable bundle of thick roll moulding hiding

[20] Interior towards west, St John Natlismtsemeli, Rk'oni, early 14th century

[21] Porch, St John Natlismtsemeli, Rk'oni, early 14th century

the building corner – a small detail, yet it demonstrates a fundamentally different architectural idiom compared to all previous phases, where the cubature of the buildings was emphasized with clear and undecorated corners. The western front suffered heavy damages in the course of time. The central arch of the blind arcade rested on top of now partly/fully destroyed corbels and framed a richly ornamented arch, itself framing a double roll/rope moulding as portal frame. The ornamented arch, resting on two bases with centralized ornament and surmounted by another façade cross, is highly decorative, but a closer look reveals astonishing inconsistencies in the interlace ornaments. In the keystone of the arch, the direction of the interlaces changes from diagonal to orthogonal, exactly in the place where the cross cuts into the arch ornament. The cross itself is surmounted by a ram's head that interrupts the ornamented cornice (itself containing at least 3 different patterns placed in random order). Some of these inconsistencies, and certainly the heavy damage to the façade corbels and the lozenge on the eastern front, seem to stand in context of the initially mentioned destruction in the year 1400 by the troops of Tamerlan. The main inscription recording this event is placed in the western portal of the porch, together with several donor's pleas for mercy, the second one next to the destroyed lozenge.[45] This is no coincidence, it appears: these places were chosen to commemorate the damages on the spot they happened and at the same time make space for the names of those wo contributed to the repairs afterwards. This also means that both church and porch were, unsurprisingly, erected before 1400, presumably in the later thirteenth or early fourteenth century.

The interior of church and porch presents some more unusual features. The church is made from high quality ashlar masonry on the inside as well (except the vault) **[20]**. High blind arches on both sides divide the nave into two bays, they are separated by pilasters carrying the barrel vault. This, and the lack of paintings, gives the space a rather archaic appearance for its late date. The most extraordinary feature is a hole in floor of the western bay leading down into a burial chamber stretching under the entire building (a second opening exists next to the altar in the east).[46] The porch interior is more elaborately decorated with ornaments, which cover all corner piers of the square space and the segments of the umbrella dome and show a last step in the shift from the earlier technical sophistication towards creative mannerisms **[21]**. The dome is presumably inspired by the slightly older one of the main church porch and not less decorative, but of lower technical complexity. Instead of the curved shape, the segments (of varying size) are simple flat slabs placed on top of the radial ribs.

45 Otkhmezuri 1997, pp. 10–11.
46 Devdariani/Zakaraia/Shevjakova 1990, p. 189. The chamber is only accessible by means of a ladder, no stairs exist.

We find the usual interlace ornaments, again with some problems in adapting the interlace to the trapezoidal shape of the segments. One segment, in the south-east, deviates in that it contains a single large cross.[47] This is surely no coincidence: the pier right under this segment also shows reliefs of the "living cross" on the bases instead of the more usual centralized interlaces on the other bases.[48] In the wall right next to it, there is a niche as we can usually find next to altars and a small window, strangely close to the central window of the wall only 80 cm to the right. The evidence of crosses and niche, combined with the crypt entrance just on the other side of the same wall in the naos of the church, underlines the function of this place as important memorial site for the defunct laid to rest in the crypt.[49] If we accept this hypothesis, it would also be one of the rare occasions of an iconographic readability of an ornamental decoration, marking the place where memorial services for the deceased would have been read.

BETWEEN SACRED AND SECULAR: BELL TOWER, MONASTIC BUILDINGS AND A BRIDGE

The least investigated parts of the monastery are the bell tower, doubling as main gate into the complex, and the vast ruins of monastic buildings **[22]**.[50] The tower consists of a semi-open rubble-built square ground floor, through which one reaches the square in front

47 On the iconographic readability of certain ornament-decorated vaults see Kaffenberger forthcoming-b.

48 On the connection of this motive with funerary culture see for example Djobadze 1992, pp. 104–105.

49 For the role of porches as memorial spaces see most recently Kaffenberger 2021. On double-story chapels as ossuaries Djobadze 1992, p. 173. Donabédian 2008, pp. 22–26 groups ossuaries and martyria together; the second function seems unlikely in the case of Rk'oni.

50 Makalatia 1959, p. 30; Bagrationi 1982, p. 17; Devdariani/Zakaraia/Shevjakova 1990, p. 189.

[22] Bell tower, Rk'oni, medieval/17th century

[23] Bridge over the Tedzami River, Rk'oni, 12th–13th century

of the main church, and an octagonal brick-built pavilion on top, which contained the bells. The latter shows remains of glazed ceramic decoration and inlaid plates - together with its characteristic shape clear indicators of a seventeenth/eighteenth century date of erection. The ground floor was considered to be older by Makalatia, but this assumption is hard to confirm. Faint traces of painting, a saint on the south-eastern pier, have been dated to the seventeenth century.[51]

The best preserved of the monastic buildings is an elongated hall in the north, traditionally considered to be the refectory. The moulded cornice confirms the medieval building date; yet, no other element of decoration remains. A second hall stands further west, oriented north-south. It seems to have been part of a multi-storey complex, of which several other chambers remain, unexplored and covered in vegetation. To the south of this complex stand the ruins of a building with enormously thick walls, very likely the first tower of the monastery. This shows in which way the conception of the monastery depended to some extent on its geographical location. The tower was certainly part of the elaborate defence system that existed to protect the valley and the roads leading through it. Bagrationi speaks of a total of three towers preserved as ruins, which in addition to Rk'oni fortress secured the valley and Makalatia describes the tower built above the fortress as "sacred place" where fires would be lit to announce the arrival of enemies.[52]

Best testimony of the historic road system is the medieval bridge, which stands about 100 m south-west of the monastery, around 10 m above the riverbed **[23]**.[53] While local lore attributes it to Queen Tamar, it is absent from historical sources and was likely built by and for the monastery during the twelfth to thirteenth century. Together with the evidence of a second bridge in the north, closer to the fortress and today mostly destroyed, we can assume that the main road stretched along the south-eastern shore of the river. Access to the monastery was from there (only?) gained by taking one of the two bridges, which were thus primarily of functional importance - as points of relatively easy defence and control of access. Additionally, they form part of the conscious integration of the monastery into the landscape, which we will discuss again below.

APPROPRIATING NATURE AND LANDSCAPE: A STYLITE HERMITAGE, TREES, WATER AND A FOOTPRINT

With these last comments, we slowly left the monastic nucleus again in order to explore more the surrounding area. The most conspicuous building outside of the monastery walls is certainly the Chapel

51 Ghavtadze 2010.
52 Makalatia 1959, p. 33; Bagrationi 1982, p. 17.
53 Chitishvili 2023, pp. 38–41.

[24] Chapel of St Simeon Stylites, Rk'oni, medieval

[25] Paintings in the apse, Chapel of St Simeon Stylites, Rk'oni, 17th century

[26] Paintings of the western wall, Chapel of St Simeon Stylites, Rk'oni, 17th century

of the Stylite St Simeon, built on the high mountain directly to the south of the monastery and known as "Mart'od-Mq'opeli" ("the one who is alone").[54] From the outside a simple tower of three stories with a door on a height of 2 m above the ground, the inside reveals a (today empty) hall on the first floor, a crypt-like cellar, and a chapel on the top floor **[24]**.

The apse of the latter is developed within the rectangular masonry shell and indicates that the space was destined to be a chapel from the beginning. Fragmentary paintings adorn the room; Ghavtadze dates them to the seventeenth century and discusses them in detail, so we will mainly give a short summary with a few corrections here. The apse "vault" shows a bust of the Virgin with Christ, here fully frontal in a monumentalized type **[25]**. In the window intrados, a black botanic ornament on white background remains. The lower apse zone contains large panels for one figure each. They were considered to show co-officiating bishops. On the panel closest to the window on the northern side a chalice appears to be depicted, above which we see the remains of a halo and the Greek letters "OC": a liturgical image of the sacrifice of Christ, depicted close to the altar.[55] The lateral figures on both sides appear to be church fathers indeed, indicated by the chess pattern on the northern one's garment. Only one narrative scene has

54 Gagoshidze 2015, p. 297. The building discussed in Marsagishvili/Mamaiashvili 1990 and Ghavtadze 2010, who saw it still in ruins. It has since been restored.

55 Marsagishvili/Mamaiashvili 1990; Ghavtadze 2010 ignores this image and only describes the largely lost bishops.

survived of the presumed cycle that once stretched across the barrel vault, in the south-east. It was identified as *Nativity/Veneration of the Magi* by Ghavtadze. The western wall is dominated by a panel with a bust of the Archangel Michael in imperial, military attire **[26]**. Below this, only the left contains a second panel with a kneeling haloed figure in posture of supplication. The halo makes it unlikely that we see the portrait of a still living donor, if not belonging to the highest (royal) social class. The context of the chapel makes it more likely that the figure depicted is a locally venerated hermit that used to occupy the tower hermitage (in fact, a small step on today's floor right in front of the image is still used for acts of private devotion).

The entire context of the building and its embellishment is highly interesting. The recreation of stylite sanctuaries is an old phenomenon in Georgia, starting with the famous pier of K'atskhi, a natural rock needle that received an almost inaccessible hermitage on its top.[56] The origins of the K'atskhi monastery are debated. For a long time considered a late antique foundation, Gagoshidze recently proposed that the veneration of the pier indeed originates in the sixth century, when a medallion of a radiating cross was carved here, linking the natural formation with the life-giving pillar of Svet'itskhoveli and, by proxy, the concept of the "life-giving tree".[57] Only around the ninth/tenth

56 On the topic most importantly Lafontaine-Dosogne 1971; Gagoshidze 2015; Loosley 2018, p. 85–102.

57 Gagoshidze 2015, pp. 304–305.

century the church would have been erected, bearing testimony to a then emerging cult – the oldest pictorial renditions of St Simeon date to the same period, e.g. in the southern porch of Oshk'i (second half of tenth century). Other certainly attested "stylite" buildings all took the form of tower houses: Mart'q'opi (eigth/ninth century – the alleged foundation of the Holy Syrian Father Anton of Mart'q'opi), Mart'vili (late tenth, early eleventh century) and Ubisi (1141).[58] Interestingly, all these were situated within monastic compounds, indicating a pattern of ascetic withdrawal on site, which would permit the monk to live in seclusion within a monastery. The chapel in Rk'oni deviates from this pattern and, despite being mentioned in all studies on stylites in Georgia, is usually described as a late afterthought, built in a "quality [that] does not compare with the [other] pillars" and dated to the fifteenth respectively seventeenth century.[59] Indeed, there is little evidence to exactly date the extant structure, even more as the paintings are relatively late. However, the roots of the hermitic life in the area certainly reach back much further, to the period of highest importance of the monastery. Allegedly, there are hermit's caves on the other side of the mountain, which bear fragments of paintings but are virtually unreachable today.[60] The charter of 1260 mentions "hermits sitting inside the caves" as part of the monastic community, just like in David Gareja.[61] Furthermore, the original document, from which Brosset edited the text, was signed by a hermit of the name Joseph – this happened in a later century, though.[62] Another indication of the importance of the hermitic lifestyle for the monastery of Rk'oni is given by the coincidental preservation of a painted stylite on the pier next to the main doorway in the church. While by the thirteenth century, presumed date of execution of the paintings, stylites appear in all media all over Georgia, they remain a conscious decision in painted programs. It is perhaps not coincidental that in the eleventh century paintings of the cave monastery Udabno, David Gareja, stylites are depicted in prominent places, and that one of the most elaborate renditions appears on the wall pilasters of Ubisi.[63] The embellishment of the hermitage in Rk'oni, independently from the question of the building's age, seems to be the product of a specific local veneration of the now nameless saint depicted on the western wall. In this context, a folkloristic legend describing the chapel's foundation is of some importance.[64] According to this tradition a certain "venerable Father Simeon" lived on a pillar or a tower on the very place in the woods. It was a period of threats by foreign armies (according to some traditions Persians, according to others Mongols) and indeed the monastery was looted. When the monks visited Simeon to tell him about the enemy's

58 *Ibidem*, pp. 296–297, with further bibliography; Loosley 2018, pp. 92–95.

59 Lafontaine-Dosogne 1971, p. 188; Gagoshidze 2015, p. 297.

60 Ghavtadze 2010, p. 128 and personal communication Natalia Chitishvili.

61 Brosset 1857, p. 455: "ქუაბთა შინა მსხდომთა".

62 *Ibidem*, p. 459.

63 Lafontaine-Dosogne 1971, pp. 193–194.

64 Makalatia 1959, p. 30; Ghavtadze 2010, p. 129 (referring to Schmerling's unpublished manuscript).

leader insulting the dignity of the monastery church by shaving his beard therein, Simeon is said to have quickly acted. From the top of the tower, Simeon shot an arrow, killing the infidel and causing the enemies to flee. While of course such tales are to be treated very carefully in terms of their historic value, they were not less real for people of past times. It is rather likely that the saint painted on the western wall in the seventeenth century is said Father Simeon, whose homonymy with the famous stylite saint might provide additional argument for a long-standing tradition of a stylite shrine on this site.

While evidently the topography of the site and the landscape it occupies play an important role in this aspect of the monastery's history, there are other aspects indicating the importance of surroundings and nature for the functioning of the sacred site. We briefly mentioned the case of K'atskhi, where a close connection between the original idea of the life-giving tree of Svet'itskhoveli and the later installation of a stylite shrine on the same site was proposed by Gagoshidze.[65] The veneration of trees has a long-standing tradition in Georgia, going back far into pre-Christian times.[66] Rk'oni is considered one of the best examples of such veneration transmitted into the place name. While only referring to the acorn today, according to Shanidze the word "(k') rk'oni" originally meant the entire oak tree – oaks being the most venerable among the trees.[67] Indeed, the origins of the monastery are said to emerge from a venerated tree described already by Ivane Javakhishvili: his family considered the tree of Rk'oni their ancestral shrine.[68] He already pointed out that, even if now addressing a linden tree, the original veneration was likely directed towards an oak. Until today, the same large Javakhishvili linden tree outside of the monastery is frequented by the faithful **[27]**.[69] According to Makalatia,

> [...] pilgrims going to the Virgin of Rk'oni, in passing by this lime, would stand, light candles and pray [...], they would bring children here, pray and leave the child's hair that was cut for the first time. [As] this lime was in possession [of the Javakhishvili], their icon was also placed on this tree [...]. It is said that as many Javakhishvili men would die, as branches would fall from this tree, and in case of birth, a new branch would grow.[70]

On the site, an eighteenth-century votive stone plaque remains,which, despite its more recent date of creation reflects the importance of this natural feature for the devotional practice evolving around the monastery.[71] It shows a large tree identified as Lindentree of St George

65 On the Svet'itskhoveli legend Plontke-Lüning 2001; Chkhartishvili 2009, Hoffmann/Wolf 2018.
66 E.g. in Siradze 1987, p. 111; Sigua 2020, pp. 177–178; Tsukhishvili 2022, p. 153.
67 Shanidze 1973, p. 136.
68 Javakhishvili 1908, pp. 93–96 on the veneration of trees in Georgia; see also Sigua 2020, p. 177.
69 Here and below Makalatia 1959, p. 31.
70 Translation *Ibidem*, p. 31.
71 The slab is stylistically close to seventeenth/eighteenth century tombstones, see most recently Kvachatadze 2022.

[27] Tree and memorial stone in the surroundings of Rk'oni Monastery

according to Makalatia (the left corner, where the inscription supposedly was, has broken off). On the right, a female figure is depicted, identified as the Mother of God. The surrounding inscription, smaller, mentions the donor Isaka Malatsidze, who was presumably cured from illness after praying at the tree and describes the properties of the Mother of God's monastery as bordering "the water that flows from the north, from the Orjo mountain range, to the south, to eastern Samach'ala".

This brings us back to the monastery itself and its dedication to the Virgin. It cannot surprise that a sacred site this immediately connected to the surrounding nature received this dedication. The characterization of the Virgin as the life-giving source (Zoodochos Pigi) is deeply rooted in Byzantine tradition, and even if no particular natural source is mentioned for Rk'oni, the site of the monastery above the Tedzami river created a framework, in which water was present at all times. Indeed, the ceremonial nature of approaching the sacred space of the

monastery appears to have been enhanced by walking over the raised arch of the bridge(s), perhaps the first place for the faithful to behold the walls of the monastery appearing in the woods, while standing above the running water of the river. Furthermore, it appears that the veneration of a tree was staged within the monastery as well: until today, the remains of a monumental linden tree (only cut down a few years ago) occupy the court-like space between the three churches, so the very centre of the complex **[18]**. The diameter of more than 1.50 m indicates an age of several centuries, making it possible that this tree, or its predecessor, were already part of the devotional practices within the monastic precinct when the memorial chapel and the church of St John were erected around it.

Even for those, who did not make it up the valley to the monastery, a natural feature nearby was imbued with sacred qualities, in order to provide another site of prayer for the faithful. It is again Makalatia, who in 1959 describes the "Naqoshari of St George" somewhere below Rk'oni Fortress on the way to the monastery.[72] This open-air niche, which perhaps stood in the tradition of "samlotsvelo-sasantle" niches discussed by Niko Chubinashvili and was not locatable by the author, appears to have contained a stone with the alleged footprint of St George.[73] It was frequented by the people of the surrounding area for simple liturgical actions and private devotion, which would not have necessitated a consecrated altar in a church. Once more, a natural feature was incorporated into the sacred topography of the monastery surroundings, adding a feature related to Georgia's most venerated saint, who would thus join the Virgin and St Symeon in their role as intercessors for the living and dead.

If we take a step back, we receive the image of a highly complex monastic site which evolved in terms of architecture and painted decoration but also in its integration into the landscape and topography during the centuries after its foundation. A venerated tree stood at the origin of veneration practices at this site, presumably fostered by the exceptional natural features of a dense wood, a river and rocky mountain outcrops meeting here. If we assume the early modern tradition to be a relatively unchanged mirror of the original practice, the tree was connected to the idea of being "life-giving", i.e., to the protection of children. A monastery with this background and built over a river would then rather easily have developed a strong veneration of the Mother of God, transporting the importance of intercession for questions of childbirth, but also working in general as powerful intercessor for the defunct. Particularly from ca 1200 on, the monastery then appears to become an important site of burial for the

72 Makalatia 1959, p. 31. The site below the castle is occupied by a holiday complex "Naqoshari Cottages", so it seems that at least the toponym was preserved.

73 Chubinashvili 1988, pp. 64–66. On the veneration of "sacred footprints" in various religions see in general Bord 2004; Patrizi 2011; Akiyama 2015; Walker Bynum 2020, pp. 221–258. On semi-open chapels with devotional/memorial function Vacheishvili 2002.

noble class, as testified most importantly by the donor images of the southern pastophorium. Here, the female donor carries the church model, presumably in line with the Virgin of Rk'oni's particular role in issues of progeny. This is complemented by the thirteenth century image of the Virgin over the main entrance, following a particularly intimate iconographic type. Perhaps it is this underlying idea which also prompted the 1260 donation to the monastery, considering that the charter points out the donating couple's childlessness as reason for the donation. The monastery continued to be an important burial site, as witnessed by the southern church, a double storey memorial building with crypt somewhat reminding of the ossuaries of in general much larger monasteries (e.g. Bachkovo in Bulgaria). The presence of a stylite hermitage played a double role for the monastery, which was particularly important during the troublesome fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: it ensured the benefits of ascetic devotion to god in metaphorical, but also specifically in terrestrial ways.[74] The latter is embedded in the legend of the locally venerated Father Simeon, who allegedly killed the enemy with an arrow shot from his hermitage. The natural site, appropriated into a site of devotion, becomes a point of military fortification as well, integrated into a network of defence structures of the river valley.

AN OUTLOOK: MULTI-CHURCH MONASTERIES IN GEORGIA AS A LITTLE EXPLORED PHENOMENON

Patrick Donabédian recently stated, that in contrast to the accumulation of monumental buildings in Armenian monasteries, in Georgian ones the "accent [was] placed on the abbey church, the small annexes of which [...] barely hinder the perception of it as only sanctuary" and that "the conventual buildings remain isolated, placed against the perimeter wall".[75] And indeed, when thinking of monumental complexes such as Haghpat **[28.1]** or Sanahin **[28.2]** – just two prominent examples from the immense corpus of medieval Armenian monasteries, both with multiple churches and chapels, *gawit'*s, libraries and subordinate structures built against or adjoining the main church – this image of diverging traditions is not entirely wrong. However, the case of Rk'oni demonstrates that, even if of more moderate dimensions, the agglomeration of buildings in the centre of a precinct is well present in Georgia, yet not investigated as a wider phenomenon. One of the main issues in this context is the lack of knowledge about the precise reason for the presence of several churches in one site, i.e., their use and function. Examples of multi-church monasteries in Georgia are numerous, ranging from the early days of Christianity to the late medieval period,

74 Indeed, for the post 1300 period it is named as only monastic centre in Shida Kartli by Beridze 2014, p. 215.

75 Donabédian 2016, p. 38.

and geographically widespread; however, few of them have been studied in detail. They do not constitute a homogenous group, within which the architectural patterns and patterns of usage are replicated from one site to the other. Instead, we can determine distinct types of "building-multiplication" within a monastery: a) agglomeration of individual sanctuaries; b) agglutination of further (sacral) spaces around the main church, and c) minor chapels (remaining) present in the surroundings of the dominant main church.

The latter group is large and can in many cases be considered as a slightly different phenomenon. In the Samtavro Monastery in Mtskheta, the old venerable chapel of St Nino going back (allegedly) to the early days of Christianity remained on the site of the monastery when the new church was built in the eleventh century.[76] Later, it was turned into a relic-like point of devotion by its own right, testifying to the ancient roots of Christianity in this very spot. Presumably, similar processes are the reason for the preservation of old and rather inconspicuous chapels on the grounds of many medieval monasteries – such as Sapara and Zarzma (Samtskhe), to name but the most prominent late examples.

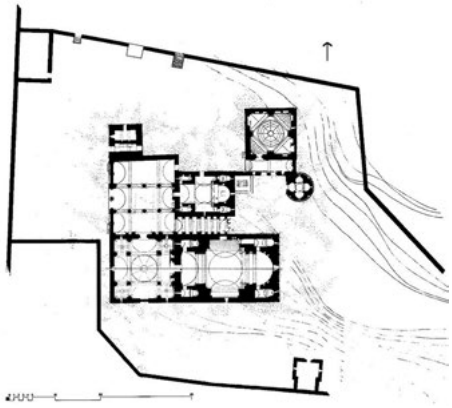
Already our example of Rk'oni shows, that in certain instances the other two groups can overlap. In general, the monastery could be attributed to group a and b alike, as first the porch with memorial space and then the southern memorial chapel were built onto the older church's exterior walls and then an individual, third sanctuary was added. This process is in a way not too different from the development of large Armenian monastic complexes, where also adjoining chapels and further ones set off from the main church by a few metres coexisted. In Haghpat, the late tenth century Surb Nshan church received in 1201 a *gawit'* to the west, evidently a space of more elaboration and complex function than a porch, but in general terms comparable in its role as threshold, site of burial and memorial and focal point for inscriptions of memorial and legal character.[77] The separate chapels of St Gregory (1023) and the Virgin (thirteenth century), are both results of private donations; we could compare the memorial chapel of Rk'oni to such buildings. The St John church in Rk'oni, however, functions slightly differently. The presence of a porch makes us more think of sites such as Sanahin, where the two main churches, dedicated to the Mother of God (tenth century) and the Saviour (twelfth century), stand parallelly, both with their individual porches (since 1211).[78] Yet, the particular function as an ossuary is perhaps more paralleled by the presence of separate mausolea in many Armenian monasteries: both Haghpat and Sanahin

76 Schmerling 1942; Mepisashvili/Schrade/Tsintsadze 1987, pp. 285–287; Beridze/Neubauer 1980, pp. 119–120; Beridze 2014, vol. I, pp. 266–268, vol. I, pp. 90–91. See also the article of Michele Bacci in this volume.

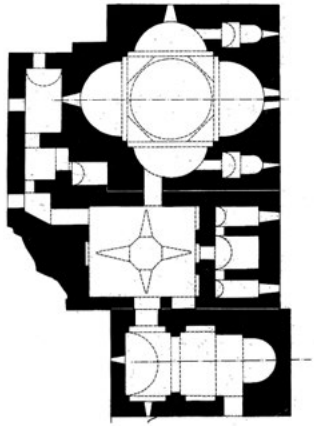
77 Haghpat: Cuneo 1988, pp. 302–309 (with older bibliography); Thierry 2002, pp. 209, 227; Vardanyan 2015b, pp. 213–214; Maranci 2018, pp. 136–140. On the role of *gawit'*s see the article of Gohar Grigoryan in this volume.

78 Sanahin: Ghalpakhtchian 1970, Cuneo 1988, pp. 290–298 (with older bibliography); Thierry 2002, p. 227.

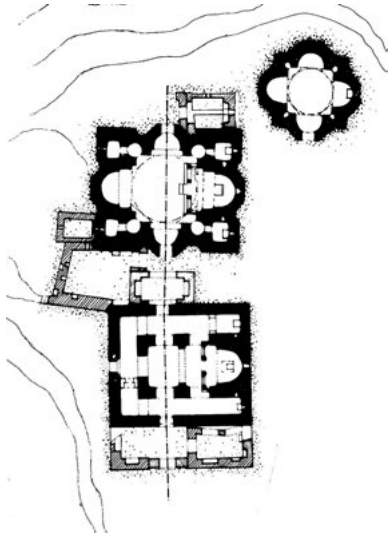
[28.1]



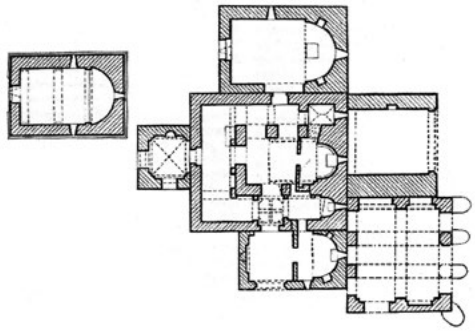
[28.2]



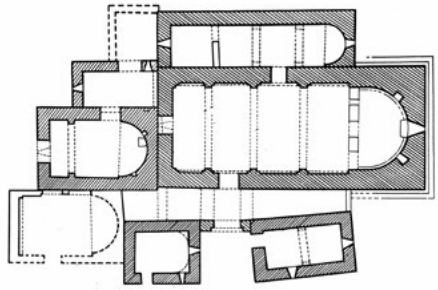
[28.3]



[28.4]



[28.5]



[28.6]

[28] Ground plans of multi-church monasteries in Armenia and Georgia

[28.1] Haghpat Monastery

[28.2] Sanahin Monastery

[28.3] Vanevan Monastery

[28.4] Dzveli Shuamta Monastery

[28.5] Matani 'Tskhrakara' Monastery

[28.6] Kozipas Mamata Monastery

contain family mausolea built in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries within their perimeter walls. Perhaps the closest formal Armenian parallel to Rk'oni would be the Vanevan Monastery near Lake Sevan, a foundation of Prince Shapuh Bagratuni and his sister Mariam in the year 902 **[28.3]**.[79] Here, the main church of St Gregory is adjoined to the south by a memorial chapel, further south follows the second church of the monastery. The space left in between these was filled with an additional hall. In this lies the main difference, the closed space instead of the open court with the (venerated?) tree indeed creating a more compact building group with centralized access and connection between the structures.

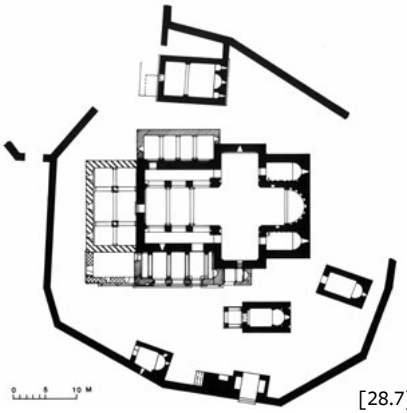
In Georgia, the oldest multi-church complex might be the fifth to sixth century Nagzauri Monastery excavated near Dmanisi (Kartli).[80] Here, three minuscule single nave chapels stand on the precinct wall, their apses reaching out of it eastwards in a rather unique arrangement. It appears that wall and southern chapels were added later to the nucleus of the now north-eastern chapel; astonishingly, the centre of the precinct remains empty as a courtyard. The precise functions of each chapel are not known.

One of the most important early medieval complexes is that of Dzveli Shuamta (K'akheti), where the original "basilica" (a single nave building with U-shaped ambulatory, fifth or sixth century) is connected to a second, centralized church of almost identical size through a small later corridor **[28.4]**.[81] The second church is a scaled-down imitation of the Holy Cross church in Mtskheta, perhaps hinting at a particular pattern of devotion and veneration in this monastery spreading in the seventh century. A third church, a tetraconch still bearing elements originating from the Jvari-type, was built only few meters north-east of the previous two churches above an alleged funerary crypt – Chubinashvili and Beridze date it as early as the seventh century as well, certainly it was built before the tenth century. No assumptions about the functional use of this remarkable complex were made, except for Chubinashvili explaining the erection of two domed new churches as the doing of one particularly successful abbot recreating the main monastery church and his private mausoleum. Here we can observe a multiplication of equally-sized churches, two of which with a dome, creating a silhouette not unlike that of many Armenian monasteries but without the presence of porches or similar large multifunctional threshold spaces. Yet, if the proposed dates for the churches are correct, it is also one of the oldest multi-church monasteries of this type, long before large scale (domed) porches became central part of the Caucasian architecture.

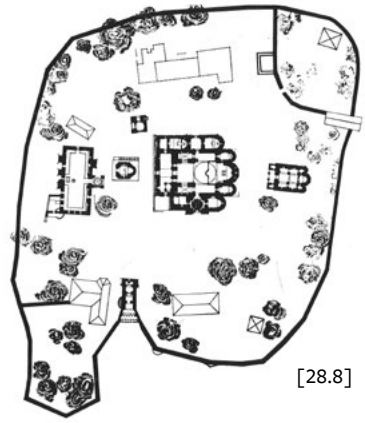
79 Vanevan: Cuneo 1988, pp. 374–375 (with older bibliography).

80 Kakhiani *et al*. 2012, pp. 7–16, 100–103.

81 Chubinashvili 1959, pp. 45–48, 246–255; Beridze 1974, pp. 109–110; *Idem* 2014, vol. I: pp. 55–57, 83–85, 160–161, vol. II: p. 149.



[28.7]



[28.8]

A second type of multi-church monastic precinct is represented by the Mat'ani Monastery (K'akheti) **[28.5]**.[82] The oldest, central church is of the same type as the Dzveli Shuamta "basilica". This church was, according to Aronishidze, only built in the eighth/ninth centuries and then a southern lateral chapel added. Another chapel was added to the north in the fifteenth century, a belfry erected above it slightly later. In the fourteenth to sixteenth century, a porch to the church was built and an independent single nave church erected in front of the porch, using fragments of an older building. While the chapels are of modest size and architectural sophistication, they show a good example of a tight agglomeration of relatively independent spaces. Again, little is known about the function, even if clearly memorial chapels must have played a central role in the process of rebuilding (the northern chapel is built over a crypt). Curiously, Beridze describes one of the now largely destroyed rectangular rooms built against the eastern wall of the church as having an opening in the vault, so it should have been the monastery's library.[83] This would present a parallel to the placement of large libraries directly against the church's body in Armenian monasteries.

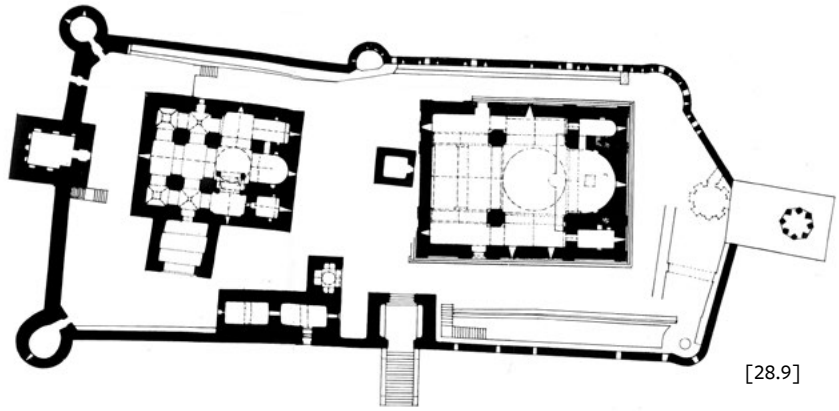
The level of dense agglomeration in Mat'ani is a rare phenomenon in Georgian architecture, but not unique. About 40 km west of Rk'oni lies the Kozipas Mamata Monastery (Kartli), high up in the mountain range **[28.6]**. Long deserted (Bagrationi describes it briefly as "empty" in the eighteenth century), its main church is preserved and goes back to the eighth/ninth century.[84] To the earliest, tiny single nave chapel, five more single nave spaces were added, all functioning as individual entities and only communicating with each other through doorways and corridors. While the density of separate sacral spaces here is remarkable, the sophistication of the architecture is relatively

82 Chubinashvili 1959, pp. 48–55; Devdariani/Dvali/Vachnadze 2004; Beridze 2014, vol. I: pp. 145–146; vol. II: p. 84; Aronishidze 2022.

83 Beridze 2014, vol. II: p.84.

84 Devdariani/Mgaloblishvili 1990.

[28.7] Khakhuli Monastery
[28.8] Gelati Monastery
[28.9] Ananuri Fortified Monastery



[28.9]

low, with only one eastern chapel façade having received a sculptural decoration in the twelfth–thirteenth century.

A somewhat opposed concept is represented by a significant group of monasteries that possess three or more churches within the perimeter wall, which are of varying size but not interconnected. They further contest the idea of Georgian monasteries being constructed around a sole sacral focal point, even if the size of the individual churches usually creates a clear hierarchization. Already the tenth century monasteries founded by David III the Curopalates (gov. 966–1000) in Tao Klarjeti provide us with prominent examples. In Kahkhuli, the late tenth century domed cruciform church received several porches and a southern annexe chapel (only accessible from the outside) in the subsequent centuries **[28.7]**.[85] At a short distance from it, four single-nave churches were built: three single apse ones to the south (one of which with a porch) and a triple-apse one to the north. The one closest to the southern church entrance, which received its porch in the twelfth or thirteenth century, has been specifically interpreted as funerary church by Jobadze due to the portal relief showing a monumental flourishing cross, but a memorial function of the other chapels is highly likely as well.[86] The formal parallels to Rk'oni, where the funerary church is also placed some meters south of the main church, extend to the monastic complex of Otkhta Ekklesia.[87] Here, the main basilica is adjoined by a 'seminary' and a refectory in an arrangement rather similar to later Armenian complexes, while less than 10 m to the south-west of the main church another funerary structure can be found. Jobadze explicitly points out the two-storey nature of this single nave building as typical for mortuary chapels; a group to which we can add the church of St John in Rk'oni.[88] Both, Kakhuli and Otkhta

85 On the architecture of Kakhuli most extensively Jobadze 1992, pp. 142–157 and most recently Giviashvili/Khizanishvili 2021, pp. 220–228 (with bibliography).
86 Jobadze 1992, p. 105.
87 On the architecture of Otkhta Ekklesia extensively Jobadze 1992, pp. 158–174; Giviashvili 2021 and most recently Giviashvili/Khizanishvili 2021, pp. 261–269 (with bibliography).
88 Jobadze 1992, p. 173.

Ekklesia were surrounded by further single nave chapels outside the perimeter walls, testifying to a complex sacral appropriation of the area, and particularly the latter is a prime example for the process of investing a nature setting with site-bound holiness in its evocation of the "Holy Zion" notion.[89]

The monastery of Shio-Mghvime (Mtskheta) possesses a sixth century and a twelfth century church (both restored later on), and additionally a connected twelfth century chapel on a mountain ridge nearby as well as further chapels. This provides another example for the integration of monasteries into the surrounding area through the establishment of veritable networks of veneration sites.[90] In Q'ints'visi (Kartli), the early thirteenth century church of St Nicholas certainly dominates the scenery, but the church of the Virgin, some 100 m west, recently rebuilt, proves its former importance through the wall paintings executed in the same period as those of the main church.[91] Finally, we have to mention Gelati Monastery (Imereti), founded in the early twelfth century under King David IV "the Builder" **[28.8]**.[92] Conceived as dynastic mausoleum for the king and his descendants, the foundation rivals the most important monastic centres both in Byzantium and neighbouring Armenia. Today the complex contains three churches, a bell tower, a gatehouse and a large hall building known as "academy" (rather the monastic refectory). The main church of 1106, dedicated to the Virgin is surrounded by a number of memorial chapels that occupy the corners between lateral porches and the narthex respectively flank the bema. To the east, the slightly smaller church of St George, a cross-in-square building was built in the thirteenth century, when also the curious chapel of St Nicholas, a miniature domed church above an open ground floor, was placed west of the main church.[93] Refectory and the three churches form more or less a central axis of monuments in the middle of the monastic precinct. They are not interconnected by built spaces but show a strong sense of spatial organisation, presumably owing to ceremonial purposes (e.g., the placement of the refectory entrance across from the main church entrance), and might be considered a Georgian reaction to the Armenian multi-church agglomerations of the same period. The surroundings of Gelati, as well, are densely occupied by smaller sacral buildings, three of which go back to the twelfth to thirteenth century (St Elijah, St Saba, and an unnamed ruin).

The longevity of multi-church monasteries in Georgia is demonstrated among others by Shemokmedi Monastery (Guria), where in around 1570 the Transfiguration church was built alongside the older Saviour church in order to host the highly venerated icon

89 Bacci 2022.

90 Andghuladze/Mamaiashvili 1990; Beridze 2014, vol. II. pp. 144–146, with older bibliography.

91 Eastmond 1998, pp. 141–154; Beridze 2014, vol. I, pp. 325–327, vol. II, pp. 141–142, with older bibliography.

92 Eastmond 1998, pp. 58–71; Tumanishvili/Khuskivadze 2007; Beridze 2014, vol. I, pp. 305–307, vol. II, p. 37; Tumanishvili 2019.

93 On the chapel and its possible symbolical implications with reference to the Holy Land and Jerusalem see Gedevanishvili 2009.

rescued from Zarzma Monastery in face of Ottoman conquests in the Samtskhe region.[94] The ongoing tradition of erecting dynastic mausolea with individual church donations is finally represented by the complex of Ananuri (Mtskheta-Mtianeti) **[28.9]**, where in the early seventeenth century the church of the Saviour was built to house the tombs of the noble family of Aragvi and the larger church of the Assumption of the Virgin added in 1689 as memorial site of Mdivanbeg Bardzim, duke of Aragvi.[95]

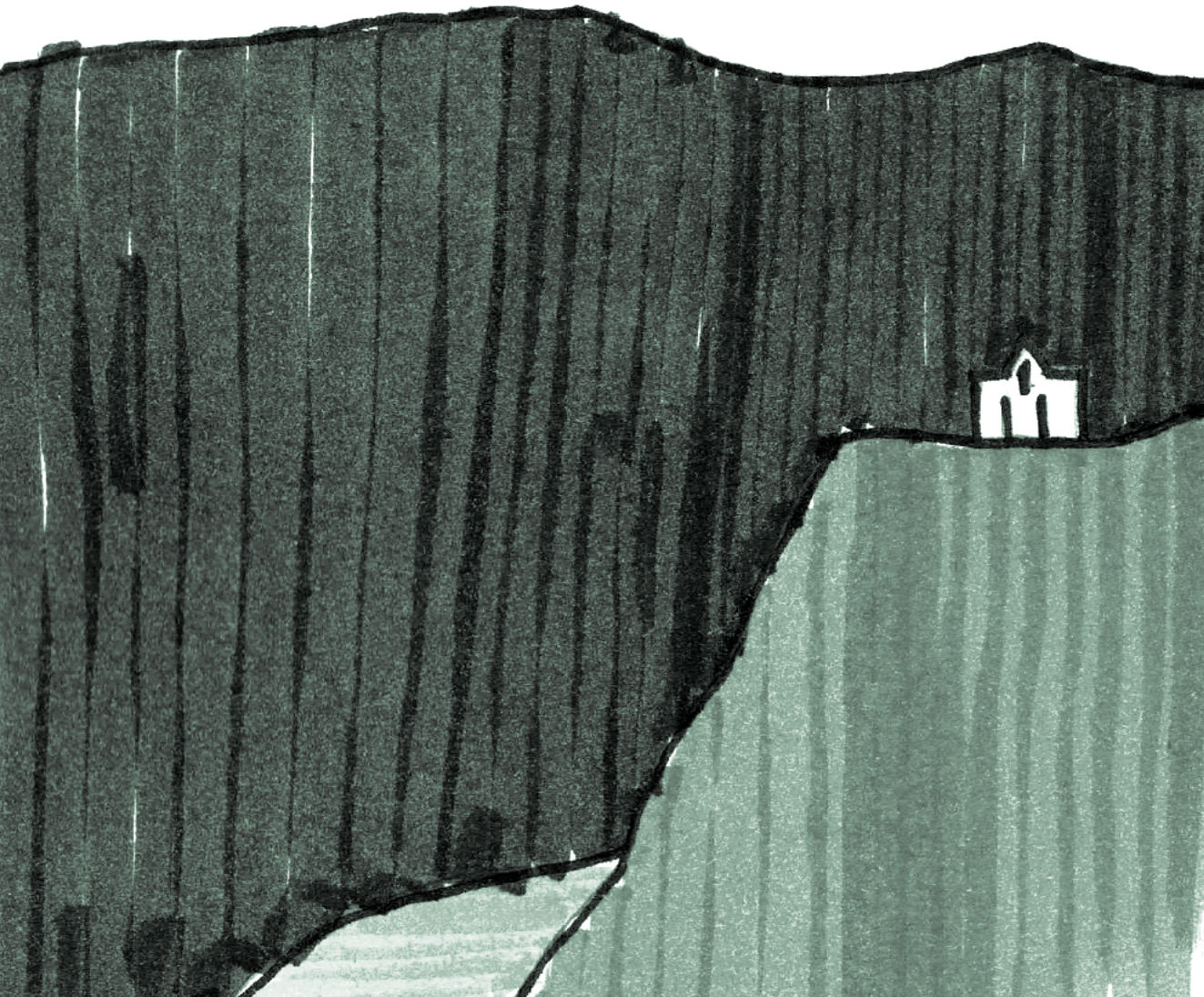
While this brief panorama of course does not do justice to the extent and complexity of the questions raised by the material legacy, it intends to open a debate about this previously neglected topic, and reinforce the necessity of investigating the monuments not only with respect to their formal shapes but also functional contexts in order to better understand possible convergences and divergences between multi-church complexes across the Caucasus.

94 Beridze 2014, vol. II, p. 143.

95 *Idem* 1994, pp. 48–51; Kvatchatadze/Janjalia 2012; Beridze 2014, vol. I: sp. pp. 442–446, vol. II: pp. 16–17.

ON THE ROAD: AT'ENI SIONI IN THE PILGRIMS' EYES

Ivan Foletti, Margarita Khakhanova



What good is a road if it doesn't lead to the church?

Repentance, 1984

Reaching the church of At'eni Sioni today requires plenty of time, patience, and determination **[1]**. The seventh-century church is located twelve kilometers south of the bitterly famous Georgian city Gori – the birthplace of Josef Stalin. Approaching the city for maximum visual and sensorial impact, one should take a *marshrutka* (a routed taxicab) to the village Didi-At'eni and then go by foot for about one and a half kilometers up the hill. Upon finally reaching the monument, the (possibly weary) traveler's eyes will set upon an edifice which appears almost untouched by time, set on a cliff side against a rocky landscape and covered with multiple reliefs, inscriptions, and graffiti.[1]

The At'eni Sioni church is built on a very impressive artificial platform, possibly dating back to the fifth century, while the church is securely dated to the seventh century **[2]**.[2] The church can be classified as a domed tetraconch with corner niches and four additional rooms or the so-called "four-apse church with four niches".[3] At the center of the edifice is a dome rising from an octagonal drum. It is covered with an octagonal sloping roof with a small cross at the top. On the drum, four windows are situated at different heights: the windows above the entrance façades are slightly lower than the windows on the east and west. The main entrance is placed on the north side, with a corresponding secondary entrance on the south side. The three sides of the church – southern, eastern, and northern repeat the same composition: each side is divided by two niches into three parts; in the middle is an apsidal ledge with three facets **[3]**. Despite the compositional similarities on each side, they are visually and structurally distinguished. For example, the niches on the east side are more elongated and narrower than those on the south and north sides. An important component of the external appearance of the church are the reliefs placed on all the four façades, to which we will return. In all we can count over twenty carved reliefs of different size and formal features. On the north side – the one with the main entrance – four reliefs can be found. On the opposite, southern façade, with the secondary entrance, we can count two significant relief compositions. On the west façade there are six scenes (some composed by several reliefs) while on the east side of the church we can list seven compositions consisting of over thirteen reliefs. The eastern façade – and this will be one of the

1 For general information about the church see e.g. Chubinashvili 1948; Barthel *et al*. 2009; Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 397–417; Abramishvili 2012; and recently the synthesis by Khakhanova/Lešák 2022 with previous bibliography.

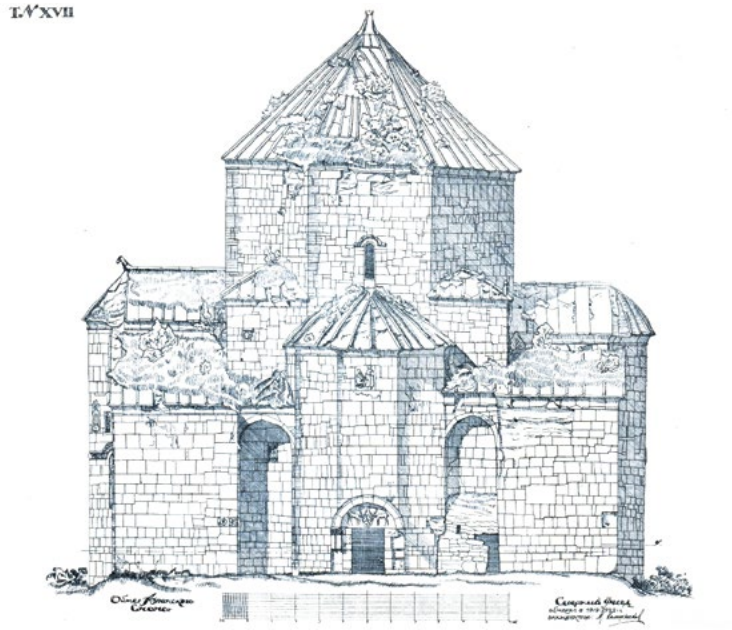
2 We believe this platform may be the remain of the original fifth century structure discovered on the site by archaeologists see Abramishvili 1996; Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 397–417.

3 Thierry/Donabédian 1987, p. 67.

[1] View towards the At'eni Sioni church from afar, At'eni

[2] At'eni Sioni church, At'eni, 7th century

[3] Mixail Kalašnikov, Sketch of the northern façade of the At'eni Sioni church, 1927



key-issues of this text – has been decorated with particular attention over the centuries. Before moving on, one essential aspect should be noted: from the platform surrounding the building, the vast majority of reliefs cannot be seen in any detail without modern equipment, the unique exception being the low-situated reliefs on the western and northern side.

Upon entering the building, an even stronger aesthetic experience awaits the beholder. The interior space is striking due to its unity and coherence. The central dome rises from a square base and is supported by a system of three rows of squinches. The four cylindrical niches between the apses lead to four rooms which are almost identical, with the exception of their vaulting system. Three rooms feature cruciform vaults, while the southeastern room deploys a deviant vaulting consisting of eight cells. Overwhelmingly, one's attention is drawn, not directly to these structural nuances, but to the rich fresco decoration – remarkably well preserved and recently restored – that coats the whole interior of the church. Whilst abundant, the decoration is arranged methodically, leading the viewer's gaze towards the apse. Scholars have determined that these wall paintings are products of the Golden Age of Georgian art, meaning they have been dated to the end of the eleventh century.[4] During the nineteenth century, based on evidence of some ruins, Platon Ioseliani (1810–1875), proposed that At'eni Sioni should have been an episcopal residence with a monastery.[5] However,

4 On the murals of the At'eni Sioni church see e.g. Virsaladze 1984; *Idem* 1988; Abramishvili 1983; Velmans/Alpago-Novello 1996, sp. pp. 17, 45, 52–55, 90; Eastmond 1998.

5 Ioseliani 1850.

[4] Church of the Holy Cross, Mtskheta, about 586–640

as we will show, during the twentieth century excavation, no traces of any medieval monastery, other than a church building, have been discovered.[6] Thus, we are lacking archeological evidence, but a significant sixth-century document mentions an assembly of bishops at At'eni Sioni. In light of this documentary evidence, we believe it is very likely that some religious structure, possibly a monastery, existed at this site already before the building of the current church.[7]

The combination of a remarkable architecture, carved reliefs from different periods, the presence of inscriptions mentioning important historical events for the region and for the whole Kingdom of Kartli, as well as the outstanding mural decoration make the church one of the most magnificent examples of medieval Iberian monuments. Paradoxically, however, the church of At'eni Sioni has not yet received the attention it deserves when compared to other coeval

6 Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, p. 401.
7 Abramishvili 1996.

architectural structures such as the church of Jvari **[4]**.[8] The isolated and apparently "peripherical" position of At'eni Sioni today does not correspond to its original situation. In the first place, its expansive and diverse attendants of devotees can be recognized when considering the dozens of preserved graffiti in Greek, Syriac, Armenian and Georgian.[9] They are silent testimonies of the building's position at the crossroads of past worlds. Furthermore, the very idea of At'eni Sioni as a "peripheral building", implicitly present in the studies on Georgian monumental art at least from the 1940s, is based on a disciplinary vision of art history constructed through a series of historiographical myths which we aim to challenge and to begin to deconstruct in our paper today.

The goal of this article is thus to investigate the original role and position of the At'eni Sioni church in the medieval Iberia, with a special focus on its function as a site of pilgrimage but also in the context of its proximity to an important medieval trade route.[10] To reach these objectives, we will firstly attempt to understand the historiographical premises of the center-periphery model. Secondly, we will take a closer look at the preserved pilgrimage graffiti within and without the church. Then, we will consider the arrangement of reliefs in relation to the location and orientation of the monument. Finally, we will situate the church in a broader context, connecting it with other contemporary buildings.

As it is important to consider the changing function of the monument through the centuries, we decided not to limit ourselves to a single period. We thus consider the edifice diachronically, with a focus on three key periods of the church's construction. These are the seventh century – the time when the present church was built; the tenth century – the time of the major reconstruction of the building; and the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – the time of the most important premodern restorations. This overview excludes the eleventh century period of mural production, which has often been the exclusive focus of previous studies.[11]

BLIND COPY OR AUTONOMOUS CONCEPT?

The first step of our analysis addresses the architectural structure and possible background for the conception and the realization of the church. In older scholarly literature – especially before the birth of the USSR – one frequently encounters opinions emphasizing the architectural similarity to coeval Iberian and Armenian churches.[12] It is possible to trace two apparently different narratives acknowledging the

8 On Jvari, see most recently Eastmond 2023 with previous bibliography.

9 For these inscriptions see e.g. Javakhishvili 1912; Parujr 1985; Abramishvili 1977; Gilgendorf 1978. Greek inscriptions were published by Qaukhchishvili 2009, pp. 197–199. Armenian inscriptions were published by Aleksidze 1978; Shoshiashvili 1980, pp. 203–220; Barnaveli 1957.

10 We wish not to enter here the very challenging discussion about the historiographical notion of "pilgrimage church", but in very pragmatic terms at the moment of its foundation the At'eni church was far from any major settlement and thus, it possible to assume, that one of its main functions was precisely to attract pilgrims. During the tenth century, with the development of urban infrastructures in its proximity, its functions may have extended. These diverse functional stages are attested e.g. by the inscriptions on the façade of the church itself; see Javakhishvili 1912.

11 On the murals and its dating see e.g. the studies by Amiranashvili 1950, pp. 181–186; Schmerling 1947; Abramishvili 1983; Virsaladze 1978; *eadem* 1984; Eastmond 1998; Abramishvili 2012, pp. 157–181.

12 E.g. DuBois de Montperreux 1842–1846, pp. 42, 380; Ioseliani 1850; Bakradze 1873; Kondakov 1876; Strzygowski 1918; Neubauer 1981; Zakaraja 1983; Virsaladze 1984, p. 13; Marutjan 1989; Plontke-Lüning 2007, pp. 316–317; Khoshtaria ed. 2008, p. 26.

original model for the church either in what is still nowadays called the "Jvari type"[13] or in what is identified as the Armenian lineage, viewing St. Hṛipsimē Church in Ējmiatsin as a prototype for At'eni Sioni.[14] Such a perspective is the result of a long-lasting "evolutionary", positivist orientation in art historical studies which finds its deep roots in nineteenth-century scholarship.[15] The origins of such an understanding of the architecture of At'eni Sioni can be traced back to the pioneering studies of Frédéric DuBois de Montperreux (1798–1850) or, more than sixty years later, those of Josef Strzygowski (1861–1941).[16] Both advocated for the "Armenian" origins of the architectural features at At'eni Sioni.[17] Similarly, after the passage of another six decades, the Armenian scholar Tiran Marutyan (1911–2007) suggested that At'eni Sioni is the link between the Armenian and Georgian types of architectural monuments. With roots in Armenia, the At'eni Sioni Church should, according to Marutyan, thus be considered the superior generative "model" of original regional aesthetics, even when compared with the Jvari church.[18] Georgian and Soviet researchers generally have held precisely the opposite point of view, as they considered the church of Jvari to be the model for all the later churches of that type.[19] This later opinion has become dominant and it is thus not surprising that Marutjan's study (and the tradition he belonged to) is strongly criticized on the grounds of his misconception of the original appearance of the Jvari, which lacked the corner rooms.[20]

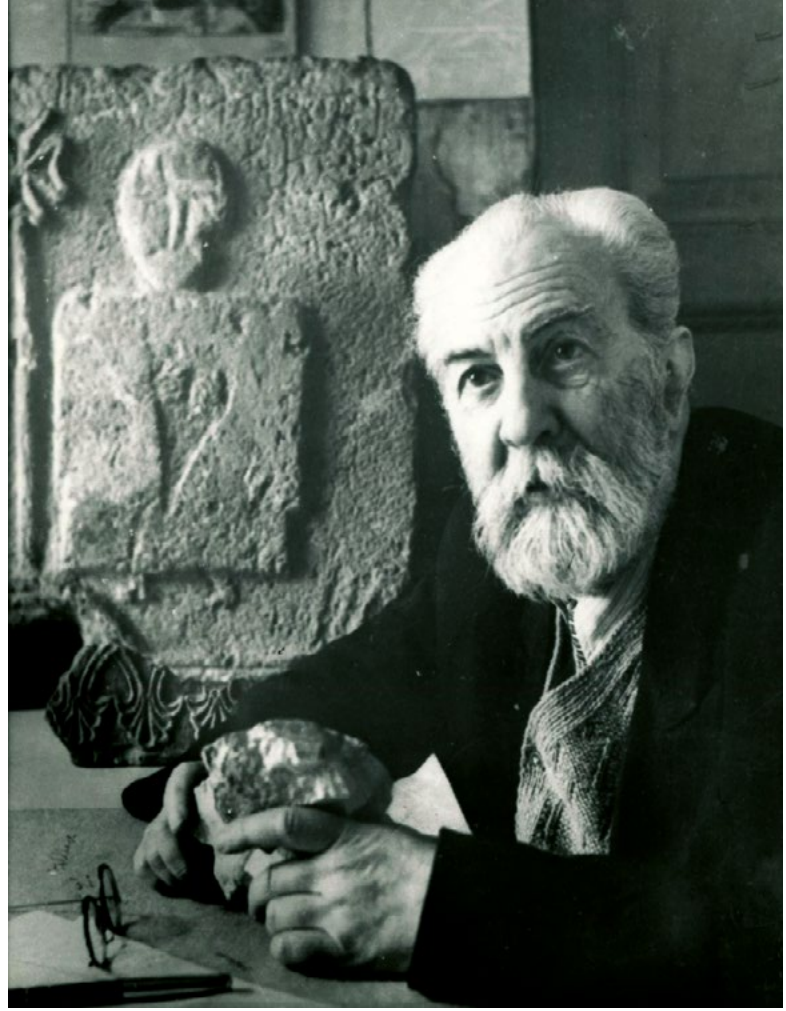
It is not our goal here to enter this debate or to support one of these hypotheses. However, it is important to stress that, while not going back to the nineteenth century framework, most scholars today agree on the Georgian "origins" of this church type.[21] Some have even argued that At'eni Sioni is an "exact copy" of the Jvari church. For example, one can read the following lines in Edith Neubauer's study in 1981:

> "While its overall concept is compatible with the Jvari church, the interior [...] does not convey the harmony that characterizes the interior of the Jvari. Even the exterior structure lacks finer articulation. [...]. He [the builder Thodosak] has not succeeded in creating an equal artwork, but only a copy of a magnificent model."[22]

Such a position originates from the opinion taken by one of the most prominent Georgian scholars of the twentieth century, Giorgi Chubinashvili (1885–1973), who published extensive research on the monuments of the Jvari type in 1948 **[5]**.[23] In this contribution, he considered the church of the Holy Cross in Mtskheta as an original

13 See e.g. Neubauer 1981; Virsaladze 1984, p. 13; Plontke-Lüning 2007, pp. 316–317.
14 See e.g. DuBois de Montperreux 1842–1846, pp. 42, 380; Ioseliani 1850; Bakradze 1873, p. 1001; Strzygowski 1918.
15 On this question see e.g. Foletti 2018, pp. 178–179.
16 DuBois de Montperreux 1842–1846, pp. 42, 380; Strzygowski 1918.
17 On these figures see e.g. Knoepfler 1998; Foletti/Lovino 2018; Elsner 2020a.
18 Marutyan 1989, pp. 127–129.
19 Severov 1947; Chubinashvili 1948; Amiranashvili 1950; Khoshtaria ed. 2008, pp. 26, 29.
20 Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 403–404.
21 Amiranashvili 1950, pp. 114–119; Chkhikvadze 1940; Zakaraja 1983; Khoshtaria 2008; Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 397–417; Ousterhout 2019, sp. pp. 271, 273.
22 Neubauer 1981, p. 47.
23 Chubinashvili 1948. About Chubinashvili see Plontke-Lüning 2012, pp. 313–314.

[5] Portrait of Giorgi Chubinashvili (1885–1973)



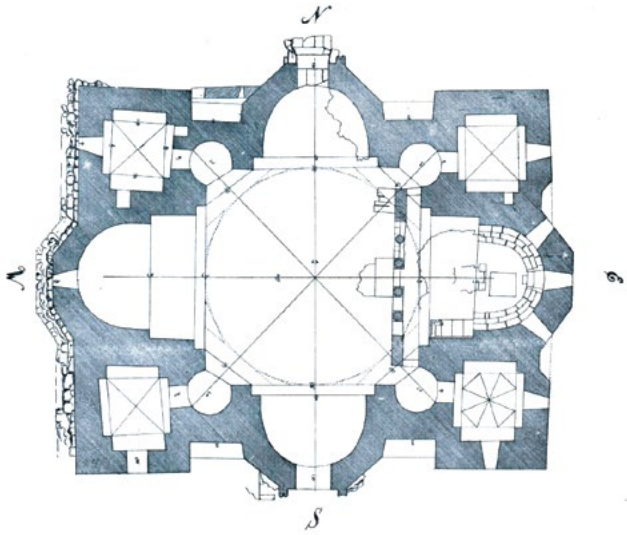
monument which stands at the beginning of a chain in the development of a specific architectural type – the "Jvari type". The researcher compared several Armenian and Georgian churches with the Jvari church, emphasizing their dependence on the original.[24] In the Church of At'eni Sioni he saw the greatest similarity to Jvari, not only in architecture, but also in the topographical location of the monuments, the external decoration scheme, and the entrances location **[6.1–6.2]**.[25] All these elements lead him to the following statement, which can be understood as a digest of his perspective:

> "By studying it, the undoubted position has been established that At'eni Sioni, as an architectural work, is the most accurate – one might even say blind – copy of the great church of the Cross of Mtskheta".[26]

24 It is not here the place to discuss this issue, but considering the framework proposed by Chubinashvili we wonder if it is a complete coincidence that Richard Krautheimer's "Introduction to an Iconography of Medieval Architecture" was published just five years earlier. Krautheimer and Chubinashvili were both students of Heinrich Wölfflin, thus one can speculate to which extent the research of the original model – in the Roman Christian World or in Georgian architecture – is the result of a common methodological training. See Krautheimer 1942.

25 Chubinashvili 1948, pp. 44–49.

26 Изучением его установлено несомненное положение, что Атенский Сион, как архитектурное произведение, - точнейшая, позволительнее даже сказать слепая, копия большой церкви креста Мцхетского. *Ibidem*, p. 121.



[6.1] Mixail Kalašnikov, At'eni Sioni floor plan, 1927

Chubinashvili's words cannot be fully disproven, since it is impossible to deny strong formal similarities between the two churches. Likewise, it is important to remember that the relationship between Jvari and At'eni Sioni can be traced also when considering the patronage of both buildings: according to written sources and reliefs on the church's façade, indeed, the king who was responsible for to the building of Jvari was Stephanoz I (590/91–604/05), the son of Guaram I (545/46–585/86).[27] The founder of the At'eni Sioni church, on the contrary, was Iberian ruler Nerse I the Great (682/86–689), who can be identified on a relief on the eastern façade representing a man in rich royal vestments. The inscription mentioning his name has been preserved on the heels of the feet of the carved donor.[28] The fact that Nerse I the Great was a direct successor of Guaram and Stephanoz[29] became an argument to support the idea of At'eni Sioni being a "copy" of Jvari **[7–8]**. Nerse's construction was – through formal features – a way to pursue the tradition of his ancestors, the founders of the dynasty of Iberian kings, an act performed to display continuity and to legitimize his rule in the region.

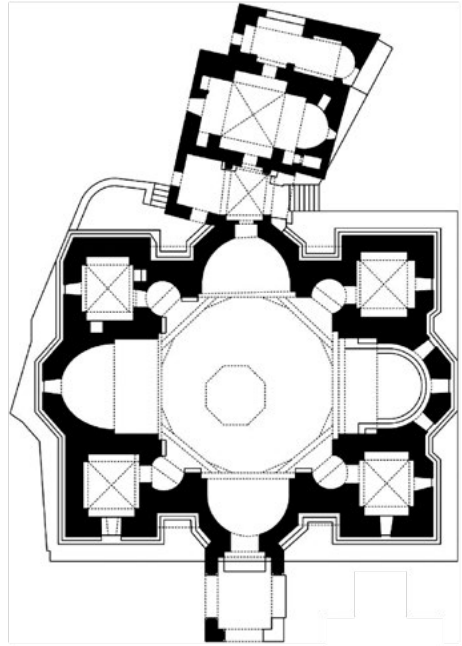
Although the formal and political links between the two edifices are thus plausible, the question of the nineteenth and early twentieth century roots behind the "origin" narrative has been mostly dismissed. Indeed, it is important to remember that the idea of architectural

27 Abramishvili 1977; Khoshtaria 2008; Eastmond 2023, p. 74.

28 With this figure and its identification many questions are connected. The inscription is dated according to different scholars on paleographical bases to the ninth or to the tenth century. However, for unknown reasons, it mentions the name of the seventh century donor of the church – perhaps to highlight continuity with the first patron and founder of the dynasty. Moreover, on the right heel of the figure the name Nerse is written, while on the other the one can read the name Stephanoz. For the further discussion on this relief see Abramishvili 1972; Shoshiashvili 1980, pp. 203–204.

29 Abramishvili 1977, pp. 52–53.

[6.2] Ground plan of Jvari, the Church of the Holy Cross, Mtskheta, ca. 586 – ca. 640



"filiation" contains ideological connotations related to the historical circumstances of the writing of the studies evoked above. In fact, first of all, the partisans of the "Armenian origin" of the At'eni Sioni "model" operated in a specific context, following the creation of the Caucasus Viceroyalty.[30] In those years, scholar's from the Russian empire presented the Caucasus within a broader colonial and imperialist discourse.[31] In studies by figures such as Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925), Nikolaj Marr (1865–1934), and also in contemporaneous encyclopedias, the region's art – both medieval Armenia and Georgia – was presented not only as provincial but also as deeply interconnected.[32] Strzygowski's background, just after the First World War, is different: his theory – to oversimplify it – is based on racial assumptions wherein the exclusive role of Armenian art – which represented the pinnacle of Aryan culture – was implicitly justified by the ethnic situation of Armenians.[33] Marutyan, on the contrary, was writing his studies during the period of the *Perestrojka* (1985–1991), in the last years of the USSR. In this context, one of the major preoccupations of the collapsing soviet empire were the growing nationalist tensions – especially vivid in the region – that challenged the very existence of the Union.[34] Studies showing the cosmopolitan nature of the Georgian and Armenian cultural production were thus welcomed and not limited by censorship.[35] In this last stage of the "internationalist" life of the USSR, Marutjan's position makes perfect sense.[36] These positions arguing

30 See e.g. Mahé/Mahé 2012, pp. 416–426; Rayfield 2012; Volxonskij 2006; Agadžanov/Trepavlov 1997.

31 Foletti 2016, pp. 2–17; Foletti/Riccioni 2018; Foletti/Rakitin 2020.

32 Kondakov/Tolstoj 1891, pp. 36–37; Marr 1934 [1914], p. 124; Arsen'ev 1893, p. 788.

33 On Strzygowski in general see e.g. Foletti/Lovino 2018 and Elsner 2020a. For the "Armenian" question see Maranci 2001/2002; Maranci 1998.

34 See e.g. Carrère d'Encausse 1978.

35 Foletti/Rakitin 2020.

36 For the re-birth of the national question in the region see also Foletti/Rakitin 2023.

for the primacy of Armenia or its deep interconnectedness with surrounding realities were heavily conditioned by the changing cultural contexts of the time in which they were published – a context in which the national character of all soviet republics is thematized and visualized **[9]**. His perspective was indeed partially in rupture with growing national tendencies within the Soviet Republic of Armenia, showing his positioning on the side of the USSR official narrative.[37]

In contrast, the studies showing a "clear" nationalistic Georgian authorship of the model – found in the ideal prototype of Jvari – arose in the Soviet years and especially in the period following Second World War. At this moment, in order to confront Nazi Germany, the USSR authorities allowed the emergence of what we might call today "national identities" within the empire.[38] In this context, studies emerged throughout the region that sought to show local (and national) distinctiveness in opposition to foreign forces. This perception would then become – at least judging from the entries in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia published after the Second World War and reissued in the 1970s – one of the historiographical dogmas of the Georgian Soviet Republic's history of art and culture.[39] Admittedly, on a broader scale, this narrative was not easy to balance with the idea of a transcontinental country and contributed to tensions that led to the collapse of the USSR in the 1980s.[40] However, the fact remains that the studies of Chubinashvili and his successors should also be interpreted in this context.

In summary, the arguments provided in the past present the church of At'eni Sioni as a "copy" of Armenian or Iberian "models". If the arguments for a more direct relationship with Jvari appear more convincing when considering the general layout, the workshop strategies, and the dynastic relationship between the patrons, it is crucial to become aware of the fact that both positions – repeated by research in later decades – were conceived in specific cultural-political contexts and that therefore the whole issue deserves to be revised.

INVISIBLE DECORATIONS?

One of the essential elements traditionally mentioned to link At'eni Sioni to Jvari church is the disposition of the external decorations. In At'eni Sioni, the reliefs are mainly placed on eastern façade, similarly as in Jvari. Furthermore, crucial reliefs are present nearby the main entrance of the two churches – in Jvari this is on the south, while on the north in At'eni Sioni **[10–11]**. However, despite this different arrangement Chubinashvili, followed by the vast majority of scholars,

[7] Relief of the Kobul-Stephanoz, Church of the Holy Cross, Mtskheta, ca. 586–610

[8] Reliefs of the ktitors, east façade, At'eni Sioni church, At'eni, 10th century

37 The Armenian "national perspective" within the USSR developed mainly during World War II with further development in the following decades, reaching an apex precisely in the years of *Perestrojka*. See Foletti/Rakitin 2020, pp. 141–146; Foletti/Rakitin 2023.

38 As far as we know, there are no studies exploring the soviet republic of Georgia from this perspective, however, the same mechanism has been recently analyzed for the case of Armenia, with many overlapping data, see Foletti/Rakitin 2023.

39 Amiranashvili 1930; Beridze/Virsaladze 1972.

40 See again Carrère d'Encausse 1978 and recently Plokhy 2017, pp. 481–507.

[9] Propaganda poster quoting Josef Stalin from the report of 6th November 1943

[10] Main entrance tympanon on the south side, church of the Holy Cross, Mtskheta, about 586–610

[11] Main entrance tympanon on the north side, At'eni Sioni church, At'eni, probably 5th century

assumed that the reason for a similar arrangement was an attempt to "blindly copy" the main Iberian church.[41] We challenge this hypothesis and will now consider the reliefs in the topographic context of the At'eni valley.

Before entering the heart of this issue, it is worth recalling that the desire to construct an ideal "evolutionary line" of architecture in the region and at the same time maintain the "national" dimension in the case of At'eni Sioni led, inevitably, to an additional problem. The copy is necessarily considered inferior to the model when examined within the framework of traditional art history, a field defined by Renaissance cannons. Copies, in essence, are lacking originality, which is the major quality criterium for Western art history.[42] Thus, one of the central arguments demonstrating the unoriginality of the At'eni Sioni church is that it was copying – furthermore without any functional reasons – even the decorative scheme at Jvari. Defining the church as a copy concerns, it should be emphasized, only the general position of the reliefs and decorations, not their stylistic features and subjects. In other words, it is a copy in structural form, not in iconography or style. That most of the At'eni Sioni reliefs – e.g. the ktitors representation on the eastern façade, very likely the ktitor and all the other figural motives on the southern façade – date to the tenth century is thus a crucial piece of evidence in elucidating a spectrum of dependency and

41 Chubinashvili 1948, pp. 156–177; Neubauer 1981; Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 397–417.

42 Elsner 2020b.

originality at At'eni Sioni.[43] Thus, Chubinashvili's idea about At'eni Sioni "imitating" the decorative scheme at Jvari is based on the wrong assumption – convincingly challenged by Abramishvili – that the latter served as a model already in the seventh century. Instead, through the convincing epigraphical analysis we know that the majority of the most important reliefs are dated to the tenth century.[44]

Furthermore, the decorative scheme of the external surface at Jvari is unusual and was tailored specifically to the context of the church's topographical environment.[45] The builders indeed conceived of it in such a way that the main visual decorations are concentrated on the most visible façades for people approaching the church by foot – from the south and the east **[12]**. The western façade, facing the cliff's sharp edge, and the northern one, obscured by the Church of the Little Cross, are much more visually and physically inaccessible. The pilgrims approaching the church likely first encountered the eastern façade, then approached the main entrance from the south side. The builder's decision to visually emphasize these two façades therefore seems fairly logical. The main visual focus on the south side is the tympanum above the entrance, depicting two angels carrying a cross of the Bolnisi type.[46] Another visual emphasis on this side is the scene placed above the portal, depicting a donor, possibly, Stephanoz II kneeling in front of his celestial protector St Stephen, accompanied by the inscription

43 Abramishvili 1972; Aladashvili 1977, pp. 41–48, sp. p. 42; Khundadze 2017a, pp. 17–18; Abramishvili 2012, pp. 133–156.

44 In this context it is important to remember that Chubinashvili was trained by Heinrich Wölfflin himself and thus very sensitive to the artistic canon defined by the latter, see e.g. Mancini 2022.

45 Chubinashvili 1948; Eastmond 2023.

46 Aladashvili 1977, pp. 10–15; Machavariani 1985.

"St Stephen, have mercy on Kobul St[ephanoz]i".[47] Then, on the west side of the southern façade, another relief similar in composition to the tympanum represents two angels carrying the bust of Christ in a medallion. The eastern façade is even more ornate. In addition to the reliefs, architectural details such as niches, windows, projections, and ornamental lintels complete its appearance. Three reliefs, one above each apsidal window, are located on this façade. The left relief depicts two figures identified by the inscription as Demetre and the Archangel Michael. An inscription next to the scene reads "St archangel Michael have mercy on Demetre hypatos" **[13]**.[48] In a relief with the figure of Christ a kneeling Stephanoz I can be seen on the middle edge of the apsidal ledge. As with every relief on this side, and nearby, we see an inscription with the words "Cross of our Savior have a mercy on Stephanoz, the patrikios of Kartli".[49] On the right edge

47 წმიდაო სტეფანე, ქობულ სტეფანოზი შეიწყალე. This interpretation is proposed by Chubinashvili 1948, p. 146; Brosset 1851; Zakaraja 1983, pp. 38–51; Khoshtaria 2008; Kravčíková 2023, pp. 349–367. An alternative reading has been suggested by Djobadze, further developed by Eastmond. The latter believe that the represented figure is not Stephanoz II but rather a further donor, possibly having a Byzantine honorific title: "Kobul st[rateg]i". See Djobadze 1960, pp. 127–135; Eastmond 2023, p. 92.

48 წმიდაო მიქაელ მთავარანგელოზო,

[12] View of the church of the Holy Cross with the road, Mtskheta

[13] Relief of the Demetre hypatos, church of the Holy Cross, Mtskheta, about 586–610

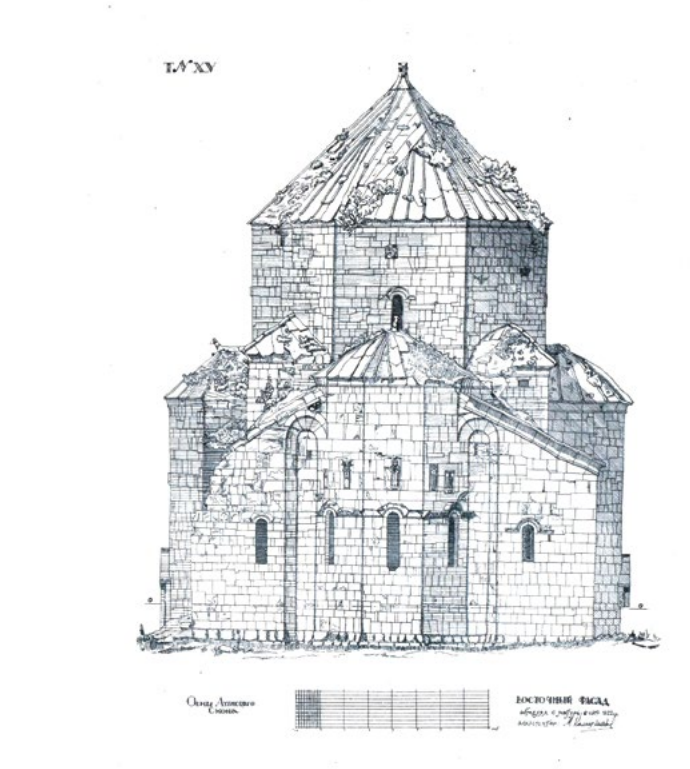
are two figures identified as Adarnese and his son Stephanoz II with the archangel Gabriel, and both figures kneel facing Christ in central panel. The inscription near the relief says "St. archangel Gabriel have mercy on Adarnerse hypatos".[50] Cumulatively, these reliefs at Jvari demonstrate that the two "public" façades are devoted mainly to the representation of patrons.

The builder of the At'eni Sioni church situated the reliefs similarly to those evident at Jvari. The most visually striking façade, again, is the eastern façade, where a total of seven relief scenes can be found **[14]**. Above the middle altar window, there is the figure of the Savior, who is distinguished in size from other figures nearby and who occupies a central position. On either side of Christ, the figures of the church founders are represented. The most prominent figure holds the model of the church in his hands, with an angel soaring above,

დემეტრეს ვპატოსსა მეოხ ხეყავ. Chubinashvili 1948, p. 143; Brosset 1851; Zakaraja 1983, pp. 38–51; Khoshtaria ed. 2008; Kravčíková 2022.

49 ჯუარო მაცხოვრისაო, სტეფანოს ქართლისა პატრიკიოსი შეიწყალე. Chubinashvili 1948, p. 142; Brosset 1851; Zakaraja 1983, pp. 38–51; Khoshtaria 2008; Kravčíková 2022.

50 წმიდაო გაბრიელ მთავარანგელოზო, ადრნერსეს ჰპატოსსა მეოხ ეყავ. Chubinashvili 1948, p. 143; Brosset 1851; Zakaraja 1983, pp. 38–51; Khoshtaria ed. 2008; Kravčíková 2022.



[14] Mixail Kalašnikov, Sketch of the eastern façade of the At'eni Sioni church, 1927

thereby expressing divine blessing for the construction of the church. The founders are identified as members of the Baghvashi family, thus dating these reliefs to the tenth century.[51] There is a consensus among scholars that the later reliefs were located in the same places as the original seventh-century reliefs, an argument emphasizing the similarity of the building's composition with Jvari, without considering their different dating.[52] Such a hypothesis is hard to prove. What is certain, however, is the fact that at the latest in the tenth century, the founders are represented on this façade.

The second richest decorative scheme can be found on the northern side, where the main entrance to the church is positioned. As on the southern façade of Jvari, the most striking feature is the relief tympanum above the entrance, depicting two deer drinking from a spring, possibly a late antique relief. There is no precise consensus on the dating of this piece since the motif could be placed only broadly after the seventh or even the fifth century.[53] In the former case, this would be a logical dating, to the moment of the edification of the current building. Considering the formal differences with the other seventh century reliefs on the façades – which are actually all very different – an earlier dating cannot be excluded, and such stylistic deviation could be attributed to other methods of building compilation. In this

51 Abramishvili 1972; Gagoshidze 2018.

52 Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 397–417.

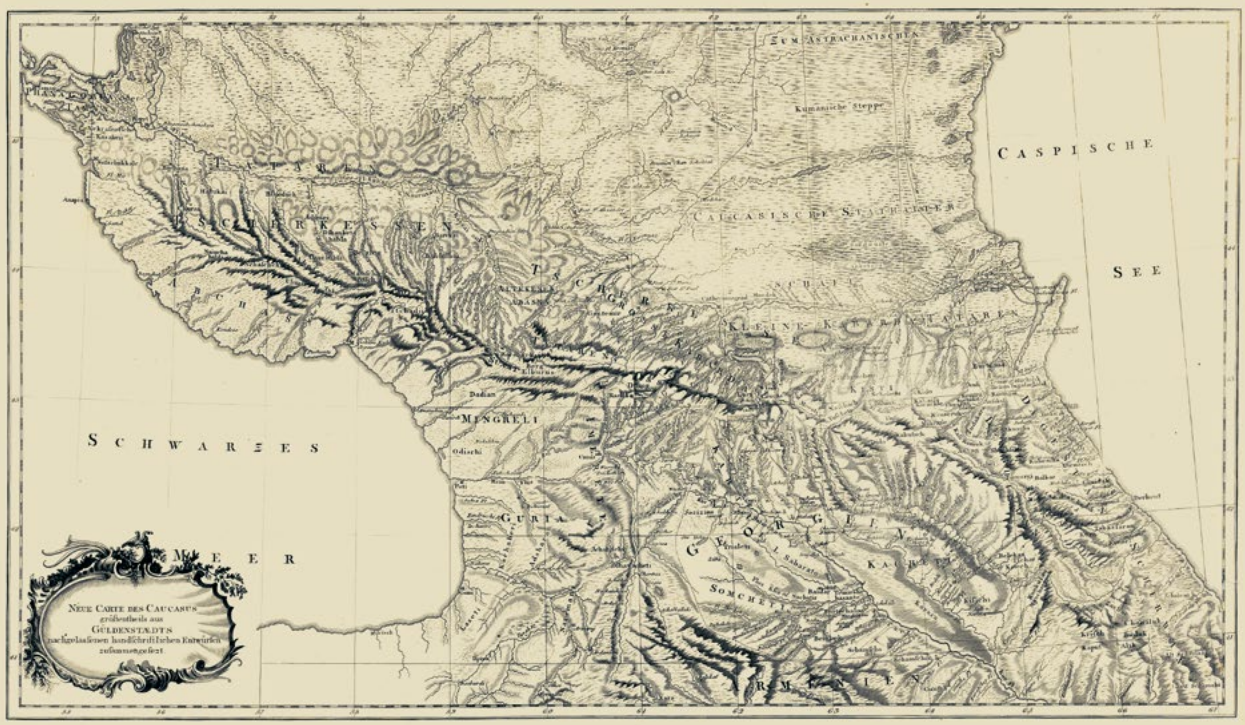
53 Abramishvili 1972; Aladashvili 1977; Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 397–417.

case, the image with the deers could be a magnificent example of spolia, possibly from the first basilica. While being much more dynamic, the scene compositionally resembles the relief with angels and a cross from Jvari, however evoking different associations, such as a paradisiac and salvific concept. On the register above, on the same ledge, founders are again represented, as in Jvari, whose dating is not unanimously accepted and thus ranges from the seventh to the tenth century. The most convincing arguments, are, however, the one exposed by Abramishvili, who dates the relief to the seventh century.[54] Thus, on the same façade, but this time over the tympanum, there is very likely another phase of spoliation. Such an approach to the accretion of architectural iconography displays a deep historical consciousness of the following builders of the church. The scene depicts a man kneeling before a saint. The composition is very similar to the one in Jvari, but unlike at the Holy Cross church, no inscription has survived which may help to identify the character.[55]

When trying to reconstruct the experience of the pilgrim approaching Jvari, we suppose that they could already see the reliefs – likely polychromed – of the eastern façade from afar and that they gained more and more definition as they got closer to the church. Approaching the church, the worshipper would inevitably then see the south façade as they approached the main entrance. The situation at At'eni Sioni is noticeably different. Today, but likely also in the original setting, the road to the church leads the traveler by the west façade and then to the north, where the main entrance is located. Thus, it seems, that the eastern façade, with the greatest number of reliefs, would attract no attention since it is turned in the direction of a tiny valley and the adjacent mountain. This situation was at the base of Chubinashvili's disrespect for the decorations of At'eni Sioni: there, the builders would have "blindly" copied the reliefs, placing them on an "invisible" façade.

But what would happen if we look elsewhere for a rationalization of this seemingly bad decision by the builder? We should not forget about the general emphasis laid on eastern façades in the Christian tradition, yet an answer could also be found in the topographical situation and historical development of the T'ana gorge. Already from the early medieval ages, the At'eni gorge (or T'ana gorge) was a crucial strategic place for a number of reasons.[56] The particular importance of the valley can be measured through the marked interest in this topographical feature displayed by the ruling houses and dynasties. In the tenth century, the At'eni Valley was controlled by the Bagvashi family before

54 Aladashvili 1977, p. 46; Abramishvili 2012, pp. 128–129.
55 Abramishvili 1972; Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 397–417.
56 Alimbarashvili 2020.



being taken by Bagrat III (960–1014), the first king of united Georgia.[57] One of the main roads crossing the valley lead through the gorge from the Shida Kartli to Kvemo Kartli, Meskhet-Javakheti, and then towards Armenia. This route is still documented in the seventeenth century by prince Vakhushti Bagrationi in his *Geography of Georgia*.[58] Moreover based on Pavliashvili, the place was of economic interest to the Georgian royal powers, since valleys are ideal places for controlling roads and tax collection.[59] Furthermore, the road also played a particularly important role in political and cultural relations with the Eastern Roman Empire, since it was the shortest path connecting Byzantium with the East **[15]**.[60] It is thus most likely the presence of this road may justify the erection, as early as the fifth or sixth century, of the original basilica of At'eni. The existence of this primitive church was confirmed by the excavations conducted in 1969–1970.[61] Its presence is also documented in a Syrian epistle from the sixth century, where bishop Simeon of the Syrian monastery of Beit Mar threatened to anathematize the bishops of Kartli, who had gathered in At'eni.[62] It is thus plausible to suppose that the At'eni church was located close to the road which, at the time of the construction and reconstruction

57 *Ibidem*, p. 200.
58 *Ibidem*, p. 199; Muraviov 1848, p. 102; Vakhushti Bagrationi, *Description of the Kingdom of Georgia, its habits and canons* [1745], ed. Janashvili 1904; Pavliashvili 2019.
59 Pavliashvili 2019; Alimbarashvili 2020.
60 Makalatia 1957.
61 Abramishvili 2012, pp. 29–41; Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, p. 401.
62 Abramishvili 1996; *Idem* 2012, pp. 41–47.

[15] Map of the Caucasus in the second half of the 18th century

of the church, played a key-role for different economic, agricultural, and trade purposes in the region.[63]

If we return now to the reliefs on the eastern façade, they no longer appear to be a blind imitation of the decorative system of Jvari, but a specifically organized system aimed to interact with people passing precisely on this road. The passage was very likely situated on the East side of the church, where the morphology of the terrain is ideal for such a pass, and where there is enough space to fit a road. If we imagine a multitude of reliefs, likely also originally polychrome, we can easily assume that they were visible from afar. In this situation, the decorations of At'eni do not appear irrational or invisible, but, on the very contrary, they fulfill a clear function by inviting people passing on the road to look to the church and, possibly, to stop on their route for a moment of prayer, for the liturgical services, or to otherwise leave their mark or an offering.

In this last aspect, At'eni Sioni must have been extremely successful: indeed, one of the outstanding aspects of the church are the already mentioned dozens of seemingly spontaneous graffiti – dated from tenth to eighteenth century – which cover all its external and internal surfaces. These are not "official" inscriptions belonging to the patronage of the founders, but traces which attest to a diversity of devotion, marked out with an urgency and an immediacy.[64] More important, on the façades of the church are graffiti in many languages, from Georgian to Armenian, Greek, Hebrew, Slavonic, and Arabic **[16]**.[65] These graffiti attest to a multitude of visitors, from all around the Mediterranean and Western Asia, becoming, at least for a moment, pilgrims worshiping this site.

The devotional nature of these graffiti is evident: they are inviting the visitors of the church to pray for their authors. A noteworthy graffito is placed on the northern column of the western apse, which is trilingual – Georgian, Armenian, and Arabic. The graffito repeats, in all three languages, exactly the same words: "I, a servant of God, wrote this. Whoever reads this, remember me in your prayers".[66] Paleographic analysis of the Georgian and Armenian versions allows us to date this graffiti back to the tenth century.[67] More important it displays the cosmopolitan nature of the site, attesting to its popularity and further to the importance of the road passing beside it.

It is thus possible to conclude that during the premodern (and early modern) period, At'eni Sioni was an important site attracting international pilgrims and travelers. Its external (and internal) decoration, far from imitating a "model", were conceived and adapted to visualize the importance of the site, to represent its patrons, and to attract the

63 Kikvidze 1963, pp. 110–124; Lortkipanidze 1988, p. 117.

64 Muradjan 1985.

65 On the inscriptions see e.g. Abramishvili 1977; Aleksidze 1978. There was also one inscription in Slavonic inside the church, mentioned by different scholars in the nineteenth century, but it has not survived to the present day. See Uvarova 1904; Muradjan 1985; DuBois de Montperreux 1842–1846.

66 Texts on Armenian inscriptions were published by Aleksidze, see Aleksidze 1978, pp. 107–108.

67 *Idem* 1978, p. 108; Muradjan 1985.

attention of those who were passing on the road. More than a simplistic use of the notions of a "model" and a "copy", we are here facing a process retaining traces of historical resonance through the mechanics of spoliation and use of traditional structural forms.

SACRALIZING THE LANDSCAPE?

To complete the picture, it is necessary to also consider the decorations on the western façade. The latter has undergone the most significant reconstructions and the few reliefs on it now are later additions.[68] Carved on this façade is a large relief cross, which according to Abramishvili, belongs to restoration work carried out, possibly, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries **[17]**.[69] The visual layout of this cross, clearly visible from afar, opens yet another question regarding the role of At'eni Sioni: indeed, in this form we see traces of visual and conceptual contacts with many other churches located in the South Caucasus. Similar reliefs – both formally and through their positionality on the edge of a valley – of monumental crosses on façades can traced back to the Odzun cathedral (end of the sixth to early seventh century) and are present much more regularly, for example, in the following centuries in the Kobayr monastery (thirteenth century), the Akht'ala monastery (early thirteenth century), the and the Hovhanavank' monastery (1216–1221).[70] The last two cases are strongly connected with the very particular patronage of the brothers Zakarids-Mkhargrdzeli, where elements of the both cultures – Armenian and Georgian – were combined creating similar patterns all around the region, which was ruled by the Iberian Queen Tamar.[71] Of course the crosses represented on these façades differ greatly in form, shape and size. However, all these examples have one feature in common: the image of cross is always situated in unexpected positions and, more importantly, meant to be visible from afar. The cross on the east façade of the Hovanavank' monastery, for example, is facing a cliff and is invisible except on the other side of the gorge. Thus, the only person capable of perceiving the relief is someone who is on the other side of the gorge and sees the cross from afar.[72] The church at Akht'ala shows us a comparable approach to the problem, with huge relief crosses on the east, north and south walls.[73] If it can be argued that at Akht'ala, the southern and northern façades of the monument are well accessible and visible to the church's visitor, this is clearly not the case with the eastern side. Once again, we encounter here the position of the church on the edge of the ravine with the façade inaccessible for close examination and visible only from below or from the opposite side of the gorge.

[16] Example of the graffiti on the surface of the At'eni Sioni church, At'eni

[17] Relief cross on the west façade of the At'eni Sioni church, At'eni, 14th–15th century

68 Chubinashvili 1948; Abramishvili 2002; Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, pp. 397–417.

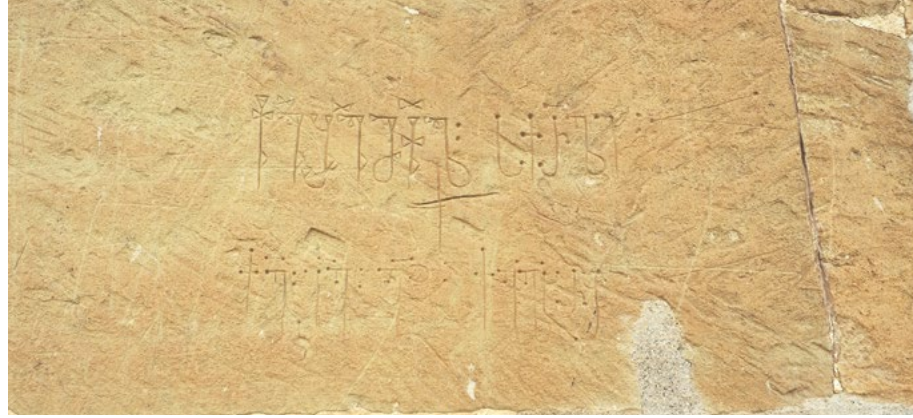
69 Abramishvili 2002, pp. 675–678.

70 On Odzun catedral see e.g. Shakhkyan 1983; Baghalyan 2014; Donabédian 2012; Kovářová 2022. Bibliography on the Akht'ala and Hovanavank' see below.

71 See e.g. Lidov 1991b; Bulia/Janjalia 2016.

72 Ghafadarjan 1948; Hayastani 2015; Yakobson 1986.

73 On the Akht'ala church see e.g. Ericov 1872; Lidov 1991b; Tadevosyan 2007. For Akht'ala and the discussion about the crosses on the façades see Eastmond 2017, pp. 28–34.



Such a situation closely recalls what has been noted in other sites of premodern Christianity.[74] Buildings – marked mainly by the sign of the cross visible only from afar – were becoming true landmarks sacralizing the surrounding landscape.[75] In this sense the function of the monuments became close to a phenomenon which was known in many different places of the premodern world,[76] and documented in the Caucasus region at the latest from late antiquity onward: the massive presence of the of cross-bearing stelas were supposed to define a sacred, Christianized, perimeter.[77] In this context, one can assume that this additional cross on At'eni Sioni church, carved in the late Middle Ages, is in perfect continuity with the late antique tradition and was incorporated within a widespread phenomenon all over the region. By the addition – between the fourteenth and fifteenth century – of this new decoration the building was updated to the contemporaneous fashion at the same moment that it maintained the function already established in the previous centuries: to constitute a true Christian landmark. If the seventh-century decoration of the façade of At'eni Sioni had a precise function – to attract pilgrims – in this very case the situation seems to be more complex: the cross – possibly polychromed – was surely visible for all the visitors approaching the church from west. However, at the same time, since it was visible also down in the valley, it had a much more "spiritual" task: to contribute, with the whole church, to express the sacred nature of the surrounding landscape.[78] In this sense, one can wonder to which extent we are pursuing a tradition begun in the tenth century: as suggested by its name the church mirrored, to a certain degree, mount Sion in the Holy Land, and can thus be seen as one of the many churches referring to the topography of the Holy Land in the region.[79] Indeed, in the original inscription about the construction of the church the builder referred to the monument just as "Holy church", thus it is conventionally considered that the dedication to the Dormition of the Mary and further connection with Sion should be related to the Bagratids era.[80]

One can finally wonder if this last addition cannot also be related to the Mongol dominance of Iberia at the time. The image of a cross is common in the visual tradition of the Caucasus, however, the emphasis on this sign, in monumental scale and placed on façades, imply a reading of this as a sign of Christian resistance to the non-Christian occupants.[81] This theory could be considered especially when acknowledging the fact that the placement of monumental crosses on façades increases in popularity during the thirteenth century, that is, the period of Mongol's pressure and invasion, especially in the contact zones between the Iberian-Armenian Kingdom and the Mongol-ruled territories.[82]

74 Bacci 2022; Capriotti 2022; Foletti 2022.

75 See in general Foletti/Lešák/Palladino 2022.

76 E.g. Virdis 2022.

77 On this phenomenon see e.g. Tchakerian 2016; Studer-Karlen 2022b.

78 We have no evidence about a medieval presence of a cross on the top of the dome, which would have been visible as well. The oldest visual document we have is image reproduced by the countess Uvarova, who visited the church in late nineteenth century. From this evidence we can notice, on the top of the building, a very old pine sign used from the late antiquity onward. See Uvarova 1904, p. 149.

79 Bacci 2016; *Idem* 2019; *Idem* 2022.

80 See Kazaryan 2012–2013, III, p. 397.

81 For the historical context see for example Bartold 1896; Berdzenishvili 1962, pp. 111–129; or the recent volume Tubach/Vashalomidze/Zimmer 2012 and Eastmond 2017.

82 See e.g. Amiranashvili 1950, chapter on the art during Mongolian dominance pp. 232–261.

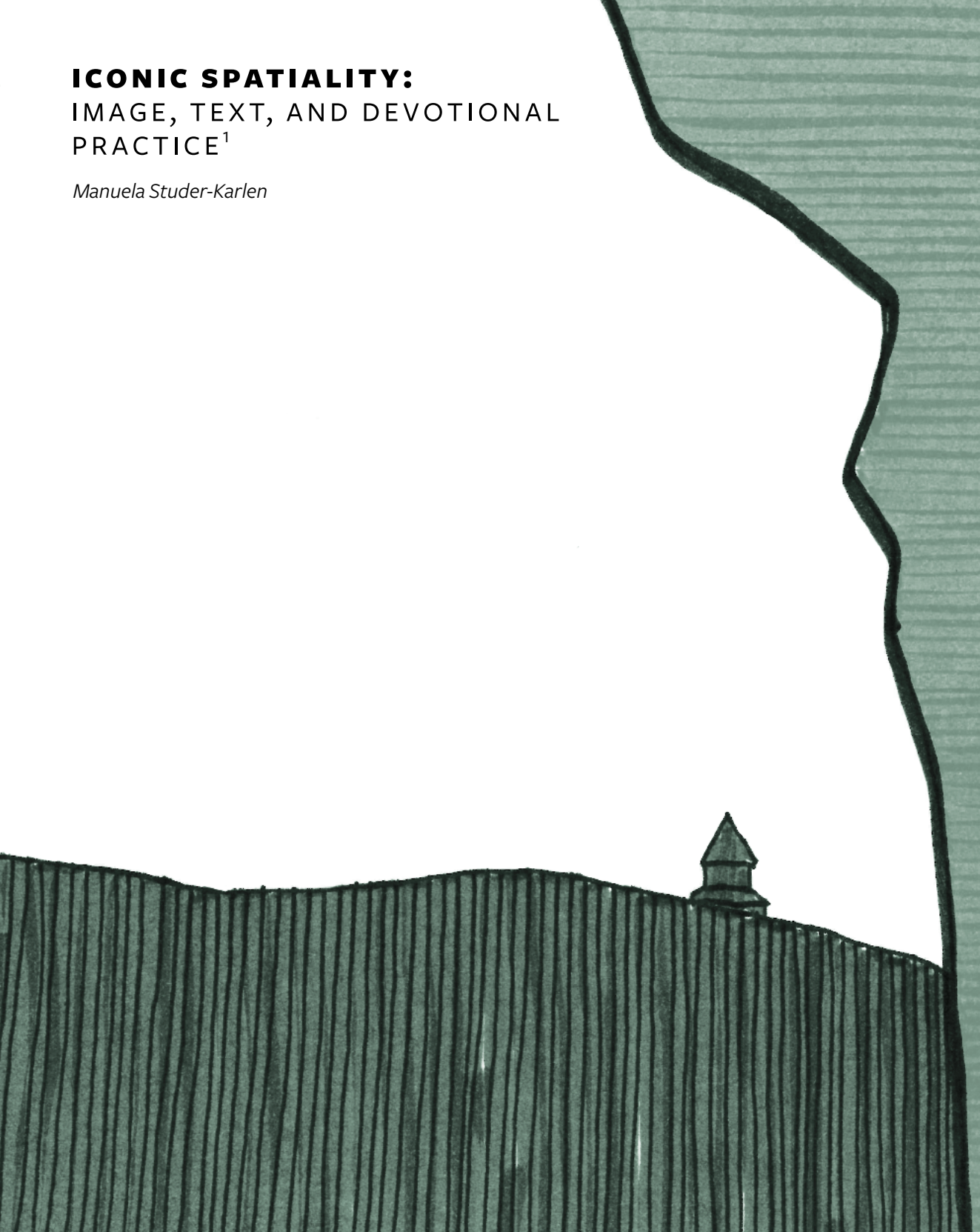
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the church of At'eni Sioni was an exceptional site throughout its pre-modern life, which at each important stage was updated and adapted to the needs of the "local" and "non-local" population. Historiography has been harsh on this monument, as this essay attests, which has been wrongly regarded as only a "blind copy" of the Jvari church. Instead, since the late antique period, the church strategically attracted pilgrims and, in all likelihood, was located next to a busy road that connected East with West, Asia with Europe. The decorations on its façades were therefore designed precisely in this context, to attract passersby and pilgrims, inviting them to stop and to visit the church. The presence of dozens of devotional graffiti in many languages shows how successful this operation was.

Two other essential data have emerged from the analysis of the exterior decorations of the church. These are, first, the cosmopolitan nature of the visitors who left their own graphic imprint on the walls of the sacred building. Coming from all sides of the known world these imprints display the central role that the region played in the pre-modern world as a true crossroads. The second element, no less important, concerns the idea of marking the façade of the church facing the valley with a cross. This is a visual sign that distinguishes the entire region of the Christian Caucasus. Far from the Russian colonial gaze, and perfectly aware of the local peculiarities of the cultures of medieval Armenia and Iberia, we must observe that the phenomenon of crosses on the façades, as signs of the Christianization of the landscape and Christian resistance, become a distinctive feature throughout the region – a fact also visible from distinct formal elements repeated across Armenia and Iberia. It is not surprising, therefore, that such a diffusion of united elements emerges in this very particular context: in the kingdom of Kartli, which, under the reign of Queen Tamar, became the last bastion of resistance to the Mongol invasion.

ICONIC SPATIALITY:
IMAGE, TEXT, AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICE[1]

Manuela Studer-Karlen



The twelfth-century icon of the Forty Martyrs in the museum in Mest'ia is unique among medieval Georgian examples **[1]**.[2] The icon was previously kept in the church of St George in Ipkhi.[3] Centred in the uppermost register of the icon is the frontal bust of the blessing Christ, surrounded by remnants of a red paint mandorla; to either side of him, against a once-golden background, forty pearl-studded crowns stand at the ready.[4] Below are five ranks of half-naked Roman soldiers: the martyrs who, under Licinius around the year 320, suffered for their faith in the freezing waters of Lake Sebaste, in Lesser Armenia.[5] The bodies are represented with lifelike proportions and physiognomies.[6] It is striking that the individualization of the martyrs captures their differences in age. Moreover, their various poses and facial expressions reveal psychological and emotional nuances, while being commonly marked by great sadness and pain. In the bottommost row, four of them even crouch on the ground, at least one seeming to be unconscious. They help and support one another; they embrace tenderly. In the uppermost rank, four martyrs who have noticed Christ turn towards him with praying hands. The variety of postures and emotional states evident in the painting is found nowhere else in medieval art – neither in icons nor in manuscripts nor in monumental arts.[7] At the level of iconography, also notable is the absence of the motif of the fleeing martyr and the bathhouse, often found in Byzantine examples.

The cult of the Forty Martyrs developed intensively in fourth-century hagiographic literature. Long and elaborate biblical passages in the *Passio* suggest that this one was used in the liturgy for the feast, celebrated on March 9.[8] Gregor of Nyssa left three homilies in honour of the Forty Martyrs, and his brother Basil the Great left another.[9] The siblings provide very similar descriptions of the torture the saints endured.

Basil's homily was delivered in 373, likely on the March 9 feast day.[10] He draws a lot from the *Passio* – indeed an early version of this was probably his source – yet he departs from it with his highly rhetorical mode of description, dramatically expanding the story such that it strongly stimulates the audience's imagination.[11] Henry Maguire has emphasized the role Basil's oration on the Forty Martyrs played during the iconoclastic controversy and, thus, the particular relevance of his sermons to Byzantine religious art and liturgy.[12] Seen in this light, the suffering of the Forty Martyrs so expressively captured in the Mest'ia icon must be understood to imitate the eloquent homily by inviting the audience or the viewer to encounter and mediate on the tortures suffered by the martyrs. This analogy between visual elements and

1 My deepest thanks go to Natalia Chitishvili for her permanent help and Thomas Kaffenberger for his support with the photos.
2 Alibegashvili 1986; *Eadem* 1987; Velmans 2002; Chichinadze 2011, p. 111, n. 6; Burchuladze 2016, pp. 197–198. The bare wooden frame suggests that originally the icon had a metal frame. Alibegashvili argues that the icon is not local. The icon is painted on canvas, which is quite rare in Georgia (68,5 × 53 cm).
3 *Ibidem*.
4 The gold leaf has flaked off. There is no inscription.
5 For the several sources of the legend: Dźwigała 2022, p. 22 (with bibliography).
6 On the iconographic type of the Forty Martyrs: Demus 1960, pp. 99–104; Velmans 2002.
7 *Ibidem*, p. 310.
8 For the date of the feast: Delehaye 1902, pp. 522–523. For the *Passio*: Karlin-Hayter 1991, pp. 256–257; Dźwigała 2022, p. 23. Since the Greek *Passio* contains numerous additions and many editors' interferences, it is difficulte to recreate the earliest state of the text and date it.
9 Gregor of Nyssa [Cavarnos 1990], pp. 135–169. Basilius Caesariensis, In quadraginta martyres Sebastenses, PG 31, col. 508–525; *BHG* 1205; *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, p. 151, n. 2863. Maguire 1994, pp. 40–42, 123; Dźwigała 2022, pp. 25–27. The mode of very graphic description of the sermon was in the tradition of pagan rhetoric.
10 Dźwigała 2022, p. 25.
11 Karlin-Hayter 1991, p. 263; Dźwigała 2022, p. 26.
12 Maguire 1994, pp. 40–41.

[1] Icon of the Forty Martyrs. Museum of Mest'ia, 12th century

[2] Forty Martyrs, stoa, Church of the Theotokos in Vardzia, 1184–1186

interrelated textual sources was anchored within sacred space, where vivid images and orations were set into a mimetic relationship with each other.[13] Resonating with the text is the painting's individualized and intimate treatment of the martyrs, which encourages devotion while also interacting with the viewer in such a way that he or she can sympathize with the martyrs and can meditate on his or her own hopes for salvation through their intercession. The highly emotional and individualized depiction of the martyrs in the icon cannot be explained without reference to the intertextuality of this patristic passage, which was intoned in the liturgy as well as in private prayer.

13 Tronzo 1994.

It is important to underline that there is an early Georgian version of the homily of Basil, which was read on the feast day of the martyrs.[14] However, despite the great veneration of warrior saints in Georgia, the martyrdom of the forty Roman soldiers features only in the following Georgian monumental painting: in the church of the Theotokos in Vardzia (1184–1186) **[2]**[15]; in Natlismtsemeli Monastery in David-Garedja (1205–1206) **[3]**[16]; and in the church of Christ in Ts'alenjikha (1384–1396) **[4]**.[17] The theme appears also in the mural paintings in the church of the Theotokos in Akht'ala (ca. 1205) **[5]**, attributed by Lidov to the donorship of an Armenian Chalcedonian community.[18]

In Vardzia, the Forty Martyrs are depicted immediately beneath the procession of the righteous that forms part of the Last Judgement in the stoa **[2]**.[19] The theme of salvation is immanent in both, the martyrs clearly being perceived as intercessors.[20] Moreover, the many saints in the Vardzia programme, and especially the warrior saints contribute to creating a visual calendar marking the annual cycle of Christological and saintly feasts.[21] This hypothesis is consistent with the idea that a close connection exists, in general, between the depiction of the

14 In the MS. Sin. georg. 32-57-33 with the date 864, fol. 109r–119r, see: Garitte 1956, p. 80, n. 21; Van Esbroeck 1975, pp. 127, 238, 250; Basil of Caesarea [Kajaia 1992], p. 22.

15 Alibegashvili 1990; Amiranashvili 1971, pp. 263–267; Eastmond 1992, pp. 99–124.

16 *Ibidem*, pp. 124–141; Bulia 2010, pp. 29, 52–55. I thank Antony Eastmond for the photo.

17 Taqaishvili 1913–1914, pp. 210–215; Amiranashvili 1971, pp. 338–341; Lortkipanidze 1992; Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011; Taqaishvili 2017, pp. 194–220. For further examples of the scene of the Forty Martyrs in monumental art: Lidov 1991a, pp. 88–90.

18 *Ibidem*, pp. 86–90; Lidov 2014, pp. 434–439, 483; Bulia/Janjalia 2016; Eastmond 2017, 39–46.

19 *Idem* 1992, pp. 99–124; Velmans 2002, pp. 306–308; Mamasakhlisi 2021, pp. 185–186.

20 Demus 1960, pp. 106–107; Lidov 1991a, p. 89. It is remarkable that the Forty Martyrs were combined with the Last Judgement also in some Cappadocian churches, for example in Güzelöz (Mavrucan) and Ylanli Kilise (eleventh century), but aligned in the hieratic pose as standing martyrs and with a cross as a sign of martyrdom in their hand. They are the chosen ones in the Last Judgement. Jolivet-Lévy 2001, pp. 273–274, 343. Only in the church dedicated to them in Şahinefendi (1216–1217) their maryrium in the lake is shown: Jolivet-Lévy 2001, pp. 336–337.

21 Eastmond 1992, p. 123.

[3] Forty Martyrs, south wall, Natlismtsemeli Monastery in David-Garedja,1205–1206

Forty Martyrs and the vivid sermon of Basil intoned on their feast day. The image imitates the text.

An unusual iconographic version of the Forty Martyrs appears on the south wall in Natlismtsemeli, namely, with the martyrs shown before the enthroned Christ as judge **[3]**.[22] This echoes the huge scene of the Last Judgement covering the entire ceiling of the church, along with the prophecy of the Second Coming and the Ascension of the Saviour, which appear in the conch of the sanctuary. The spatial disposition places the notion of salvation at the semantic core of the Last Judgement and the Forty Martyrs. The donors, who sought to integrate themselves into this programme surrounding the promise of salvation, are shown in procession on the opposite (north) and west walls.[23]

Meanwhile, on the west wall in the church of the Theotokos in Akht'ala is a depiction of four ranks of naked Roman soldiers freezing in the lake **[5]**. Noteworthy is the immense representation of the blessing Christ in a mandorla, resonating with the great theophany invoked in the Transfiguration that appears on the arched entrance into the south-west compartment, as well as with the Last Judgement rendered on the joint west wall.[24] Over the composition of the Forty Martyrs in the lunette is a quite eroded scene, which Lidov identifies as the "Liturgy at the Invention of the Relics of the Forty Martyrs".

22 Bulia 2010, p. 55. Christ is enthroned, holding a book in his left hand and a crown in his right. He is flanked by seraphim and two adoring angels on either side. Below these are lined up in two rows the crowns and below them the martyrs, which are no longer well preserved.

23 Eastmond 1992, pp. 124–141.

24 Thierry 1982, pp. 164–166.

[4] Forty Martyrs, east wall, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha,1384–1396

This attribution correlates with numerous tales of the miraculous acquisitions of the relics of the Sebaste saints.[25] The treatment in Akht'ala emphasizes the liturgical content of the theme, and this is intensified by the Communion of Mary of Egypt, which unfolds to either side of the round window between the two compositions of the Forty Martyrs.[26]

In addition to this liturgical component, the idea of triumph in the image of Christ crowning the Martyrs is linked to the earthly coronation of the donors. In the Akht'ala and Natlismtsemeli programmes alike, the theme of the founder's divinely chosen royalty is fused, across the space, with that of the Forty Martyrs, giving it additional legitimacy.[27] As we will see in the next section of the essay, in Ts'alenjikha the depiction of the Forty Martyrs can be seen on the east wall of the north compartment **[4]**, where it forms a group with other "icon-like" paintings, ostensibly added to the programme by the donor.[28]

WITHIN SACRED SPACE: "ICON-LIKE" PAINTINGS IN THE CHURCH OF THE SAVIOUR IN TS'ALENJIKHA

For the church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha (1384–1396), researchers have largely focused on the style of the paintings; on the way in which the artist of Constantinople, Manuel Evgenikos, is indexed

25 Lidov 1991a, p. 87; *Idem* 2014, pp. 435–436. Lidov states that tales of the miraculous acquisitions of the relics of the Sebaste saints were extremely popular since the precious remains were preserved in many countries. For further liturgical indications in the church programm: Lidov 1989, pp. 33–47.

26 The liturgical meaning is associated to the theme of the Forty Martyrs also in other churches, for instance in St Sophia in Ohrid, where it was located in the prothesis chapel and directly linked with the rite of the Proskomide. Babić 1969, pp. 117–118; *Eadem* 1986.

27 Lidov 1991a, p. 89; *Idem* 2014, pp. 437–438. Another parallel is to be seen in narthex at the church of the Archangels in Lesnovo (1349). Lidov is certainly right to suppose for the similarity of iconographic treatment in the murals of these two monuments separated widely in time and space to a common source in one of the iconographic programmes of the Byzantine captial. Another reason could be a common textual source. For Lesnovo and the symbolic meaning of the representation of the Forty Martyrs and Christ's baptism: Gavrilovic 1981, pp. 190–194.

28 Belting invented the term "icône scénique" for this group: Belting 1979, p. 103; Belting 2021, p. 29.

[5] Forty Martyrs, west wall, Church of the Theotokos in Akht'ala, ca. 1205

[6] The Theotokos between Peter and Paul, the apse, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

therein; and on the Georgian and Greek inscriptions on the west faces of the north-western and south-western pillars, respectively, in which the artist as well as the historical context are recorded.[29] Though Evgenikos' Constantinopolitan origins are considered certain on the basis of the inscriptions, no other churches can be reliably assigned to him, nor do we know any details surrounding the circumstances of his stay in Georgia.[30] However, as is explicitly

29 Taqaishvili 1913–1914, pp. 210–215; Amiranashvili 1971, pp. 338–341; Lortkipanidze 1977; *Eadem* 1992; *Eadem*/Janjalia 2011; Taqaishvili 2017, pp. 194–220; Mikeladze 2022, pp. 20–21, 32–33; Gagoshidze 2022, pp. 215–218. In research, the pictorial programme has been compared with the (roughly simultaneous) programme in the Peribleptos Church in Mistra (about 1380): Lazarev 1967, p. 374; Lortkipanidze 1977, pp. 6–7; *Eadem*/Janjalia 2011, pp. 17–18; Belting 2021, pp. 35–36.

30 Concerning the painter Manuel Evgenikos: Lazarev 1967, p. 373; Lortkipanidze 1977; Belting 1979; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1980, pp. 100–101; Velmans 1988; Cutler 1991, p. 742; Constantinides 2007, pp. 206–207; Belting 2021. On the polemic between Lazarev and Belting on whether Manuel Evgenikos can be compared with Theophanes the Greek: Foletti 2021b.

mentioned in the inscriptions, Georgian artists collaborated with him on the mural programme.[31] Although the style is homogeneous, researchers have identified at least four different hands.[32] Additionally, according to an inscription, the paintings currently on the dome and the barrel vaults – structures that collapsed in the seventeenth century – were executed, along with several murals now in the ambulatory, in 1648 under Bishop Evdemon Jaiani, with consideration to the original programme.[33]

For the decoration of the church, Vameq I Dadiani, the *eristavteristavi* (grand duke) and *mandat'urtukhutsesi* (chief of interior affairs) of the royal court and the independent ruler of Odishi (now Samegrelo), commanded the Georgian monks Kvabalia Makharebeli and Andronike Gabisulava to bring the Constantinopolitan painter Evgenikos to Georgia.[34] In addition to the Pantokrator in the dome, the programme features festive cycles in two wall zones and on the barrel vaults; the murals also include the scenes of the Passion and of the childhood of the Theotokos, which are presented in the north- and south-east compartments of the church.[35] Particularly notable is the detailed Marian cycle in the south arm, incorporating the scene of the first steps of Mary on the southern wall of the south-east compartment.[36]

Another remarkable element is the composition in the conch of the apse, with the Theotokos appearing between Peter and Paul and the

31 Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, pp. 8, 17. Only the inscriptions on the scrolls of the prophets and the bishops and explanatory inscriptions in the jambs are in Greek. For the Greek inscriptions: Kaukhchishvili 2009, pp. 94–101.

32 Lazarev 1967, pp. 373, 416, n. 81. His insights that only a small part was painted by Georgian artists were subsequently discussed and partly rejected by Belting (Belting 1979, pp. 110–113), Velmans (Velmans 1988, p. 225) as well as Lortkipanidze (Lortkipanidze 1992, p. 193). Belting is of the opinion that the smallest part of the work can be attributed to Evgenikos. Velmans disagreed with this assumption. Mouriki supported Belting's thesis: Mouriki 1981, p. 750.

33 Belting 1979, p. 103; Lortkipanidze 1977, pp. 2–3; Lortkipanidze 1992, p. 192; Belting 2021, p. 31.

34 PLP, 3, p. 116, n. 6192. For the inscription: Taqaishvili 1913–1914, pp. 210–211; Belting 1979, pp. 104–106; Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, p. 17; Belting 2021, p. 30; Kalopissi-Verti 2007, pp. 59–66, Fig. 35; Taqaishvili 2017, pp. 195–196. Since the reign of Vameq I Dadiani (1384–1396) provides a certain datation, it is the only monument of the second half of the fourteenth century from a Constantinopolitan workshop that can offer an absolute dating. Lazarev 1967, p. 373; Lortkipanidze 1992, p. 191; Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, pp. 15–16.

35 For the programm of the church and the distribution of the scenes: Belting 1979; Lortkipanidze 1992; *Eadem*/Janjalia 2011; Belting 2021.

36 Lafontaine-Dosogne 1992, p. 123, n. 8; Skhirtladze 2012, pp. 110–112.

[7] Melismos in the apse, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

[8] Christ Anapeson in the apse, Church of the Transfiguration in Zarzma, 2nd half of the 14th century

archangels Michael and Gabriel **[6]**.[37] Below is the earliest-known occurrence of the Melismos iconography in Georgia **[7]**. Though the placement of the Melismos in the apse to represent a liturgical-sacrificial act has been an integral part of Byzantine monumental painting since the late twelfth century[38], in two Georgian churches of the fourteenth century we find uniquely Christ Anapeson in the bema instead, namely, in Transfiguration Church in Zarzma **[8]** and the Koimesis Church in Mart'vili.[39] In the church of the Mother of God in Nabakht'evi, Christ Anapeson is likewise featured in the bema near the prothesis (1412–1431).[40] In this specific location, the Anapeson takes on the function of the Melismos surrounded by the concelebrating Church Fathers.[41] In addition, this placement emphasizes an interpretation of the Anapeson as a slaughtered sacrifice and thus as connected with the celebration of the Eucharist. The idiosyncratic location had a liturgical reasoning. In Holy Cross Church in Jerusalem (first half of the fourteenth century), for example, the placement of the Anapeson on the southern face of the north-west pillar related directly to the procession of *Epitaphios Threnos*.[42] The depiction was inscribed with Gen. 49:9, the textual source for the Christ Anapeson theme, which is intoned several times during the Holy Week liturgy.[43] The transfer of religious ideas from Mount Athos – the origin of the *Epitaphios Threnos* rite – is easy to trace for Georgia because of the intense interaction with the monastery of Iviron, on Mount Athos, and the lively translation activity of Georgian monks there.[44] The programmes at Zarzma, Mart'vili, and Nabakht'evi demonstrate an awareness of the important connection of Christ Anapeson to the Passion, the Resurrection, and the Redemption, and therefore closely linking the Anapeson to the Proskomide rite that took place in the sacred space. The location of the Anapeson near the prothesis emphasizes sacramental realism and may relate to the fact that the Proskomide rite is accompanied by biblical verses describing the suffering Christ as a sacrificial lamb (Is. 53:7) and quoting the Passion according to John (John 19:34–35).[45] The Anapeson can represent the sacrificial lamb. The underlining of this signification explains the spatial decisions and thus seems to have been essential to the Georgian rite. However, the Constantinopolitan artist of Ts'alenjikha, Manuel Evgenikos, was unaware of this local development. There is no question that the apse can be stylistically attributed to him, and there he opted for this variant with the Melismos, which was certainly known to him.[46] The Anapeson, on the other hand, he places above the tympanum of the south wall, which is unique in Georgia but finds parallels in several Byzantine churches.[47] The Anapeson thus appears above the door

37 Lafontaine-Dosogne 1980, p. 100, Fig. 141; Velmans 1988. There is only one parallel for this apse theme, namely, the one in the church in Perachorio (Cyprus) from the twelfth century: Megaw/Hawkins 1962, p. 288, Fig. 12; Stylianou 1997, pp. 422–425.

38 For the Melismos and the related rite: Walter 1982, p. 238; Taft 1988a; *Idem* 2000, pp. 319–379; Konstantinidi 2008, pp. 15–48; Jolivet-Lévy 2009, pp. 182–193; Congourdeau 2009.

39 For the Anapeson in Georgia: Lortkipanidze 1977; Velmans 1991, pp. 1920–1926; Studer-Karlen 2021, pp. 154–158; Studer-Karlen 2022a, pp. 219–253.

40 *Ibidem*, pp. 249–253.

41 Konstantinidi 2008, pp. 15–48.

42 Studer-Karlen 2022a, pp. 223–229.

43 *Ibidem*, pp. 19–34.

44 Tarchnishvili 1955, pp. 135–152, 164–170; Taft 1988b, pp. 184–187; Martin-Hisard 1996; Aleksidze 2021, pp. 625–629.

45 Bornert 1966, pp. 148–150; Walter 1982, p. 235; Congourdeau 2009, p. 292; Hawkes-Teeples 2014, pp. 323–324; Marinis 2014, p. 33.

46 Lortkipanidze 1977, p. 17; *Eadem*/Janjalia 2011, p. 18.

47 The Anapeson is placed above an exit door in the following churches: Protaton, Mount Athos (beginning of the fourteenth century), Theologos, Achragias, Hagios Nikolaos (last quarter of the fourteenth century); Pantanassa in Mistra (1428). For this location: Studer-Karlen 2022a, pp. 89–91.

leading to the exit and, from the seventeenth century onwards, to the south-east chapels, where it functioned as an apotropaion and a devotional image for the faithful who passed while the relevant prayers were spoken.[48]

In Ts'alenjikha, the Melismos is displayed behind the real altar where the priest takes his seat **[7]**. The Christ Child is depicted lying on the altar in a paten richly decorated and covered with an *asteriskos*. Flanking the Melismos are two angels, each one carrying a rhipidion. Six Church Fathers appear in the soffits of the three windows above. To the sides of the windows in the lower register of the wall – also flanking the Melismos – are portraits of the Church Fathers, each

48 Hadermann-Misguich 2005, pp. 224–226; Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, pp. 184–193.

[9] St George, the Dadiani family and the personification of the weekdays, north wall, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

row headed by Basil the Great and John Chrysostom respectively.[49] Above each of them is an angel-deacon. The six angel-deacons bear candlesticks as well as rhipidia. On the side walls of the apse appear additional Church Fathers and deacons. These figures represent the liturgical entrance procession – known as the Great Entrance.[50] Since the deacons are winged, it is the heavenly liturgy that is depicted.[51]

Further spatial interactions unfold in the church, as the donors themselves participate in the Great Entrance. The portrait of the noble founder with his wife, Queen Marekh, and his son on the north wall of the north-western part of the church likewise fits into the context of the Great Entrance **[9]**. Vameq I Dadiani, with hands raised, is dressed in Byzantine imperial clothing; his wife and son follow him. Given that no holy figure appears in front of the trio, the image does not represent an encounter with Christ, the Theotokos or any particular saint. Rather, it shows a formative procession during the liturgy, towards the east. The north-western compartment may have been the area of the church where the family remained while celebrating the liturgy. The manner in which the ruler was present in the daily service is evident in the *Cherubikos Hymnos*, which was audibly sung during the Great Entrance, forming the theatrical climax of the ritual. Indeed, the *Cherubikos Hymnos* was rhythmically interrupted – as is documented in the manuscripts – by liturgical commemorations for the living and the deceased, including the donors themselves.[52] Thus, the staging of the sovereign in the sacred space, whereby he is depicted in the mural programme as a participant in the liturgy, becomes, above all, a visual prayer, and a mimetic touchstone for his continuous commemoration in the rite.[53] This staging, and its interaction with the liturgy, offered a guarantee of salvation, extending the original intention of the foundation itself. The donors are shown following three saints towards the apse in the procession of the *Cherubikos Hymnos*: depicted on the north wall of the north-east compartment, they are St Catherine **[10]**, and east of the door, St Constantine, and St Helena, all wearing the loros and a crown. The integration into this royal succession and thus the mirroring of the actual procession during the Great Entrance is of major relevance for the sovereigns. To the west of the founders' portrait is an image of St George, the patron saint of the Dadiani family, to whom they directed their prayers **[9]**.[54]

In connection with this compartment, it should also be noted that Georgian saints are among the numerous standing figures featured in the decorative programme, completing the royal procession. These include Princes David and Constantine of Argveti, who appear on the north wall immediately next to the founder's family **[10]**. The two

49 On their open rotuli were Greek texts, today illegible. The inscriptions of the names, however, are in Georgian.

50 Taft 1975; Taft/Parenti 2014. For the Great Entrance in art: Spatharakis 1996; Tomič Đurič 2014, pp. 130–137; *Eadem* 2015, pp. 138–145.

51 Belting 1979, p. 103; Belting 2021, p. 26.

52 Taft 1975, pp. 78–79, 227–234, 430; Belting 1981, pp. 195–196; Alexopoulos 2009, pp. 232–235; Woodfin 2012, p. 126; Taft/Parenti 2014, p. 396.

53 See for this aspect: Studer-Karlen 2023.

54 Belting 1979, p. 103; Belting 2021, p. 29. This compartment contains several scenes from the vita and martyrium of the saint. Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, pp. 180–181.

[10] St David of Argveti and St Catherine, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

brothers were martyred during the second Arab campaign against Georgia in 737–741, being thus known as faithful and skilled military leaders. The Martyrdom, probably written in the first half of the twelfth century by an anonymous author, was very popular in Georgia, because of its anti-Islamic sentiments.[55] The placement of their portraits near those of the ruler's family therefore acted as propaganda for the righteous faith and the resistance against the Islamic invasions.[56] Depicted directly opposite these portraits are seven warrior saints, standing frontally **[11]**.[57] This juxtaposition creates a supplementary interaction involving the founder and the military situation; indeed, from 1386 onwards, Georgia suffered greatly from Tamerlane's invasions.[58] The glorification of the seven warrior saints also underlines the founder's wish to associate himself with their military success.

There are several indications of an emphasis on Georgian Orthodoxy. For example, the unique Asomtavruli inscription in the triumphal

55 See for the text: Fähnrich 2010, pp. 151–152; Nanobashvili 2022; with a list of the manuscripts (pp. 598–599). Beside two recensions, three shorter synaxaria are known.

56 Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, pp. 17, 178–179. Concerning the theme of national saints, Akht'ala stands out among contemporary Georgian paintings for its emphasis on this aspect: Bulia/Janjalia 2016, pp. 116–120.

57 Lortkipanidze 1992, p. 194; Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, Figs 86–91. St George, Demetrius, unknown saint, Theodor, unknown saint, Nestor, Procopius.

58 Fähnrich 2010, pp. 252–257.

arch corresponds to a passage from Euthalius's prologue to his edition of the Pauline *Epistles* **[6]**. From the excerpt from the hypothesis of the letter to the Romans, the following inscription can still be read:

> [...] ႣႨႣႤႡႳႪႨ ႫႭႺႨႵႳႪႨ ႮႠႥႪႤ ႰႭႫႠႤႪႧႠ ႫႨႫႠႰႧ
> ႼႠႰႱႺႤႫႱ ႧჃႱႠ ႤႮႨႱႲႭႪႤႱႠ ႩႭႰႨႬႧႤႪႧႠ [...] ႠႱႫႭႭႣႠ
> ႱႠႰႼႫႳႬႭႤႡႠ [...]

> The holy and great Apostle Paul sent from Corinth his epistle to the Romans, whom he had never seen but of whose faith he had heard report.[59]

The suggested date for the Georgian translations of this text is the fifth century for the earliest version and the seventh century for the expanded one.[60] These very early translations are known from four manuscripts from the tenth and eleventh centuries.[61] As the inscription centres on the fact that the apostle Paul has been informed of the Romans' faithfulness to Christianity, it can also be taken as a reference to Georgia's faithfulness to Christ, an identity that was particularly important for the country at the time of Tamerlane's invasions.

In the west area of the church, we find another visual allusion to this. In the jambs of the west door and in the tympanum, the vision of Peter of Alexandria is shown, alongside an image of Arius himself.[62] This has a eucharistic and dogmatic signification, pointing to Christ's nature as coeternal with God the Father. This doctrine is propagated to the vision of the promoter of anti-Arian theory.[63] The relevant hymn of Peter was read on the Triumph of Orthodoxy Sunday during the litany of icons, specifically in the third troparion of the first ode and in the seventh of the sixth ode.[64] In addition, the cycle of St Nicolas in the prothesis, which constitutes one of the most detailed cycles in Byzantine art, offers a further conceptual connection.[65] In the conch of the prothesis, St Nicolas receives the Gospel and an omophorion from Christ and the Virgin, respectively, a theme that points to the establishment of Orthodoxy **[12]**.[66] Accordingly, we can recognize the founder's desire not only to present in his church a complex, interactive programme thematizing salvation but, more broadly, to propagate the true Orthodox faith. This aspiration must, of course, be seen against the backdrop of the violent Mongol invasions.[67]

In this programme – which intermingles liturgical and religious references along with others drawn from contemporary political and military events – the large, isolated, iconic fields depicting individual saints fulfil a particular devotional function. These must have been

59 Lortkipanidze 1986, pp. 148–149. Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, p. 17. The inscription was first published by Taqaishvili 1913–1914, p. 214; Taqaishvili 2017, p. 197. The inscription is comprised of the first two sentences of the hypothesis. The letter to the Romans is a didactic letter containing teaching on the fundamentals of faiths: Blomkvist 2012, pp. 148–150.

60 Birdsall 2006, pp. 233–234; Blomkvist 2012.

61 Tbilisi, National Centre of Manuscripts, MS. a 407, MS. s 1138, MS. s 1398: all tenth century. Historical-Ethnographical Museum in Kutaisi, MS. 176: eleventh century. Birdsdall 2006, pp. 217–218; Blomkvist 2012, pp. 5–8.

62 Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, p. 65; Belting 2021, p. 39, Fig. 18.

63 Walter 1982, pp. 213–214; Tomeković 1988, pp. 312–313, 322; Altripp 1998, pp. 165–168; Koukiaris 2011, pp. 63–71.

64 *Ibidem*, p. 63.

65 Ševčenko 1983, pp. 52–55, 328–330.

66 Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, p. 17.

67 *Ibidem*. They claim that the importance of these religious confirmations related to the great schism and the concept was therefore brought from the painter coming form the capital. But since the historical circumstances were a daily issue of the founder, the core of the idea is easier to see in contrast to the Mongolian threat, especially because the founder portraits are incorporated here.

executed at the special request of the donor.[68] We recall the aforementioned image of St George on the north wall next to the donors **[9]**; in the corresponding compartment on the west wall are depicted the Three Hebrew Youths **[13]**.[69] There are several parallels to this scene in Georgian painting, such as in the church of St Nicholas in Q'intsvisi (early thirteenth century)[70], in the church of the Dormition in Betania (early thirteenth century)[71], in the church of the Transfiguration in Zarzma (second half of the fourteenth century)[72], among other churches as well as in manuscripts.[73] The image is an Old Testament prefiguration of salvation and is strongly connected to the Incarnation and Eucharist. The portrayal of the Three Youths is based on Dan. 3:19–30, which is read on the feasts of the Nativity and the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple[74]; the chant of the Three Youths of Babylon (Dan. 3:52–90) became part of the liturgy, and the theme is mentioned several times in the eucharistic prayers.[75] Their martyrdom in the furnace is equated to the three days Christ spent in the tomb, such that the Book of Daniel is read on Good Saturday.[76] Mariam Didebulidze has, moreover, emphasized the scene's connotation of the Holy Trinity, which was another tenet that existed in confrontation with heresies. Hence the image contributes to an anti-heretical layer of meaning comprehensively presented in the Ts'alenjikha programme.[77] The unusual inclusion of certain figures in the depiction of the Three Youths in Ts'alenjikha makes clear that this image is to be understood in connection with that of the founder, which follows on the north wall **[9]**. Three figures approach the furnace from the left **[13]**. The first among them wears a crown, identifying him either as King Nebuchadnedzar or, possibly, due to this figure's special appearance and prominence in the picture, as the founder himself, who thus participates in this salvific event and venerates the Holy Trinity.

The representation of Daniel in the Lion's Den is the only one known in Georgian painting, although this iconography enjoyed great success in other materials between the sixth and tenth centuries **[14]**.[78] Figuring on the easternmost portion of the south wall, directly adjacent to the entrance to the diaconicon, this Old Testament prefiguration of salvation heralds the Resurrection of Christ. From the upper-left corner, two angels descend on Daniel. The one in front holds a richly ornamented vase, which points to the liturgical significance of the picture.

Above the door to the diaconicon, which is flanked by St Elisabeth and St Zacharias, is the depiction of the Forty Martyrs **[4]**. Its top register is identical to that in the Mest'ia icon **[1]**, with Christ blessing alongside the forty crowns arrayed in two rows. Likewise, the Forty

[11] Warrior saints, south wall, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

[12] St Nicolas, prothesis conch, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

68 Belting 1979, p. 103; Tomeković 2011, p. 298; Lortkipanidze/Janjalia 2011, p. 17; Belting 2021, p. 29.

69 Lortkipanidze 1992, pp. 86–87. For the iconography: Didebulidze 2011, pp. 118–124.

70 For Q'intsvisi see: Didebulidze 2007, pp. 66, 68; Didebulidze 2011, pp. 119–123. Here the image is also depicted on the west wall.

71 For Betania see: Privalova 1980; *Eadem* 1986, pp. 153–157, Eastmond 1992, 154–169. The portrayal is in the nothern transept.

72 Studer-Karlen 2018.

73 See for all Georgian examples: Didebulidze 2011, p. 119.

74 Ladouceur 2006, p. 12.

75 Didebulidze 2011, p. 119.

76 Rostovskij 1997, p. 458; Didebulidze 2011, p. 119.

77 *Ibidem*, pp. 120–123.

78 Khundadze 1999; Machabeli 2008, p. 29; Khundadze 2017c, pp. 110–112, Figs 201–206, 211, 230.

Martyrs below are of differing ages and are rendered with individualized appearances and pronounced emotions. In the mural, the men gather even closer together; they support, embrace, and comfort one another. Here, in contrast to the icon but in keeping with the tradition of the paintings, the bathhouse with the apostate martyr appears on the left side. The intense emotions and suffering of the martyrs invite the viewer into a devotional encounter, exactly as the icon does – to call to mind and to pray the source text, the homily of Basil the Great. Their joint connection to the text meant that each had a devotional potential. The painted image in the church thus fulfils exactly the same function as the icon, namely, activating the mimetic potential of the subject. The icon was in fact kept in a church, and like the mural programme it would certainly have been involved in both private as well as ritual practices.

[13] The three Hebrew youths of Babylon, west wall, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

[14] Daniel in the Lion's Den, south wall, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

Concerning the other paintings in Ts'alenjikha, the prefiguration of the Seven Weekdays finds no parallel in the visual arts, in any medium. It therefore remains to be asked what purpose this iconography served in context.

THE PERSONIFICATIONS OF THE WEEKDAYS

The church in Ts'alenjikha preserves – on the north wall of its north-western compartment, above the image of St George – a unique iconographic motif: the personifications of the Weekdays as busts of holy women set in medallions **[9]**.[79] The inscriptions beside the white circle of the portraits proceed from the left side with "Day of Monday"; the last portrait has the inscription "Day of Sunday".

Such personifications can be found in some Byzantine examples in connection with the depiction of St Kyriaki, whose name means

79 Lortkipanidze 1986, pp. 149–152; Lortkipanidze/Janialia 2011, p. 17.

[15] St Kyriaki, south wall pillar, Church of St Demetrianos in Dhali in Cyprus, 1317

Sunday, the day of the Resurrection. St Kyriaki is represented in Byzantine monumental painting in princely garments and among other female saints.[80] The *Painter's Book of Athos* mentions her among the martyrs and the anargyroi, without describing her appearance.[81] The image of the saint is also very common in Cyprus. There, it takes a special iconographic form: St Kyriaki is shown in imperial costume with a crown, and on her dress is a ribbon with busts set into medallions or she is holding the medallions in her hands **[15, 16]**.[82] According to the inscriptions, these busts personify the days of the week.[83] This other case in which the days are represented is nevertheless not an exact parallel to the unique depiction in Ts'alenjikha, where the seven days of the week are individually lined up within seven medallions and appear prominently on the north wall **[9, 17]**. Although the last three

80 Concerning her iconography: Spatharakis 1999, pp. 342–343, Tsamakda 2012, pp. 88–90.

81 *Hermeneia*, §169. Hetherington 1981, p. 63.

82 In the church of St Demetrianos in Dhali in Cyprus (1317), St Kyriaki is depicted on the south wall pillar [Fig. 15], on in the church of the Archangel Michael in Pedoulas in Cyprus (1414) on the north wall [Fig. 16]. Stylianou/Stylianou 1997, pp. 331–342, 425–427, Fig. 202.

83 Gabelić 1985, pp. 115–119. The first example dates from the twelfth century (Church of the Virgin near Kophinou), but the type was popular between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Thus, the portrait does not depict the historical image of St Kyriaki nor its symbolic substitute as a Christ's bride but is a pictorial interpretation of her name – Sunday – and the other days of the week.

[16] St Kyriaki, north wall, Church of the Archangel Michael in Pedoulas in Cyprus, 1414

medallions are all poorly preserved, it can be assumed that the female busts therein are likewise shown holding martyrs' crosses in their left hands while raising their right hands in speech.[84] One might consider the written source for this unique mise-en-scène in Ts'alenjikha to be the *Hexaemeron*, which is frequently reproduced in the Georgian manuscripts. Basil the Great's homilies on the *Hexaemeron* count among the most widely translated early Christian texts in general. The Georgian version exists in two recensions: an undated pre-Athonite version and that of George the Athonite, who adapted this earlier version with reference to the original Greek.[85] The unique treatment of this theme thus relates to a text that found great popularity, especially in Georgia – the text once again provoking a particular visual treatment only comprehensible in connection with that text.

84 The female saints in the medallions in the church of St Demetrianos in Dhali have also crosses in their hands [Fig. 15].

85 Abuladze 1964.

THE IMPACT OF RITUAL AND OF HISTORICAL CONTEXT ON THE PAINTINGS

A comparison of the Mest'ia icon to a mural representing, in the framework of a sacred space, the same subject matter has demonstrated their equivalent impact on the viewer. Provided that the viewer knows the relevant textual source, its resonance in the visual rendering is guaranteed. This experience is supplemented by the emotionality of the rendering, which invites an intimate interaction: the viewer finds details with which to personally identify and on which to meditate, including their hopes for intercession and salvation.

Research has long acknowledged the ways in which liturgical practices and religious disputes are reflected in the paintings of the churches.[86] The programme in Ts'alenjikha exemplifies how texts that were read during the liturgy in Georgia were visually transposed. Thus, a liturgical function can be ascribed to the special placement

86 Maguire 1994.

[17] The personification of the weekdays, Monday, and Tuesday, north wall, Church of the Saviour in Ts'alenjikha, 1384–1396

of Christ Anapeson in the apse of Georgian churches. In Ts'alenjikha, however, the Constantinopolitan artist of the apse paintings departed from this Georgian tradition and follows the premises as known from other Byzantine examples.

We nevertheless observe several ideological axes that transverse the interior of the church, linking its various elements. One axis pertains to the donor, Vameq I Dadiani, and his family, who are characterized as participants in the procession of the Great Entrance – the most important part of the liturgy – through their specific placement and mode of portrayal. In this way, the founder creates a place for himself in the liturgy and, accordingly, guarantees his own commemoration, while at the same time not relying upon propaganda. The significance here was twofold, highlighting Orthodoxy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the donor's military successes – both welcome messages in the difficult period of aggression by heretical forces. These meanings and references are ubiquitous, unfolding in an interwoven and multi-layered assemblage of images across the space.

Particularly noteworthy in Ts'alenjikha is the presence of images with a devotional character, that is, provoking the recitation of related texts and prayers and having a high interactional potential due to their strong emotionality and multivalence. They assume a function equivalent to that of private icons. Such murals were meant to be experienced as elements of a liturgical-collective space as well as distinctive visual foci for individual devotions. Their aim is to create a representation that embraces two types of narration, one verbal and the other visual, and affirms the legitimacy of the ritual act or the prayers in question. It is precisely this mimetic nature of images in the Georgian Church, their special equivalence with familiar prayers and liturgical texts, that explains the visual idiosyncrasies often observed in this context.

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APPROACHES TO SACRED SPACE(S) IN MEDIEVAL SUBCAUCASIAN CULTURES

Michele Bacci,
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