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THE LAST PAGAN TEMPLE AT ARMAZTSIKHE

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Abstract

This paper provides a detailed architectural description of the late Roman temple discovered in 1996 at Armaztsikhe (Bagineti) in the ancient capital of Caucasian Iberia, Mtskheta, set in its local context and with comparisons drawn from further afield.

In 1996, the year in which excavations resumed,¹ a temple was unearthed on the lower terrace of the ancient capital of Caucasian Iberia, Armaztsikhe² (modern bagineti in Mtskheta) (Figs. 1–2). The context included such subsidiary structures a long, partitioned passage, a wine-cellar (or barn) with 16 pithoi for storing wine dug into the ground, a system of longitudinal corridors, a room in the northestern corner, etc. A six-apse temple is the main feature: it lies on the periphery of the area and its eastern side runs along the edge of the terrace. The temple is only partly preserved but its remains enable us to give an idea of the structure as a **"hole** (Figs. 3–5).

The temple is almost square in form (17.5 x 18 m), its walls are 1.5 m thick, and the entrance doorways lie opposite each other in the north and south walls. The this rectangle, the six apses are inserted, paired east and west, single north and auth. A narrow, squarish corridor runs from the south-west apse to a gallery, with opening through its north-west corner leading into the wine-cellar. Another cordor, parallel to the north wall, runs westward from the north apse to a small member in the temple's north-western corner. Its function is unclear; it was probby the temple's treasury. In turn, this chamber connects through a doorway to a mow, longitudinal corridor, running parallel to which is a wider area, separated the corridor by a thick wall (1.75 m) that continues the alignment of the mple's north wall.

Excavations of the area between 1943 and 1948 had revealed structures from antiquity and the mediaeval period (Apakidze 1963, 21–22; Kipiani 1991, 34–35). Work recommenced in 1996 the late A. Apakidze (Director), V. Nikolaishvili (Field Director) and S. Kedia (architect). I did micipate in the excavation but I have been kindly offered the opportunity to study and publish

EXAMPLE 1 Proceedings of the excavation of th



(1). Mtkvari (Kura/Cyrus) river; (2). Aragvi (Aragus) river; (3). Mtskheta town; (4). Armaztsikhe (Bagineti); (5). Djvari monastery; (6). Tsitsamuri; (7). Tsitsamuri rural settlement (2nd-3rd centurier AD); (8). Bebristsikhe and ancient fortification remains; (9). Samtavro (settlement and cemetery) (10); Samtavro convent, King Mirian's basilica, late Roman remains; (11). Northern gateway of Mtskheta citadel (early mediaeval); (12). 'Barbareti' church; (13). Svetitskhoveli, King Vakhtan Gorgasali's basilica ('Holy of Holies'), late Roman architectural details; (14). Aragviskari, 'Antioch' Stephantsminda; (15). West side of fortifications of Mtskheta citadel (early mediaeval); (16) 'Gethsemane' church (early mediaeval), remains of early Christian structures, cemetery; (17). Ancier bridge ('Pompey's bridge'); (18). Stone tomb (late Roman); (19)-(20). Roman baths; (21). Six-aps temple; (22). 'Column Hall'; (23). Byzantine cistern; (24). Early Christian single-nave church (ruins (25). Ancient fortification walls.



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Fig. 2: View of Armaztsikhe (Bagineti) from the Djvari monastery.



Fig. 3: General view of the excavation.



Fig. 4: Details of excavation and remains.





ine-cellar; II. Corridor; III-IV. Lengthwise corridor; V. Chamber (Treasury?); VI. Temple
iii-VIII. Corridors; IX Apses; X. Supposed apses. (1). Base of central column; (2). Fragments of central column; (3). Pedestal of sculpture; (4). Corinthianised capitals and fragments of -(6). Pilaster capitals; (7). Denticles; (8). Wall grooves supporting posts; (9). Wall grooves posts in apses; (10). North entrance of temple; (11). South entrance of temple; (12)-(13).
arways of temple; (14). Courses of adobe brickwork; (15). Timber posts between apses; (16).
sandstone block; (17). Interior substructure of temple – cobblestone pavement; (18). Ditch. and masonry of part of temple.

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There are two rows of pithoi, eight in each, dug into the ground of the cellar. This type of pithoi is typical of late Roman-early mediaeval Caucasian ria. The north and south sides of the temple are bordered, at a distance of 1.6 by ditches made of sandstone slabs.

A column had been erected in the centre of the temple. Its base has been for in situ. The plinth is an equilateral hexahedron, according with the six apses temple, though the temple itself diverges from the base and a capital (either mented or unfinished) scattered over the south-western part of the interior in the radii of the west and (supposed) east apses are 2.10 m, while the north south measure 2.25 m. The east side of the temple structure is completely was away. A socle of sandstone quadrates with masonry of adobe bricks above is served to a height of 2 m (Fig. 5.1).

Some elements of woodwork are preserved at the joints of the apses support-bearing posts made of courses of logs. The floors of the south-west and the corridor leading to the gallery are plastered with lime mortar 2-3 thick.

The interior surfaces of the gallery walls bear the imprints of columns, in form of circular grooves of 30 cm diameter and a depth of 20 cm arising, as both parts of the corridor leading from the south-west apse to the gallery and opening from the north apse to the chamber. Similar but rectangular grooves were found at the lower levels of the apse walls, and the remains of wood found along the grooves' inner surfaces suggest that the apses were internally columned. Nine small complete Corinthianised capitals were found within the area, plus man more fragments, several of which were in the eastern part of the temple along with traces of the supposed eastern pair of apses (Fig. 5).

I have already mentioned the capital (more an impost) of the central column Two pieces of similar capitals were found outside the temple building but within the temple area, to the north-west and south-east. The north and south areas of the temple were covered with similar sandstone details: dentils forming the components of a cogged frontage frieze. The pedestal of a sculpture was found in front of the north-west apse, though not *in situ*. Unfortunately, no fragments of the sculpture itself have been discovered anywhere.

It is obvious that the temple was destroyed, but were this as a result of a battle it is implausible that any complete tiles would remain. Here, however, the bulk of tiles are unbroken (see below). Moreover, we have a column base *in situ* and a capital (impost), although the column itself is missing. It seems very likely that this was made of wood but it would not have perished without leaving traces beneath the adobe debris – we have, after all, timber support-bearing posts and the remains of wood in the grooves of the wall columns. building area of the temple was perfectly levelled without disturbing the soil. Two courses of well-dressed, sandstone quadrates, set on a special, underlay of sandstone flakes and joined edge to edge by a thin layer of ortar, form a socle, which acts as a doorsill at the entrances to the temple. terior substructure of the temple was made of specially selected flat cobblehich were laid out and then plastered with clay and adobe.

hich were laid out and then plastered with eap places the bricks, 22.5 x 45 x 10 cm). are framed with bricks of the same size. In some places the bricks were ease or even quite randomly. The spaces between the apse frames and the effaces of the walls were filled mainly with pressed clay, as were the areas effaces of the walls were filled mainly with pressed clay, as were the areas



Fig. 6: Base of central column. (1). Plan; (2). Front; (3). Section.



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Fig. 7: (1). Profile of central column; (2). Axonometric projection; (3). Base and fragment column (reconstruction); (4). Geometric scheme of the temple.

bad-bearing element of the superstructure, were firmly bonded to each other with **not**ched joints of a quarter of their diameter.³

Architectural Details

Chumn Base

have already mentioned the column base, an equilateral hexahedron 1.27 m in fameter (Figs. 4 bottom, 6). It consists of four pieces which, following Greek actice, are connected to each other with iron crumps, the ends of which are bedded into special mortises and welded with lead (Fig. 7.2). It is clear that a of 1.27 m diameter was first divided into four quadrants and then into a mahedron using a simple correlation. The height of the base is 35 cm. Its surface hexahedron, though the corners are not stressed. There are semicircular projecwhere the sides of the hexahedron must cross one another, i.e. the end of the mm was of unusual shape; accordingly, the column itself had to be made hexain with semicircular pilasters (Fig. 7.3). The diameter of the column is that of circle traced around the hexahedron – 75 cm. The decorative aspect of such a mm is undeniable but, in this case, the column functions as a structural eleof the building.

The body of the base has the form of a hexahedral prismatoid. Its facets (Fig. are fractured into three steps – cascades of wide, three-staged volutes descendfrom the top of the plinth towards the corners, whose sides are decorated with acratched-out spirals (Figs. 6.2, 7.1). The deep circular hole in the surface of nece of the base is for a wooden dowel used to fix the column. The hole could be in the centre of the base because this is where the corners of all the base joined.

(Impost)

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capital (impost) too is an equilateral hexahedron with the same radius as the **though** of different height – 47 cm (of which, abacus 12 cm). The dado of **pital**, like that of the base, is fractured into three steps, which are reminiscent **Ion**ic architrave fascia (Figs. 8–9). The volutes of the capital may even be **brackets**; i.e. artistically, there is an absolute coincidence with the volutes of **though** reversed. The pattern of beaded design decorating the volutes (a **two** motif of granules and pirouettes, not an architectural pattern) is a sim**version** of the astragal decoration, which is the most telling indication of

iani and Amashukeli 1995, 7, pl. 1.



Fig. 8: Capital (impost) of central column.

Roman taste.⁴ The beaded compositions here make bows of volutes, a pattern borrowed entirely from the Ionic order. The profiles of the volutes are divided lengthwise with beaded patterns – a corner of the capital is here interpreted as is profile (Fig. 9.2) and a side, in fact fractured, as a face (Fig. 10). The profiles of the volutes coincide exactly with the balusters of Ionic capitals.

There are small consoles at the base of the capital, each of them fractured into two vertical 'leaves' and with the form of a volute base. The diameter of the neck of the capital is 60 cm, i.e. 7.5 cm smaller than the base of the column.

Central Column

Although the central column here has not been found, it may be regarded as an example of a structural feature that had grown into a decorative motif. The base and capital are in absolute accord with each other, and this impressive artistic and constructive dialogue between them is perfectly supported by the shaft. It is extremely

⁴ Beads without spaces. See the volute decorations of the Arch of Titus (late 1st century) (Durm 1905, 411, fig. 458).



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Tiles

Three different types of tile were discovered, most of them complete: grooved tiles, tiles with upturned sides and ridge tiles, these last seldom found (Fig. 15). Grooved tiles with horn-like additions (index pins) are typical of Caucasian Iberia for late Roman to early mediaeval times (Fig. 15.2).¹¹ Tiles with upturned sides differ from one another in size, the form of their sides and the shape of their trapezoid forms. This is to be expected: the central structure of the temple and its pyramidal roof consisted of six triangular sections (Fig. 15.3). The dimensions of the conch-grooved tiles all differ, but each of them has a perfectly formed rim (index pin) at 2.5–6 cm from their narrow end (Fig. 15.1).

Geometric Scheme and Measurements of the Temple

I have already noted that an equilateral hexahedron is a basic geometric form for the base and capital of the central column. Their forms correspond explicitly with the hexahedron of the temple interior, i.e. to the hexahedron inserted in the circle lining the centres of the support-bearing posts that separate the apses. But the hexahedron connecting the edges of the apses is far from equilateral: it is a hexahedron of the golden mean, thus the large diameters of the north and south apses are related to the distance between them (Fig. 7.4), i.e. with the centre of the temple, according to the principles of the golden mean.¹²

The diameter of the column base is 75 cm (= 2.5 Roman feet), and this unit (M) forms the basis for every element of the temple. The distance between the centre of the temple and the west column, i.e. the radius of the central circle, is 5.10 m (17 ft). The radii of the north and south apses are 2.25 m (7.5 ft; $3 \times M$); the width of the walls is 1.15 feet (1.5 x M); the side of an adobe brick is 45 cm (1.5 ft). The radius of the outer circle of the temple, i.e. the distance between the centre and the west apse walls, is 7.80 m (26 ft; 10.4 x M). The temple is 18 m long, which equals 60 ft (24 x M). The radius of each small apse is 2.10 m; that equals 7 ft (2.8 x M).

The main problem here is to assess the height of the central column. The difference between the surface diameter of its base and the neck of its capital is 7.5 cm, and the slenderness of the column itself makes me suppose that it was 7.5 m high (see below). This is 25 ft, i.e. $10 \times M$ (Fig. 10). It turns out that besides the modular and metrical unit we have an artistic one, perhaps approximate – namely, the pedestal.

¹⁰ Ridge tiles are rare finds: all tiles discovered during excavations of burnt and destroyed buildings were very fragmented, and any remaining fragments of ridge tiles were mistaken for those of other types. Moreover, because of their dimensions, ridge tiles break easily. On ridge tiles found in Georgia, see Kipiani 1991, 4–6.

¹¹ Dzneladze 1997, 3-5, etc.

¹² Cf. Jacobson 1986, 22.



Fig 16: Pedestal of sculpture.

Pedestal (Figs. 16-18)

This was in front of the north-west apse but it had definitely been displaced. Its form is that of a low, rectangular prism made of limestone (height: 30 cm; length-72 cm; width: 70 cm). Its height is one Roman foot but its width coincides with the width of the temple itself (70 cm x 25 = 17.5 m), and its length with the length of the temple by the same multiplier (72 cm x 25 = 18 m). Thus, from the height of the pedestal we can derive the height of the column (30 cm x 25 = 7.5 m).

All four faces of the pedestal are homogeneous and packed with architecture detail. Pilasters are made on a stylobate decorated with seven rosettes on each side. Bases are of the so-called Attic-Asian type so widespread in the Hellenised East. Fluted columns are crowned with capitals of the same style as those on the central column of the temple and completely coinciding with the capitals of the pilaster described above. The necks of the capitals are in the form of a wide guilloche design; the geometrical garlands between the pilasters are typical of late antiquing The fluted shaft of the column is beyond doubts in the Ionic tradition. The same may be said about the pitch of the frontal volutes on the corner capitals and about the cogged cornice, which duplicates the denticulation I had supposed for the temple itself - the inclination of intermediate surfaces between the dentils. Three good-sized rosettes are carved within each space between the pilasters, all eight petalled except for a six-petal example on the back of the pedestal, the shape of the petals clearly of Near Eastern inspiration, and each divided into two by a low midrib.14 Such rosettes were very popular in Georgia in antiquity.15

The pedestal is a striking specimen of combined Ionian and Near Eastern trade tion: placing colonnades on small architectural pieces is the former,¹⁶ which became widespread throughout the Hellenised Near East;17 and the line of rosettes as a repetitive motif is equally characteristic of the East as a whole.¹⁸ Generally, all East ern dynasts and deities stand on pedestals decorated with rosettes.¹⁹

As to our example, it was actually used as the pedestal of a Greek-style (Helland istic) sculpture. Feet chased into its surface point to this. The sculpture rested on

¹³ Guillaume 1983, figs. 3-4, 6.

14 Wilber 1937, 24.

¹⁵ For example the Corinthian capitals from Vani (2nd century BC); Sarkine (Grdzeli Mindeat - a rosette on the dado of an Ionian capital; and Armaztsikhe - frieze with a lion and rosette en a (1st century BC-1st century AD); etc. See Kipiani 1987, pls. 26-27, 14, 16; 1993, pls. 34-35-

¹⁶ Demangel 1932, 200, figs. 55-56.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the decorated front sides of stupas (Marshall 1951, pls. 28–29, 46, 73,

¹⁸ For example, friezes of rosettes in Achaemenid Iran, on Jewish sarcophagi, on ossuaries, tectural details from India, etc. (Nylander 1970, fig. 48a; Levit-Tawil 1994, 180–82; Rowland 1995 490-91, fig. 1a-c).

¹⁹ Marshall 1951, pls. 223, 225.157.









Fig. 19: (1)–(2). Reconstruction of temple and axonometric projection; (3)–(4). Reconstruction of denticle, and axonometric projection.



Fig. 20: Reconstruction of roofing system in central area of temple and apse.

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left foot (standbein): the depression is deeper than the right and it also has a special rectangular hole for attaching the frame of the sculpture; the right foot is a little aft and set aside, i.e. it was lighter (spielbein). The mortises for the feet are 29-30 cm long - the length of the feet themselves must be conjectured on account of the puddling/spillage required for the bronze melted into the mortises. If we take Polykleitos as our basis,²⁰ the height of the sculpture would have been about 1.80 m.

The temple has many peculiar features, and the pedestal is no exception. The damaged mortises are such that it is as if the sculpture had been shaken and removed by a metal tool. Were the sculpture bronze, then patinated remains of bronze would undoubtedly have been found in the mortises and holes had the sculpture stood there for a month or more. If it had been marble, then marble flakes would have been found here.²¹ Nothing was. To me, this suggests a bronze sculpture had stood on the pedestal, but just for a matter of days.

I am not inclined to the idea that the pedestal frontages completely mirror the temple itself, but to reconstruct it after the model provides an illuminating expenence (Fig. 19.1-2).

Construction Scheme

The apses make of almost exactly two-thirds of the circle. I have already noted that the mortises cut into the adobe could have been used to hold wooden bracker which strengthened the wall-supporting posts with Corinthianised capitals. Them had to be a dozen such posts inside each apse. There would have been a beam ressing on the top of each post and each beam was necessarily inclined from a certain centre-point. The essential point is that here we are presented with an attempt to combine two different traditions. A Roman multi-apse space was inserted into = rectangle. The roof of the temple could not have been entirely covered in tiles: this was impossible because of the central column, the corners of whose base and captal were directed towards the support-bearing posts.

It is now that the function of the capital volutes (corbels) and column pilaster becomes clear: each pilaster is an independent support for the corbels. The corbel (an aggregation of the volutes) follow the beams from the surface of the abaat towards the support-bearing posts. It was necessary to erect a post in the centre the abacus, and from the top of this post rafters could be lowered, forming a section combined with the section of the apse etc. (see the reconstruction in Fig. 200

²⁰ Vipper 1972, 180-81.

²¹ As with those from the statue of the goddess on the gateway of ancient Vani (Lordkipanilla 1979, 199).



Fig. 21: Plans of Georgia's six-apse churches. (1). Gogiuba; (2). Kiagmis Alti; (3). Bochorma; (4). Katskhi; (5). Nikortsminda; (6). Kumurdo.

Reconstruction of the temple and its separate elements is somewhat hypothetial, underlining that we have an unfinished structure: I have sought to reconstruct architectural idea, not a realised and destroyed building.

Structures with multiple apses are associated with the style of the emperor Hadian and were widespread throughout the Roman empire and countries culturally and politically connected with it from the 2nd century AD onward. Six-apse buildings were rather rare in the whole of late antiquity,²² and none of them was furished with a central column. The temple at Armaztsikhe differs completely from imposedly similar Roman buildings and it cannot serve as an exemplar of a paricular type of architecture. The idea of the multi-apse form had, of course, been perrowed from the Roman world, but the execution was according to traditional

²² For example: the burial of Calventius on the Appian Way (Mikhailov 1973, 657, fig. 226); the **backgroup on the set of the set o**

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Caucasian Iberian building practice and techniques: this, the interior rosette, is not seen on the exterior, which seems to be general Near Eastern practice.²³

That the building serves a cultic purpose is undeniable. It seems that it served as an intermediate gateway, a temple-propylaeum,²⁴ through which one might enter part of the city: the northern entrance at Armaztsikhe leads towards the lower gateway.

There is the strong impression that the temple was never completed. Why not? One may suppose that this was because of the radical changes in political and religious orientation that were in train in the country. Georgian written sources include information about Iberia's adoption of Christianity and King Mirian's decision to reorientate the country to the West rather than the East. *Moktsevai Kartlisai* ('The Conversion of Kartli to Christianity')²⁵ informs us that, though elements of the Armazi pantheon had perished as a result of St Nino's zealous prayers, King Mirian did not consider that it had vanished completely and sought in some form to restore it, suggesting that Nino serve Armazi, i.e. become a priestess of Armazi. But very soon the king changed his mind and began to build a Christian church in the centre of Mtskheta, at 'Paradise' (the royal garden).

It must be acknowledged that 'Paradise' is a very complex site from a stratigraphical point of view: an 11th-century cathedral, Svetitskhoveli, now sits upon it. In 1978, some 2nd-century Corinthianised capitals were found,²⁶ an ancient water pipe in 1997–98,²⁷ and a very interesting rich burial of the 3rd–4th centuries AD in 2002.²⁸

So, King Mirian built a Christian church, the 'Holy of Holies', within an area of ancient buildings and burials. And the type of church was more than unusual: in contained seven pillars, 'and they erected six pillars but the seventh, the largest and most surprising, they were unable to erect in the centre' (Leonti Mroveli 111–112)." *Moktsevai Kartlisai* says the same: '... and when they tried to erect the seventh [pillar], the king and his people did their best but failed' (Chelistian version 138).

A construction with seven pillars, one of them in the centre, is impossible to consider as Christian church. It appears that King Mirian built the 'Holy of Holies'

²³ For example the 'Round temple' at Nisa, where it is found inside but is not seen on the exterior (Pugachenkova 1958, 100–02).

²⁴ This is a common feature of ancient Georgian buildings – the temple-propylaeum at Vani; the large temple of Tsikhia-Gora acting as a gateway; the main temple at Dedoplis Mindori, which server as a gate for the cultic complex and was the route through to its main area (see Kipiani 2000, 10–11 35–36, 41, 70).

²⁵ Edition by I. Abuladze (Tbilisi 1963).

26 Kipiani 1997, 61-64.

²⁷ Mandjgaladze 1998, 12.

28 Apakidze et al. 2004, 104. It contained a unique desk-set.

²⁹ In *Kartlis Tskhovreba* ("The Georgian Chronicles"), edition by S. Kaukhchishvili, vol. 1 (Tbiline 1955).

according to a scheme familiar to him: a hexahedron. The written sources concenrate on the moment when the seventh pillar was miraculously lifted up, then **avered and settled on its own stump, '...and they felled a fir tree and they made pillar of it'.** The point is: for which hexahedron did they fell the tree – the pagan the Christian? Normally, it is impossible to use a suddenly felled tree trunk as a **pilar.** Like any other timber, it needs to be dried and seasoned, which takes a long **me.** Moreover, the pillar miraculously erected itself inside the 'Holy of Holies', d 'it was awful to watch it', in the words of the chronicler. The scene was amazbecause the pillar was the central post inside a six-apse church. This astonishes **a true.** There is only one other explanation – that the pillar had been the **a true column of the Armaztsikhe temple, and it was then relocated to the Chrisa church along with an unchanged geometrical scheme.**

The provisional use of schemes for pagan temples in building churches in the **adject** stages of Christianity seems to me to be a quite natural development, par**cularly** since the canonical arrangements for the new religion were neither settled **bor** universal in those countries which had adopted it. In answer to King Mirian's **cquest**, the emperor Constantine I sent a group of priests to Caucasian Iberia. **They** brought with them a new conception and model of what a church should be. **The** first Christian basilica was built in Mtskheta in the Makvlovani area, as is **mested** archaeologically.³⁰

One more thing needs to be taken into consideration. Georgia is the only Chrisian country distinguished by six-apse churches (Gogiuba, Kiagmis Alti, Bochorma, Karskhi, and in modified form at Kumurdo and Nikortsminda) (Fig. 21); in Armethere is only one, Anisi, a replica of Gogiuba. It is, of course, very difficult to ressert that a six-apse scheme is borrowed either from pagan temples or from the endy Christian churches (though attested archaeologically and chronicled in the inten record), but the idea of the hexahedron was common in Georgia for a very long time, and there is no point denying this.³¹

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³⁹ Kipiani 2003.

²¹ Translated from Georgian by M. Kapanadze.

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