

FIRST STEPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF GEORGIAN ECCLESIASTIC ARCHITECTURE: MATERIALS AND CONSIDERATIONS 1

Even today, in the works of the majority of Georgian art historians, we cannot see any protest against the rather strange supposition, hastily elaborated in the 1920s, according to which allegedly, unlike the whole early Christian world, the Iberian authorities, during more than a century after the recognition of Christianity as the state religion, built exceptionally miniature or rather small churches without any canonical design.

Even recently, the above mentioned Georgian art historians have named the impeding reason for revising this almost dogmatic, not documentarily confirmed opinion, stating that in order to revise the described theory, they have not had tangible materials at hand – i.e., could not find above-ground remaining samples of large churches, built in the 4th or even last quarter of the 5th centuries in East Georgia with objective dating signs, constructed in accordance with the accepted canonical planning, recognized by the early Christian foreign world.

Taking into account the aforesaid reliable trends of the genesis of church architecture in Roman and early Byzantine world countries, it is apparent for us that the first or further generations of Georgian architectural historians should have given more consideration to the Georgian ancient written sources – „*Kartlis Tskhovreba*” and „*Moqcevai Qartlisai*” (Baptizing of Georgia) for information about Christian affiliation of Kartli immediately after Christianization, as well as the construction of the first churches in the country under the guidance of invited Byzantine architects who came to Georgia together with the first clergymen. If the respected researchers had compared the data provided in the mentioned historic sources about church architecture within other countries of the Christian world with the conclusions that had been already published in numerous scientific editions abroad by the time, beyond all doubt, in close cooperation with professional archaeologists, they would have also started in Georgia searching the underground remnants of Christian churches, adapted to the general planning of the temples, characteristic for Roman and early Byzantine world during the fourth and first half of the fifth centuries (of course, taking into consideration local construction traditions and capabilities of construction materials).

Nowadays it is very difficult to discuss why the above mentioned Georgian art historians assumed unrealistically that at the dawn of church building, Christian basilicas, which were only slightly different from Roman and early Byzantine-type churches (let us say, the Syrian and Antioch-type basilicas), could have been built in our country – the explanation, why such buildings could not be preserved “standing aboveground” until nowadays, must have been rather logical: with a high degree of probability, they should have taken into account that for the next centuries, as a result of almost continual military incursions throughout Georgian territory, these temples were razed to

1 The report was read at the international conference: „Art History in Georgia: Past – Present – Future”, Dedicated to the 100 year anniversary of the Tbilisi State University. Tbilisi, November 16-17, 2018.

the ground, or their extremely damaged remains have been reconstructed beyond recognition at various places, here and there (as we are aware, ruins of the aforementioned basilicas of the similar rank have been unearthed abroad, mostly destroyed to the foundation level). We cannot say precisely why it happened; however, long-term archaeological investigation of these monuments was regarded by respected scientists as unnecessary and they aimed at identifying the earliest Georgian churches among the constructions within the reach of their observable space, built in compliance with not entirely formed stylistic and planning schemes, in some cases even hardly determinable chronologically as well as functionally.

Such an approach towards the research problem results in the fact that this large group of art historians identified a miniature chapel built upon the ossuary chamber of the Nekresi monastery, dated back by us as a result of the archaeological research from the subsequent period of the 6th century, with the most significant Christian temple which, according to the historic sources, was constructed in the city of Nekresi in the 4th century. This rather ungainly construction is even presented as one of the primary monument of the Georgian church architecture in textbooks on art history published by them. And what is more, by their efforts, it is mentioned as such in the tourist guidebooks as well.

However, in our opinion, the mentioned hypotheses are currently rejected, because as a result of the archaeological research conducted by the Georgian National Museum from the 1980s up to the present, two remarkable basilicas of the 4th and beginning of 5th century have been revealed in the former city of Nekresi. Taking into consideration actuality of the problem, in the given article we will present architectural and planning picture identified during the archeological investigation of these basilicas ruins as well as our suppositions concerning the first Christian churches throughout the Iberia Kingdom.

Chabukauri Basilica

During the archaeological excavations conducted in 1998-2005, a large complex of building ruins were found in the central part of the former city of Nekresi, known nowadays under the name of *Chabukauri* district. The central building was a three-nave basilica, oriented on an east-west axis, 31 m long and 15 m wide.

The basilica hall is divided into three naves by five pairs of rectangular-shaped pillars (Fig. 3, 4). A rectangular sanctuary is arranged to the east of the central nave. It is situated approximately 50 cm higher from the base of the basilica nave. In the center of the sanctuary once stood a four-legged alabaster altar table: during the excavations, fragments of the ornamented, capitals, serving as bearers for the upper plate of the table and decorated with relief cross depictions were revealed. The similar altar tables decorated with capitals are frequently found in the Byzantine temples of the IV-V c.c. (Hirschfeld 1992, 252).

To the right and the left of the sanctuary, the side naves terminate in rectangular-shaped pastophoria, each with entrance doors from the west to the nave. The naos can be entered through southern, western and northern doors. The church is built of large, selected sledged stones. In the corners of the building openings, carved travertine stones have been abundantly used as column tops, as well as for the arches and other places requiring accurately dressed and measured stones.

The walls, from 1m to 1.2 m thick, are set on a lime-mortar foundation. The interior of the building was completely plastered with lime and painted in dark red. The floor was covered with local, flat, split shale rocks over lime-mortar.

The excavations convinced us that the basilica had been covered with a combination of flat and ridged roof tiles (*solenis* and *kalifteri*) based on a framework of wooden beams. The floor surface was dotted with the fallen roofing components: the remains of ramshackle wooden beams mixed with both types of tile debris and splinters of ceramic antefixes; and large iron nails (from 7-8 cm to 16-18 cm in length. All in all up to 300 such nails were discovered in the basilica interior) were scattered across the interior. It is also significant that the flat ceramic antefixes found here that decorated the outer edges of the tiled façade (Fig. 5), were notched or jagged on one side, painted in white, and could be attached only to the outer edge of the wooden framework.

The dimensions of the wooden framework for roofing is indicated by the size and shape of the arch fragments carved from travertine stone revealed during the clearing of the basilica: their parallel sides and lower arcs were trimmed, while the back was left rough. Such a configuration is absolutely in line with the longitudinal colonnade arches dividing the naves, whereas the backs of the vault-supporting arches should have been carved. By inserting the measurements of the arch fragments into the appropriate mathematical formulae, we could ascertain that these details represented parts of semicircular arches, the diameters of which (with an approximately 10 cm margin of error) equal 3 meters. Consequently the shape of the semicircular carved travertine fragments unearthed during the basilica excavations, do not resemble the size of the base that supported 6 meter arches, conventionally surrounding the temple central nave from above. On the other hand, their outlines do not fit the 2.4-2.25 meter-wide side naves either. However this is the distance ($3\text{ m} \pm 10\text{ cm}$) between columns, longitudinally dividing the basilica's naves.

In our opinion, these archaeological facts, together with the evidence that the basilica's interior longitudinal walls have no arch-supporting pilasters, may suggest that the naves of Chabukauri basilica were covered with roof tiles laid on wooden beams, where as the nave-dividing row of columns created perfectly-carved longitudinal arches. Since all known Georgian basilica-types as well as hall-type temples built after the 5th – 6th centuries, are covered with stone vaults, we think that the above mentioned method of roofing seems to be based directly on the general trends that characterized Roman and Byzantine basilica architecture of the 4th-6th centuries throughout the Central and Eastern Christian provinces of the Roman Empire.

Thus, by confirming this covering method at the Chabukauri Basilica, the recognized opinion of many famous Georgian art historians who alleged that wooden structures were not used at all in roofing the oldest Christian basilicas built in Georgia but rather that they were covered with a tile layer placed on limestone vaults, has been proved to be groundless (Chubinashvili 1970, 40; Beridze 1974, 23).

The rectangular-shaped sanctuary discovered in Chabukauri Basilica doesn't have any analogous parallels among the monuments of Georgian church architecture of the early Middle Ages yet discovered. But, on the other hand, the tradition of arranging sanctuaries and the adjacent spaces in a similar way was common in basilicas throughout Northern Syria and the Holy Land in the

IVth-VIth centuries, and is found more rarely across Mesopotamia and Egypt (Beyer 1925, 36-44, 80-91; 4f, 5f; Tchalenko 1953, pl. X-1, XI-3,6, XIII-1,3,4; Netzer et al, 1993, 219-232).

Contrary to the steadfast faith of more than one generation of Georgian art historians, the existence of pastophoria adjacent to the sanctuary in Chabukauri Basilica, does not indicate that the temple can't be dated to earlier than the VI th century (Beridze 1974, 24; Chubinashvili 1936, 32-50); a lot of 4th-5th century Christian basilicas in South-East Europe, Western Asia, North Africa and Europe have analogous pastophoria (Caleri 2014, 185-188).

The assumption, expressly based on the archaeological analysis of the construction of the Chabukauri Basilica, that it was founded in such an early epoch is also supported by the archaeological picture, observed as a result an earlier section below the floor horizon of the temple. It was discovered that the Christian basilica was built on almost the same site as a pagan temple that was demolished as soon as Christianity was proclaimed the official religion in East Georgia. A few fragments of black and grey kilned, polished clay wares, discovered at the foundation level of the previous temple, confirmed that a religious building had existed here in the Hellenistic or late Antique periods.

In addition this opinion that the construction of Chabukauri Basilica took place very soon after the recognition of Christianity as the official state religion of Georgia is supported by the artefacts obtained during the archaeological excavations of the monument. In various spaces of the Chabukauri Basilica, fragments of three-spouted pitchers, polished red on the outside, handleless wine jars and bowls known also from other archaeological monuments of Georgia, are dated back to the 4th-5th centuries when taking into account well-known parallels (Chilashvili 1964, 100; Mamaishvili 2004, 134-136; Sinauridze 1966, 62).

A varied and very interesting collection of interior lighting devices was revealed at the time of excavation around the basilica naos and sanctuary, was especially notable near to the floor horizon. Here we found well-preserved bronze oil lamps and glass chandeliers (damaged), which, at the time of the destruction event were hanging from fixed fastenings in the church ceiling or walls on bronze artistic chains.

One of the bronze lamps stood on a flat bronze rectangular base (Fig. 6); one of its sides ends in an apsidal ledge and it is clear that it is a symbolically designed model of a Christian church. The base hung on four chains, consisting of wattled rods and rings replacing each other. The lamp itself had a wick duct, lily-shaped relief back and spherical fuel filler body. This example has close parallels with 4th-5th century metal artworks from different regions of the Byzantine world (Djuric 1995, 56f, 78f, 84f; Bonk 1985, 17f; Lofreda 2001-134; Mutz 1972, 393-394f). Six – and four-shafted artistic and exquisite bronze lampads (chandeliers), discovered in the basilica floor belong to the same period of time (Fig. 7) (Mutz, 1972, 141). The lamps with several ducts around the oil filler were widespread in the Roman world in the 1st-3rd centuries AD, but they are rare in the 4th century. Therefore it is perhaps impossible to date them back to later than the 4th or 4th-5th centuries AD.

Dolochopi Basilica

As a results of the excavations conducted in 2012-2017 in the easternmost area of the former city of Nekresi, on the right bank of the *Duruju* river, in forested territory known nowadays under the name of the former village of *Dolochopi* (now in the Kvareli countryside), we unearthed an even larger basilica (Fig. 8). The length and width of its central, three-nave hall (36m X 18.5m) considerably exceeds all basilica-type churches known in Georgia until now (Fig. 9). The hall of the basilica is divided in to naves by means of 5 pairs of cross-planned columns. The columns were preserved up to 1.5-2 m high. They stood on a rectangularly-planned, approximately 2X2 m long and 20-25cm tall socle that has been well-preserved. The walls and columns of the basilica are built with well-selected sledged stones as well as cobble-stones gathered at the Duruji river side, and lime-mortar. For the construction of the arches and column capitals, travertine carved stones were used. The walls of the basilica interior space were plastered with lime and painted in red.

At the eastern edge of the middle nave of the Dolochopi Basilica, there is a distinctly horseshoe-shaped apsed sanctuary. In accordance with the configuration of the demolished blocks revealed on the floor, the apse was surrounded with a limestone vault from above. Around the sanctuary a masonry four-stage bench for clergymen has been arranged, whereas in the easternmost part the high throne of the archbishop was established with steps leading to it from the sanctuary (Fig. 11). So far similarly arranged sanctuaries have not been confirmed in other churches in Georgia. The above mentioned stone stairs surrounding the sanctuary from inside and the thrones for clergymen of a particular hierarchical level (synthronon) are well-known only from the early medieval cathedrals of the Byzantine world – hierarchs would sit on the benches during liturgical services to personify Christ and His apostles (Koch 1995, 36,46; Grossmann 1982, 213-215).

It should be noted that the bema in the temple sanctuary, stands out in the form of a “proscenium” in the west as far as the first pair of columns in the central nave. Since the altar platform is 90 cm higher than the naos floor, it was possible to ascend the platform from the west, east and north by means of 3-step staircase the same width as the ambo. It is also significant no other projecting bema of this type has been found among medieval Georgian basilicas; however analogous ceremonial bemas are characteristic of especially important basilicas of the central provinces of the early Byzantine world (Wilkinson 1993, 19-21).

In the underground space of the basilica altar, spacious, approximately 15 sq.m crypt (burial vault) was found (fig. 14); the crypt was created at the time of the temple construction in the lower space of the apsis (conch). In the central part of the chamber, on the floor a reliquary (reliquarium) for keeping sacred parts was built, made of wooden beams, plastered with high-quality lime; nowadays the reliquarium can be spotted at the planning level. As it seems, the altar table, which has not been preserved up to the present time was situated just above the crypt, on the floor of the sanctuary. Existence of such crypts and reliquariums for keeping sacred parts or remains of saints under the altar or under the altar table represents a very common practice in Late Antiquity Roman churches as well as Early Byzantine Christian temples. However, in Georgia, here perfectly – built analogical construction of the given type has been revealed for the first time.

Rectangularly planned pastophoria were built to the right and left of the sanctuary, along the side naves and entered from the naves. From the north, west and south the central hall is surrounded with a contemporary system of galleries within the spaces created by the unified external walls of

the time – eukterions, stoas and narthexes, the height of which varies from 1 meter to 1.5 meters (Fig. 10, 12).

Together with authentic galleries and narthex, the external size of the total perimeter for the Dolochopi basilica is 44 m X 27 m, owing to which it does not have any comparative structures throughout the Caucasus or in adjacent regions. The exquisite spatial design, structural, architectural and artistic solutions of the church make it unique and outstanding among early Christian basilicas of the central provinces within the Roman and Byzantine world, and it undoubtedly falls into their circle.

Some of the planning and construction elements in the Dolochopi basilica (for example, a multi-stage synthronon, proscenium-like bema, wooden constructions for roofing), have not been found since the Vth-VIth centuries among samples of the Georgian church architecture. Some unusual, unfamiliar decorative elements for Georgian churches after the Vth century, such as an interior entirely plastered in red paint, decorated roofs with coloured, jagged antefixes etc., indicate that the style of this churches copied from Christian basilicas spread in the IVth-Vth centuries in the eastern provinces of the Roman and Byzantine Empires and some other neighboring regions, and therefore, the construction of the Dolochopi basilica should be presumed to be of the same period (Bakhtadze 2010b, 2012, 2014). Roman and Byzantine empires

The assumption that the Dolochopi Basilica was constructed at such an early period is even more justified by the fragments of similar clayware dated to the 4th-5th century, and well-known from Georgian archaeological monuments, unearthed during the excavations of the earliest stratigraphic layers of the church, mostly tamped into the cavities of the initial floor (Pl. 1-5,6,7). The Remains of interior lighting devices, glass lampads (chandeliers) placed into metal bars and silver hangers are particularly interesting (Pl. 1-3,4). Exactly same type lighting devices, so called „poli-chandeliers“, have been widespread in early Byzantine world and they are dated back to the 5th-6th centuries (Whitehouse 1997, 196-201; Papadopoulou 2003, 260, pl. 122, 14-15f).

The analysis of artefacts obtained from the construction ruins covering the floor, properly defined the period that indicates the interruption of the temple functioning, as well as circumstances – the basilica was destroyed in the 6th century as a result of the earthquake. The remains of the church have been used afterwards as a cemetery by the local settlement dwellers – during the excavations of the basilica, we had to study over 100 individual and collective tombs of the 8th-12th c.c.

In 2015–2016, the Dolochopi Basilica excavations led us to one more discovery: it was found out that this grandiose temple had been built on the ruins of even earlier Christian basilica of up to 25 meters long and approximately 15 meters wide (Fig. 13) (More precisely, this is the basilica's local vernacular form, the earliest sample of the “three church basilica in Georgia. Sometime later – in the 6th-9th centuries, this simplified variation of the basilica, was widely spread all over Georgia and, in particular, Kakheti region. Chubinashvili, 1959, 34-46). The remains of lime-plastered walls of this primary 2-4 stone masonry building were well preserved under the floor of the Basilica naos and the northern by-pass interior; as it seems, this church consisted of central hall with rectangular sanctuary to the east and circular galleries (from the north, west and south). Along the galleries, to the north and the south of the sanctuary, rectangular-shaped pastophoria were arranged. Due to fragmentariness of the construction remnants, we cannot say much about the planning peculiarities of the first chronological phase of the Dolochopi temple for the present,

except from the fact that it was also based on a wooden structure, covered with roof tiles; the edges of the roof were beautified with clay antefixes in the style of the larger basilica. A Therefore, in the previous layer of the Dolochopi Basilica, the remnants of the second in size basilica, revealed until nowadays among the IV century Georgian temples, were confirmed (it was slightly shorter than the Chabukauri Basilica).

Conclusion

Thus, resulting from our archaeological researches carried out for the last several years, three large basilicas, having rather exquisite architectural style and constructed with the distance of only several decades away from each other, built in one and the same city of the Iberia Kingdom, have been discovered. This circumstance rather evidently attests that very soon after proclaiming Christianity as the state religion in Georgia (in 326 AD), during the IV century and, it's obvious, throughout the entire 5th century, large Churches were built, designed in compliance with canonical requirements of Roman and early Byzantine Christian liturgy.

დამოწმებანი:

- ბახტაძე ნ. დოლოჭოპის ბაზილიკაზე 2012 წელს ჩატარებული არქეოლოგიური კვლევის ანგარიში. *ჰუმანიტარულ კვლევათა ჟურნალი კადმოსი*, # 4. 273-303. თბ., 2012 (რედ. ზ. კიკნაძე).
- ბახტაძე ნ. *კერამიკული ნაკეთობანი შუა საუკუნეების საქართველოში*. თბ., 2013.
- ბახტაძე ნ. ა. ნეკრესი. თბ., 2010.
- ბახტაძე ნ. ბ. ნეკრესის ნაქალაქარზე გამოვლენილი ჭაბუკაურის ბაზილიკის დათარიღებისათვის. *ძიებანი საქართველოს არქეოლოგიაში*. #19. 209-220. თბ., 2010 (რედ. გ. კვირკველია).
- ბახტაძე ნ. ყვარლის რაიონის არქეოლოგიური ექსპედიციის ახალი აღმოჩენები. *ყვარელი*, 2006, # 19-20.
- ბახტაძე ნ., მამიაშვილი ვ., გაბეხაძე ბ. დოლოჭოპის ბაზილიკის არქეოლოგიური კვლევა ნაქალაქარ ნეკრესში. *ონლაინ არქეოლოგია*. #8. *საქართველოს კულტურული მემკვიდრეობის დაცვის ეროვნული სააგენტო*. 110-131. თბ., 2015.
- ბერიძე ვ. *ძველი ქართული ხუროთმოძღვრება*. თბ., 1974.
- თუმანიშვილი დ. უძველესი ქართული საეკლესიო ნაგებობების გამო. *გზაჯვარედინზე*. თბ., 2008 (რედ. ი. ხუსკივაძე). 144-161.
- კახიანი კ., ჭანიშვილი გ., კოპალიანი ჯ., მაჩაბელი კ., ალექსიძე ზ., ღლიღვაშვილი ე., პატარიძე ნ. *ადრექრისტიანული საეკლესიო კომპლექსი დმანისიდან*. თბ., 2012.
- კიკნაძე ზ., მირზაშვილი თ. რას მოგვითხრობს მირიანის წიგნი. *კრიტიკა*. #6. თბ., 1985 (რედ. რ. სირაძე).
- კიკნაძე ზ., მირზაშვილი თ. კულტურის ისტორიის კვლევის მეთოდებისთვის. *კრიტიკა*. #2. თბ., 1987 (რედ. რ. სირაძე).
- მამიაშვილი ნ. *ქალაქი ჭრემი*. თბ., 2004.
- მოქცევამ ქართლისად. *მატბერდის კრებული X საუკუნისა*. თბ., 1979.
- მროელი ლეონტი. *ცხოვრება ქართველთა მეფეთა*. ქართლის ცხოვრება, ტ. I. თბ., 1955.
- მუსხელიშვილი დ. *საქართველო IV-VIII საუკუნეებში*. თბ., 2003.
- სინაურიძე მ. *აღმოსავლეთ საქართველოს ადრეფეოდალური ხანის კერამიკა*. თბ., 1966.
- ჩუბინაშვილი ნ. ზედაზენი, კლიკისჯვარი, ღვიარა. ქართული ხელოვნება, 7. თბ., 1971.
- ჩუბინაშვილი გ. *ქართული ხელოვნების ისტორია*. ტ. 1. თბ., 1936.
- ჭილაშვილი ლ. *არეში*. თბ., 1991.
- ჭილაშვილი ლ. *ნაქალაქარი ურბნისი*. თბ., 1964.
- ჭილაშვილი ლ. *ნეკრესის უძველესი ქართული წარწერები და ქართული დამწერლობის ისტორიის საკითხები*. თბ., 2004.

- Атлас сильных землетрясений СССР до 1975 года. Москва, 1977.
- Комеч А. Архитектура Византии. Культура Византии. № 1. 573-595. Москва, 1984 (Ред.3. Удальцова).
- Кондаков Н. Археологическое путешествие по Сирии и Палестине. Санкт-Петербург, 1904.
- Чубинашвили Г. Архитектура Кахетии. Тбилиси, 1959.
- Чубинашвили Г. К вопросу о начальных формах Христианского Храма. Вопросы истории искусства. № 1. 36-43. Тбилиси, 1970 (Ред. В. Беридзе).
- Beyer H. Der Syrische Kirchenbau. Berlin, 1925.
- Bank A. Byzantine Art in the Collections of Soviet Museums, Leningrad, 1985.
- Djuric S. The Anawati collection, Catalog 1: Ancient Lamps from the Mediterranean, Toronto 1995.
- Herson S., Price R. (Editors) Roman Glass in the Corning Museum of Glass. Vol.1. New York, 1997. Leiden, 2002.
- Hirschfeld Y. The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1992.
- Grossmann P. Christliche Architektur in Ägypten. Leiden 2002 .
- Caleri A. La prima chiesa di Betania: nuove proposte interpretative, *Temporis Signa* 9 (2014), 181–194.
- Koch G. Frühchristliche Kunst. Stuttgart, 1995.
- Mišković A. Prostor i funkcije sakristije u ranokršćanskom razdoblju na primjeru zadarskoga episkopalnog sklopa. *Ars Adriatica*. 3/2. 2013. 7-20.
- Milburn R. *Early Christian Art and Architecture*. University of California Press. Berkley, Los Angeles, 1988.
- Mutz A. Die Kunst des Metalledens bei den Römern, Stuttgart 1972.
- Netzer E.; Birger-Calderon R.; Feller A. The Churches of Herodium, In: *Ancient Churches Revealed*, Jerusalem 1993 (Ed. Tsafir, Y.), pp. 219–232.
- Papadopoulou B. Bronze Lamps and Polycandela: the Averof collection in the Baron Tositsas foundation museum Metsovo, Epirus, NW Greece. Nyon, Geneva, 2003.
- Plontke-Lüning A. Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien (Katalog der Erhaltenen Kirchenbauten), Wien, 2007
- Roman Glass in the Corning Museum of Glass. Vol.1. New York, 1997 (edit. Herson S., Price R.)
- Smith R. Glass from the Ancient World. The Ray Winfield Smith Collection. A Special Exhibition. New York, 1957.
- Tchalenko G. Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord. 3 vols. Paris, 1953.
- Wilkinson J. Christian Worship in the Byzantine Period. 17-27. *Ancient Churches Revealed*. Jerusalem, 1993 (Edit. Y. Tsafir).