The Churches of Mtskheta: Acceptance and Rejection of Foreign Influence in the Church Architecture of Eastern Georgia

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The small town of Mtskheta, located near Tbilisi, the capital of the Republic of Georgia, is the seat of the Georgian Orthodox Church and is the heart of Christianity in the country. This town, one of the oldest in the nation, was once the capital and has been a key player throughout Georgia's tumultuous history, witnessing not only the nation's conversion to Christianity, but also the devastation of foreign invasions. It also contains three churches that are national symbols and represent the two major waves of church building in the seventh and eleventh centuries. Georgia is, above all, a Christian nation and religion is central to its national identity. This paper examines the interaction between incoming foreign cultures and deeply-rooted local traditions that have shaped art and architecture in Transcaucasia.[1]

Nestled among the Caucasus Mountains, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, present-day Georgia contains fewer than four million people and has its own unique alphabet and language as well as a long, complex history. In fact, historians cannot agree on how Georgia got its English exonym, because in the native tongue, *kartulad*, the country is called *Sakartvelo*, or "land of the *karvelians*."[2] They know that the name "*Sakartvelo*" first appeared in texts around 800 AD as another name for the eastern kingdom of Kartli in Transcaucasia. It then evolved to signify the unified eastern and western kingdoms in 1008.[3] Most scholars agree that the name "Georgia" did not stem from the nation's patron saint, George, as is commonly thought, but actually comes

[1] This research addresses the multitude of influences that have contributed to the development of Georgia's ecclesiastical architecture. While many sources are available in English, there is a wealth of research published exclusively in Russian and/or Georgian, which I was unable to include due to linguistic limitations. I understand that this restricts my discussion of scholarship on Georgian art and architecture, especially since it ignores a significant portion of the Georgian perspective. However, I have compiled a rich set of resources, which, along with my firsthand observation of Mtskheta's churches, have allowed me to analyze the development of church architecture in Eastern Georgia.

[2] Stephen H. Rapp, *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts* (Peeters Publishers, 2003), 419-423.

[3] Ibid.

from the Persian *gorj* and Arabic *korj*, which found their way into Western texts in a number of variations. Scholars are unsure why Persia assigned Georgia this name, but it is possibly derived from the Old Persian word *vrkān*, which means "land of the wolves," which is a fitting moniker for the abundant Transcaucasia's extensive wilderness.[4]

The region is also known for the richness of its ancient history, which has witnessed the rise and fall of civilizations for millennia. In fact, the nation is home to the earliest human remains found outside of Africa, uncovered in Dmanisi and dated at 1.8 million years old. Archaeologists also believe that it was likely the birthplace of viticulture.[5] Remains from the earliest ethnic groups in the region show signs of international relations, which resulted in the merging of incoming cultures with strongly-rooted local traditions.[6] This interaction between the native culture and the influence of foreign societies has shaped Georgia into the country it is today – one whose people are proud of their unique, rich heritage.

Central to this national identity is Christianity, which became the official state religion in the fourth century.[7] In the fifth century, the Georgian Orthodox Church became autocephalous, with its own patriarch in Mtskheta.[8] It was also in this century that the Georgian alphabet emerged, which facilitated the translation of the Bible into the vernacular and furthered the region's independence from its eager neighbors, Byzantium and Persia, who vied for control over the

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[4] Keith Hitchins, *Encyclopædia Iranica*, 5th ed., vol. X (Winona Lake, IN: Encyclopædia Iranica Foundation, 2012), s.v. "Georgia i. The Land and the People," 460.
[5] Mariam Didebulidze, D. G. Tumanishvili, and Nino Mataradze, *Ancient Georgian Art: From the Pre-Christian Period throughout the Eighteenth Century* (Tbilisi: Ministry of Culture, Monument Protection and Sport, 2008), 1.
[6] Elena Rova, "The Kura-Araxes Culture in the Shida Kartli Region of Georgia: An Overview," in *Paléorient* 40, no. 2 (2014): 48, accessed October 2017, doi:10.3406/paleo.2014.5635.
[7] Károly Gink and Erzsébet Csmegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples* (Budapest: Corvina, 1975), 15.
[8] Ibid.

region.[9] Even today, Georgia's national identity is rooted in the strength of its people's devotion as the basis of its independence. The flag is composed of five crosses and is an adaptation of a medieval crest from western Georgia.[10] In the 2002 census, 83.9 percent of the population identified as Orthodox Christians, and the people often turn first to the Church for guidance before the government, which is still searching for stability in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse and Georgia's newfound autonomy in 1991.[11]

Churches in Early Christian Transcaucasia demonstrate a variety of building solutions including both basilican and cruciform plans. The latter eventually dominated church building in Georgia, giving rise to sixth-century Jvari (Holy Cross) Church and the group of seventh-century churches it inspired (Fig. 1). Ecclesiastical architecture continued to develop in the following centuries, culminating in the grander, more complex churches of the eleventh century, such as Svetitskhoveli and Samtavro (Fig. 2-3). These structures represent the relationship between Georgia's local artistic traditions and the influence of the Byzantine and Persian empires. These outside forces are expressed in both the composition and the decoration of churches in a way that adapted certain elements to serve local needs and practices. These dynamics reached a crescendo in Georgia's Golden Age during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in which the region was finally united as one independent nation. The country's prosperity encouraged the arts to flourish and this period is still celebrated in the art and architecture of the nation today.

Why focus on Mtskheta? This town is not only the seat of the Georgian Orthodox Church but is also integral to the nation's identity. In this way, it has been both a source of national power

[9] Ibid.
[10] Silvia Serrano, "The Georgian Church," in *Russian Politics and Law* 52, no. 4 (August 2014): 75, accessed October 2017, doi:10.2753/rup1061-1940520404.
[11] Ibid., 78.

and the center of foreign control. This makes it a fitting case study for the adaptation and rejection of foreign influence in Georgian church architecture. Though Georgia resisted cultural domination, it has been undeniably shaped by its cultural exchanges with its eastern and western neighbors.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Two Bronze Age civilizations inhabited the Caucasus mountain range and the surrounding region. First was the Shulaveri-Shomu from about 6000 to 4000 BC, followed by the Kura-Araxes from roughly 4000 to 2000 BC. Archaeological evidence of these cultures reveals strong local traditions, continuous from the Shulaveri-Shomu to the Kura-Araxes, as well as some indications of international trade.[12] This trend continues throughout Georgia's history and is particularly visible in its art, in which the emphasis is often placed on preserving and honoring age-old traditions rather than reinventing or rejecting precedents. I argue that this is a result of the nation's near-constant struggle against foreign aggression, which resulted in a tenacious fight to maintain cultural as well as political independence. The present-day Republic of Georgia is composed of four native ethnic groups, which emerged in the region around 2000 BC. They comprise the Svans of the north-western mountains, the Megrels and Chans in western Georgia, and the Karts in the east.[13] Around 1200 BC, the four proto-Georgia tribes banded together into two tribal unions, which gave rise to the eastern and western kingdoms of Kartli (Iberia in Greek) and Egrisi (Colchis in Greek), respectively, by the sixth and fifth centuries BC (Fig. 4).[14] Egrisi, which bordered the Black Sea, is featured in the Greek legend of Jason and the Argonauts as the home of Princess

[12] Rova, "The Kura-Araxes Culture in the Shida Kartli Region of Georgia: An Overview," 48.
[13] Levan Chilashvili and Nodar Lomouri, "A Brief History of Georgia," in *National Treasures of Georgia*, ed. Ori Z. Soltes (London: Philip Wilson, 1999): 30.
[14] Chilashvili and Lomouri, "A Brief History of Georgia," 30. This refers to the tribal unions Diaokhi, or Daiaeni, and Kolkha, or Kulka, which became Kartli and Egrisi, respectively.

Medea and the Golden Fleece.[15] The Caucasus Mountains also appear in Greek mythology as the location of Prometheus's eternal punishment, whereby he was chained to a rock to have his liver eaten daily by an eagle.[16] Thus, the civilizations of Transcaucasia were clearly known by their western neighbors. Furthermore, this region also hosted the Transcaucasian sea-trade route, stretching from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea via the Pazisi-Rioni and Kura-Mtkvari rivers, thereby linking the Hellenic world with the Near East and India. These interactions in Antiquity demonstrate Egrisi and Kartli's international contacts that laid the foundation for further cultural exchanges between Transcaucasia and its neighbors. In 63 BC, Egrisi was conquered by the Roman Empire, which was subsequently succeeded by the Byzantine Empire. Yet the influx of Hellenic culture was not able to uproot the deeply ingrained traditions of western Transcaucasia.[17] Although, overall, Georgia does not display significant Hellenic influence, archaeological evidence reveals undeniable Roman presence in the region, to be discussed below.

The most important event in shaping Georgia's national identity is arguably the conversion of Kartli to Christianity in 337 AD. The religion was not new to Transcaucasia, since the apostles St. Andrew and St. Simon the Canaanite allegedly preached in Transcaucasia during the first century.[18] Furthermore, archaeological remains in the Nastakisi Valley reveal first- or second-century churches integrated with residential buildings, which was common in early Christian communities.[19] Before the rise of Christianity in Transcaucasia, Zoroastrianism and the cult of

[15] Gink and Csmegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 15.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 12.
[18] Didebulidze, Tumanishvili, and Mataraże, *Ancient Georgian Art: From the Pre-Christian Period throughout the Eighteenth Century*, 3.
[19] Anania Japaridze, Mamuka Matsaberidze, Bakar Matsaberidze, and Marina Samkharadze, *A Short History of the Georgian Church* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2014), 17.
[19] Ibid., 13.

Mithras prevailed.[20] These beliefs, though officially rejected by the Church, were not completely driven out of local traditions and pagan motifs even appear in Christian art and on church façades.[21] It is furthermore likely that Georgia's ecclesiastical architecture was greatly informed by pagan temples adapted for use as the first churches.[22] Early in the fourth century, St. Nino of Cappadocia, known as the Illuminator of Georgia, arrived in the region, where she traveled around preaching Christ's faith, and ultimately convinced King Mirian III (r. 284-361) and his wife to be baptized. Thus, Christianity was declared the state religion and a mass baptism took place at the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers in present-day Mtskheta, then the capital of Kartli.[23] King Mirian III then had two small basilicas constructed nearby where present-day Svetitskhoveli and Samtavro are located. The *catholicos*, or head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, first resided at Svetitskhoveli, though later relocated to Samtavro in the fifth century.[24]

Although St. Nino is credited with the nation's conversion to Christianity, there were other factors at play as well. She certainly influenced King Mirian's decision and did much to standardize worship in Transcaucasia, but it is probable that Kartli's widespread conversion also went smoothly because of Christianity's established presence there and its promotion by the ruler. In addition, Kartli's adoption of Christianity also indicated a desire for closer ties with the west

[20] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers, and Temples*, 12.
[21] Ibid., 67.
[22] Arthur Upham Pope, *Persian Architecture: The Triumph of Form and Color* (New York: G. Braziller, 1965), 71. Pope remarks on the similarity in Persia between Zoroastrian temples and early Sassanid churches (third to fourth centuries). The temples' central plan of a square surmounted by a dome was remarkably similar to the cross-in-square plans of Sassanid churches and the structures were used interchangeably during this transitional time.
[23] Didebulidze, Tumanishvili, and Mataraże, *Ancient Georgian Art: From the Pre-Christian Period throughout the Eighteenth Century*, 3.
[24] Gia Chanishvili, Samtavro Tsminda Ninos Dedata Monasteri, (Tbilisi: Samtavro Tsminda Ninos Dedata Monasteri, 2008): 28.

and the opportunity for independence in the face of the Persian threat.[25] This is one of many instances in which religion was used as a political tool. For example, Kartli used Byzantium as a Christian ally after its conversion, but when Constantinople became too overbearing, the nation looked to its Persian neighbors for aid. Persia, in turn, was eager to support Kartli's resistance to Byzantine control.[26]

Though it spread to Egrisi at the same time it did Kartli, Christianity was not the official state religion of the western kingdom until the ruler Tsate was baptized in Constantinople in 523.[27] However, the excavation of some of the oldest known churches in Georgia along the coast of the Black Sea attests that the religion was widely practiced in the region before the sixth century.[28] Their shared religion subsequently tied the eastern and western kingdoms together and became the basis for a majority of political and foreign policy decisions. From this point on, the strength and independence of the Transcaucasian nations stemmed from their religious unity and conviction. The emergence in the fifth century of the Georgian alphabet, unlike any other, had major religious ramifications as well.[29] The Bible was soon translated into the vernacular language, further tying Egrisi and Kartli together culturally and distancing them from Byzantium and Persia.[30]

Though Kartli converted to Christianity in part to gain Byzantium as an ally, Sassanid Persia did not cease to threaten the nation in the fourth and fifth centuries. King Vakhtang Gorgasali (r. c. 447-522) made significant headway in Kartli's fight for liberation toward the end

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[25] Lomouri, "The History of Georgian-Byzantine Relations," 183.
[26] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples*, 15.
[27] Ibid.
[28] L. G. Krushkova, "The Spread of Christianity in the Black Sea Littoral (Written and Archaeological Sources," in *AWE* 6 (2007): 181-182. Accessed December 2017, doi: 10.2143/AWE.6.0.2022799.
[29] Serrano, "The Georgian Church," 75.
[30] Ibid.

of the fifth century, but was ultimately defeated and killed.[31] Though he failed to achieve political independence from Persia, Vakhtang Gorgasali's reign saw significant progress for the Georgian Orthodox Church, which became autocephalous with its own *catholicos*, no longer subservient to the Byzantine patriarch. However, at this time the church in western Georgia remained under the control of Constantinople. [32]

Sassanid Persia further asserted its authority in the 520s when it abolished kingship in Kartli, fully absorbing it as a province. This century was equally difficult for Egrisi, which was divided by Byzantium into two parts, Lazika and the Abkhazian Principality, ruled by Byzantine governors.[33] Despite these hardships, Georgian culture continued to flourish. The earliest known work of Georgian literature, the hagiographic novel *The Martyrdom of St. Shushanik*, came out of this period, as well as architectural developments that will be discussed below.[34] Transcaucasia's thriving culture could not, however, hold back new, Muslim conquerors in the seventh century, who spread into Kartli to replace the Sassanid Persians they had conquered. Though the Umayyad and subsequent Abbasid caliphates governed Kartli for four centuries, the nation never converted to Islam, nor did it cease to produce Christian art and architecture. If anything, these foreign oppressors served to further cement Christianity into the fabric of Georgia's national identity. The Muslims were also unable to fully conquer Kartli, as they could not dominate the communities in its remote mountainous regions.[35] The schism between the Georgian and Armenian Orthodox churches in the seventh century is also noteworthy because it demonstrates the depth of religious conviction in Transcaucasia and the confident assertions of independence by both Georgia and

[31] Chilashvili and Lomouri, "A Brief History of Georgia," 31.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 32.
[34] Ibid., 33.
[35] Ibid.

Armenia. These two cultures are inextricably intertwined through their shared regional history as neighbors, but are distinctly different in significant details of their languages, doctrine, and art.[36]

By the late eighth century, western Transcaucasia (then the kingdom of Abkhazia rather than Egrisi) was united under Leo II (r. 767-812), the self-proclaimed King of Abkhazia. In the ninth century, the Abkhazeti kingdom also split from the Byzantine church and subordinated itself to the *catholicos* in Kartli's capital, Mtskheta, thus officially uniting the eastern and western churches.[37] The ninth and tenth centuries brought Kartli and Abkhazeti increasingly closer to unification, drawn together by their shared culture and common enemies to the east and west. Finally, the nation now known as Georgia was formed in 1008 by the political unification of its various parts under King Bagrat III (r. 978-1014), the Unifier, of the Bagrationi dynasty. His descendent King David IV (r. 1089-1125), the Builder, accomplished considerable internal reforms and greatly strengthened the vulnerable fledgling nation. These include laying the foundations for a standing army, bringing both the nobles and the church under the dominion of the throne, and promoting the arts.[38] In 1122, he freed Tbilisi after four hundred years of Persian rule and made it the capital of the country, though nearby Mtskheta remained the seat of religious power.[39] This solidified Georgia's independence and began the nation's century-long Golden Age, during which the economy and the arts prospered, facilitating social, literary, architectural, and philosophical developments. At this point, Georgia stretched from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, encompassing parts of present-day Armenia and Azerbaijan as well.[40] The nation then became

[36] Cyril Toumanoff, "Caucasia and Byzantine Studies," in *Traditio* 12 (1956): 418, accessed October 2017, doi:10.1017/s0362152900007777.
[37] Chilashvili and Lomouri, "A Brief History of Georgia," 33.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Japaridze, *A Short History of the Georgian Church*, 42.
[40] Chilashvili and Lomouri, "A Brief History of Georgia," 33.

the Christian frontier during the Crusades. It was later invaded by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, facing yet again foreign domination, but nevertheless retaining its unique cultural identity.[41]

GEORGIA'S ARTISTIC HERITAGE

The pivotal role that tradition has played in Georgia's cultural heritage is evident in its visual arts. There is a continuity even today between ancient art forms and modern ones. Constant references to the past are especially clear in the nation's ecclesiastical architecture, which continues building patterns begun a millennium ago. For example, Sameba (Holy Trinity) Cathedral in Tbilisi, constructed between 1995 and 2004, is distinctly similar to eleventh-century churches such as Svetitskhoveli and Samtavro in Mtskheta (Fig. 5). This attests the Georgians' deep-rooted respect for their heritage. Art and architecture in Georgia certainly show growth from one period to the next, but not in the aggressive way that asserts the supposed superiority of one style over that of the preceding one. I argue that Transcaucasian art's strong sense of continuity is an effect of the near-constant menace presented by foreign invaders.[42] There has never been a point in the nation's history that it was not threatened by its neighbors, and even today Russia continues to exert pressure on its former Soviet Union Republic.[43] This resulted in the need to band together in

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[41] Ibid., 34.

[42] Ibid., 34-35. Following the Mongol conquest of Georgia during the later Middle Ages, the nation retained varying levels of autonomy. In 1801, Georgian territories began to be gradually absorbed into the Tsarist Russian Empire, and after a few years of independence following the Bolshevik Revolution, the nation became a Union Republic until it declared its independence in 1991.

[43] "2008 Georgia Russia Conflict Fast Facts." CNN. March 26, 2017. Accessed December 2017. http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/13/world/europe/2008-georgia-russia-conflict/index.html. Russia continues to encroach on Georgian land, supporting the autonomy of its breakaway provinces of South Ossetia (declared independence 1991) and Abkhazia (declared independence 1992), which culminated in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. The border between the two nations continues to change as Russian forces move their fences ever-southward overnight, resulting in Georgians waking up one day in "Russia."

solidarity in the face of various threats, such as the Byzantine Empire and Persia, which, as we have seen, vied for control of the region. As the Georgians were so busy fighting foreign aggressors, they did not have the luxury to question their own identity and experiment in the same way that artists in stable civilizations did. This constant fight against foreign oppression reinforced national pride and led to strong artistic traditions that have endured for millennia.

Georgia's unique position at a geographic and cultural crossroads consequently raises the question as to which traditions are indigenous to the region and which were introduced by other cultures. Only in studying this issue of adaptation versus rejection in the visual arts can one fully understand the complex heritage of Transcaucasia and its relationship with its neighbors. Prehistoric evidence of international trade indicates that this phenomenon is as old as civilization in the region itself. For instance, Bronze Age pottery belonging to the Kura-Araxes culture reveals that local ceramics traditions prevailed, with selective adaptation of foreign techniques.[44] This is indicative of the strong sense of identity that seems to have taken root in the region early on. Furthermore, architecture and metalworking were also established art forms in Transcaucasia by the Early Bronze Age, as demonstrated by the jewelry found in many burials (Fig. 6). Contact between subsequent civilizations in the region and their neighbors to the east and west is not only documented, but also visible in the arts.[45]

Large-scale three-dimensional sculpture was not widely produced throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The plastic arts consisted primarily of functional objects, such as pottery and metal jewelry, rather than purely decorative figural statues.[46] Sculpture was most often utilized as

[44] Rova, "Kura-Araxes Culture," 48. The Kura-Araxes culture extended somewhat further south and west than Kartli, but Rova's paper focuses on the region that is now central Georgia, just west of Mtskheta.
[45] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 13.
[46] Didebulidze, Tumanishvili, and Mataraże, *Ancient Georgian Art*, 5.

a decorative element in the form of applied reliefs. For instance, the Early Christian stone crosses throughout Transcaucasia incorporate carvings of biblical scenes on each side, illustrating the contemporary perception of Christianity in the region as well as local artistic traditions.[47] The division of imagery across the various planes of the cross is akin to that of a triptych. In addition, the imagery is frontal and linear, with a bold and unified precision that differs from the more stylized relief carvings in Byzantium at the same time.[48]

The most prolific use of applied reliefs, however, was as architectural ornamentation. In domestic buildings, these were concentrated on the inside, as in the *darbazi*-roofed homes of Chazhashi, discussed below, whereas religious buildings usually incorporated relief carvings on their façades.[49] Early churches did not include ornamental relief as much as their medieval successors, but some examples of fifth- and sixth-century carvings are preserved on the façades of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (saved and reused in the 11th-century structure) and the church at Jvari Monastery.[50] Motifs carried over from pagan practices as well as stylized donor portraits often appeared in façade reliefs.[51] Medieval churches later incorporated geometric and vegetal patterns borrowed from Persian reliefs around doors and windows. Sculpture's subordination to architecture developed in accordance with pre-Christian traditions, but likely endured after the conversion to Christianity due to three-dimensional sculpture's association with idolatry.[52]

Although sculpture was considered secondary to architecture and never came to dominate church façades in the same way as it did its western Romanesque and Gothic counterparts, that

[47] Matchabeli, "Georgia and the Byzantine World," 191.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Judy, "The Village of Chazhashi: Georgian Svannish Vernacular Architecture," 51.
[50] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 68.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Didebulidze, Tumanishvili, and Mataraże, *Ancient Georgian Art* 23.

does not mean that its decorative use was unimportant. On the contrary, the aesthetic choice to prioritize structural form over detail lent Georgian buildings a clarity and harmony that might have otherwise been lost in elaborately ornamented structures. This design choice also reflects the solidity and solemnity of the Georgian culture, which has weathered storms that have forged it into an even stronger society.

This paper uses architecture to address the issue of adaptation and rejection of foreign influence, because buildings, especially churches, are a public and conspicuous statement of people's perception of the world around them. Buildings are the places in which people live, work, and worship, and in this way reflect how they interpret their environment. Georgia's many churches not only record the evolution of the nation's faith since its conversion to Christianity, they also illuminate its pre-Christian beliefs and how Transcaucasia made the transition from paganism to Christianity.

Above all, Georgian architecture demonstrates a blend of local traditions with eastern and western elements. This is arguably most visible in the nation's many churches. Scattered throughout the country and built over more than 1500 years, Georgia's numerous religious complexes are visible proof of the unifying power that religion had over the many disparate regions, as well as the perseverance of local traditions. In addition to reflecting the nation's political, religious, and artistic history, ecclesiastical architecture also illuminates Georgia's social history and strong community values. The most obvious recurring architectural elements throughout Georgian structures are the preferences for centrally planned layouts and domes. For example, homes utilizing the *darbazi* roof format were widespread throughout Georgia and other areas of Asia Minor. This roof style comprises a dome formed by overlapping beams of decreasing length, with an oculus at the apex for ventilation of the hearth below (Fig. 7). According to a study

of the medieval village Chazhashi in Svaneti, a mountainous region in former Egrisi, the central post that supported these domes also symbolized the strength of the family unit, which was integral for survival in the unforgiving climate of remote areas such as this. [53] Vitruvius even included the *darbazi* in his first-century compendium, *De architectura*.[54] The layout beneath the *darbazi* reflects its Bronze Age precursors, which were near-circular homes also arranged around a central hearth.[55] The central location of the hearth further correlates with the strength of the family unit, as it was also the seat of domestic rituals.[56] This building type flourished throughout Georgia for centuries and was still commonly used for large family homes through the 18th century.[57]

Indeed, the *darbazi* format has never truly faded from Transcaucasian architecture. Giorgi Chubinashvili claims that Georgian churches developed out of the *darbazi* format of centrally planned, domed homes.[58] This was certainly one factor that likely contributed to the preference for centralized churches in Transcaucasia, but it is not the only one. Pre-Christian temples in this region also likely favored central plans, making the transition to centrally planned churches logical. Before the advent of Christianity, Georgia shared the same dominant religion as Persia, Zoroastrianism, which was commonly practiced in a square temple topped by a dome on squinches (Fig. 8).[59] The link between Zoroastrian temples and early Georgian churches also emphasizes the ancient relationship between Transcaucasia and Persia. This pagan format may have informed

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[53] Mary Kay Judy, "The Village of Chazhashi: Georgian Svannish Vernacular Architecture," in *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology* 31, no 2/3 (2000): 50-51, accessed October 2017, doi:10.2307/1504660.
[54] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 13.
[55] Rova, "Kura-Araxes Culture," 56.
[56] Ibid., 55.
[57] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 33.
[58] Giorgi N. Chubinashvili, "On the Initial Forms of Georgian Churches," in *Ancient Christianity in the Caucasus*, ed. Tamila Mgaloblishvili (Surrey, England: Curzon, 1998), 190.
[59] Pope, *Persian Architecture*, 65.

eastern Europe's preference for centralized churches in addition to the influence of Hellenistic *martyria*. As a result, early medieval churches in Georgia, such as Jvari, are remarkably similar to their pagan forebears. The persistence of local pagan traditions in carving indicates that these beliefs were not completely abandoned when the nation converted to Christianity, thus suggesting that other artistic practices, such as architecture, also include elements carried over from their pagan predecessors.[60] Early Christians adapted the space because it already suited their basic needs for worship, then modified the existing format rather than inventing a new one.[61] Thus, even though Kartli converted to Christianity in the fourth century in part to align itself with Byzantium, it remained culturally tied to Persia by shared traits such as this. Consequently, it was likely the presence of both the *darbazi* and centrally planned temples that informed the ultimate rejection of the basilica in Transcaucasia.

The building technique used for the majority of churches in Transcaucasia is also noteworthy. Most of the extant buildings are faced with ashlar, or finely dressed stones, which was an old architectural tradition in Transcaucasia.[62] This distinguishes Georgian churches from those found in the Byzantine Empire, as well as structures in Persia. Local styles varied throughout Constantinople's vast holdings and many provided alternatives to ashlar masonry. Many Byzantine churches, especially those in Greece, were constructed out of uncut rubble with courses of bricks interspersed throughout.[63] In addition, cut stone masonry was rare in Persia, where architects

[60] Judy, "The Village of Chazhashi: Georgian Svannish Vernacular Architecture," 51.
[61] Ibid., 71.
[62] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 68.
[63] Panayotis L. Vocotopoulos, "Church Architecture in Greece during the Middle Byzantine Period," in *Perceptions of Byzantium and its Neighbors: 843-1261*, ed. Olenka Z. Pevny (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 157.

preferred to use bricks and rubble covered by stucco.[64] This is not to say that ashlar masonry was exclusive to Transcaucasia, rather that it was used exclusively there. This building technique is yet another example of the strength of local traditions, which were sometimes altered to accommodate new practices, such as façade ornamentation, while at other times they staunchly followed their established principles.

GEORGIAN CHURCHES BEFORE 1000

Christian liturgy was still evolving in Transcaucasia in the centuries following its conversion, which contributed to the variety of building solutions found throughout the region and allowed local architects to find their own solutions in accordance with the established, independent architectural tradition there.[65] From an early point, churches in Transcaucasia favored a centralized layout. The cruciform plan was not invented in Georgia, but was altered to suit local needs and gave rise to a wave of church building following this template.[66] This format in Georgia was informed by a variety of sources, including cross-domed Byzantine churches and centralized Zoroastrian temples. Although some basilicas were built in Transcaucasia and even survive today, that floorplan was ultimately superseded by the inscribed-cross plan. In fact, a number of the basilicas that were constructed in Transcaucasia, such as the fifth-century Svetitskhoveli, were rebuilt around the eleventh century according to a centralized layout.[67] The rarity of the basilica format throughout the region is another testament to the strength of established traditions there. Many scholars agree that the basilica design was introduced by the clergy in Early Christian

[64] Pope, *Persian Architecture*, 75. The brick was invented in Persia around 8000 BC and was the dominant building material thereafter.
[65] Chubinashvili, "On the Initial Forms of Georgian Churches," 192.
[66] Vocotopoulos, "Church Architecture in Greece during the Middle Byzantine Period," 156. The cruciform plan developed for churches is believed to have originated in the West (possibly Greece) and was commonly used for early Byzantine churches in addition to the basilica.
[67] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 67.

Georgia, who wanted to model the churches after ones in the Holy Land. However, the descriptions they apparently provided were either too vague or too radical for the Georgian architects and stonemasons who had not seen the models themselves.[68] The early choice of central cruciform churches was a natural progression from the domestic *darbazi*, firmly ingrained in Transcaucasia by the Early Christian period, and was additionally influenced by Zoroastrian temples and perhaps some awareness of Hellenistic *martyria*.[69]

The Holy Cross plan, with its compact symmetry first maturely articulated at Jvari Monastery, became dominant in the seventh century.[70] The Great Church of Jvari, the archetype of a group of seventh-century churches built throughout Kartli and Egrisi, exemplifies the harmonious proportions sought in this period. The small yet imposing building is situated on the rocky mountaintop overlooking Mtskheta and the convergence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers. Constructed between 586 and 604 under the direction of *erismtavari* (literally "head of the nation," commonly translated as "duke") Stepanoz I, it replaced a small inscribed-cross church erected in the mid-sixth century on the same site. This immensely holy site, still a prominent pilgrimage destination, is revered because it houses a reliquary with a piece of the wooden cross that St. Nino herself placed atop the mountain when she preached there in the fourth century. In its most basic form, the church does not deviate too far from that of a traditional Zoroastrian temple, yet this plan expresses the contemporary Christian concepts of the universe.[71] Thus, Jvari demonstrates one phase in the evolution from pagan temples to the extended cruciform churches that persist in

[68] Chubinashvili, "On the Initial Forms of Georgian Churches," 190.
[69] Ibid., 193.
[70] Gia Marsagishvili, "A Brief Introduction to Georgian Architecture," in *National Treasures of Georgia*, ed. Ori Z. Soltes (London: Philip Wilson, 1999): 99. The church at Ninotsminda was an integral step in the development of the division of space characteristic of the Holy Cross churches.
[71] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 49.

Georgia to this day. The church combines a cross and octagon in its layout, which symbolize the Crucifixion and Resurrection, respectively (Fig. 9).[72] The three elevations of the church also represent the Christian organization of the universe – the vaulted dome is closest to the "heavenly sphere" and the cross arms of the next level constitute the transition to the lowest "earthly" sphere, which is occupied by the clergy and the laypeople.[73] The Holy Cross type developed at Jvari became the universally accepted format for pilgrimage churches until the innovations of the 11th century. The shape of the dome, which gradually became conical on the outside rather than rounded, points yet again to the influence of the *darbazi*, as well as Zoroastrian temples, on Georgian ecclesiastical architecture.[74] Jvari's low, solid composition, and domed squinches attest to Georgia and Persia's shared pre-Christian religious history and thus architectural tradition. The solution of the Holy Cross church format merged the dome on squinches, so pervasive in Near Eastern architecture, with the Christian cruciform layout, forming the basis for the next major shift in religious architecture in Transcaucasia.

Jvari is noteworthy moreover for the reliefs found on its exterior. Not only do they reveal local artistic practices, they also provide useful historical context. The east façade features the donor portraits, which include *erismtavari* Stepanoz I and the *hypatoi* (consuls) Demetre and Adarnase, who were also relatives of Stepanoz I (Fig. 10-11).[75] The prolific ramifications of Jvari underscore the unified spirit of Kartli's people despite their Muslim overlords. The nation's seventh-century church building campaign asserted the religious and ideological independence of Transcaucasia, all the more important in the face of foreign domination. The presence of these

[72] Ibid., 49.
[73] Ibid., 48.
[74] The dome of Jvari is not present in all Holy Cross churches, some of which had already adopted the conically capped drum.
[75] Matchabeli, "Georgia and the Byzantine World," 190.

donor portraits reinforces the strong tradition of royal patronage of the church throughout Transcaucasian history, which lingers even today in the government's close ties to the church.[76] The two entities relied on one another for support, which was crucial for weathering the region's turbulent leadership changes.[77] In addition to the figural reliefs on Jvari's façade are some vegetal carvings bordering the doorways and windows. These illustrate Kartli's relationship to Persia and foreshadow further developments in façade decoration that will become fully realized in eleventh-century churches.

The exterior ornamentation of churches in Transcaucasia was further developed in the seventh century at Tsromi (Fig. 12). Though the church's structural composition is atypical, it introduced a new decorative scheme, the blind arcade, in order to achieve unity throughout the east façade. This allowed buildings to maintain their external symmetry, while indicating the internal division of space, such as apses on the eastern end. The blind arcade subsequently became a hallmark of Georgian churches, in many cases continuing on all sides.[78]

In addition to providing valuable insight into the politics at play in Kartli at the end of the sixth century, Jvari must be considered for its far-reaching ramifications throughout subsequent church construction in Transcaucasia. This church's crucial role in architectural development cannot be ignored. The concepts developed in Jvari inspired the designs of its seventh-century cousins, which include the churches located at Ateni, Dzveli-Shuamta, and Martvili (Fig. 13-14). It is important to acknowledge the similarities between churches in Georgia and Armenia at this time, but significant differences in the decorative elements of those edifices and liturgical practices

[76] Serrano, "The Georgian Church," 76.
[77] Antony Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998): 10-11.
[78] Marsagishvili, "A Brief Introduction to Georgian Architecture," 99.

then separate those structures in Armenia from the Georgian Holy Cross type.[79] Thus, the completion of Jvari established the centrally focused church as the standard in Georgia, which has persisted since, though the buildings of the following period are distinctive for their elaboration on this scheme. The widespread use of this format also exemplifies the increasingly unified mindset throughout Transcaucasia, embodied in standardized church building and liturgical practices.[80]

MEDIEVAL CHURCHES AFTER 1000

While the Holy Cross format prevailed for a few hundred years, medieval Georgian architects soon expanded on the plan in order to construct ever-grander churches to the glory of God. The churches built throughout the Middle Ages grew from the compact, symmetrical structures that seemed to merge with their mountainous surroundings to elongated crosses – still centralized – that moved the focus to the vertical axis. Unfortunately, recurring foreign aggression in the seventh and eighth centuries caused yet more political problems for Georgia. As mentioned above, the Muslim conquest of Kartli did not stymie church building in Transcaucasia but instead caused it to flourish, as, threatened by Islam, Georgians clung more closely than ever to their Christian faith.[81] For example, Khvtaeba (Holy Spirit) Church at Ikalto Monastery in eastern Kartli was built during the eighth and ninth centuries (Fig. 15), and exemplifies the transition from the Holy Cross churches to the elongated but still centralized cross plan eventually typified by Svetitskhoveli Cathedral. One can easily see the vertical growth and multiplication of hierarchic levels in Khvtaeba, as well as the proliferation of decoration across the façade. It is no coincidence that this spreading ornamentation coincided with stronger eastern influences on Georgia. The

[79] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples*, 49.
[80] Ibid., 49.
[81] Ibid., 19.

patterns carved in relief around the windows of Khvtaeba are the precursors to the more intricate geometric and vegetal designs that decorate Svetitskhoveli and Samtavro cathedrals in Mtskheta (Fig. 16). This growing use of relief is quite similar to that of Persian and Arabic architecture, as demonstrated by the eighth-century Umayyad palace, Qasr Mshatta (Fig 17).

The unification of Georgia in 1008 under Bagrat III, the Unifier, of the Bagrationi dynasty put Georgia on the path towards its Golden Age in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Bagrat III was proclaimed King of Kartli and Abkhazia in that year, thus putting an end to centuries of fighting and uniting the entire region of present-day Georgia. At the dawn of the eleventh century, old styles continued to influence religious architecture. The standard eleventh-century composition simplified some of the preceding architectural experimentation and led to more careful selection of decorative elements.[82] Churches from this period are characterized by an elaboration on the hierarchic levels seen at Jvari, which became more distinct and incorporated more intermediate levels. Furthermore, the dome remained centered over the middle of the composition, though further elevated on a taller drum. Likewise, the arms of the cross extended, sometimes with the east-west axis somewhat longer than the north-south one (as the plan and sections in Figs. 18 & 19 indicate).

Churches throughout the newly strengthened Georgia soon found a balance between the compact symmetry and tripartite elevation of the Holy Cross churches and dynamism of their successors. The common solution is visible in the great cathedral of Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta. Inspired by the church at Kutaisi (c. 1003), the seat of the Bagratid dynasty (Fig. 20), Svetitskhoveli (1010-1029) is considered one of the greatest cathedrals ever constructed in

[82] Ibid., 15.

Georgia.[83] The site of Svetitskhoveli was sacred even in the pre-Christian era, when a holy grove of trees grew there. It was then the location of a royal palace complex before the first stone church was constructed there in the fifth century.[84] Christianity further enhanced the site's significance. Not only was it near the spot of the merging Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers where King Mirian III and his wife Queen Nana were baptized, it is also believed by Georgians to be the resting place of Christ's mantle. According to Georgian hagiography, a Georgian Jew from Mtskheta named Elias was in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified. He then bought Jesus's robe from a Roman soldier and brought it back to Mtskheta. When his sister Sidonia touched it, she was overcome with such emotion that she died clutching it. No one could remove it from her grasp, and therefore she was buried with it and a great cedar tree grew from her grave. Then, when St. Nino ordered the tree to be chopped down for the construction of the first Georgian church, it was made into seven columns for the foundation. Yet one of these pillars was supposedly magical and out flowed a sacred liquid capable of curing any disease. Consequently, the church built on that spot was named after the "life-giving" (*tskhoveli* in Georgian) "pillar" (*sveti* in Georgian).[85]

Archaeological excavations during a 20th-century restoration project uncovered the foundation of the fifth-century basilica, parts of which are still visible in the present structure. This footprint also indicates that it was similar to the contemporary Sion basilica in Bolinsk, demonstrating the presence of this plan in Georgia even if it did not gain widespread popularity.[86] The basilica was replaced by the extant cathedral, which is considered by many to be the epitome of a medieval Georgian church and like Jvari became the archetype for religious architecture

[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 24. A wooden church occupied the site before the construction of the fifth-century stone one.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.

throughout the nation. Svetitskhoveli represents the culmination of four centuries' experimentation with the Holy Cross church type. Although when viewed from above the format may appear similar to that of a basilica, it is set apart by the prevailing symmetry carried over from the seventh-century cruciform churches. The focus is always drawn back to the center, both by the balanced arms of the cross and the resulting position of the dome on squinches over the nave rather than the altar.[87] The dome on squinches format was prolific in structures from the Near East, but was succeeded by pendentives in the Byzantine Empire by this time.[88] Furthermore, the main body of the structure, which excludes the narthex, preserves these equal proportions, conveying a solidity and stability similar to that of Jvari's compact symmetry. Despite the interior features of the floorplan that introduce asymmetry, such as the two eastern chapels, the building's exterior maintains a uniform consistency that belies the organization of the space within. Only the blind arcade on the eastern façade indicates the presence of the three apses. Inside, the nave is flanked by side aisles, which along with the dome and apse feature some surviving frescoes that were uncovered in the twentieth century under layers of paint. The earliest, the Christ Pantocrator in the apse, dates to the eleventh century (Fig. 21). This follows standard Eastern Orthodox iconography, with Christ seated on a bejeweled golden throne, holding an open Bible and gesturing with his right hand. The thirteenth-century program located near the altar on the south wall is something of an anomaly (Fig. 22). It includes a Christ in Majesty surrounded by angels and zodiac signs, various narratives featuring sea monsters and sailors, and along the bottom are the eleventh-century nobility and clergy celebrating the construction of the cathedral.[89] The fresco in the restored dome dates to the seventeenth or eighteenth century and is only in fragments but perhaps once depicted a Christ in

[87] Ibid., 25. The dome was rebuilt in the seventeenth century according to the original.
[88] Matchabeli, "Georgia and the Byzantine World," 190.
[89] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 67.

Majesty encircled by a ring of Greek text. (Fig, 23). These wall paintings share a common focus on the cosmic world more than on the physical one, which is typical of Eastern Orthodox painting.[90] The scenes are characterized by stylized, haloed figures, a shallow plane in front of a solid background, and decorative patterns throughout.

Another noteworthy feature inside the cathedral is the Holy Sepulcher chapel set up in the south-western aisle during the fifteenth century (Fig. 24). This domed, detached cross martyry was constructed to mark the place where Sidonia was buried with Christ's robe. The structure's exterior features geometric fretwork around the door and windows, while the interior is decorated with frescoes of scenes from Jesus's life.[91] The chapel underscores Svetitskhoveli's importance in the Georgian Church, as well as throughout the Christian world.

The details included on the façades of eleventh-century churches consist of geometric and vegetal reliefs that border the windows and doors, and create patterns on the exterior walls that mimic the shapes of arched windows (Fig. 25). The façade of the extant Svetitskhoveli is something of an anomaly in that it also incorporates sculpture from the fifth-century basilica that it replaced, such as the bulls' heads underneath the window on the east façade.[92] Some of the surviving eleventh-century reliefs have been moved from their original positions, as noted by George Patashuri.[93] He also points out the polychromatic use of stone in such decorative features

[90] Ibid., 68
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., 67
[93] George Patashuri, "Reconstruction of the 11th-century Exterior Decoration System of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta," in *1st International Symposium of Georgian Culture: Georgian Art in the Context of European and Asian Cultures*, proceedings (Tbilisi, Georgia: Georgian Arts & Culture Center, 2009): 256.

as the "fan" pattern on the east façade, which utilizes alternating light green and darker red stones for a more dynamic effect that was not attempted in subsequent restorations.[94]

In addition, Georgia's eleventh-century churches continued to include inscriptions and donor portraits in a similar style to their predecessors, underscoring the persisting alliance between Georgia's religious and political leaders. Svetitskhoveli features two inscriptions and a relief related to the architect, Arsukidze, on the north and east façades. The inscriptions record the dates of construction and his name, as well as a reference to his death before the cathedral's completion.[95] The carving depicts a hand, which legend claims refers to an event in which Arsukidze's right hand was cut off, though whether this was because of a noble's jealousy or a desire to ensure the church's singularity is unclear (Fig. 26).[96] Whatever the case, Svetitskhoveli does represent the close ties between church and state that are inherent in the nation's history. This is demonstrated both by the interior frescoes depicting the clergy and nobility, and the situation of the original church within King Mirian III's royal complex.[97] Although it is impossible to claim that there were never tensions between the two spheres of power, it is reasonable to posit that the constantly threatened state of the nation forced Georgia's political and religious leaders to maintain a close relationship in order to regain and uphold Georgia's unified freedom.[98]

Although the Church of the Transfiguration at Samtavro Convent shares many commonalities with its neighbor and contemporary, Svetitskhoveli, but its façade provides a more complete look at eleventh-century relief carving. Like Svetitskhoveli, Samtavro replaced an earlier

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[94] Ibid.
[95] Gink and Csemegi-Tompos, *Georgia: Treasures, Towers and Temples,* 25.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., 24.
[98] This research does not devote an extensive focus to the politics of Georgia, but I have not discovered major disputes between religious and political leaders, as is more prevalent in western European history.

basilica.[99] As mentioned above, this site became the seat of the Georgian *catholicos* in the fifth century, and indeed "Samtavro" means "the place of the head of state." Furthermore, King Mirian III and Queen Nana are buried there, as well as some famous religious figures and writers.[100] In the first half of the eleventh century, this smaller structure was replaced by the present one, which incorporated the foundation and stones from the original one. Samtavro slightly modified the layout of Svetitskhoveli with fewer intermediate levels of elevation. This church represents the full maturation of the concepts developed in religious architecture between the seventh and eleventh centuries through its simplified composition and carefully selected decoration.[101]

Here, the external emphasis is on the sculptural decoration, which clearly demonstrates ties to Persia. Persian architecture had long utilized extensive geometric patterns carved into its façades and introduced intricate vegetal reliefs as early as the sixth century.[102] The Persians primarily concentrated this decoration around doors and windows, though their Arabic conquerors allowed decoration to dominate the façades of both religious and secular structures, such as in Qasr Mshatta.[103] The similarities between Near Eastern reliefs and those on eleventh-century Georgian churches is remarkable, but not very surprising, given the long relationship between Transcaucasia and Persia. As with other architectural elements that Georgian architects and masons adopted for their churches, such as the centralized format with a dome on squinches, the nation's trade with and political subjugation to its eastern neighbors undoubtedly introduced Persian, and subsequently Arabic, artistic traditions. This is not to say that sculptural relief such as this was entirely foreign to Georgia, rather that it informed the development of local traditions. For instance,

[99] Chanishvili, *Samtavro Tsminda Ninos Dedata Monaste*ri, 210.
[100] Ibid., 19.
[101] Didebulidze, Tumanishvili, and Mataraże, *Ancient Georgian Art*, 15.
[102] Pope, *Persian Architecture* 65.
[103] Ibid., 70.

Transcaucasia's long history of sculpture as architectural ornamentation is visible inside the *darbazi* homes of Chazhashi.[104] The selective use of decoration on Samtavro's façade is a blend of local traditions and eastern styles, whereby the choice of grapevines as the border around windows and doors of many Georgian churches points to the nation's ancient history of viticulture, as the fruit is yet another national symbol.[105]

Svetitskhoveli and Samtavro represent the dominant church style throughout Georgia in the eleventh century and later. This is visible in the structure and decoration of their contemporaries, which include Nikortsminda (1010-1014), Samtavisi (1030), and Alaverdi (early 11th century), and later churches like the twelfth-century Gelati Monastery (begun 1106) and the twenty-first-century Sameba Cathedral in Tbilisi (Fig. 27-29). As a whole, Georgian ecclesiastical architecture has not experienced the waves of sweeping innovation that western European churches have. For instance, the differences between Early Christian and Gothic churches in western Europe, not to mention subsequent Renaissance structures, are much more radical than those observed over the course of 1700 years of Christianity in Georgia. Georgia's culture, and its contemporary churches in particular, still reflect a medieval aesthetic in a way that most western cultures do not. The Middle Ages in Georgia led to a flourishing of the arts that culminated in the nation's Golden Age. Among the characteristics of ecclesiastical architecture at this time are a refined hierarchy of elevations, from the "heavenly" dome to the "earthly" chambers that accommodated the clergy and laypeople, as well as the selective incorporation of decorative relief around doorways and windows. Furthermore, this era reflects the changing foreign influence on the nation. Although Georgia fought against Persian, then Arab Muslim, aggression for centuries,

[104] Judy, "The Village of Chazhashi: Georgian Svannish Vernacular Architecture," 51. See page
[105] Didebulidze, Tumanishvili, and Mataraże, *Ancient Georgian Art,* 1.

the inclusion of eastern elements in Georgian art speaks to the reality of a shared culture that transcended politics. Thus, the presence of eastern enemies in Georgia's cities and towns, along with its religious ties to Constantinople, resulted in a unique blending of eastern and western cultures with indigenous traditions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Mtskheta's churches demonstrate the fusion of local traditions with Byzantine and Persian elements, resulting in distinctive structures that assert their independence from those external forces. The town's strategic location as the former capital of Kartli and the seat of the Georgian Orthodox Church has made it a crossroads of international influences on the politics and culture of the nation. This is reflected in the town's three major churches, which demonstrate overt aesthetic ties to Persia and a slightly subtler artistic connection to Byzantium. While Constantinople strongly influenced the Georgian Orthodox Church's doctrine and thus ecclesiastical art, Persian architecture informed both the composition and façade decoration of Georgian churches. These elements are articulated in the major waves of medieval church building in Georgia during the seventh and eleventh centuries.

Jvari, with its compact symmetry and bold division of space, served as the catalyst for the Holy Cross churches of the seventh century. It both established the Georgian cruciform church plan and introduced some characteristic façade decoration that inspired further experimentation in the following centuries. Most evident here are the influence of the *darbazi* used in homes throughout Transcaucasia and familiarity with Zoroastrian temples. Both structures are reflected in the church's domed composition. The reliefs of Jvari also reinforced the inextricable relationship between the secular and religious leaders of the nation, which is still central to Georgia's national identity.

Svetitskhoveli illustrates the extended cross plan and more dramatic elevation of the eleventh century that has become a hallmark of ecclesiastical architecture in Georgia to this day. The dynamism of this building indicates the strength of the newly unified nation at that time and a celebration of Georgia's independence. Yet the more elaborate ornamentation of the façade emphasizes the continuation of the nation's ancient ties to Persia. These reliefs exemplify the implementation of foreign techniques in a uniquely Georgian way that does not mimic, but borrows. Various features throughout the church also attest to the prevalence of restoration throughout the country's history, necessitated by both foreign invasions and nature (i.e., earthquakes). Likewise, Samtavro demonstrates the refined execution of those developments seen in Svetitskhoveli, most notably the exterior decoration. The edited use of the elaborate vegetal and geometric patterns as borders around doors and windows distinguishes it from many Arabic sources of inspiration and the use of specifically grape vines brands it as "Georgian."

Despite the inundation of foreign cultures throughout its history, Georgia demonstrates a lengthy tradition of adaptation of, rather than submission to, external influences. The nation's strong ties to both its eastern and western neighbors is plainly visible throughout the visual arts in Georgian. However, what makes Georgia noteworthy is the way in which it adapted these foreign elements to suit its own purposes, thereby forging a distinct culture entirely its own. Mtskheta, as the seat of the Georgian Orthodox Church, holds power not only over the nation's historical identity, but also over the creation of its future one. It is impossible to predict the future, but it will be interesting to see the way in which this ancient town responds to the foreign influences that it faces in the twenty-first century and beyond, and their resulting effect.

Fig. 1 Jvari Church, Mtskheta, c. 586-604.

Fig. 2 Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, Mtskheta, 1010-1029.

Fig. 3 Samtavro Transfiguration Cathedral, Mtskheta, first half of 11th century.

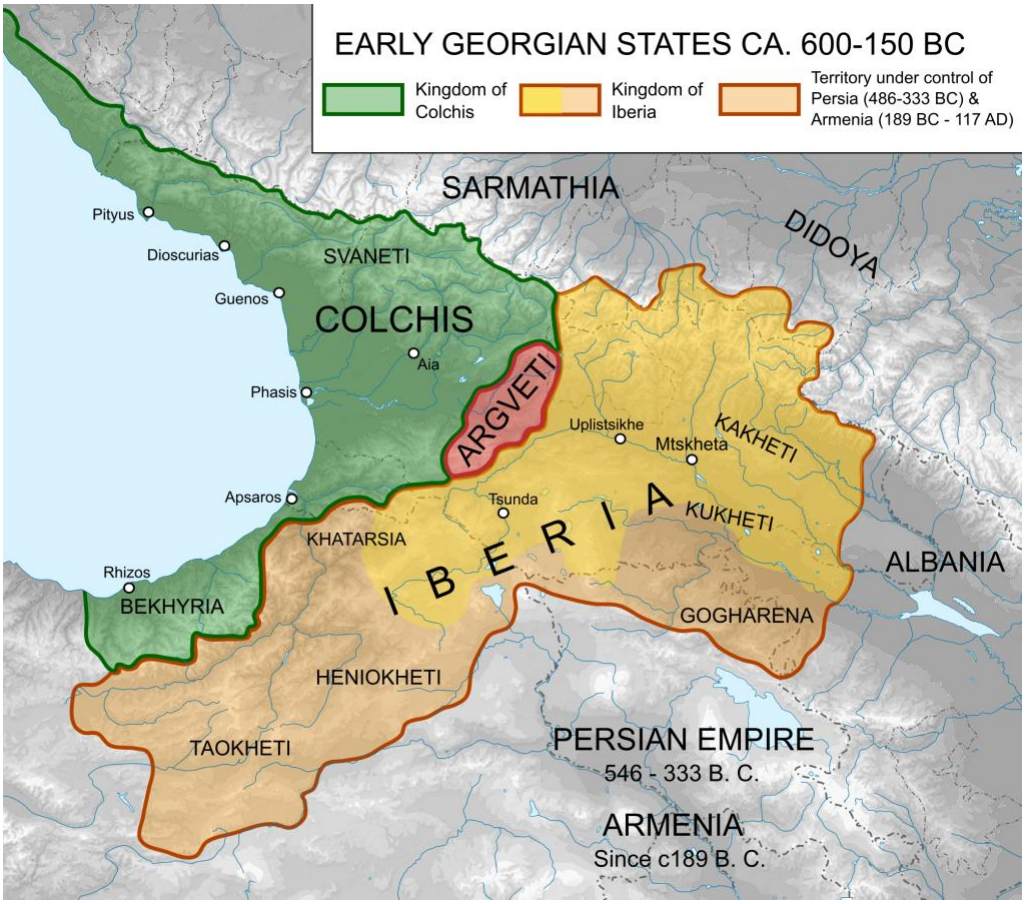

Fig. 4 Early Georgian States, c. 600-150 BC.

Fig. 5 Sameba Cathedral, Tbilisi, 1995-2004.

Fig. 6 Gold Necklace, Kurgans Trialeti, early second millennium BC.

Fig. 7 Reconstruction of traditional *darbazi* home, Tbilisi Ethnographic Museum, 20th century.

Fig. 8 Bazeh Khur Fire Temple, Khorasan, Parthan era (247 BC - 224 AD)

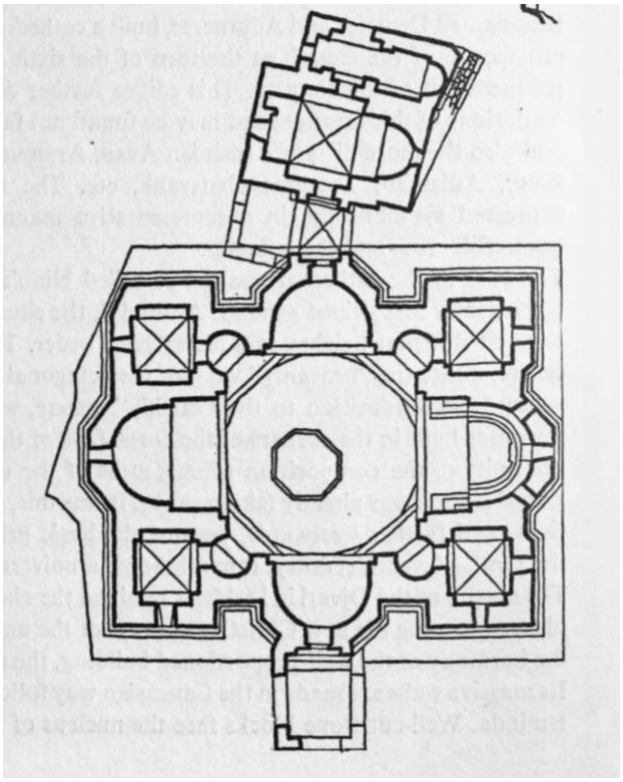

Fig. 9 Floorplan of Jvari, Mtskheta, c. 586-604.

Fig. 10 Erismtavari Stepanoz I kneeling before Christ on Jvari façade, Mtskheta, c. 586-604.

Fig. 11 Hypatoi Adarnase kneeling before Christ, Jvari façade, Mtskheta, c. 586-604.

Fig. 12 Tsromi Church, Tsromi, 626-634.

Fig. 13 Sion Church, Ateni, early seventh century.

Fig. 14 Dzveli-Shuamta Church, near Telavi, seventh century.

Fig. 15 Khvtaeba Church, Ikalto Monastery, eighth-ninth centuries.

Fig. 16 Samtavro façade detail, first half of 11th century.

Fig. 17 Qasr Mshatta, Jordan (façade now in Berlin), eighth century.

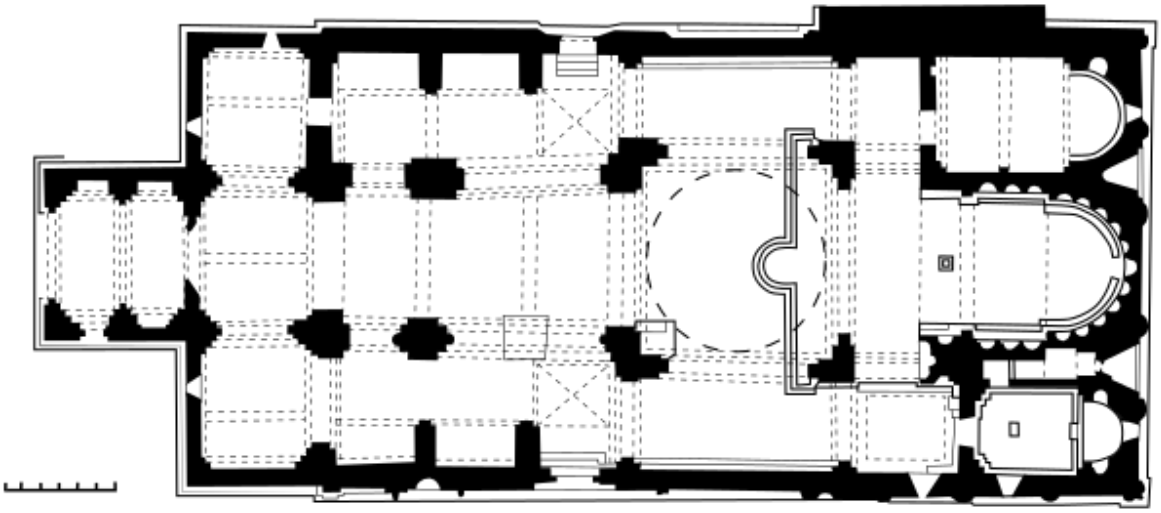

Fig. 18 Floorplan of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, Mtskheta, 1011-1029.

Fig. 19 Cross-section of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral, Mtskheta, 1011-1029.

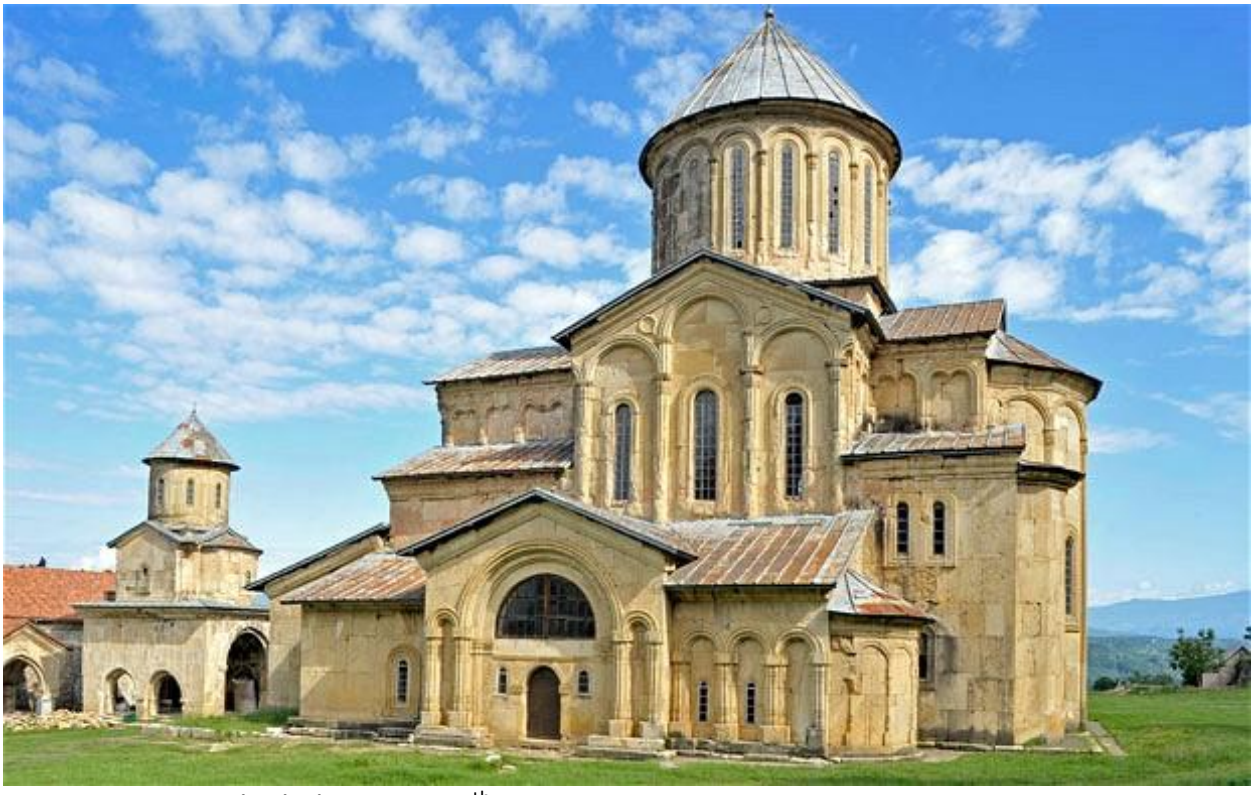

Fig. 20 Bagrati Cathedral, Kutaisi, 11th century.

Fig. 21 Christ Pantocrator, Svetitskhoveli apse, Mtskheta, 1010-1029.

Fig. 22 Fresco, Svetitskhoveli south wall, 13th century.

Fig. 23 Dome fresco, Svetitskhoveli, c. 18th-19th centuries.

Fig. 24 Holy Sepulcher Chapel, Svetitskhoveli, 15th century.

Fig. 25 East façade, Svetitskhoveli, 1010-1029.

Fig. 26 Relief of Arsukidze's hand on north façade, Svetitskhoveli, 1010-1029.

Fig. 27 Nikortsminda Cathedral, Nikortsminda, 1010-1014.

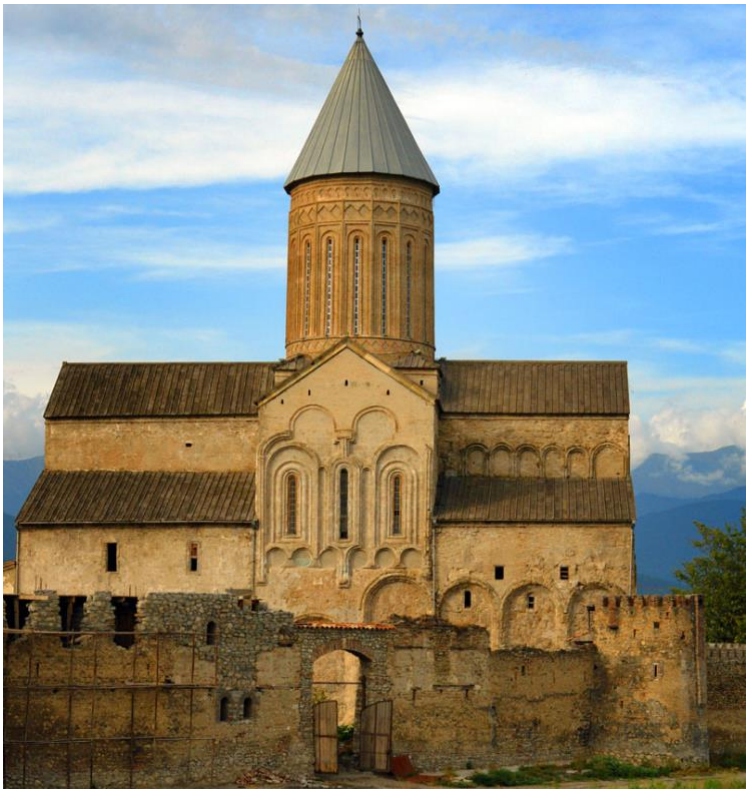

Fig. 28 Alaverdi Cathedral, near Akhmeta, 11th century.

Fig. 29 Church of the Virgin, Gelati Monastery, 1106.

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