

History

New Observations on the History of the Tsaishi Cathedral from the Ancient Capitals to the Christian Iconostasis

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This paper explores the fascinating history of the Tsaishi Cathedral in Western Georgia, with a focus on the discovery and analysis of six white marble capitals found on the Cathedral grounds. The study, conducted between the years 2014 and 2017, reveals the unique features of these Corinthian-style capitals, including intricate acanthus leaf carvings and floral ornaments. The research delves into the restoration process that led to the relocation of the pillars to a museum, allowing for a detailed examination of their artistic elements. The study presents various hypotheses regarding the purpose and origin of the Tsaishi Cathedral. The captivating findings emphasize the significance of Tsaishi as a religious hub and its evolution through different historical periods. Finally, the marble capitals, now housed in the Art Palace, are highlighted as invaluable works of art deserving ongoing care and attention. © 2024 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

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One of the most remarkable cathedrals in Western Georgia, and particularly in Mingrelia, is the Tsaishi Cathedral. Its lengthy and varied history is full of intriguing occurrences. We present some of the facts discovered between the years 2014 and 2017 to demonstrate the previous assertion.

A pair of huge, two-meter-tall marble pillars were once connected to the altar's walls in the corners of the deacon's house and sacristy, where the Cathedral's current iconostasis now stands. These wide columns had ends made of marble that were equally large. The capitals' bases had slightly lower dimensions than the poles they were attached

to. As a result, generally speaking, the proportionate discrepancy between the pillars and capitals was clearly obvious and suggested that the marble embellishment was an afterthought. When the possibility of building a new iconostasis in the Tsaishi Cathedral came up in 2015 during the restoration process, the restorers made decision to dismantle the pillars and capitals and prepare them for transfer to the museum. The western area of the Cathedral was where special artifacts were stored. Due to this circumstance, we were able to analyze these architectural elements more thoroughly and come to some important conclusions [1].

It seemed we were dealing with wonderful pieces of beautiful white marble by looking at and photographing the large capitals in the daytime. These capitals are of the Corinthian style and are surrounded by two rows of stylized acanthus leaves. The column head is defined by three huge stacked leaves on each of the four sides.

Three capitals were constructed at the time in an old iconostasis; all three are Corinthian. While the leaves of one plant are delicate and graceful, those of the other two have more dense carvings that could be considered to be overly relief. On the front of the column, an ornament in the shape of a star is positioned between two acanthus leaves.

We were able to capture a pretty extraordinary moment because of the removal of the column heads from the previous iconostasis. It is known, in particular, that the Greeks and Romans painted capitals and other architectural features made of marble with considerable ability and elegance. For instance, the Parthenon in Athens and the Arch of Constantine in Rome both had colored capitals. The capitals of Tsaishi present identical circumstances; on one of them, acanthus leaves are painted with such skill that it cannot be determined that the capitals were painted contemporaneously, and on the other, flower ornaments painted with red and blue paint are simply tailored to the stone, leading us to believe that it occurred later (possibly in the early Christian period) even in old age. As a result, these exceptional finds have preserved the simple beauty of old art as well as its peculiar appeal. It is obvious that we are dealing with a very early period of pillar painting and that the installation prompted the painting to be preserved until this day because the floral ornament has only been preserved on one part of the capital, namely on the side where it was built into the wall.

It is important to note that the marble capitals were not only found on the sanctuary walls in Tsaishi. Irakli Zambakhidze, the deputy director of the museum joined the expedition of the Art Palace in 2015 as they set up another capital in the

yard close to the cathedral bell tower. We don't know when or how these artifacts were discovered in the churchyard, but it was obvious that they needed care due to their condition, and their importance called for their transfer to the museum. We relocated the marble capital to the Art Palace after reaching an arrangement with Father Zabulon, the Cathedral's head. It turns out that we have been involved with yet another gorgeous architectural detail after proper processing and cleaning. Although more elongated and sparsely ornamented, the capital is Corinthian in this case as well. Large acanthus leaves are stacked in a row that serves as the carving, between which the star-shaped flower adornment is clearly seen.

The so-called "Corinthian capitals" are a different variety of marble we located. Here, acanthus leaves are utilized as well as ornamentation, and a star-shaped flower serves as the embellishment between the two little column heads.

Thus, a total of six white marble capitals have been found on the grounds of the Tsaishi architectural complex; three of them are substantial, classical capitals that are lavishly decorated with acanthus leaves, and their correspondingly sizable marble columns have also been preserved. The third group consists of two little columns that are embellished with tiny acanthus leaf adornments. One capital is fixed only by the upper section and is comparatively simply ornamented.

A logical question arises as to what caused such an abundance of marble capitals of the ancient period in the territory of the Tsaishi Cathedral.

The first thing you may think of in this circumstance is a fascinating occurrence that happened in the fourteenth century at the Khobi church near Tsaishi. The famous and mighty Eristavt-Eristavi of Mingrelia marched against the nonbelievers and the dishonest people in Jiketi, raided their fortresses, and took marble "pillars and slates" to build the church in Khobi, according to the nine-line narrative carved on a sizable stone in the southern part of this Cathedral. The marble architectural

components were regarded as such a priceless gem at the time that Eristavt-Eristavi traveled far to obtain them in order to construct his own resting place. This incident is specifically described in the inscription.

It makes sense to ask, “Didn’t the same thing happen in Tsaishi?” In other words, “Were the disclosed column heads not the consequence of the Jiketi military expedition, and were they not later incorporated into the iconostasis of the Tsaishi Cathedral?”

The renowned Georgian art historian Wakhtang Djobadze spent a great deal of time studying the marble fragments and capitals of Khobi Cathedral [2]. The latter, according to Djobadze, is a fairly intricate model of the capital that consists of a little image tucked in between the coils of an acanthus leaf. The so-called Theodosian capitals are precisely replicated by this kind of sample. Khobi’s capital is not well preserved, in contrast to Tsaishi. The majority of the upper and lower sides are shattered, and the little elevation portions also sustain damage.

The column heads discovered in Tsaishi in 2015 and 2017 near the bell tower and on the slope of the ravine did not match any marble pieces from the Khobi Cathedral, so they can be considered unique artifacts.

One further thing to note is that the Khobi Chapel also contains other marble pieces, such as pulpit tiles, in addition to the column capitals. Only one location, namely the unique area in front of the entrance doors on the southern facade, in Tsaishi, contains an identical setting. These are particulars of window or door frames adorned with a lovely olive branch motif.

Vameq Dadiani (1384–1396) may have donated the Greek (likely church) marble columns, slabs, and other pieces taken from Jiketi not only to the Khobi Cathedral but also to the Tsaishi Cathedral based on importance and strength, as suggested by the column capitals found in the iconostasis of the Tsaishi Cathedral.

According to Professor Parmen Zakaria’s research, the central domed structure built at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries predated the church’s current structure. The Catholicos of Abkhazia, Malakia Gurieli, began work on the Cathedral’s repair in 1616 after it was wrecked by a significant earthquake in 1614 [3]. However, it is obvious that Malakia considered their unique artistic and historical significance and placed the Greek capitals that survived the earthquake in the most conspicuous place in the Cathedral – in the iconostasis. Today, it is difficult to determine where the capitals brought and donated by Eristavt-Eristavi were placed at the time of Vameq.

We would want to briefly discuss the time period of the marble fragments that were brought back from Jiketi.

According to Professor Wakhtang Djobadze, the altar of the basilica from the sixth century, which is repaired in the Hagia Sophia garden, and the capitals and other marble fragments from Khobi date to the sixth century. The similarity is demonstrated not only by the design, the shape of the stone slabs, and the carvings on the pilasters but also by the cross that can be seen on the pulpit balcony’s middle oval wall in the Basilica of Bayezid.

It can be said that the Tsaishi capitals precisely replicate the row of columns from the early Christian church in Ravenna. Additionally, the Basilica of St. Apollinaire and the marble crosses from Ravenna are strikingly similar to the crosses carved into the Khobi walls in terms of their shapes and outlines, indicating the shared origin of these fragments.

We can explain another noteworthy occurrence involving the cathedral of Tsaishi thanks to the well-known cathedral of Ravenna. In particular, the capital that was discovered in 2015 was close to the Tsaishi bell tower and moved to the Art Palace but did not resemble any of the Khobi or Tsaishi capitals, however, it found an equivalent in Ravenna.

This unusual Tsaishi capital is somewhat smaller and more extended across the circumference.

Our examination of the Ravenna Cathedral's interior revealed that these capitals served a specific function in early Christian churches and were set beneath the pulpit's marble foundation. Since Ravenna's pulpit's characteristics are precisely repeated in the columnar form we discovered in Tsaishi, this further demonstrates its uniqueness.

Although it is challenging to prove the above argument by resolving this problem, it is simple to discuss other, equally logical explanations for the origin of the capitals. The above reasoning is close to both logic and historical facts.

It is well known that Tsaishi has long been a significant religious hub in Western Georgia. It is believed that during the paganism era, this area formerly housed a shrine that was either associated with the religion of the sun god or Mithraism. According to historian Kalistratus Samushia, the toponym "Tsaishi" indicates this because it is a name associated with the worship of the sun and moon god [4]. This theory is supported by the discovery of a lion's head in Tsaishi that bears the image of the sun on its forehead. It makes sense to ask - if the Tsaishi capitals are the remains of the Cathedral of the old, pagan period. The history of world religion knows many facts about replacing religious buildings of the ancient period with Christian chapels, remodeling them, or building new Cathedrals on their ruins.

Another explanation for the creation of the capitals might be taken into consideration in addition to the one stated above: the Christian center in Tsaishi dates back to the sixth and seventh centuries. In the region of Western Georgia, three

ecclesiastical districts were ruled by the Patriarchate of Constantinople during this time. The first is the metropolis of Lazika, which includes the municipality of Tsaishi and four bishop dioceses. The notices (lists) of the chairs of the Patriarchate of Constantinople from the 7th–8th centuries serve as evidence for this [5]. Thus, it is evident that at the afore-mentioned time, on the location of the current cathedral, there was undoubtedly a large church edifice, dating from the early Christian era. By the end of the 10th century, in our judgment, the latter should have been demolished. The Greek Church and its hierarchy have vanished at this point, and Imereti's church reform appears to be finished. Obviously, the Catholicos of Abkhazia subordinate to the Catholicos of Kartli would try to fully nationalize their flock, and this would also affect the architecture of the bishoprics. This great event was probably followed by the architecture of the old Cathedral in Tsaishi disappearing and being replaced by the Georgian church. The possibility that the capitals made of Tsaishi marble are the last pieces of the old Greek cathedral cannot be ruled out. If we accept this viewpoint, it appears that the Greek column capitals in this instance (like Khobi) are priceless works of art from the reign of Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (483-565), and as a result of their secondary consumption, they were able to travel to us from the demolished Cathedral.

The Tsaishi capitals were moved to the Art Palace, where they are currently on permanent display. With such a unique and lengthy history, they definitely merited special care and attention.

ისტორია

ახალი დაკვირვებანი ცაიშის ტაძრის ისტორიისთვის ანტიკური კაპიტელებიდან ქრისტიანულ კანკელამდე

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(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. მეტრეველის მიერ)

ნაშრომი იკვლევს დასავლეთ საქართველოში ცაიშის ტაძრის საინტერესო ისტორიას, ტექსტში აქცენტი გაკეთებულია ტაძრის ტერიტორიაზე აღმოჩენილი თეთრი მარმარილოს ექვსი კაპიტელის აღმოჩენასა და ანალიზზე. კვლევა, რომელიც ჩატარდა 2014–დან 2017 წლამდე, ავლენს ამ კორინთული სტილის კაპიტელების უნიკალურ თავისებურებებს, მათ შორის, რთული აკანტუსის ფოთლების მოჩუქურთმებას და ყვავილების ორნამენტებს. კვლევა ეხება რესტავრაციის პროცესს, რამაც გამოიწვია მუზეუმში სვეტების გადატანის აუცილებლობა, რომ მათი მხატვრული ელემენტების დეტალურად შესწავლის შესაძლებლობა გვქონოდა. ნაშრომში წარმოდგენილია სხვადასხვა ჰიპოთეზა ცაიშის კათედრალის დანიშნულებასა და წარმომავლობასთან დაკავშირებით. აღმოჩენები ხაზს უსვამს ცაიშის, როგორც რელიგიური ცენტრის მნიშვნელობას და მის ევოლუციას სხვადასხვა ისტორიულ პერიოდში. დასასრულ, მარმარილოს კაპიტელები, რომლებიც ახლა ხელოვნების სასახლეშია განთავსებული, ხელოვნების ფასდაუდებელი ნიმუშებია, რომლებიც იმსახურებს მუდმივ ზრუნვასა და ყურადღებას.

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