

A SHORT HISTORY OF GEORGIAN ARCHITECTURE

Georgia is situated on the isthmus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In the north it is bounded by the Main Caucasian Range, forming the frontier with Russia, Azerbaijan to the east and in the south by Armenia and Turkey. Geographically Georgia is the meeting place of the European and Asian continents and is located at the crossroads of western and eastern cultures.

In classical sources eastern Georgia is called Iberia or Caucasian Iberia, while western Georgia was known to Greeks and Romans as Colchis.

Georgia has an elongated form from east to west. Approximately in the centre in the Great Caucasian range extends downwards to the south Surami range, bisecting the country into western and eastern parts. Although this range is not high, it produces different climates on its western and eastern sides. In the western part the climate is milder and on the sea coast sub-tropical with frequent rains, while the eastern part is typically dry.



Figure 1 Map of Georgia

Georgian vernacular architecture

The different climates in western and eastern Georgia, together with distinct local

building materials and various cultural differences creates a diverse range of vernacular architectural styles.

In western Georgia, because the climate is mild and the region has abundance of timber, vernacular architecture is characterised by timber buildings. Surrounding the timber houses are lawns and decorative trees, which rarely found in the rest of the country. The population and hamlets scattered in the landscape.

In eastern Georgia, vernacular architecture is typified by *Darbazi*, a type of masonry building partially cut into ground and roofed by timber or stone (rarely) constructions known as *Darbazi*, from which the type derives its name.



Figure 2 Darbazi interior

It is thought that this type of roof construction was described as the Colchis house by Vitruvius, because his description precisely describes this type of roof. He writes: "In Pontus among the nation of the Colchi, because of their rich forests, two whole trees are laid flat, right and left, on the ground, a space being left between them as wide as the lengths of the trees allow. On the furthest parts of them, two others are placed transversely, and these four

trees inclose in the middle the space for the dwelling. Then laying upon them alternate beams from the four sides, they join up the angles. And so constructing the walls with trees, they raise up towers rising perpendicular from the lowest parts. The gaps which are left by the thickness of the timber they block up with splinters and clay. Further, they

raise the roofs by cutting off the cross-beams at the end and gradually narrowing them. And so, from the four sides they cover with middle a pyramid on high. This they cover with leafage and clay, and, barbarian fashion, construct the covered roofs of their towers.



Figure 3 Khevsureti region, Muco village



Figure 4 Svaneti region, Mulakhi village

In mountainous regions of Georgia each family owned fortified tower houses. Thus

mountain villages are picturesque with many towers punctuating the skyline, each built from rubble-stone or slate masonry according to the availability of local materials.

Pre-Christian Georgian architecture

The first traces of man's activity on the territory of Georgia are found in the Palaeolithic age. In eastern and western Georgia a number of camps and cave settlements have survived from the early to late Palaeolithic periods.

The first settlements appeared in eastern Georgia in the Neolithic period (fifth and fourth millennia BC) and are known as settlements of the Shulaveri-Shomutepe archaeological culture. The structures, looking like termite mounds, were round, organized around courts and built of mud bricks. The population were no longer gatherers, but farmers cultivating wheat. There is some evidence that these people built and used simple canals for irrigation.

In the early bronze period (the third millennia BC) an archaeological culture known as Kura-Araxes flourished and spread over all of southern Transcaucasia. Some classical settlements of the Kura-Araxes, such as Qvatskhelebi and Khizanaant Gora, have been excavated in Georgia. In this period, groups of individual structures, built of wattle with clay rendering and flat roofs, formed hamlets. The structures had two internal spaces: one, generally small, used as portico and store room and the second, larger (approximately four and half by four and half metres), with a central pillar supporting the roof. In front of the pillar a hearth was usually built and was sometimes given anthropomorphic or zoomorphic features, like horns or a man with a phallus. It is thought that the hearths were used not only for everyday purposes but also as family altars.

From the late phase of the early bronze and middle bronze periods only '*kurgan*' burials have survived. These burials represent chambers where corpses were buried with grave-goods and sometimes in rich burials with other corpses, perhaps slaves and animals usually horses or oxen are found. Over the chambers artificial mounds were built. Some of the chambers are of very sophisticated construction of stone with roofing stepped

stone construction, a second type is made from timber logs with an infill with rubble and cobbles.

It is thought that some of the dolmens on the Black Sea coast of Georgia, and menhirs and megalithic structures of Southern Georgia with characteristic Cyclopean masonry come from the middle bronze period



Figure 5 Manhir



Figure 6 Abuli Cyclopean Castle

The late bronze period (from the middle of the second to the beginning of the first

millennia BC) is characterized by the diversity of settlements. These settlements have different patterns according to geographical and climatic conditions and provide indications of various aspects of the activity of the population. For instance, in the southern Georgian highlands the population were mostly cattle farmers. They lived in stone-built structures with two internal spaces: one for cattle and a living area.



Figure 7 Late Bronze age house from Samtavro

In central Georgia however arable farming was the predominant form in the economy. The inhabitants of the settlements tried to maximise the agricultural land use of the fertile valleys by building terraced settlements on hill slopes such that the roof of one building formed a court for the structure above. In this way the occupants of these settlements tried to avoid settlements in the fertile and arable valleys.

Towards the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennia emerges the legend of the Argonauts who visited western Georgia, Colchis in search of the mythical Golden Fleece.

In the middle of the first millennium BC the western Georgian tribes, the Megrelis and the Chan, formed a state, the kingdom of Colchis. The principal cities of Colchis such as

Phasis, Surium possibly present-day Vani, Shorapani and Dioscurias are mentioned in classical historical sources. Some of these have been excavated and have revealed remarkable evidence of a prosperous society which could afford luxurious grave-goods.



Figure 8 Grave from Vani

In eastern Georgia the creation of a state is connected by historical tradition with the name of King Parnavaz, who ruled in the fourth century BC and established the first Georgian royal line. It seems that the historical tradition can be trusted because from the fourth century BC the first cities appeared in eastern Georgia such as the Iberian capital Mtskheta, Samadlo and Urbnisi.

Architectural monuments of this period provide significant examples of different kinds of structures. In Bagineti and Vani remains of fortifications have survived. The fortifications of Bagineti follow the contours of the whole slope of the hill where the city, part of Greater Mtskheta, was situated. There are remains of curtain walls and square towers which had ashlar socles and mud brick construction above. In Vani there are also examples of early Hellenistic fortifications. In both cases the structures provide

clear evidence that builders were well aware of the principles and methods of building used by the rest of the Hellenistic world.

In Samadlo a building constructed from rubble stone has been excavated and has been identified by the archaeologist I. Gagoshidze as a religious building because of its resemblance to Urartian tower temples and Achaemenid structures such as Kaaba-i Zardusht in Naqsh-e Rostam and Zendan-i Sulaiman in Pasargadae.

One of the most important sites of the early Hellenistic period, because of the information it gives us, is Tsikhiagora in Kaspi region of central Georgia. Tsikhiagora is a fortified precinct with a temple and other ancillary structures like barns, a mill, a bakery, a priest's dwelling, and a *marani* (a special structure where wine is produced and stored). The temple at Tsikhiagora represents a local type of Iranian fire temples. Here a capital of a column carved in the form of a bull protoma was found showing the influence of well-known Achaemenian capitals. The capital is dated to the late fourth and early third century or in other words the post-Achaemenian period.



Figure 9 Tsikhiagora, capital

Remains of some religious structures from the early Hellenistic period have survived in Vani. One important feature of these structures should be mentioned. Namely, while building techniques and the system of decoration follows the Hellenistic tradition, there is not a single temple of the classical Greek peripteral type. In other words here we have complicated syncretism of the traditional Hellenistic decoration and craftsmanship with local forms of sacred structures also showing some influence of oriental culture.

The number of remains of surviving monuments increases in the late Hellenistic and late antique periods and shows different aspects of life of Georgian society in that period. On the one hand we have more historical sources from that period where are described the Iberian kingdom, its policies, society, geography, religion and other aspects. For instance, we have Strabo's description of Iberian kingdom: Furthermore, the greater part of Iberia is so well developed in respect to cities and farmsteads that their roofs are tiled, and their houses as well as their market-places and other public buildings are constructed with architectural skill', and then, 'There are also four castes among the inhabitants of Iberia. One, and the first of all, is that from which they appoint their kings, the appointee being both the next of kin to his predecessor and the eldest, whereas the second in line administers justice and commands the army. The second caste is that of the priests, who among other things attend to all matters of controversy with the neighbouring peoples. The third is that of the soldiers and the farmers. And the fourth is that of the common people, who are slaves of the king and perform all the services that pertain to human livelihood. Their possessions are held in common by them according to families, although the eldest is ruler and steward of each estate. Such are the Iberians and their country.

From this passage of Strabo it is clear that at that time Iberia enjoyed prosperity and its society was well structured. This is also clear from archaeological evidence too, both from removable and from non-removable artefacts and buildings. A large number of sites with different characteristics have survived. But among them some are specially worth mentioning.

First of all is the huge *temenos*, or holy precinct Dedoplis Mindori in the Kareli region of central Georgia. It occupies the middle of a valley running from the range Tsetskhliis seri south to the river Mtkvari. This *temenos* comprises a sacred precinct where eight temples stood. All except the central part of the main temple were built of mud bricks and roofed with tiles. The temples show the conspicuous impact of oriental architecture but some elements, for example the capitals, have a whole range of specific features. The complex of Dedoplis Mindori was built between the end of the second and beginning of first centuries BC and was destroyed at the end of first and beginning of

second centuries AD.

On the southern edge of the valley in which Dedoplis Mindori *temenos* was situated, a fortified palace of the same period (called by archaeologists Dedoplis Gora) was discovered on the hill by the riverside. The surviving evidence is particularly vivid and includes not only substantial evidence of the architecture, but also food, weapon, furniture and other artifacts of daily life. It seems that it was used as a residence for a governor or the royal family when they visited the *temenos* Dedoplis Mindori. The palace had at least two stories and was roofed by tiles. The walls consisted of two parts: the socle, constructed with logs infilled with rubble and clay and walls, built of mud brick.



Figure 10 Dedoplis gora, wall remains

To the Hellenistic and late antique periods (with medieval alterations and additions) belongs the rock-hewn city of Uphlistsikhe (another wide-spread spelling is Uplistikhe).



Figure 11 Uphlistsikhe

In the late antique period a luxury villa was constructed in Dzalisa, with several baths and a swimming pool. In one of the baths the floor of the frigidarium was paved with mosaics with images of Dionysus and Ariadna, demonstrating the influence of the Antiochian school. Some of the villa rooms had hollow floors for heating system.



Figure 12 Dzalisa, Dionysus and Ariadna mosaic floor

Not far from Dzalisa remains of the city of Nastagisi were discovered, dating from the Hellenistic, late antique and early medieval periods. It is a large city containing many kinds of structures: ordinary dwellings, pagan shrines and the earliest Christian church in Georgia (third century AD), built before the Georgian kings formally declared Christianity as an official state religion.

A palace in Armaziskhevi dates from the late antique period and, in contrast to Dzalisa villa, it belongs to the oriental style of four-*iwan* palaces. In Armaziskhevi we face the problem of the amalgamation of eastern and western features, which are so characteristic of Georgian culture. In the basic oriental style palace a bath of Roman type was incorporated.

From the late antique period comes a tomb in Mtskheta. It is distinguished by high quality masonry and was roofed with tiles. Scholars have suggested it belonged to a family of Georgian aristocracy.



Figure 13 Mtskheta tomb

The remains of foundations in Nekresi of a very specific plan structure dated to the third century AD. It is not clear what was a function of this structure, but the plan is of four basilica-like structures surrounding the square central structure. It seems that this structure might have had an impact on the architecture of the following, early medieval

or Christian, period.



Figure 14 Nekresi, foundations of pre-Christian building

Medieval Georgian architecture

In the 337 BC Christianity was declared by the king Mirian as an official state religion and from this time a new era in Georgian history and its architecture began. At the same time the Georgian alphabet was developed. Surprisingly, the oldest surviving Georgian inscription is not in the territory of Georgia, but in Palestine in the Judean desert where the Georgian monastery Bir-el Qut (modern name of the site) was founded. This inscription was incorporated in a mosaic floor.

Another big event was the moving of the capital of Georgia in the fifth century, in the time of the King Vakhtang Gorgasali, from Mtskheta into Tbilisi where it has remained ever since. Thus, different structures like the fortress Narikala, churches, palaces and lesser dwellings begun to appear from this time onwards in Tbilisi.

With the Christianisation of Georgia the character of religious buildings changed dramatically. The new religion demanded new buildings and basilica-type churches spread widely between the late fourth and sixth centuries. It is worth noting that with

the arrival of Christianity not only the type of religious structures but also their methods of construction were substantially altered. In the Hellenistic and late antique periods temples in Georgia were built mainly from mud brick with some carved stone elements such as capitals or bases, but from the early medieval period onwards masonry was used for church building.

It should be noted that the survival rate of the various kinds of structures is strikingly different. We have many examples of ecclesiastical architecture, and a relatively large number of fortification structures; but by contrast, examples of secular architecture have survived only rarely and as a rule the quality of preservation is poor. Consequently, the development of the study of Georgian ecclesiastical history and the history of secular architecture has been different. We can determine an almost full picture of the development of church architecture, but have many gaps in knowledge of secular architecture. So, in fact, a study of medieval Georgian architecture is in reality a study of the history of ecclesiastical architecture.

One of the most magnificent examples of early medieval churches is the biggest basilica of that period, Bolnisis Sioni (478-493). It shows some motives in common with early medieval Syrian churches, but at the same time it bears many local features.

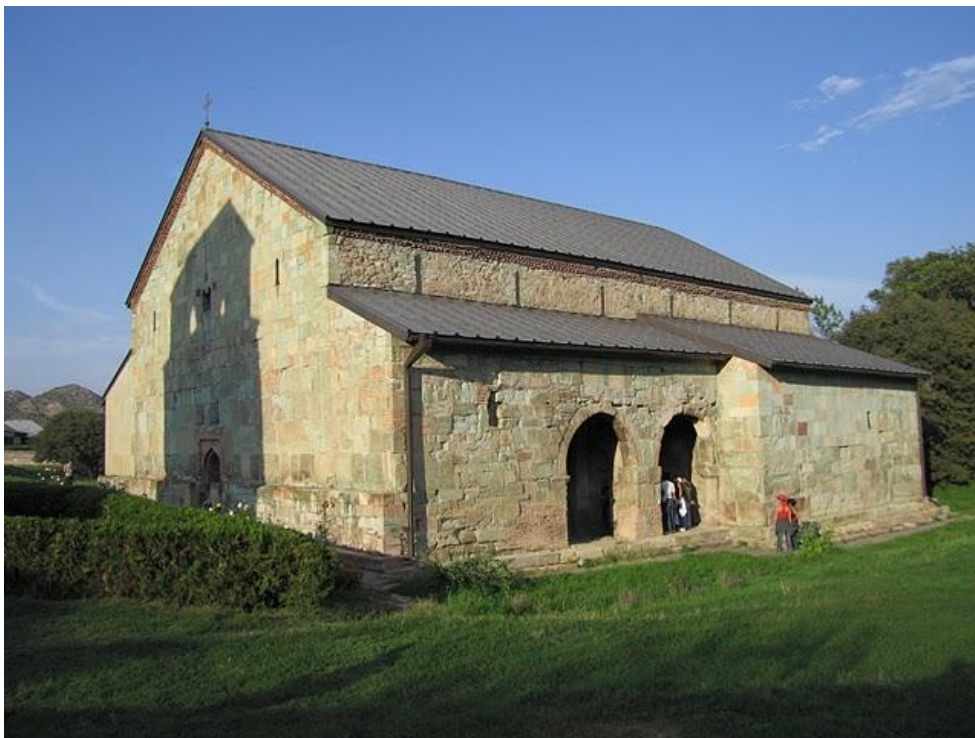


Figure 15 Bolnisis Sioni

Good examples of the early medieval three-nave basilica are the sixth century basilicas in Anchiskhati in Tbilisi and Urbnisi. Both of them have horseshoe arches and an apse plan form, as in other comparable early churches. The horseshoe form is specifically characteristic of early medieval monuments.



Figure 16 Anchiskhati

It has to be mentioned that basilican churches in Georgia were built right up to the eleventh century. The last big basilica, Othkhtha eklesia, was built in the south province of Georgia, Tao-Klardjethi (now the territory of Turkey). From then on we encounter only domed or simple one-nave churches.

From the end of the sixth century domed churches, having centrally placed domes and four-apses, began to predominate in Georgian architecture. The outstanding example of this type of church is Djvari in Mtskheta (Holy Cross of Mtskheta), built in 586-604 by *eristavis* Guaram and Stepanoz on the place of a pre-Christian structure possibly pagan temple. It stands on the crest of the hill and looks down towards Mtskheta and the main cathedral of Georgia Svetitskhoveli. On this place at the edge of the cliff stood a wooden cross from fourth century AD which, according to ecclesiastical tradition, was miraculous and associated with the name of Saint Nino who converted Georgia to Christianity. It was a difficult task to build a church around the cross and also to

emphasize its miraculous powers, but the ancient architect solved the problem through great artistic flair and technical skill. He built a high sub-structure on the western edge of the cliff to support the west part of the church so the wooden cross would be positioned centrally in the church.

The composition of Djvari church is based on a central space with four apses each having square corner chambers. Thus the plan of the central space represents a cross, or in other words, depicts the idea of the Holy Cross. However, it is not only this that distinguishes Djvari of Mtskheta, but also its harmonious proportions, fine reliefs, quality craftsmanship and its remarkable compatibility with the surrounding area. The church's exterior fully follows the interior spaces all of which make Djvari of Mtskheta one of the finest examples of early medieval architecture in the world.



Figure 17 Djvari of Mtskheta

In the seventh century a church was built in Ateni (Gori region in central Georgia), as a replica of Djvari of Mtskheta. This is an early example of an architect, and maybe donor, copying a successful building. The church in Ateni was altered several times but its appearance changed substantially in the tenth century when the dome was rebuilt. In eleventh century magnificent mural paintings were painted in Ateni.

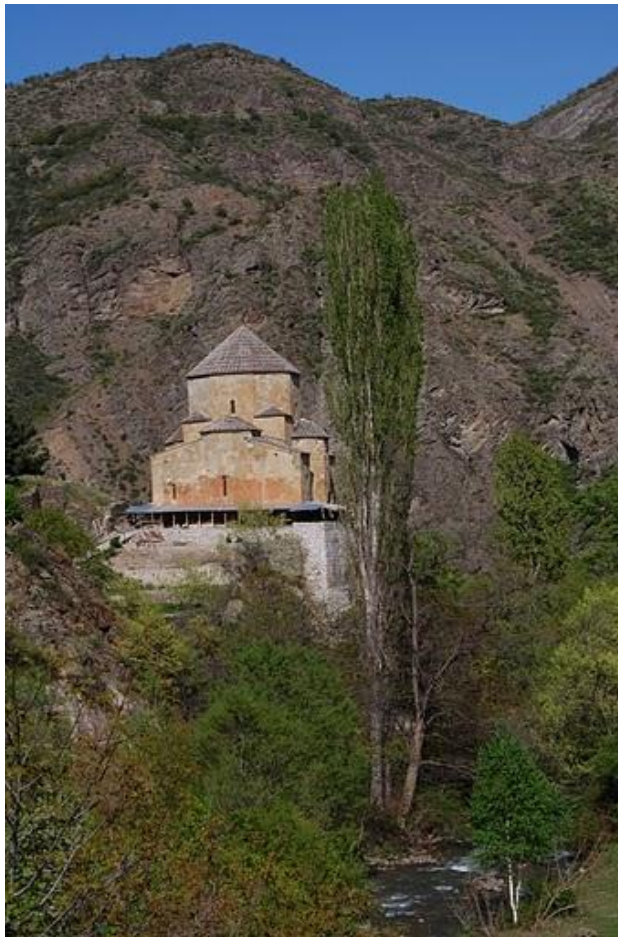


Figure 18 Ateni

There are some other examples of the Djvari type churches (e.g. Shuamtha, Martvili). It should be mentioned that churches of Djvari type are found only in Georgia and Armenia.

In the first part of the seventh century one of the most influential structures of the period was built - the church at Tsromi - which determined the course of future development in Georgian ecclesiastical architecture for centuries. In contrast with Djvari of Mtskheta which did not give any architectural evolution, in Tsromi an important new feature appeared. The dome is not supported by walls as in Djvari, but by four free standing piers. More attention is paid to the longitudinal axis and on the east elevation of the church two deep recesses appeared flanking the central window of the altar apse and thus emphasizing it. All these features were developed in later Georgian churches.



Figure 19 Tsromi

The eighth and ninth centuries in Georgian art historical literature are called a transition period. By this term scholars mean that the eighth and ninth centuries were the period of a quest or a period when architects were looking for new forms and ideas in ecclesiastical architecture. This process is reflected in the churches of Vachnadziani, where for the first time pendentive instead of squinches appeared, Gurdjaani, with double-dome roofing; unique in Georgia, Armazi, where the dome is hidden in the roof structure so that from the outside the church has a basilican appearance.



Figure 20 Gurjaani

In 963-973 the cathedral Oshki was built. It is one of the biggest Georgian churches with elaborate decoration and refined proportions. Oshki is a church of three-apse type with a long west arm, so that its longitudinal axis is emphasised. The dome is supported by four free standing piers.

The late tenth and eleventh centuries are the second golden age following the first peak of Georgian architecture in the seventh century. This was the period of a fully developed feudal society and strong unity of the country. It was accompanied by a flourishing of Georgian culture: theology, literature, science, goldsmith, painting, all reached a level of maturity and sophistication at this time.

During this period the leading type of ecclesiastical building was the domed church. The plan usually represents a cross inscribed in a rectangle, which is elongated on the east-west axis. The proportions become more elongated than in preceding periods, but harmony and balance between whole and its parts are conserved. The main dominant of church buildings is a high dome on a polygonal drum. The decorations of the exteriors are highly artistic using a wide range of decorative motifs, geometrical and organic. With the superb quality of stone carving the ancient builders achieved true effulgence. Superior quality was also achieved in the design and decoration of the carved stone altar screens, wooden carving and mural paintings. Since the end of the ninth century interiors of churches have been covered with frescoes.

In the beginning of eleventh century three cathedrals Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta, Bagrati in Kutaisi and Alaverdi in Kakheti were built in the central, western and eastern parts of Georgia. These cathedrals are undoubtedly landmarks of the epoch.

The main cathedral of Georgia Svetitskhoveli was built in 1010-1029 by an architect, Arsukisdze, on the site of the fourth century church built by King Mirian after his christening. This church was replaced with a large basilica by the king Vakhtang Gorgasali in the fifth century. Eventually Arsukisdze rebuilt the basilica with a new cathedral which since then has been the seat of the Catholicos of Georgia, the highest rank in the Georgian church.



Figure 21 Svetitskhiveli

Bagrati cathedral in Kutaisi was completed in 1003 but was severely damaged in the sixteenth century and has survived as a ruin. Even as a ruin it leaves an unforgettable impression, because of its strikingly harmonious proportions and high quality stone masonry and carving.



Figure 22 Bagrati

The cathedral at Alaverdi in eastern Georgian province Kakheti was built also in the beginning of the eleventh century. Unlike the cathedrals of Svetitskhoveli and Bagrati this cathedral's decoration is more modest and its principal effect is achieved by its harmonious proportions. It is the loftiest cathedral in Georgia.



Figure 23 Alaverdi

The church in Samtavisi, Kartli region was built In 1030. Its architecture determined the design of other Georgian churches for many centuries. Churches of this type are of comparatively modest size and are domed with nearly square plans. The domes are supported by two piers and projection of the altar apse. The decorated façades are rich and entirely cover the drums of the domes and the window surroundings. The façades are divided by decorative arches. The churches in Bethania, Pitarethi, Qvathakhevi, Ikortha were built in this way.



Figure 24 Samtavisi



Figure 25 Pitareti



Figure 26 Qvathakhevi

Many monasteries flourished in medieval Georgia as did some Georgian monasteries outside the country. In particular two cave monasteries should be noted: the biggest monastery in Georgia - David-Garedja in east Georgia and Vardzia in south-west Georgia. Both of them are distinguished by the highest quality mural paintings. In David-Garedja paintings from the ninth to the seventeenth century have survived. In Vardzia the main church was covered with magnificent frescos in twelfth century and it contains a contemporary portrait of the Queen Tamara, the most popular Queen of Georgia.



Figure 27 David-Gareja Monastery

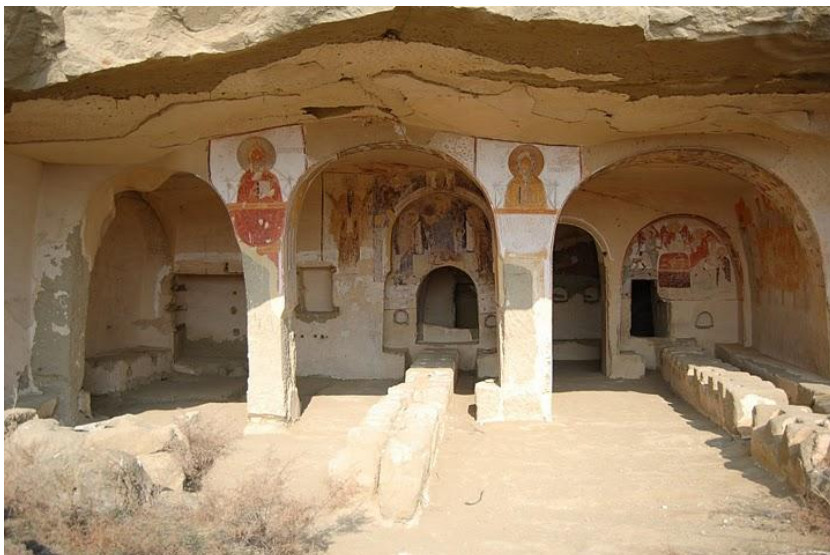


Figure 28 David-Gareja, Refectory



Figure 29 Vardzia

From the thirteenth century Georgia suffered from a series of devastating Mongol invasions and from then on the process of decline and disintegration of the Georgian kingdom began. In fourteenth and fifteenth centuries this process developed and eventually at the end of the fifteenth century, the Georgian kingdom split apart, into the kingdoms of Karthli, Kakhethi, Imerethi and the principality of Samtskhe. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the main strongholds of Christianity in the Near East, Georgia and Armenia, were encircled by hostile Muslim countries. Naturally, the changing political situation was reflected in the quality and quantity of architectural monuments.

The Methekhi church in Tbilisi and the main churches in Zarzma and Safara monasteries have survived from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These monuments are the best examples of the period, but even here, the decline of artistic value is clearly seen. The design of the decoration is less interesting and it suffers from a loss of vitality and schematisation.



Figure 30 Methekhi



Figure 31 Zarzma

We have only few examples of surviving structures from the fifteenth century. It is only

in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that new structures, began to be built although efforts were mostly concentrated on restoration of existing structures after the devastation of the fifteenth century. The situation in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was not favourable for large scale building activity. Georgia was in permanent state of war with both the Ottoman empire and Iran. The conditions became worse because of struggles between the semi-independent principalities within Georgia. Despite this, however, some rather interesting structures were built, for instance, the fortified castle at Ananuri, where the major and minor domed churches are surrounded by strong stone -built ramparts with multi-storey dwelling towers.



Figure 32 Ananuri

Another interesting example is the city of Gremi, the capital of the eastern-Georgian Kakhethian kingdom in sixteenth century. Here remains of churches, trading arcades, baths and dwellings have survived. On the hill above the city the brick domed church, built in 1565, and a good example of the architecture of the period is set. This church in common with some other structures shows the influence of Persian architecture. This impact is seen in the use of bricks instead of traditional ashlar masonry and in decoration and structural elements, especially in arcades and vaults. Instead of semi-circular arches and vaults as used in previous periods, pointed arches, now became popular. These are the most common form found in Islamic architecture.



Figure 33 Gremi

In 1801 the Russians abolished the Georgian kingdom and incorporated Georgia into its Empire as a province. Thus the architectural style of Russian Classicism was established in nineteenth century Georgia. The main emphasis in building activity was on urban construction. All public buildings of that period followed the Russian classical style, while private houses in the cities adopted a different approach. Here the façades were built in classical style, but traditional elements such as balconies and courtyard verandas were also incorporated.