

Georgia and the Outside World: An Introduction

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The essays collected in the present book discuss the first results of an ongoing debate, originating in an international workshop held at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, on May 22nd–23rd, 2017 and organized by the chair of Medieval Art with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation. In a first instance, this event was conceived as an opportunity to enable Georgian scholars to exchange ideas with Western European colleagues, make a *status quaestionis* on the different approaches to the art-historical analysis of Medieval Georgian heritage, and work out new research perspectives. The workshop proved to be especially successful, since it gave birth to long discussions, where many questions were raised as to the historical, geographic, and cultural boundaries of Georgia, the country's and its different regions' connections with other cultures, and the multiple ways in which such issues have been tackled in present and past historiography.

It must be stressed that the Fribourg workshop was itself the outcome of an increased scholarly interest in the role played by Georgia as an important agent in the wider network of cross-cultural exchange in the Middle Ages. For many years, the country's artistic space was almost fully neglected or deliberately ignored by Western European Medievalists and even Byzantinists, the most notable exception being, at the turn of the 19th century, the much controversial figure of Joseph Strzygowski, whose scientific itinerary and its impact on later historiography was the object of a conference organized by Ivan Foletti in Brno in February 2017.¹ In the Soviet period, knowledge of the Southern Caucasian region was rather limited outside the Union's boundaries, even if some of Giorgi Chubinashvili and Shalwa Amiranashvili's publications were also made available in French, English, Italian, or German translations.² In general, only occasionally efforts were made in Western Europe to introduce Georgia into wider narratives of Medieval arts: mention should be made of the exhibition 'Schatzkammer Georgien' organized in Vienna by Werner Seibt in 1981,³ the two conferences

1 'Orient oder Rom? Prehistory, History and Reception of a Historiographical Myth' (1880–1930), Brno, 6–8 February 2017; cf. <http://www.earlymedievalstudies.com/konference.html> [17.05.2018].

2 See, e.g., Chubinashvili, Giorgi, *Die georgische Goldschmiedekunst des 8.–18. Jahrhunderts. Auswahl und Erläuterung der Tafeln sowie Abriss der Geschichte*, Tbilisi 1957; Chubinashvili, Giorgi, *I monumenti del tipo Gvari. Ricerca sull'architettura Georgiana*, Milan 1974; Amiranashvili, Shalwa, *Georgian Metalwork from Antiquity to the 18th Century*, London 1971.

3 *Schatzkammer Georgien. Mittelalterliche Kunst aus dem Staatlichen Kunstmuseum Tbilisi*, Ed. Seibt, Werner, Wien 1981.

organized in Italy in the 1970s and early 1980s,⁴ and Kurt Weitzmann's general book 'The Icon', where a chapter was devoted to Georgian materials with the involvement of Georgian specialists.⁵ Other scholars, such as Tania Velmans and Adriano Alpagò Novello were pioneering in fostering knowledge of many otherwise neglected materials during the 1980s.⁶

It can be said, anyway, that an increased interest did not take place in Western Europe before the country's independence in 1991, and more intensely after the year 2000. Mention should be made of Annegret Plontke-Lüning's long-standing research on late antique and early medieval architecture,⁷ Antony Eastmond's work on political imagery, the investigations on the arts of Medieval Svaneti fostered since the 1990s by Brigitta Schrader,⁸ the photographic documentation collected by Gundolf Brockhaus,⁹ and the more recent studies on sculpture and architectural décors by Nina Iamanidze, a young researcher trained in France.¹⁰ Collaborations with Georgian scholars were especially intensified from the year 2000 onwards: the journal *Iconographica* has been committed to publishing articles in English by prominent researchers (such as Zaza Skhirt'ladze, Mariam Didebulidze, Nina Ch'ich'inadze, and others),¹¹ a general survey of Medieval Georgian painting was

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- 4 Atti del primo simposio internazionale sull'arte Georgiana, Bergamo 28–30 giugno 1974, Ed. Ieni, Giulio, Milan 1977; L'arte georgiana dal IX al XIV secolo. Atti del terzo simposio internazionale sull'arte Georgiana, 14–18 ottobre 1980, Ed. Calò Mariani, Maria Stella, Galatina 1986.
 - 5 Alibegashvili, Gaiane and Volskaya, Aneli, Les icônes de la Géorgie, in: Les icônes, Eds. Weitzmann, Kurt; Alibegashvili, Gaiane; Volskaya, Aneli et alii, Paris 1982, pp. 85–128.
 - 6 Velmans, Tania, L'art médiéval de l'Orient chrétien, Recueil d'études, Sofia 2002; Velmans, Tania and Alpagò Novello, Adriano, L'arte della Georgia. Affreschi e architetture, Milan 1996.
 - 7 Plontke-Lüning, Annegret, Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien. Die Entwicklung des christlichen Sakralbaus in Lazika, Iberien, Armenien, Albanien und den Grenzregionen vom 4. bis zum 7. Jh. (Veröffentlichungen zur Byzanzforschung 13), Wien 2007.
 - 8 Georgien im Spiegel seiner Kultur und Geschichte. Zweites deutsch-georgisches Symposium, 9. bis 11. Mai 1997, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Vortragstexte, Ed. Schrader, Brigitta, Berlin 1998; Schatzkammer Swanetien. Das Restaurierungsprogramm von 'Stichting Horizon' 1997–2006 in Georgien, Eds. Schrader, Brigitta and Rolf, Mahlow 2009; Schrader, Brigitta, Peripherie im historischen Kontext. Die Entwicklung Swanetiens zur Schatzkammer Georgiens von den Anfängen bis in das 17. Jahrhundert, Tbilisi 2016.
 - 9 Brockhaus, Gundolf, Georgian Architecture. A Documented Photo-Archival Collection on Microfiche with 47.000 Photographs for the Study of Early and Late Medieval Christian Architectural Arts of Georgia and its Historical Area of Settlement, Leiden 1994–2010.
 - 10 Iamanidze, Nina, Les installations liturgiques sculptées des églises de Géorgie (VI^e–XIII^e siècles), Turnhout 2010; Iamanidze, Nina, Saints cavaliers. Culte et images en Géorgie aux IV^e–XI^e siècles, Wiesbaden 2016.
 - 11 Gedevanishvili, Ekaterine, The Representation of the Holy Face in Georgian Medieval Art, in: *Iconographica* 5 (2006), pp. 11–31; K'vach'at'adze, Ekaterine, 'Chained' Lions on the Porch of Kolagiri Fortress. Towards an Interpretation of 'Chained' Lions in Medieval Georgian Sculpture, in: *Iconographica* 6 (2007), pp. 78–84; Gedevanishvili, Ekaterine, Some Thoughts on the Depiction of the Ecumenical Councils at Gelati, in: *Iconographica* 6 (2007), pp. 54–60; Didebulidze, Mariam, St. Nicholas in the 13th Century Mural Painting of

the outcome of a joint Georgian-Greek research group,¹² and important scientific trips, summer schools and conferences were organized between 2006 and 2011 by the Kunsthistorisches Institut-Max-Planck-Gesellschaft of Florence in synergy with the Chubinashvili Institut of Art History in Tbilisi.¹³

The study trips were the occasion for the making of a very systematic photographic campaign which is of extremely high value for anybody interested in medieval arts.¹⁴ The Institute itself is planning to organize more scientific events on Georgian topics, where the outcomes of the work done will be communicated and commented on. On its turn, the Centre for Early Medieval Studies at Brno University, Czech Republic, is fostering new research on Georgian materials and the first outcome of this commitment was the recent volume 'The Medieval South Caucasus', published in 2016 by Ivan Foletti and Erik Thunø.¹⁵ The Fribourg workshop can therefore be viewed as a first step in this international academic effort to bring Georgia closer to the scientific interest of historians of both Western and Byzantine arts, and it results from an uninterrupted collaboration with the abovementioned institutions. Furthermore, its goal was not only scientific, but also educational. Georgia had already been the focus of a *Blockkurs* held by Nina Ch'ich'inadze in 2015, which provided a general introduction to the arts of the country in the medieval period. The workshop itself was intended to serve also as a preparatory didactic event for the study trip to Eastern and Western Georgia organized in late August to early September 2017 by the chair of medieval art in collaboration with the Chubinashvili Institute in Tbilisi, the University of Basel, and the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa.

Kintsvisi Church, Georgia, in: *Iconographica* 6 (2007), pp. 61–77; K'vach'at'adze, Ekaterine, The Relief Icon of St. Nicholas in the South Façade of the Virgin Church in Ananuri, in: *Iconographica* 7 (2008), pp. 107–112; Eastmond, Antony and Skhirt'ladze, Zaza, Udabno Monastery in Georgia. Innovation, Conservation and the Reinterpretation of Medieval Art, in: *Iconographica* 7 (2008), pp. 23–43; Ch'ich'inadze, Nina, Icons as Relics. Re-Interpreting Repoussé Revetments of Devotional Images in Medieval Georgia, in: *Iconographica* 10–11 (2011–2012), pp. 47–56; Berelashvili, Eka, New Materials Concerning the History of 17th Century Georgian Ecclesiastical Embroidery, in: *Iconographica* 10–11 (2011–2012), pp. 124–134; Ch'ich'inadze, Nina, Perception of Icon in Bertubani Royal Panel, in: *Iconographica* 15 (2016), pp. 83–92; Kevkhishvili, Marina, Il ciclo agiografico di San Giorgio a Nakipari, in: *Iconographica* 15 (2016), pp. 46–56.

- 12 Medieval Painting in Georgia. Local Stylistic Expression and Participation to Byzantine Oecumenicity, Eds. Panagiotidi-Kesisoglou, Maria and Kalopissi-Verti, Sofia, Athens 2014.
- 13 Cf. Kunsthistorisches Institut. Forschungsbericht November 2008–Juli 2012, Eds. Wolf, Gerhard and Nova, Alessandro, Florence 2012, p. 68.
- 14 A selection of images from the 2006, 2007, 2011 campaigns is available in the online-exhibition 'Georgien' at the KHI website <http://photothek.khi.fi.it/documents/oau/00000137> [17.05.2018]. The photographer of these campaigns, Dror Maayan, has published two nice portfolios: Maayan, Dror, Across Georgia. A Photographic Survey, Tbilisi 2007; Maayan, Dror, Georgia. A Journey through the Ages, Raanana 2009.
- 15 The Medieval South Caucasus. Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia, Eds. Foletti, Ivan and Thunø, Erik (Convivium Supplementum 2016), Brno 2016.

The Fribourg workshop was successful in setting the stage for an unconstrained exchange of ideas and a likewise unconditioned manifestation of basically different, if not opposite, viewpoints. In this sense, it resulted in an unprecedented occasion to reflect on the biases of the art-historical discipline, its traditional and modern research methods, and, also, on the different ways in which our scientific approaches may be affected not only by either internationally acknowledged scholarly trends or local traditions, but also by our tendency to use them as a key to understand not only past societies, but also, if only indirectly or unconsciously, the world we are part of. In the wake of post-colonial studies and in response to present-day notions of globalisation and multiculturalism, many investigators of medieval arts, especially in Western Europe and the United States, tend to lay emphasis on the permeability of cultures to other artistic traditions and are irresistibly fascinated by the ways in which forms and objects associated with other people's visual and/or spatial conventions come to be transmitted, appropriated, modified, and transformed in different contexts. This tendency finds expression especially in the relatively new field of Mediterranean Studies and is still seeking a more precise definition of its methods of inquiry and terminology: whereas many contributions have been focused on the circulation of artworks and artists (in keeping with the notion of 'artistic transfer', that is especially emphasized in French scholarship),¹⁶ the investigation of other, less mechanic forms of artistic interaction (e.g. those taking place in complex, multi-layered and multi-ethnic societies or those stemming from a shared, cross-cultural interest in the political or religious aura associated with some object-types and media) is still at its initial stage of development and lacks a proper theoretical frame, given that such notions as 'acculturation', 'transfer', 'multiculturalism', 'hybridity', 'entanglement', 'interchange', or 'transculturality' are insufficient to thoroughly describe the complex dynamics underlying the multifarious forms of human interaction which happen to be materialized in objects and images.¹⁷

Such developments are sometimes regarded with suspicion by other scholars, who choose to remain loyal to a description of arts as both mirroring and directly stemming from a human group's cultural distinctiveness, associated with its settling in a specific geographic area, its allegiance to a religious tradition, and its shared language. This view does not refrain from stressing the important role played by cultural contacts with other human experiences, but generally it manifests anxieties as to the risk that art history may finally shift from a nationalistic

16 Les transferts artistiques dans l'Europe gothique. Repenser la circulation des artistes, des œuvres, des thèmes et des savoir-faire (XII^e-XVI^e siècle), Eds. Dubois, Jacques; Guillouët, Jean-Marie and Van den Bossche, Benoît, Paris 2014.

17 The most systematic attempts at defining this new field of investigation can be found in the overview by Baader, Hannah and Wolf, Gerhard, *Kunstgeschichte*, in: *Handbuch der Mediterranistik. Systematische Mittelmeerforschung und disziplinäre Zugänge*, Eds. Dabag, Mihran; Haller, Dieter; Jaspert, Nikolas et alii, Munich 2015, pp. 253–290, and the collective work *Transkulturelle Verflechtungen. Mediävistische Perspektiven*, Ed. Netzwerk Transkulturelle Verflechtungen, Göttingen 2016.

approach, inherited from 19th century scholarship, that described artistic cultures as homogeneous and mutually excluding phenomena, into an indiscriminate exaltation of hybridizations and *mélanges*, where any specificity ends by being denied or dissolved. While holding fast to more traditional paradigms, such scholars are defending the principle that the repertory of forms produced by specific human groups in specific historical and geographical contexts tend to stand out for some distinctive, characterizing features that are not necessarily encountered in other people's arts, even if they may, at least partially, originate from an exchange with other cultures.

Readers of this book will acknowledge that the here collected essays provide a wide range of different approaches shifting from an emphasis on cross-cultural interaction to recognition of Georgia's cultural and artistic distinctiveness, as is especially shown by Mariam Didebulidze's introductory article on the state of the field. Annegret Plontke-Lüning tackles the issue of the country's early history, when it was known as Iberia and its connection with nearby Armenian culture was especially strong. In a case study on Manglisi Cathedral, Thomas Kaffenberger investigates the ways in which motifs of different origins came to be appropriated and transformed in the formative phase of Georgian architecture, and the role played by donors in such dynamics. The 'personal agency' of individual donors in transmitting forms and ideas from and to the country is further explored in Zaza Skhirt'ladze's text, whereas Nina Ch'ich'inadze focusses on the patronage of Bagrat' III, the first king of unified Georgia, and his role as promoter of Christological piety via the making of prestigious icons. Manuela Studer-Karlen discusses the iconography of Old Testament prefigurations of the Mother of God in their relationship with, and distinctiveness from, contemporary Byzantine tradition. Finally, Ekaterine Gedevanishvili deals with the image of the country's most emblematic saint, the holy horseman George, and shows to what extent the latter's most widespread compositions can be deemed to have originated in Georgia, though as an outcome of constant dialogue with Byzantine and other Eastern Christian visual cultures.

In many respects, the methodological diversity reflected in such articles is largely a matter of emphasis, since all approaches seem to imply the same basic questions. In particular, the discourse on hybridity and *mélanges*, inasmuch as it focuses on artworks whose specific features are described as originating from the encounter of things associated with two or more distinctive human experiences, implicitly reaffirms the principle that, at least before mingling, cultures are basically coherent, self-aware and self-oriented phenomena. Not unlike the cultural homogeneity evoked by traditional approaches, hybridity tends to be described as inhering within particular styles, iconographies, objects or media, and as signalling a specific, possibly subversive way of marking difference. The issue has been especially debated in recent studies on the arts of colonial Spanish America, where emphasis was laid on the risk that our recognition of a composite or 'mixed' character may lead to an arbitrary separation of what we presently see as normative from what

looks unconventional or departing from presumptive norms.¹⁸ The problem is therefore not so much to emphasize mixes as opposed to allegedly homogeneous cultures, yet rather to acknowledge the extent to which, in past societies, forms, objects, and media came to be perceived as associated with specific traditions, and which materials and conventions, either locally originated or borrowed from other experiences, were occasionally or permanently viewed as shared indicators of a group's identity and self-awareness. It is not a matter of denying the very fact that human communities often tend to describe themselves as distinct from the rest of mankind in terms of kinship, religion, and language: both individual and collective identities are cultural constructs, often worked out in oppositional terms, and that particular form of social practice that we are accustomed to call 'art' can positively contribute to negotiate, assess, and modify its contours.

In this sense, it can be assumed that the study of Georgian, as in general of Medieval arts can take advantage from a non-prejudicial approach focusing on the examination of cultural processes and dynamics, rather than relying on a selective definition of what should be inherently 'indigenous' as opposed to what lays outside of the country's shifting boundaries, which are temporal, geographic, and conceptual at the same time. Many of the academic biases affecting the interpretation of Georgian materials are heirs to 19th century historiographic constructs whose impact and developments started being investigated only in recent times. Oddly enough, as postcolonial studies were basically concerned with overcoming the Eurocentric approach of Western European scholarship, not enough attention was laid on the ways in which the countries annexed to the Russian Empire came to be incorporated into both national and transnational narratives of art historical development. As Ivan Foletti has shown, the characterization of Georgia as a mere Byzantine province or periphery, stressed in particular by Nikodim Kondakov, went hand in hand with the emphasis on Moscow as heir to Constantinople and contributed to back Russian Imperial claims on political and cultural supremacy in the whole of the Subcaucasian space.¹⁹ Consequently, it would be too simplistic to dismiss Chubinashvili's and his school's revendication of the country's autonomous role in giving shape to local artistic traditions as an expression of Georgian chauvinism, given that it implied a well-grounded, in a sense 'post-colonial' or better 'anti-colonial' criticism of the imperialist connotations of previous Russian

18 Dean, Carolyn and Leibsohn, Dana, *Hybridity and Its Discontents*. Visual Culture in Colonial Spanish America, in: *Colonial Latin American Review* 12 (2003), pp. 5–35.

19 Foletti, Ivan, *The Russian View of a 'Peripheral' Region*. Nikodim P. Kondakov and the Southern Caucasus, in: *The Medieval South Caucasus. Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia*, Eds. Foletti, Ivan and Thunø, Erik (Convivium Supplementum 2016), Brno 2016, pp. 20–35. The historiographical developments of studies on the arts of Southern Caucasus were more recently investigated in a conference organized by Foletti: *Discovering the Southern Caucasus (1800–1930)*, Lausanne, 7th of November 2017 (<http://www.earlymedievalstudies.com/konference.html> [17.05.2018]).

scholarship, which was partly made possible by the Socialist revolution and the change of regime in 1917.²⁰

Since its pioneering phase, the art-historical discourse on this area of the world has faced the problem of how to apply a stylistic taxonomy to a region which, on account of its location on the geographic and cultural crossroads between the Roman, later Byzantine Christian and the Persian Zoroastrian, later Islamic worlds on the one side, as well as the Mediterranean Near East and the steppes of Northern Caucasus and Central Asia, was always open to many interactions with other cultures and was itself characterized by the presence of different communities, speaking a plurality of languages and practising various religious cults. The first answer consisted in reducing Georgia's cultural complexity to a substantial, if indistinct, conformity to a Byzantine or Byzantine-influenced set of forms, which seemed to be especially evident in connection with painting and admittedly much more problematic with reference to architecture, which stands out for autonomous features, though frequently encountered in the wider Subcaucasian region. It is therefore not surprising that the earliest attempts at defining Georgia's specificities concerned the taxonomy of historical buildings and were largely a consequence of Giorgi Chubinashvili's reaction to Josef Strzygowski's provocative thesis concerning the Armenian origins of all church types and décors in the whole area of Southern Caucasus, which was frequently appropriated and developed by Armenian art-historians.²¹ Scholars of both sides have since then been obsessed with locating in their own country the earliest structures which may unequivocally bear witness to the precedence of one or the other culture as the initiator of a local architectural tradition at the macroregional scale. More or less consciously, such an approach aimed, on the one hand, to stress the distinctiveness of local buildings vis-à-vis Byzantine tradition and, on the other hand, to assert the cultural primacy of one South Caucasian tradition over the other or the latter's derivation from the former. Relations were seen rather in terms of genetics, than of interaction, exchange, or transfer.

This obsession seems to surface again in our times, especially in contemporary Russian scholarship. In a recent, well-informed and accurate publication, Andrej Vinogradov and Denis Beleckij characterize the architectural foundations of the Kings of Abkhazia, in the 9th and 10th century, as directly stemming from Byzantine models of the Pontos and Trebizond area and as giving rise to a local tradition,

20 On the historiographical debate on Georgian architecture see Neubauer, Edith, *Zur Geschichte der Erforschung der mittelalterlichen Architektur Georgiens*, in: *Transkaukasiens mittelalterliche Kunst und die Romanik Europas*, Ed. Neubauer, Edith, Norderstedt 2007, pp. 13–38.

21 Maranci, Christina, *The Historiography of Armenian Architecture*. Josef Strzygowski, Austria and Armenia, in: *Revue des études arméniennes* 28 (2002), pp. 287–307. On Chubinashvili's reaction to Strzygowski's book see Lovino, Francesco, *Southern Caucasus in Perspective. The Scholarly Debate through the Pages of Seminarium Kondakovianum and Skythika (1927–1938)*, in: *The Medieval South Caucasus. Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia*, Eds. Foletti, Ivan and Thunø, Erik (*Convivium Supplementum* 2016), Brno 2016, pp. 36–51, here pp. 42–43).

which, “far from being peripheral, proves to be one of the most significant phenomena of Eastern Christian architecture in this period”.²² The distinctiveness of this ‘school’ is indicated, in their view, by the adoption of the inscribed-cross church type with cruciform pillars and by the use of some technical devices, such as stone walls, stepped buttresses, brick arches, and semi-open porches; after the accession of Bagrat’ III (978–1014) as the first king of a (partly) unified Georgia, such innovations were to exert an influence also onto buildings in Kartli and Kakheti. In so doing, the two authors assign a pivotal role to this area – which was *de facto* independent though formally subjected to Constantinople – in transmitting specific architectural forms from the Empire to the Southern Caucasian regions and overturn Chubinashvili and his school’s view of Abkhazian architecture as a direct offspring of Georgian tradition.²³

Methodologically, this quest for genetic primacy – *генетические связи*, *გენეტიკური კავშირები*, ‘genetic relations’, being an expression frequently used in Russian and Georgian scholarship to hint at derivative connections – proves to be misleading, since it tends to invest specific cultures with a sort of unnegotiable and inalienable copyright on distinctive sets of forms. In its effort to define what belongs exclusively to one community or another, this approach tends to play down the fact that analogous patterns came to be used indistinctly by different peoples, irrespective of whoever first made use of them, through gradual processes of adaptation, where various factors (political, religious, functional, social, economic, etc.) played a specific role. In this sense, it is worth mentioning Armen Kazaryan’s monumental investigation of 7th century architecture in the wider South Caucasian area, which stands out for its emphasis laid more on the ways in which forms came to be shared than on the latter’s remote origins in one or the other group’s artistic practice.²⁴

The basic question is, rather, on which grounds and for which specific purposes forms and objects happened to be viewed as worthy of imitation, reuse, and deliberate appropriation. With reference to mural or icon painting, scholars of different orientation basically agree that Byzantine tradition was constantly perceived as the most important source of inspiration, especially as regards its technical and stylistic aspects. The specificity of Georgian pictorial arts seems to lay rather in the distinctive ways in which programs were adapted to liturgical habits and spatial contexts which did not directly correspond to the situation in Constantinople or other centres of the Eastern Christian Empire: for example, a strong devotion for the

22 Vinogradov, Andrej and Beleckij, Denis, *Церковная архитектура Абхазии в эпоху Абхазского царства. Конец VIII–X в.* [The Church Architecture of Abkhazia in the Era of the Abkhazian Kingdom. End of the 8th–10th Century], Moscow 2015, p. 321.

23 Vinogradov and Beleckij 2015, p. 14, where Chubinashvili is deemed to have intentionally downplayed the connections of Abkhazia with the Pontos area and Byzantium in general.

24 Kazaryan, Armen, *Церковная архитектура стран Закавказья VII века. Формирование и развитие традиции* [Church Architecture of the Countries of Transcaucasia During the 7th Century. Formation and Development of Tradition], Moscow 2012; for a description and critical approach to traditional historiography cf. vol. I, pp. 40–79.

Holy Cross justifies the latter's display in the dome instead of Christ Pantokrator. When Greek immigrant artists, like Manuel Evgenikos in Ts'alenjikha between 1384 and 1396,²⁵ were asked to decorate a Georgian-rite church, they accordingly adapted their iconographic and compositional conventions to the needs of their local counterparts – the sponsors, as well as the clergy and the community the cycle was meant for – but were not asked to significantly alter the general stylistic appearance of their images. This indicates that Georgians acknowledged the religious authority the repertory of forms of Byzantine religious painting was commonly invested with by almost all Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities in Medieval times: in the case of mosaic, its perception as a specifically Constantinopolitan, imperial, and outstandingly luxurious way of honouring God is indicated by the qualification of this artistic medium in old sources as “pebble of Saint Sophia”.²⁶ The majestic church of the Byzantine capital and its legendary décors played such an impact on the imagination of Caucasian peoples, that the site is described in Ossetian folk religion – rooted in pre-Christian usages – as a sort of supernatural, godly place. So, in the collection of Nart sagas known as the ‘Book of Heroes’ made famous by Georges Dumézil, Saint Sophia is described as a “celestial sepulchre”, where, by God's will, spirits and geniuses transport the bodies of dead giant-heroes.²⁷

It is therefore beyond doubt that Byzantine painting was regarded as a normative set of forms which, to a higher or lesser degree, had to be used and exploited in the decoration of Georgian churches, in order to make them more beautiful, precious, and worship-inspiring. This became especially evident after the unification of Georgia, when the imitation of Constantinopolitan patterns of church décors contributed to emphasize the legitimacy of local power, not only on account of the shared perception of Byzantine forms as conveying authority, but also because Georgian rulership was formally acknowledged in its derivation from Imperial recognition: until David IV (1089–1125), sovereigns were namely bestowed with such titles as *kouropalates* or *sebastos*. With the decline of Byzantium in the late 12th and 13th century, it can be assumed that loyalty to Byzantine visual conventions could be fostered by the court as a strategy to assess the country's role as a defender and continuator of the latter's political experience and symbolic meaning. As Giorgi Ch'eishvili has shown, two different attitudes seem to coexist in Medieval Georgian perceptions of Byzantium: whereas nobody denied the latter's view as the cradle of Orthodoxy and a sort of second Holy Land, a model of power, and

25 For a detailed description of the murals, see Lortkipanidze, Inga and Janjalia, Mzia, Ts'alendjikha. Wall Paintings in the Saviour's Church, Tbilisi 2011. The basic study is Lortkipanidze, Inga, Роспись в Цаленджиха. Художник Кир Мануэл Евгеникос и его место в грузинской средневековой монументальной живописи [Painting in Tsalenjikha. The Artist Kir Manuel Eugenikos and his Place in the Georgian Medieval Monumental Painting], Tbilisi 1992. Cf. also Belting, Hans, Le peintre Manuel Eugenikos de Constantinople, en Géorgie, in: Cahiers archéologiques 28 (1979), pp. 103–114.

26 Khusk'ivadze, Leila, The Mosaic of Gelati, Tbilisi 2005, pp. 46–48.

27 Livre des héros, Ed. Dumézil, Georges, Paris 1965, pp. 234–235.

the source of all cultural achievement (to such an extent that the term *berdzenni*, 'wise people', was used to hint at the Greeks), it was also regarded as an alien, often threatening, and rival country.²⁸

As a matter of fact, décors standing out for their conformity to Byzantine standards and even to contemporary trends of the capital are basically to be found within foundations by kings or other important members of the court: most notably, 'Comnenian' forms can easily be detected in churches decorated on the initiative of Queen Tamar's milieu (such as Vardzia, Betania, Q'int's'visi, or Timotesubani). In later centuries, rulers made no less efforts in procuring the means to have their buildings decorated by masters working in the Greek way: in the case of Ts'alenjikh, we know that Evgenikos was engaged in Constantinople by two emissaries of the *mandaturtukhucesi* (a sort of Minister of the Interior) Vamek Dadiani. Still later, in the 16th century, artists from Mount Athos were active in the Kingdom of Kakheti and gave birth to a local declination of post-Byzantine pictorial arts. In the same period, other, mostly minor churches were decorated with painted programs standing out for the use of "an intensive expressive linearity and a decorative tone", stemming from a distinctive chromatic sensitivity.²⁹ This stylistic divide is frequently understood as bearing witness to the existence of a specifically indigenous way of painting as opposed to a more 'genuinely' Byzantine one, even if both were practiced in the same country and in the same times.³⁰ Nevertheless, it has been rightly stressed that similar distinctions could be applied to any other artistic context and did exist even within the boundaries of the Eastern Empire.³¹ Furthermore, the co-existence of distinctive forms, as it can be observed in other Near Eastern areas such as, e.g., the County of Tripoli in present-day Lebanon whose 13th century monuments are painted in either a 'Syrian' or a Palaiologan style,³² can be the outcome of different factors, such as

28 Ch'eishvili, Giorgi, Georgian Perceptions of Byzantium in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries, in: *Eastern Approaches to Byzantium*, Ed. Eastmond, Antony, Aldershot 2001, pp. 199–209.

29 Panagiotidi-Kesisoglou, Maria, Medieval Georgian and Byzantine Painting. Introductory Remarks, in: *Medieval Painting in Georgia. Local Stylistic Expression and Participation to Byzantine Oecumenicity*, Eds. Panagiotidi-Kesisoglou, Maria and Kalopissi-Verti, Sofia, Athens 2014, pp. 93–105, here p. 105.

30 Lazarev, Viktor, Константинополь и национальные школы в свете новых открытий [Constantinople and National Schools in the Light of New Discoveries], in: *Византийский временник* [Byzantine Chronicle] 17 (1960), pp. 93–101; Beridze, Vakht'ang, L'art géorgien dans le cadre du Moyen Âge européen, in: *Bedi Kartlisa. Revue de Kartvélogie* 40 (1982), pp. 139–146.

31 Fyssas, Nikolaos, Monumental Painting in Medieval Georgia from the Golden Age of Queen Thamar until the Fall of Byzantium. Tradition and Artistic 'Oecumenicity', in: *Medieval Painting in Georgia. Local Stylistic Expression and Participation to Byzantine Oecumenicity*, Eds. Panagiotidi-Kesisoglou, Maria and Kalopissi-Verti, Sofia, Athens 2014, pp. 123–146, here pp. 145–146.

32 Immerzeel, Mat, *Identity Puzzles. Medieval Christian Art in Syria and Lebanon*, Leuven 2009.

the availability of artists and artworks, the local authoritativeness of some monuments, the latter's political and cultural contexts, or the semantic associations conveyed by some specific objects and media. However, it can be assumed that, in the eyes of Medieval beholders, murals made in a more linear way were not perceived as less authoritative – and so, in a sense, less 'Byzantine' – than those made in keeping with contemporary Constantinopolitan trends.

In Georgia, as elsewhere, forms could be used in a selective way, in association with distinctive media and object-types, in order to suit particular needs or convey specific messages. If Greek religious painting was viewed as something normative and therefore as worth imitating, other traditions could be exploited when dealing with other types of décors: for example, the idea of preciousness conveyed by Islamic textiles was strong enough to encourage Caucasian rulers to adopt luxury Persian vestments, and in doing this they shared the same attitude manifested by other elites in different countries, including, as Barry Flood has observed, as far as Buddhist Ladakh.³³ Appreciation for Islamic textiles is also indicated by their use to wrap relics, as witnessed by some Svanetian cases, in significant parallelism with habits known from other borderline regions between Christian- and Muslim-ruled areas, such as Northern Spain.³⁴ On the other hand, the long-standing tradition of embellishing church exteriors with reliefs – shared by both Georgians and Armenians and developed since late Antiquity – was seen as a powerful source of inspiration by other neighbouring powers: as Antony Eastmond has shown, such precedents were intentionally exploited by the 13th century rulers of the Pontos, the so-called Grand Komnenoi, in the decoration of the cathedral of Saint Sophia in Trebizond, which was meant to embody their role as heirs to the Byzantine Empire: used in combination with Seljuk patterns, they served a visual strategy by which the new sovereigns manifested both their being rooted in the regional context and their claims to imperial rule.³⁵

Relief images played a privileged role in Georgian, and more generally in Southern Caucasian, visual cultures: they were used not only as architectural décors, but also as self-contained, autonomous objects, especially in the form of metal icons shaped out of chased and repoussé gilt-silver sheets. The latter are known to have existed in Byzantine art, since they are occasionally mentioned in ancient monastic inventories, but only a very few examples of this object-type have survived until our days in Greece or the Balkans (a case in point being a late 12th century

33 Flood, Finbarr Barry, *A Turk in the Dukhang? Comparative Perspectives on Elite Dress in Medieval Ladakh and the Caucasus*, in: *Interaction in the Himalayas and Central Asia. Processes of Transfer, Translation and Transformation in Art, Archaeology, Religion and Polity*, Eds. Allinger, Eva; Grenet, Frantz; Jahoda, Christian et alii, Vienna 2017, pp. 277–254.

34 Flood, Finbarr Barry and K'oshoridze, Irina, *Wrapping the Cross in Arabic. Function and Meaning of Islamic Textiles in the Churches of Svaneti, Georgia* (forthcoming).

35 Eastmond, Antony, *Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium. Hagia Sophia and the Empire of Trebizond*, Aldershot 2004, p. 95.