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Old Georgian Christian and Byzantine Art in the Light of European Culture

The earliest surviving Georgian literary work, *The Martyrdom of Shushanik*, describes the spiritual and physical struggle Georgia had to undergo when making a choice between the West and the East, Christianity and Islam. It lasted till the 18th century, when Erekle II took a decision that had likewise deplorable consequences for Georgia. In the 19th century Georgia lost its independence but escaped the threat of conversion to Islam. However, in the 20th century atheism created an absolutely new reality for Georgia and Western Europe, which, fortunately, was temporary and the orientation towards Christian culture and thought, which was so natural for Georgian identity and linked it to the rest of the civilized world, was restored.

In terms of location, Christianity originated within the Roman Empire. The Lord preached in Palestine, which was then part of the Empire. Painting must have been the first to develop among Christian arts. As until the 4th century the Christians were persecuted and were unable to build temples in the literary sense, architecture was relatively late to develop. Naturally, first Christian art works were created secretly, on the walls of catacombs. According to the Holy tradition, there were several Vernicle Images of the Savior, icons created by Apostle Luke. However, architecture needed to be legalized to a greater extent as it was impossible to build temples secretly. At first, houses served as churches where Christians could gather and officiate a service. After Christianity was legalized, Christian architecture started to develop.

The most widespread types of Christian church architecture are basilica and cruciform design (including the cruciform-domed type). Basilica is defined as the 'house of the King' (βασιλική σποά). It is a rectangular

building divided into 3 or 5 naves by colonnades. The middle nave, which culminates in an apse is wider and higher. A basilica is covered with a double pitched roof.¹ In Ancient Greece and Rome basilica was a public building and after the legalization of Christianity was established as one of the main forms of Christian church architecture.

Part of early Georgian churches are basilicas – the Anchiskhati, St. Nino's Church in Samtavro, Bolnisi Zion (a three-nave basilica), the earlier church of Svetitskoveli is believed to have been a basilica, etc. Another part of Georgian churches are of cruciform-domed type. Among them are the Cross Monastery of Mtskheta, a classical cruciform church repeating the shape of cross from all sides, Ateni Zion, etc. Byzantine churches too are designed to the two mentioned patterns. Saint Peter's Church in Rome is a basilica, like many other churches of an early period found in Europe or the Holy Land. Georgian basilica does not have a cupola. In his study of Old Georgian basilicas, Vaktang Beridze describes them as a rectangular structures without a cupola,² while in the West domed basilicas are quite common, the most important of them being Saint Peter's basilica and the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Paris.

Basilica and cruciform (cruciform-domed) design are the two most widely reported types of Christian church architecture. However, there are other types as well: for example, rotunda – the Georgian Bana Cathedral in Tao-Klarjeti was a circular structure, which is obvious from the ruins. The Chapel of the Ascension in Jerusalem is a rotunda too. Thus, Georgian and Byzantine churches, as well as early and the most renowned European Christian temples, prominent for their architectural, historical and spiritual value, have common architectural properties – basically, the basilica and cruciform designs. They were afterwards enriched with national and cultural traits of a particular nation. For instance, Russian churches are characterized by the plurality of domes. Some even see symbolic implications in the number of domes³: 1 – The Single Deity, 2 – The two Natures of Jesus, 3 – The Holy Trinity, 5 – The Christ and the 4 Evangelists, 7 – 7 Sacraments; some interpret seven domes as the symbol of the 7 Ecumenical Councils, 13 – Christ and his 12 Disciples. These shared architectural properties stem from common conceptual groundings. They are 1. The religious grounding (the Church was initially single

¹ Beridze V., *Old Georgian Architecture*, Tbilisi 1974, 197.

² *Ibid.*

³ Православный Храм, Устройство православного храма, Википедия. See also www.missionbookrussia.com, Устройство православного храма, автор проекта и составитель – Александр Петров.

and integral, while schisms took place later); 2. Ancient culture, Greek and Roman art, which played an important role in the development of Christian art. However, the contribution of each nation converted to Christianity is unique and this individuality was reflected in the common Christian cultural thought. It should also be added that the prototype of basilica is ancient temple, Parthenon being the most brilliant example of it.

At the conference session, Mr. Kekis of the Hellenic Republic stated that Byzantium never lost its ties with ancient Greece and was always rooted in ancient culture. On its part, Byzantium fostered Europe including Georgia (like any other Christian nation, especially, European), which wonderfully combined the new, Christian art with its own rich old cultural tradition. Although, Georgian pagan temples, unlike Greek, did not survive, archeological excavations in Vani, Armazi, Zhinvali, Dmanisi and other sites attest to the rich cultural tradition. Especially noteworthy is Uplistsikhe (started in the 1st half of the 1st millennium BC), with surviving remains of a pagan shrine.

It is common knowledge that when a country was converted to the Christian faith, i. e. when its king and queen adopted Christianity and proclaimed it the state religion, architects and artists were invited from Byzantium. The paleologian frescos of Ubisi, which are the continuation of the Byzantine school of painting, the wonderful frescos of Svetitskhoveli, loaded with mystic symbolism, the famous Vladimir icon of the Holy Virgin, which is a masterpiece of the Byzantine school, and many other have their artistic roots in ancient Greece – the Frescos of Knossos and the Etruscan paintings. When you look at the fresco of Hora (Primavera) at Pompeii, you think that she is as perfect as the Blue Bird. This painting tradition was filled with the Christian faith and thus spiritualized, developed into the style of Christian iconography, represented by numerous beautiful and holy frescos, whether Byzantine or Georgian, European or Asian. Thus were created Rublyov's Holy Trinity and the fresco of the angel of Kintsvisi – an angel bearing the news of the Holy Resurrection, painted at the sublime of Christian iconography. These works are perfectly beautiful and at the same time holy, featuring episodes from the Holy Scripture. The rich painting tradition is harmoniously combined with the Christian outlook and perfection is rendered from the divine perspective, conveying the Christian spirit. What before was worldly beautiful, now became divine, reflecting communion with the Lord. Now beauty not only appeals to a physical eye, but is grace-giving and holy, unworldly. These qualities are endowed upon an icon or a church by the Holy Spirit, through the power of consecration. Naturally, this concerns Georgian as well as Byzantine, Russian or western European art.

Churches as well as some frescos are filled with the Georgian spirit, e. g. the frescos of Vardzia and Betania. This is also caused by the fact that the frescos feature Georgian kings and princes, Georgian apparel and ornaments. On the other hand, the Kintsvisi Angel stands above countries and nationalities by his beauty and perfection, like *The Knight in the Tiger's Skin*, which at the same time fully conveys the splendor and beauty of the Georgian language.

By this I wanted to say that all nations – Georgia, Greece or the entire European Christian civilization – are united as they all have the same grounds – Christianity, which was integral when the majority of these states confessed it. Each nation contributes to Christian architecture and paintings by its individual character. Like a person, a nation, a state and its population, as well as its neighborhood, even if ethically different, has its distinct properties. The common geographical area may also be the reason for two nations' affinity, common character traits and inclinations. However, when a masterpiece is created, it stands above all, as God is perfection and all that is elevated and perfect transcends the worldly limits and merges with the divine perfection.

Thus, the main message of the present paper is the following: Georgian, Byzantine and, in general, European Christian cultures have their roots in their respective national traditions as well as in ancient culture, which was succeeded by Christian culture, as Christ was born and lived on the territory of the Roman Empire (Palestine was occupied by Rome), and Greece, together with its colonies in Asia Minor, also formed a part of Rome. Christianity imparted its divine spirit to what had been materially perfect and what is called ancient art. Since then, each nation has been contributing its artistic potential to this new art, creating nationality-wise original Christian culture, which would bridge it with its past, its character, its future and contemporaneity. At the same time, Christianity and its preceding ancient art unites every art with the rest of Christian Europe and its art.

Ancient art is so perfect that nothing else needs to be added to it. At each stage of human existence, God has been granting men what they have been able to accept. When men were able to receive physical beauty, they were given it – the aesthetic ancient art, while when men were prepared for receiving the beauty filled with the divine spirit, Christian art was created. Men, whether pagan or faithful, are granted every talent and faculty by God. Hora (Primavera) of Pompeii is perfect and nothing needs to be added to it. It only lacked the divine spirit, which was granted to the

Christian fresco – the image of the Kintsvisi Angel is perfect and, being a fresco, it also has the divine spirit.

We could remember the image of Nefertiti for comparison. Though not a wall painting, it is nevertheless a piece of painting, but conveys a different kind of aesthetics, different strokes and contours; it represents a different school rooted in a different culture. Ancient painting is the foundation on which Georgian Christian, Byzantine and European arts are based (Italian Renaissance is the direct revival of the ancient school. Georgian and Byzantine frescos do not have the delightfulness but are invested with the ascetic spirit. This spirit is absent in the Italian Renaissance art. This is where the Renaissance parts from what are known as the Christian fresco and icon). Thus, there is one line, one channel of thought, united by Christianity. At the same time, all bear their respective national identities and specific properties, and this is how it should be; otherwise, the divine seed, present in every person and nation and imparting individuality and divinity (granted to every creature, every nation, the earth and the universe on the whole by the grace of the Holy Spirit and through the creative acts of God), will not manifest itself.



Bolnisi Zion - The 5th c. Three-Nave Basilica



Mtskheta Cross Monastery - The 6th c. Cruciform Domed Basilica



St. John the Baptist's Church at Kaneo
The Middle Byzantine Period. A Typical Cruciform Domed Church



Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, Vatican



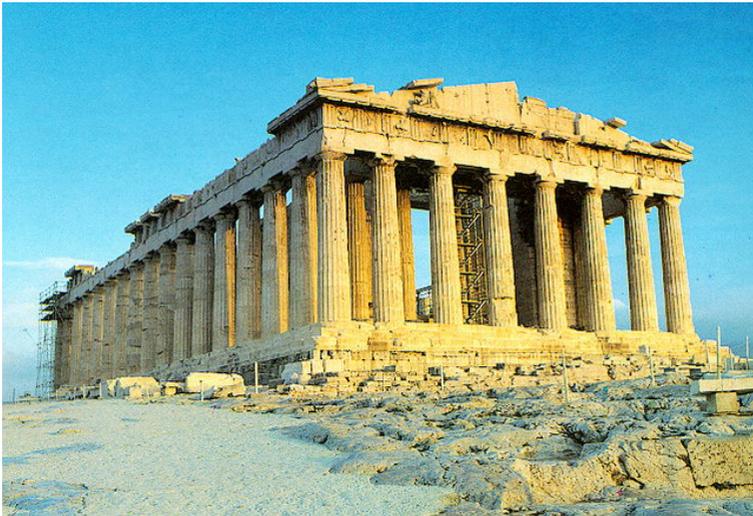
Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Paris



The Chapel of the Ascension in Jerusalem. An Octagonal Rotunda



Bana - Historical Tao. Built in the 7th c.
Redesigned in the 9th-10th cc. under the Reign of Adarnase II



Parthenon, Athens. The 5th c. BC