

## *History*

# Circassian Christian Churches and their Relation to Georgian Christian Architecture

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**The relationship between Georgia and Circassia has a centuries-old history. The relationship was mainly expressed in political and cultural activities including spread of Christianity and church architecture. Georgia as a strong leading Christian state in the Caucasus assumed the role of the defender of Christianity. From Georgia Christianity spread to Ingushetia, Dagestan and Circassia, where Georgian Christian churches were built, such as Tkhaba-Yerdy, Datuna, Shoana, Senty, Arkhyz. Along with the spread of church architecture, the Georgian language and alphabet were also spread there. Those territories were in the Diocese of the Georgian Christian Church, consequently, the liturgy was practiced in Georgian. That is evidenced by the Asomtavruli inscriptions and the books found in those churches. Tkhaba-Yerdy is a three-church basilica typical to Georgian architecture, and the Datuna church is a hall-type church like those built throughout Georgia. “Shoana” means Svani in Georgian language. The inscriptions found in Shoana contain the name of the King of Egris-Abkhazia, Leon III, confirming the influence of the Georgian kingdom on Circassia. The name of the church Senty is associated with the Georgian word “sveti” (pillar) like Svetitskhoveli. The two churches are Free-Cross type churches like the Tsromi church dating back to the seventh century. In Byzantium such architectural style appeared in the ninth century. This fact shows that the Byzantine Empire did not have as much influence on Circassia as Georgia. © 2021 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.**

Circassia, Church, Georgia

The relationship of Georgia with the peoples of the North Caucasus can be divided into two parts: the relationship with the Northeast Caucasus – Ingushetia, Dagestan, Ossetia, and the relationship with the Northwest Caucasus – Circassia and Balkaria. In the Northeast Caucasus the Christian architecture is mainly preserved in Ingushetia, Dagestan and North Ossetia (Dvaleti). Georgia's political and cultural relationship with Ingushetia

dates back to the time of the first Georgian King Pharnavaz. The Christian churches of Ingushetia Tkhaba-Yerdy, Gal-Yerdy, Magh-Yerdy, Albi-Yerdy, Delite are associated with Georgian church architecture. Ingushetian Christian monuments date back to 9-11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As of today, all monuments on the territory of Ingushetia are in the Jeirakh region bordering Georgia. Especially interesting is the Tkhaba-

Yerdy church, which has been long studied by Georgian and foreign scholars. The monument is a so-called 'three-church basilica' typical to Georgian architecture [1]. Among the Georgian inscriptions discovered during the research there is one on the western facade saying: "God Bless the Patriarch of the East, Melchizedek". Melchizedek was the first patriarch of Georgia. In addition, there is another interesting artifact showing the connection of the Tkhaba-Yerdy church to Georgia. A clay composition of the Tree of Life has a Georgian Asomtavruli inscription on it [2]. The artifact is considered lost today. The example of the Tkhaba-Yerdy church confirms the close relationship between Georgia and Ingushetia that formed the basis for the close kinship of the two peoples that grew stronger over the centuries.

In parallel to Ingushetia, Georgia had close spiritual and political ties with the people of Dagestan manifested in the relationship between the historical Avareti and the Kingdom of Kakheti dating back to 8-9<sup>th</sup> centuries [3]. The church in the village of Datuna on the historical territory of Avareti is the only Christian church in Dagestan today. According to the researchers, there were about three hundred churches in Dagestan, but today this is the only one survived. The church of Datuna is a single-nave hall-type church. By the concept of the plan, partitioning of the inner walls and some other architectural features it is organically connected to the Christian architecture of Georgia of the 9-11<sup>th</sup> centuries [4]. Another feature of the Datuna church is the presence of additional elongated staircases in the wall, which are found only in Georgian churches of the 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as: Ekhvevi, Arbo, Shida Kartli Vanati, Disevi, Z/Karabulakhi, Satkhe. The same element is found in Khozita Mair am Church of the first half of 11<sup>th</sup> century, in Dvaleti. Also, lots of Georgian Asomtavruli inscriptions are found in Dagestan.

Historically Dvaleti region was a part of Georgia but since 1921 it is a part of the Republic

of North Ossetia, the Russian Federation. There are several Christian churches in Dvaleti such as Khozita Mad-Mairam church, Tli church and Nuzali church dating back to 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries [5].

Studying the long-lasting relationship between Georgia and the Northeast Caucasus it is worth noting that along with Christianity the Georgian language and alphabet were actively spread among those peoples. Georgian theological books discovered there confirm the relationships discussed in the present paper. For centuries Georgia was the central state in the entire Caucasus that is confirmed by the study of the church architecture remained in the North Caucasus.

## Materials and Discussion

The study of the Christian Churches existing in the Republic of Circassia is of special interest today. Scholars consider that the ecclesiastical centers of the tenth century such as Shoana, Senty and the Middle and Upper Zelenchuk churches in the city of Arkhyz have close connection with the architecture of Abkhazia and the Byzantium. Many foreign researchers worked there at different time studying those churches (Vinogradov, Beletski, Kuznetsov), but they were not studied by Georgian scholars, though they studied the monuments in Ingushetia, Dvaleti and Dagestan.

Scholars of different academic schools have different ideas about the origin of the peoples of Circassia. Russian scholars write that the area was inhabited by Alans from the very beginning, and then there came the Balkarians and Circassians. According to them, they were the people who constructed those churches, but according to the Georgian scholars the area where the churches are built was inhabited by Georgians, namely by Svans, since ancient times. That is proved by number of toponyms and historical materials. In the National Archives of Georgia, there is kept a letter to Baron Rozen written by Digorkhan Dadashkeliani – Gardapkhadze, the widow of the principal of Svaneti. Her title was the ruler of the river Baksan,

Kuban, Dali and Angur. The author of the letter asks Baron Rozen to restore historical justice. The letter describes the history of the annexation of the territories of Svaneti by the Russian Empire in the 30s of the 19th century [6]. Those were the territories, where the above churches are built.

Until 1834, quite a large territory (Svaneti province and some Svan communities) on the banks of the river Terek (Tergi) as well as the territories of Kuban and Baksan was owned by Georgia. The Dadeshkelians regarded Urusbevio, the northernmost point of the Svaneti principality to be property, and the space from Elbrus to Chegem was considered as the territory of Georgia. In 1834, a military officer I. Shakhovski sent by Baron Rozen, to describe the borders of Svaneti defined the areas of Svaneti on each side [7].

According to the historical sources the area was a part of Georgia until 1834. Apparently, over the centuries, the situation changed in that area. According to the latest information, the territory must be a part of Georgia [6].

The Kingdom of the Abkhazia always had close political and cultural relationship with the people of Circassia. After the spread of Christianity, the Abkhaz coastline and Lazika had close relationship with the Eastern Rome, and then with the Byzantine world.

The first preacher of Christianity in Georgia and in the Caucasus, in general, was Apostle Andrew or Andrew the First-Called, as he is known in Georgia. After declaring Christianity as the state religion in Kartli, it was spread in western Georgia from the Byzantium as well as from Kartli. Byzantium led western Georgia to the jurisdiction of the Constantinople Patriarchate. At the first stage, in Abkhazia and in the North Caucasus the Christianity was spread from Byzantium. However, in the 10th century the situation changed. The letter of Nicholas Mystikos, the Patriarch of Constantinople written to Giorgi II (923-957) the king of the Egris-Abkhazia says [8]: “Your piety and irreproachable behavior inflamed our love to

you, the proof of your piety is your attitude to the Alans, you enlightened the ruler of Alans, and all, who were worth of the Holy Epiphany”. According to the letter, it is clear that King Giorgi II had a great role in Christianization of the Alans. Obviously, it was not only the spread of Christianity. King Giorgi II wanted politically to subjugate the territory of Alans and gain influence over the Caucasus.

Georgian kings continued relationship with Egris-Abkhazia extending their relations to the Ingushia, Dagestan, Ossetia and Circassia. The proof is the spread of Georgian language and script there.

The study of churches in Circassia started in the 30s of the 19th century. German architect Joseph Bernardacci was the first who described those chapels. Traveling in the region by the order of the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs, he published his report in the Journal of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1830 [9]. The question of Christianity became active in the North Caucasus during the Caucasian wars. Apparently, the Russian authorities tried to use that in their favor and activated the research of the Christian trace.

There are some churches found in Arkhyz (Great Zelenchuk), in Labi and in Teberda. They were built mainly under the influence of the kings of Egris-Abkhazia, through the effort of Constantine III (893-922) and his son George II. All the churches are located high in the mountains near the passes leading to the Abkhazian kingdom, 80-100 km away from the Abkhazian churches [10].

The Shoana church is located on the left bank of the Kuban River, 7 km away to the north from the city of Karachayevsk, on the mountain of the same name. It is also known as “Khumara”. The monument was first mentioned by Klaproth and was first described by Bernardacci in 1829. It is a cross-type building, with three ledges in the east: an altar and pastophorions. There are four, square-shaped ramparts in the center bearing the dome. From the north and south it has small extensions. From the west side of the church there is built a

pillar wall. The length of the church is 12.90 m, the width 8.90 m and the height 12 m [11].

The church has three entrances from the north, south and west, but the west door is locked and there is no gateway, neither in the north side and not in the south, apparently because of the lack of space. The western wall is too close to the rock.

The cathedral dome is octagonal, which has a frieze with the arches in its upper part. It can be compared with the octagonal dome of the Telovani's Jvarpatiosani (8-9<sup>th</sup> centuries) where the arches for decoration appear for the first time.

In the interior, to the right of the altar there is depicted a cross, which has a Greek inscription: “ok Evon Λογ Λεόνε” – the inscription is incomplete. It was found by Vladimir Kuznetsov's expedition. Presumably, the inscription says “Slave of God Leon” [11]. In that period, when the cathedral was built, there was only one Leon - that was Leon III (957-967), the king of the Egris-Abkhazia. However, the author avoids talking about Leon III and tries to find the person with the same name in the Byzantine Empire [12].

The architectural feature of the church is associated with Georgian architecture, for example, the building materials and the facade are like those of Georgian. The plan of the church is like the church of Bzyb, in Abkhazia and the elements of the decor look like those of Telovani church of the Holy Cross (Jvarpatiosani).

The church of Shoana dates back to 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries and is named after Saint George. Supposedly, it was the residence of the Bishop and was a part of the monastery complex. There are some tombs on its vast territory. Considering the inscriptions and architectural landmarks found during the study of the cathedral, the building can be dated by the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in particular, around 960-970.

About 25 km away from the Shoana church there is Senty church located on the banks of the River Teberda near the village of the same name Teberda. The chapel is located at an elevated place

on the hill. According to locals, Senty was called a stone monument that had a human image and was kept in the monastery. The word “senty” must mean the same as “pillar” (“sveti”) in Georgian [13]. Just like Shoana, the Cathedral of Senty was first studied by German architect Bernardacci in 1829 by the order of General Emanuel. Diachkov-Tarasov, who also studied the cathedral, notes that the word “senty” means column: “In Georgian “senty” is the column; the Georgians brought the Christianity and the Holiness here, which was then spread to the local population” [14].

Senty is a free-cross type church with three wings - west, north and south. It is built with cut reddish sandstone – bricks are not used; the interior is not divided. The apse of the church is semicircular and is about 2 meters away from the main part. The church has a narthex; the tholobate is of a conical and circular shape. All three front doors have semicircular windows on top. To the east the apse of the altar is covered with a conch. Its three windows are covered with blocks cut into arch shapes and forming an archivolt. The facade walls are covered with simple cornices; the old church was whitewashed, and the roof was covered with tiles. Schteder believed that the chapel was covered with a roof from the very beginning [15].

It should be noted that the Senty church does not have a square form under the dome. The simplicity of the church plan is expressed in the absence of the pilasters; the supporting arches rest directly on the walls. The stepped supporting arches and a flat niche in the key stone inside the box arch are very interesting. The ogees arch is also worth mentioning.

The walls are painted; they are arranged in two tiers; the upper tier is separated from the bottom with two straight parallel lines, including the spiral ornament. Mostly, red and blue pigments are used for painting.

The central part of the altar had been covered by the image of the Mother of God; unfortunately, the image is completely removed from the altar and most likely is lost. There are the warrior's armor and

a spear, the guardians of the famous altar and four images of the Holy Fathers from the Bible on the right side. On the right wall of the West side, on the upper tier, there is the scene of entering Jerusalem; one of the Holy Fathers on the lower tier must have the Bible in his hands.

On the upper south wall there are two scenes depicted: transfiguration to the right and a warrior with a spear in his hand to the left [14].

Among the frescoes there used to be some inscriptions, according to which the church was dated to 965. The inscriptions mentioned Nicephorus the Emperor of Byzantine, also David and Maria, the rulers of Alanya. However, their identity is not specified in scientific literature. It should be noted that the inscriptions are lost for today and can be considered only basing on the authors who had seen and studied them.

Some cross-domed churches are found in the city of Arkhyz known as the Middle and Upper Zelenchuk churches. The first one is the middle-Arkhyz church.

The Middle Zelenchuk church in Arkhyz is a free-cross type church. The supporting piers of the dome are hardly separated from the walls; they form a square under the dome. The pendentives join the piers to the dome. The apses on the outside are semicircular. There is a porch in the west that seems to have been closed from the very beginning.

The tholobate of the eight-windowed cylindrical dome of the church is the largest among those of the other churches in Alanya. The dome rests on supporting arches that narrow slightly towards the center and have a stepped form. They are joined to tholobate of the dome by means of the pendentives. The church was illuminated through eight windows. Some researchers believe that the church has two construction periods. According to the trace of painting inside the cathedral the first

stage is dated back to the 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the second to the 11-12<sup>th</sup>. Apparently, that was a cathedral church of Arkhyz [15].

The Upper Zelenchuk Church is the second church in Arkhyz located about 2 km away from the Middle Zelenchuk church. It is a cross-type church with three porches; on the east side there are three semicircular vaults, with an average dome. It is like the Lykhny church in Abkhazia by the arrangement of the altar with three semicircular vaults on the east side. The south porch is very close to the corner, as in the Lykhny church. Supposedly, the cathedral of the Arkhyz was based on the Church of Lykhny [10]. It is noteworthy that Zelenchuk churches were the parts of a monastery complex, and of them the Middle Zelenchuk was the Cathedral church.

## Conclusion

Thus, the people of Georgia and the North Caucasus (Ingushetia, Dagestan, Osetia and Circassia) have historical connections, which is confirmed by historical materials (written sources, inscriptions) and architectural monuments considered above. According to historical sources, Georgia has centuries-old connections with the North Caucasian peoples and has a great role in their conversion to Christianity, material proves of which are the churches existing there. The study of the above churches confirms their connection with the Georgian architecture, especially with the Abkhazian churches.

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ისტორია

## ჩერქეზეთის ქრისტიანული ეკლესიები და მათი კავშირი ქართულ ქრისტიანულ არქიტექტურასთან

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(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის დ. მუსხელიშვილის მიერ)

საქართველოსა და ჩერქეზეთის ურთიერთობა საუკუნეებს მოიცავს. ეს ურთიერთობა ძირითადად გამოიხატებოდა პოლიტიკური და კულტურული აქტიურობებით, მათ შორის, ქრისტიანობის გავრცელებით და საეკლესიო არქიტექტურით. კავკასიაში საქართველოს ქრისტიანულ, ძლიერ და წამყვან სახელმწიფოდ ჩამოყალიბების შემდეგ, ჩვენმა ქვეყანამ თავის თავზე აიღო ქრისტიანობის დამცველის როლი. საქართველოდან ქრისტიანობა ვრცელდებოდა ინგუშეთში, დაღესტანსა და ჩერქეზეთში. აქ შენდებოდა ქართული ეკლესიები – ტყობა-ერდი, დათუნას ეკლესია, შუანა, სენტი, არხიზი. საეკლესიო არქიტექტურის მშენებლობის პარალელურად აქ ვრცელდებოდა ქართული ენა და დამწერლობა. ეს ტერიტორიები საქართველოს ქრისტიანული ეკლესიის ეპარქიების შემადგენლობაში შედიოდა. შესაბამისად წირვა-ლოცვა დიდი ხნის განმავლობაში სწორედ ქართულად აღევლინებოდა, ამის დასტურია ის ასომთავრული წარწერები და წიგნები, რაც ეკლესიების შესწავლისას არის აღმოჩენილი. ტყობა-ერდი არის სამეკლესიანი ბაზილიკა, რომლის არქიტექტურული ტიპი საქართველოში ჩამოყალიბდა. დათუნას ეკლესია არის დარბაზული ეკლესია, რომლის მსგავსი ყოველთვის შენდებოდა საქართველოს ტერიტორიაზე. შუანა იგივე სვანს ნიშნავს, მისი შესწავლისას აღმოჩნდა წარწერა, სადაც მოხსენიებულია ეგრის-აფხაზეთის მეფე ლეონ მესამე, რაც ადასტურებს ამ ქართული სამეფოს გავლენას ჩერქეზეთში. სენტი ქართულ სვეტს, სვეტიცხოველს უკავშირდება. ორივე ეს ეკლესია თავისუფალი ჯვრის ტიპის ეკლესიებია, რომელთა მსგავსი, პირველი არქიტექტურული ნიმუშია წრომის ეკლესია, რომელიც მეშვიდე საუკუნითაა დათარიღებული. ბიზანტიაში ასეთი არქიტექტურული სტილის მშენებლობა მეცხრე საუკუნიდან იწყება. ეს არქიტექტურული ტიპი დადასტურებაა იმისა, რომ ბიზანტიის იმპერიას არ ჰქონდა ისეთი დიდი გავლენა ჩერქეზეთში, როგორც საქართველოს.

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