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Medieval Art and Architecture on the Territories of Conflict Regions of Georgia –

Shida (Inner) Kartli

The Georgian territory called South Osetia, which is occupied by the Russians today, is an inseparable part of the Georgian historical region Shida (Inner) Kartli. It is situated in the middle and upper parts of the Prone, Liakhvi, Lekhura and Ksani valleys and embraces Qornisi, Tskhinvali, Djava and Akhagori districts. This region, which is not detached from the rest of Shida Kartli by a natural border and is a mountainous part of Shida Kartli, is full of Medieval architectural monuments. These monuments are similar to those preserved in the other parts of Shida Kartli and are characterized by typical Georgian appearance.

The mountainous part of Shida Kartli represents the whole spectrum of architectural types common to Georgia from the end of the 5th century to the Late Middle Ages inclusive. There are Early Medieval three-nave basilicas (Nikozi) and hall-type churches (Mosabruni) as well as monuments of the transition period (Tsirkoli, Armazi), domed buildings of the Middle Ages (Tighva, Ikorta) and Late Medieval religious and fortification constructions (Kulbiti, Beloti, Dzaghina) in the region. Their walls have preserved Georgian inscriptions that points to the fact that people residing here were ethnic Georgians and considered themselves a part of Georgian culture.

Thus, cultural monuments survived here (architecture, murals, chasing) are the outcome of creative work of the Georgian nation and are considered within the context of common Georgian culture.

The present report represents only the most significant monuments of the Middle Ages located on the territory.

The Episcopal cathedral of Ghvtaeba (Deity) at Nikozi situated in the Liakhvi Valley is an ancient spiritual center. There rests the body of Saint Razhden, tortured by the Persians in the fifth century. Saint Razhden, Persian by origin, who brought up the wife of the Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali, was tortured by his countrymen for adopting Christian faith. Vakhtang buried the relics of Saint Razhden in Nikozi, where later, at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century a three-nave basilica - the Episcopal church - was built. The eastern façade of the Nikozi church preserves an inscription of the first bishop of Nikozi – Zachariah - executed in *asomtavruli* (capital) script. The church underwent fundamental alterations in the 14th -15th centuries, when the badly damaged three-nave basilica was converted to a cross-dome church. Repair works were carried out at the church in 1888-1896 too and the initiator of these works was Giorgi Sadzaglishvili, the future Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Kirion, who came from Nikozi.

East of the Nikozi church the Episcopal Palace of the 9th -10th centuries has survived, whose gate decor reminds us of the embellishment of the refectory door of the Kalauri monastery (9th century) in

Kakheti, the extreme eastern region of Georgia. In 2006-2008, the Nikozi Episcopal Palace was repaired and roofed. However, the rehabilitated building was destroyed by dozens of bombs dropped from the Russian aircraft at the beginning of August 2008.

There is a small-size domed church of the Archangels situated near the Ghvtaeba church. The bishop of Nikozi Michael built it as his own shrine at the end of the tenth century. This wonderful church of *kuppel-halle* type must have been built by an architect who came from Tao-Klarjeti, a historical region of Georgia, now on the territory of Turkey.

Early medieval monuments have been preserved in the Ksani Valley too: the newly restored Mosabruni church belongs to the seventh century. By its masonry of pebble stone arranged horizontally it reminds us of the monuments from Kakheti. Remains of the church with projecting apse at village Korintha belongs to the same period.

In the 8th -9th centuries, an Arab emir established himself in Tbilisi and, consequently, the hearths of Georgian creative activities moved from central regions of Georgia to its peripheries that were less accessible for the Arabs. In the architecture of these times, audacious attempts and strivings of architects are observed, due to which this period is often referred to as the epoch of strivings. In the highlands of Shida Kartli, in the valleys of the rivers Ksani and Rekhula several landmark monuments have been preserved, the most remarkable among them being the Virgin's church at Tsirkoli and St. George's church at Armazi, which have survived almost in the original shape. They are remarkable for the fact that their central space is covered with a dome, while on the exterior they are screened by a saddle roof like ordinary hall-type churches. The St. George's church at Armazi has an inscription dated by 864 that mentions Abbot Giorgi. In both of these churches fragments of ancient murals have survived: in Armazi there is a painted altar screen representing three youths (9th century), while at Tsirkoli there are fragments of the archaic version of the composition of the Nativity and representations of saint sisters (10th century).

The domed church of the Kabeni church at Qanchaeti is an interesting monument of this epoch. It was built in the ninth century and was substantially repaired in the 10th and the 13th centuries. Fragments of murals have survived in this church as well.

A church of the Bieti monastery partly carved in rock is situated in the Mejuda valley. Its donor's inscription mentions Duke of the Dukes Ioane, one of the first representatives of the Qanchaelis' feudal house (9th century).

The Inauri church, situated in the Patara Liakhvi valley, is dated to the eighth-ninth centuries. Its dome is located under the saddle roof, like the one at Tsirkoli and Armazi. The Kusireti church near village Tamarasheni, which is a reminiscent of the Armazi church by its décor, is also very interesting as well as the St. George's church of Kemerti, which was destroyed by the earthquake in 1991 and restored in 1994, where fragments of ancient wall-painting were recorded. The richly decorated altar screen slabs of the tenth century, which bear certain proximity to the decoration of the ones from Potoleti (the Borjomi valley), are also preserved in this church.

In the second half of the ninth century, a powerful family of the Tbelis became preeminent in Shida Kartli. At the beginning of the tenth century Ivane Tbeli was the governor of Kartli, which we learn from the inscription of St. George's church at Eredvi dated by 906. This important inscription of Eredvi, carved upon the column of the church gate, is a historic source containing substantial information where the story of the military march of the west-Georgian king Constantine in Hereti is also described.

A number of churches were built in the estate of the Tbelis over the tenth century. The most remarkable among them are the Tbeti Bortsvishvari, Dodoti Tskhrakara, Kheiti Sabatsminda. The ruins of the latter impress a beholder with the pier of the gate and a skillfully carved volute capital. This church stands out with the original treatment of planning, which is the combination of a domed building of *crois-libre* type and a basilica. There are two more churches of the same planning in different regions of Georgia: the Shoreti church in Samtskhe and Khobi in Samegrelo.

In the area of Kudaro (the Jejora valley), hall-type churches with annexes dated to the second half of the tenth century survived: Nadarbazevi, Kasagina, Kvaisi Jvari. They are remarkable for their walls with rich ornamental décor and with Georgian inscriptions and relief compositions. These monuments at Kudaro comprise a compact group characterized by similar manner of carving, which allows Prof. Natela Aladashvili to discuss a regional school of relief sculpting - the so called "Kudaro school".

Only one of these reliefs is preserved at the Georgian National Museum; the fate of the rest is unclear.

In old villages of Shida Kartli there are numerous tenth century monuments – ordinary rural hall-type churches of simple planning. On scrutinizing the standard of building and the style of the décor of these churches, it becomes obvious that they were built not by professional architects but employing local sources, by the country "self-taught" builders. Such churches usually had many sponsors, which was often recorded in the inscriptions carved on the walls of the churches. The following, for example, make up such a group: Arbo, Vanati, Disevi. Churches scattered in various districts of village Kheiti were definitely built by the same group of builders.

In the village of Tighva in the Prone valley there has survived a domed church - one of the masterpieces of Georgian architecture, built in 1152. According to an ancient Georgian historian, the Queen of Shirvan Tamar, the daughter of the king of Georgia David the Builder (1089-1125), built it. Tamar's name is mentioned in the inscription carved on the northern wall of church.

Modesty that was unusual for the twelfth century Georgian architecture is the peculiarity of the Tighva church, which Professor Leo Rcheulishvili explains by the spiritual condition of the widowed Queen of Shirvan Tamar. The Tighva church impresses a beholder by perfection and proportions of architectural forms. Its large upper floor gallery, which is a strong accent of the interior of the church, was the place used by Tamar, already a nun, for attending a service.

In 1172, twenty years after building the Tighva church, a domed church of the Archangel was built at Ikorta, which, unlike Tighva, is one of the churches distinctly ornamented with architectural décor. Its facades are formed with continuous decorative arches. Eastern façade, which is the imitation of the composition of the east façade of the Samtavisi church (1030) and is its closest parallel, represents a

monumental cross embellished with shafts and rhombs. Fragmentary inscriptions say that the builders of Ikorta were Duke of the Dukes Vardan, also Arsen, Basil and others.

Walls of the church have preserved fragments of the 13th century high-class wall-painting. The Virgin with Child is represented in the conch.

By the late Medieval epoch the Ikorta church had turned into the crypt of the Ksani dukes. Here lie buried the heroes of the Kakheti rebellion of 1659, saint dukes Shalva, Elizbar and Bidzina Choloqashvili, who had been tortured in Iran.

In 1991 the earthquake caused damage to the Ikorta church - the dome was destroyed, the body of the church was cracked. Conservation works started in 1998 and the church was completely restored.

The occupied territory of Shida Kartli preserves numerous monuments of the period of cultural rise in the history of Georgia (12th -13th cc). The ninth century Kaben church, situated in the Ksani valley, was completely altered and decorated with murals. Eastern façade of the church was ornamented with a monumental cross and decorative rhombs.

The analogous composition (but without rhombs) is repeated on the eastern façade of the hall-type Khopa monastery standing in the wood near village Mosabruni in the Ksani valley. This church was built in the 20s of the 13th century and is complicated with annexes and gates; a large refectory built with pebbles is situated to the west.

The Tiri church of the Virgin standing next to the rock is situated in the Liakhvi valley. It consists of a hall-type church (end of the 13th century), a bell-tower (the 14th century), a refectory and monks' cells. Fragments of the 14th -15th centuries have survived on the walls of the beautifully decorated church. A richly ornamented chancel screen beautifies the altar. The church is the resting place of Prince Rostom, son of Vakhtang VI. Here are inscriptions of Tavkhelidzes, Taktakidzes and Machabelis.

Constructions of the architectural type of a three-nave basilica are rarely built in Georgia after the tenth century. At the watershed of the Patara Liakhvi and Mejuda two 13th -14th cc three-nave basilicas – Charebi and Klivana are situated.

The Tsunari domed church belongs to the 14th century (presently village Tsunari is called Khetagurovo). By its proportions and décor it resembles its contemporary monuments located in other parts of Georgia

In the highlands of Shida Kartli numerous late Medieval monuments – religious and secular buildings – have been preserved.

A big-size domed church of the Virgin built in 1718 stands in the center of Tskhinvali. Its building inscription mentions donors Kaikhosro and Parsadan and Kaikhosro's son Givi.

The Kulbiti church of the Virgin of *kuppel-halle* type is dated by the 18th century. It has carved crosses and animal representations preserved on its walls. Its décor is reminiscent of late medieval architectural monuments. Some researchers think that the builder of the Kulbiti church of the Virgin

took the tenth century Archangels' church of Nikozi as a sample. There are graves of Georgian noblemen- Luarsab (1794) and Dimitri (1818) Cherkezishvili in the church.

The residence of the dukes of Ksani – Largvisi – is mentioned in the chronicles. Largvisi is a compound architectural complex consisting of the Saint Theodore's church, an outer wall with a gate and a residential tower of the 13th -14th centuries. The central building – a large domed church of St. Theodore was built over the old church by the Duke of Ksani David and his mother Ketevan in 1759. In terms of proportions and ornamental décor this church is one of the most remarkable constructions of Medieval Georgian architecture.

In the highlands of Shida Kartli a number of secular buildings have been preserved – castles, towers and palaces.

On the verge of the 16th -17th centuries, the center of the Ksani dominion was moved to Akhlagori where a Georgian architectural ensemble of the 17th century has survived. It consists of three architectural complexes. The main complex includes a palace, an outer wall with towers and a bath. Originally, a two-storey palace built of brick stood here, which was re-made in the middle of the 19th century and was ornamented with tall columns and an open-work balcony was arranged on the upper floor. Today the palace houses the Museum of Local Lore, History and Economy. Rich collections of samples of ethnography, history and art are preserved in this museum. Particularly remarkable is the treasury of the museum, where first-class samples of medieval chasing art transferred from the churches of the Ksani valley are preserved. The collection represents big crosses for erecting in front of altars, chased icons and other ecclesiastical items.

The palace of the Palavandishvili family at Dzaghina belongs to the 17th century. It consists of a residential house built of brick and a five-storey tower. Its central hall decorated with lanceted niches flanked by small-size rooms from two sides is open towards the Prone valley through a deep balcony.

The Beloti Castle in the Patara Liakhvi Valley is definitely a defense shelter from the Lezghins and Osetians. There are an outer wall equipped with three towers, a residential house and a big-size hall-type church here. After abolishing the Ksani dominion in 1777 the Beloti Castle was owned by Prince Iulon and from 1802 Russian troops garrisoned here.

Thus, cultural monuments preserved on the occupied territories of Shida Kartli highlands are the creative outcome of Georgians - the autochthonous population residing on the territory and constitute an inseparable part of the general Georgian culture.