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The Early Christian Churches of the Ancient City of **Nekresi**

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ყდის დიზაინი: დავით ჯანიაშვილი Cover design by Davit Janiashvili დაკაბადონება: იოსებ ქემაშვილი Layout by Ioseb Kemashvili მონოგრაფია ეძღვნება საქართველოში, ყვარლის მუნიციპალიტეტში მდებარე გვიანანტიკური და ადრეული შუა საუკუნეების ნაქალაქარ ნეკრესის ტერიტორიაზე უკანასკნელი ორი ათწლეულის განმავლობაში გამოვლენილ ადრექრისტიანულ ძეგლთა არქეოლოგიური და ხუროთმოძღვრული კვლევის საკითხებს. ნაშრომის ავტორებმა არქეოლოგიურ-სტრატიგრაფიული, შედარებითი ტიპოლოგიური ანალიზის და ტექნიკური მეთოდებით შეისწავლეს როგორც ნეკრესის მონასტრის ანსამბლში ჩართული, ბოლო დრომდე უძველეს ქართულ ქრისტიანულ ბაზილიკად მიჩნეული მცირე სამლოცველო, ისე ნაქალაქარის სხვადასხვა უბანში, დიდწილად მათ მიერვე აღმოჩენილი ქრისტიანული ტაძრები და შემდეგ დასკვნამდე მივიდნენ: ეს უკანასკნელი, დიდი და სავსებით კანონიკური გეგმარების, გვიანრომაულ-ადრებიზანტიური სამყაროს აღმოსავლეთის პროვინციების ნიმუშებთან მეტად მიახლოებული გეგმარების ბაზილიკები, მე-4 საუკუნის მეორე ნახევარსა და მე-5 საუკუნის დასაწყისში უნდა იყოს აგებული იბერიის სამეფოს საერო და სასულიერო ხელისუფალთა ძალისხმევით.

ნაშრომში ახალ, ობიექტურ ფაქტებსა და არგუმენტებზე დაყრდნობით, უსაფუძვლოდაა მიჩნეული მე-20 ს-ის პირველ ნახევარში ქართველ ხელოვნებათ-მცოდნეთა წრეში შემუშავებული და სამეცნიერო მიმოქცევაში დღემდეც მნიშვნელოვანწილად დამკვიდრებული თეორია: თითქოსდა, იბერიის სამეფოში ქრისტიანობის სახელმწიფო რელიგიად შემოღების შემდგომ ლამის საუკუნენახევრის განმავლობაში, ქრისტიანული ტაძრების მშენებლები ადგილობრივ ხუროთმოძღვრულ ტრადიციებზე მეტისმეტად დამოკიდებულების გამო, ნაკლებად უწევდნენ ანგარიშს რომის იმპერიის წიაღში შემუშავებულ, იმჟამად ქრისტიანული კულტურის სფეროში მოქცეულ ქვეყნებში უკვე საყოველთაოდ მიღებულ გეგმარებით ნორმებს.

This monograph is dedicated to the research of the early Christian monuments revealed on the territory of the former city of Nekresi during the last two decades. They date back to late antiquity and the early Middle Ages and are located in the Kvareli municipality, Kakheti region. The authors of the work have studied the chapel of the Nekresi Monastery (which was considered the oldest Georgian Christian basilica) as well as the Christian temples revealed in different parts of the city using comparative archaeological and stratigraphical methods of typological and technical analysis. They concluded that the latest large basilicas were canonically designed buildings planned in late Roman and early Byzantine provincial style that must have been built by the efforts of the clerical and civil rulers of the Iberian Kingdom in the second half of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century.

Based on these new objective facts and arguments, the theory developed in fine art experts' circles in the first half of the 20th century, which is still considered credible today, can be considered groundless: one and a half centuries after proclaiming Christianity as the state religion, the builders in the Iberian Kingdom ignored widespread norms of Christian Church design developed in the Roman Empire, due to a dependence on the local architectural traditions.

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THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES OF THE ANCIENT CITY OF NEKRESI

Archaeological research conducted by the Georgian National Museum from the 1980s up to the present has proved that in the late Antique period, one of the most important cities in the Caucasian Kingdom of Iberia, Nekresi, was located within today's Kvareli Municipality in Kakheti in the Republic of Georgia. It was situated on the plain below the monastery known by the same name of Nekresi (Fig. 2, 7), on the terraced slope of the southernmost offshoot of the Caucasus Range, spreading across a territory of approximately 200 hectares. The city consisted of several, more or less distant "quarters", lined up in an east-west direction, separated by hills in some areas. Some sections of the city stretched up to the Duruji River gorge the east, and to the Chelta riverbed in the west (Fig. 1, 3, 4, 5).

As a result of the excavations, two remarkable basilicas of the early Christian period were revealed in the former city together with numerous other monuments. These churches, as soon as they were discovered, revived special interest among researchers of ancient Georgian church architecture. As a matter of fact, the Georgian historic chronicles narrate the construction of a remarkable church in Nekresi by the king of Iberia, Trdat, in the second half of the 4th century; in the first half of the 20th century, famous Georgian art historians expressed their opinion about the identification of this construction, by associating a small grey chapel preserved in Nekresi monastery (Fig. 6, 8) with the monument in the sources. For a long time, they have used this example as support for the argument that after proclaiming Christianity as the state religion, the Kingdom of Iberia had only small, non-canonically planned churches for more than a century. It should be noted that this hypothesis has been accepted by a number of researchers of ancient Georgian architecture until now.

It is only recently that, against the background of new findings, this assumption has been recognized as groundless by some scientists. For example, our archaeological research has revealed that the building of Nekresi monastery chapel stands on a pedestal with a complicated system of tombs beneath it. The largest and the most important of the tombs is a crypt, where there are chambers cut in the floor, which are full of the remains of deceased monks (Fig. 9-15). Buildings of this structure have many parallels with the architectural elements of Eastern Christian Monasteries, which are known as Memorial Chapels. The Nekresi Chapel might have had the same function and it could not have been built earlier than the 6th century when the monastery itself was founded. This dating coincides with the excavation finds which date from the 6th-9th centuries and were revealed during the achaeological research (Tab. 1).

Taking into consideration these problems, in this monograph we present architectural and planning pictures identified during the archaeological investigation of the basilicas mentioned above, as well as our suppositions concerning the temples and general typological and chronological issues of the first Christian churches throughout the Kingdom of Iberia.

During the archaeological excavations conducted in 1998-2005, a large complex of early Christian period buildings were found in the central part of the former city of Nekresi, known nowadays as Chabukauri district. The central building of the ensemble was a three-nave basilica, oriented on an east-west axis, 34 m long and 15 m wide (Fig. 16). As a result of the excavations, the following picture of the building's collapse was revealed: the main upper parts of each wall and column constructed of large-sized blocks in the basilica leaned

over to the north. In addition, as we will see further on, the rather rich interior of the temple was buried under the ruins, meaning that it was safe and undisturbed by robbers. All these points suggest that the temple was destroyed due to a devastating earthquake (Fig. 17, 18). The emerging picture confirmed that the temple had not been substantially reconstructed between its foundation and its destruction; and after its collapse nobody had ever tried to clear away the rubble from its main area and restore it to its original state. Therefore, the plan of the structure found by us is quite authentic and reflects the architectural design of the builders.

The basilica hall is divided into three naves by five pairs of rectangular-shaped pillars (Fig. 19, 20). A rectangular sanctuary is arranged to the east of the central nave. It is situated approximately 50 cm higher from the base of the basilica nave. In the center of the sanctuary once stood a four-legged alabaster altar table: during the excavations, fragments of the ornamented capitals, serving as bearers for the upper plate of the table and decorated with relief cross depictions were revealed. Similar altar tables decorated with capitals are frequently found in the Byzantine temples of the 4th-5th centuries.

To the right and left of the sanctuary, the side naves terminate in rectangular-shaped pastophoria, each with entrance doors from the west to the nave. The naos can be entered through southern, western and northern doors. The church is built of large, selected sledged stones. In the corners of the building openings, carved travertine stones have been abundantly used as column tops, as well as for the arches and other places requiring accurately dressed and measured stones. The walls, from 1m to 1.2 m thick, are set on a lime-mortar foundation. The interior of the building was completely plastered with lime and painted in dark red. The floor was covered with local, flat, split shale rocks over lime-mortar.

The excavations convinced us that the basilica had been covered with a combination of flat and ridged roof tiles. The floor surface was dotted with the fallen roofing components: the remains of ramshackle wooden beams mixed with tile debris and splinters of ceramic antefixes; and large iron nails were scattered across the interior. It is also significant that the flat ceramic antefixes found here that decorated the outer edges of the tiled façade (Fig. 23), were notched or jagged on one side, painted in white, and could be attached only to the outer edge of the wooden framework.

These archaeological findings, together with the evidence that the basilica's interior longitudinal walls have no arch-supporting pilasters, suggest that the naves of Chabukauri basilica were covered with roof tiles laid on wooden beams (Fig. 24), whereas the nave-dividing row of columns created perfectly-carved longitudinal arches. Since all known Georgian basilica-type as well as hall-type temples built after the 5th - 6th centuries, are covered with stone vaults, we think that this method of roofing was based directly on the general trends that characterized Roman and Byzantine basilica architecture of the 4th-6th centuries throughout the Central and Eastern Christian provinces of the Roman Empire. This resulted from ancient Roman traditions where the roofs of ancient basilicas mainly rested on wooden load bearing constructions, which were either seen from the hall interior, or were "planked" with wooden ceilings.

Thus, by confirming this covering method at the Chabukauri Basilica, the opinion of many famous Georgian art historians, who alleged that wooden structures were not used at all in roofing the oldest Christian basilicas built in Georgia but rather that they were covered with a tile layer placed on limestone vaults, has been proved to be groundless.

The rectangular-shaped sanctuary discovered in Chabukauri Basilica doesn't have any analogous parallels among the monuments of Georgian church architecture of the early Middle Ages yet discovered. On the other hand, the tradition of arranging sanctuaries and the adjacent spaces in a similar way was common in basilicas throughout Northern Syria and the Holy Land in the 4th-6th centuries, and is found more rarely across Mesopotamia and Egypt. Therefore it becomes obvious that the rectangularity of the Chabukauri Basilica sanctuary should be seen as an artistic architectural element copied from the basilicas of Georgia's neighboring Eastern Christian countries and not simply the consequence of rather weak construction. It seems that later, after the 6th century, the tradition of arranging sanctuaries in this manner did not gain popularity in the church architecture of other West Asian regions as well as in Georgia.

Contrary to the steadfast faith of more than one generation of Georgian art historians, the existence of pastophoria adjacent to the sanctuary in Chabukauri Basilica, does not indicate that the temple can't be dated to earlier than the 6th century; a lot of 4th-5th century Christian basilicas in South-Eastern Europe, Western Asia, North Africa and Europe have analogous pastophoria. As a matter of fact, in the earliest churches of the Christian world, the rooms next to the altar did not have the canonical functions of deacon's and credence rooms until the 8th century. However due to construction needs these rooms, arranged in the above mentioned manner, were used in different temples for different functions, in particular, as crypts, treasuries (sacristy), baptisteries, etc.

The assumption, expressly based on the archaeological analysis of the construction of the Chabukauri Basilica, that it was founded in such an early epoch is also supported by the archaeological picture, observed as a result an earlier section below the floor horizon of the temple. It was discovered that the Christian basilica was built on almost the same site as a grandiose pagan temple that was demolished as soon as Christianity was proclaimed the official religion in East Georgia. A few fragments of black and grey kilned, polished clay wares, discovered at the foundation level of the previous temple, confirmed that a religious building had existed here in the Hellenistic or late Antique periods (Tab.II 1, 2). Some masonry of the ruined pagan temple foundations was left as the base for the walls and columns of the Christian temple, while the remaining material of the demolished building was used in the construction of the temple. It seems that this was a so called "sectional-type" temple which consisted of at least five similarly outlined and same sized rooms connected with each other by means of passageways located along the central axis.

The construction of the church at the site presumably served the common intention of secular and spiritual leaders within all countries of the early Christian world: on the one hand, the demolition of a pagan temple and the construction of an even more grandiose church at the exact same site must have been considered a symbol of the victory of the new religion over ancient beliefs. Meanwhile the awe and reverence of the population towards the usual place of worship could have been unconsciously transferred to the new church. We think that it is also clear that after proclaiming Christianity as the state religion in Iberia in 326 AD, the pagan temple could not have been preserved intact in the center of one of the country's most important cities and was therefore demolished after only a century and a half to build a Christian temple at the same site with the same construction materials.

In addition this opinion that the construction of Chabukauri Basilica took place very soon after the recognition of Christianity as the official state religion of Georgia is supported by the artefacts obtained during the archaeological excavations of the monument. Flat

and grooved tile remains, painted in red as well as fragments of clay artefacts, jagged or notched on one side discovered in the layers nearest to the basilica floor and in the lower layers of the ruins, are dated generally to the 4th-5th centuries in accordance with their stylistic features. In various spaces of Chabukauri Basilica, fragments of stratigraphically studied three-spouted pitchers, polished red on the outside, handle-less wine jars and bowls known also from other archaeological monuments of Georgia, are dated back to the 4th-5th centuries when compared with well-known parallels.

A varied and very interesting collection of interior lighting devices was revealed at the time of excavation around the basilica naos and sanctuary, and this was especially notable near to the floor horizon. Here we found well-preserved bronze oil lamps and glass chandeliers (damaged), which, at the time of the destruction event were hanging from fixed fastenings in the church ceiling or walls on bronze artistic chains.

One of the bronze lamps stood on a flat bronze rectangular base (Fig. 29); one of its sides ends in an apsidal ledge and it is clear that it is a symbolically designed model of a Christian church. The base hung on four chains, consisting of wattled rods and rings replacing each other. The lamp itself had a wick duct, lily-shaped relief back and spherical fuel filler body. This example has close parallels with 4th-5th century metal artworks from different regions of the Byzantine world. Six- and four-shafted artistic and exquisite bronze lampads (chandeliers), discovered on the basilica floor belong to the same period of time (Fig. 30). Lamps with several ducts around the oil filler were widespread in the Roman world in the 1st-3rd centuries AD, but they are rare in the 4th century. Therefore it is perhaps impossible to date them back to later than the 4th or 4th-5th centuries AD.

After the destruction of the large Chabukauri Basilica, a new small church was built against its relatively well preserved northern wall using materials gathered from the old basilica ruins: the fragments of carved arches and door jambs from the demolished basilica are built into the walls of the church all over the place (Fig. 20, 31). The upper chronological frameworks of the second phase church have been firmly defined due to numismatic material, which dates from the 2 nd half of the 6th century: apart from a few fragments of ceramic artwork characterized as being of the 5th-6th centuries, two silver coins were found in the floor horizon layer, dating to the building demolition - one of them a Persian coin from the time of Hormizd IV (579-590) and another Byzantine coin, minted in the name of Flavius Phocas (602-610) (Fig. 32).

Therefore, after the demolition of the large Chabukauri Basilica, even the smaller church using its construction materials and built on its ruins, was damaged at the end of the 6th century. This circumstance, as well as the probable age of the creation and application of the above mentioned artefacts scattered under the ruins of the basilica floor, make us think that the temple was destroyed as the result of a mighty, magnitude nine earthquake occuring in 427 with the epicenter located not very far from Nekresi, in what is currently Azerbaijan, near the city of Ganja.

As a results of excavations conducted in 2012-2019 in the easternmost area of the former city of Nekresi, on the right bank of the Duruji River, in forested territory known nowadays under the name of the former village of Dolochopi (now in the Kvareli countryside), we unearthed an even larger basilica (Fig. 36, 37). The length and width of its central, three-nave hall (36m X 18.5m) considerably exceeds all basilica-type churches known in Georgia until now (Fig. 42-45). The hall of the basilica is divided into naves by means of 5 pairs of

cross-planned columns. The columns were preserved up to 1.5-2 m high. They stood on a rectangularly-planned, approximately 2x2 m long and 20-25cm tall socle that has been well-preserved. The walls and columns of the basilica are built with well-selected sledged stones as well as cobble-stones gathered at the Duruji river side, and lime-mortar. For the construction of the arches and column capitals, travertine carved stones were used. The walls of the basilica interior space were plastered with lime and painted in red.

At the eastern edge of the middle nave of the Dolochopi Basilica, there is a distinctly horseshoe-shaped apsed sanctuary. In accordance with the configuration of the demolished blocks revealed on the floor, the apse was surrounded with a limestone vault from above. Around the sanctuary a masonry four-stage bench for clergymen has been arranged, whereas in the easternmost part the high throne of the archbishop was established with steps leading to it from the sanctuary (Fig. 46). So far similarly arranged sanctuaries have not been confirmed in other churches in Georgia. The stone stairs surrounding the sanctuary from inside and the thrones for clergymen of a particular hierarchical level (synthronon) are well-known only from the early medieval cathedrals of the Byzantine world - hierarchs would sit on the benches during liturgical services to personify Christ and His apostles.

It should be noted that the bema in the temple sanctuary, stands out in the form of a "proscenium" in the west as far as the first pair of columns in the central nave. Since the altar platform is 90 cm higher than the naos floor, it was possible to ascend the platform from the west, east and north by means of 3-step staircase the same width as the ambo. It is also significant no other projecting bema of this type has been found among medieval Georgian basilicas; however analogous ceremonial bemas are characteristic of especially important basilicas of the central provinces of the early Byzantine world.

In the underground space of the basilica altar, a spacious, approximately 15 sq.m crypt (burial vault) was found (Fig. 46, 47); the crypt was created at the time of the temple construction in the lower space of the apse (conch). In the central part of the chamber, on the floor a reliquary (reliquarium) for keeping sacred parts was built, made of wooden beams, plastered with high-quality lime; nowadays the reliquarium can be spotted at the planning level. It seems the altar table, which has not been preserved up to the present time, was situated just above the crypt on the floor of the sanctuary. The existence of such crypts and reliquaries for keeping sacred parts or remains of saints under the altar or under the altar table represents a very common practice in Late Antique Roman churches as well as Early Byzantine Christian temples. However this is the first time that this type of crypt has been found in Georgia.

Rectangularly planned pastophoria were built to the right and left of the sanctuary, along the side naves and entered from the naves; the northern pastophorion had an autonomous door from the northern space that later, during the period of the church functioning, was abolished; that is why it is doubtful that this space served as credence room during the church construction period: this element was unnecessary in both the ancient as well as the contemporary liturgies. If we also take into consideration that neither of these pastophoria was lit by a window, it should be considered that these spaces, as in the Chabukauri Basilica pastophoria, did not have legalized functions as deacon's and credence rooms.

From the north, west and south the central hall is surrounded with a contemporary system of galleries within the spaces created by the unified external walls of the time _ eukterions, stoas and narthexes, the height of which varies from 1 meter to 1.5 meters

(Fig. 42, 43-60). In the eastern most parts of the northern as well as the southern galleries, the eukterions have been arranged ending in horseshoe-shaped apses. We think that the northern "outer" chapel could have initially functioned as a baptistery.

Three-nave basilicas surrounded by a system of eukterions, stoas and narthexes, were as common in the 4th-6th centuries as five-nave basilicas throughout the central provinces of the Roman Empire as well as in the peripheries of it and were located practically across the whole early Christian world. The silhouettes of their facades looked exactly the same as those of five-nave basilicas: the tallest was a span-roofed central nave, while pent roofs below sloped down towards north and south.

Together with authentic galleries and narthex (perhaps first floor of a bishopic palace), the external size of the total perimeter for the Dolochopi basilica is 44 m x 27 m, owing to which it does not have any comparative structures throughout the Caucasus or in adjacent regions. The exquisite spatial design, structural, architectural and artistic solutions of the church make it unique and outstanding among early Christian basilicas within the Roman and Byzantine world, and it undoubtedly falls into their circle.

The Dolochopi basilica, based on its wooden beams, was covered with roof tiles (Tab. XI - 7). Similar to Chabukauri basilica, this was demonstrated by the picture revealed during the excavations: the layer of tile debris and charred wooden debris as a result of the basilica's destruction and burning, was scattered around the surface of the basilica together with numerous forged nails dispersed among the ruined material (Tab. XI - 2). In addition, some stone construction details of Dolochopi basilica remained in place to confirm the roof type - the remains of the wall, preserved up to a relatively high horizon (7.2 m) between the main hall and the northern bypass, has spaces in the wall for wooden beams with a horizontal section of 23cm x 25cm which were made along the whole length of the north wall, at a height of approximately 5.6 meters, at a distance of 1.5-1.7 m from another (Fig. 51).

Some of the planning and construction elements in Dolochopi basilica (for example, a multi-stage synthronon, proscenium-like bema, wooden constructions for roofing), have not been found since the 5th-6th centuries among samples of Georgian church architecture. Some unusual, unfamiliar decorative elements for Georgian churches after the 5th century, such as an interior entirely plastered in red paint, decorated roofs with coloured, jagged antefixes etc., indicate that the style of these churches was copied from Christian basilicas in the 4th-5th centuries in the eastern provinces of the Roman and Byzantine Empires and some other neighboring regions, and therefore, the construction of Dolochopi basilica should be presumed to be of the same period.

The assumption that Dolochopi Basilica was constructed at such an early period is even more justified by the fragments of similar clayware dated to the 4th-5th century, and well-known from Georgian archaeological monuments, unearthed during the excavations of the earliest stratigraphic layers of the church, mostly tamped into the cavities of the initial floor (Tab. XIII - XIV). The remains of interior lighting devices, glass lampads (chandeliers) placed into metal bars and silver hangers are particularly interesting (Tab. XVI). Exactly the same type of lighting devices, so called "poli-chandeliers", were widespread in the early Byzantine world and they are dated back to the 5th-6th centuries.

The analysis of artefacts obtained from the ruins covering the floor, indicates the interruption of the temple functioning, as well as the circumstances in which this happened

- the basilica was destroyed in the 6th century as a result of an earthquake (Fig. 57-61; Tab. XII). (we also can't rule out the possibility that the big basilica might have been destroyed as a result of demolition and burning by the Persian conquerors).

However, soon after this, Dolochopi Basilica - narrowed and shortened, was nevertheless restored (Fig. 63). At this stage it did not have the shape of a basilica, as the space between columns was filled up with masonry - the altar of the church was left the same, but the temple had only a hall, arranged in the eastern part of the central nave, and a chapel constructed in the southern nave. Around the 8th century, this awkwardly-built church, restored with inappropriate construction methods, was probably eventually ruined as a result of the devastation of Nekresi by Arab invaders and its final destruction. The remains of the church were used afterwards as a cemetery by the local settlement dwellers - during the excavations of the basilica, we had to study over 106 individual and collective tombs of the 8th-12th centuries (Fig. 37-40; Tab. V - X).

In 2015 2016, the Dolochopi Basilica excavations led us to one more discovery: it was discovered that this grandiose temple had been built on the ruins of an even earlier Christian basilica of up to 25 meters long and approximately 15 meters wide (Fig. 66, 67) More precisely, this is the basilica's local vernacular form, the earliest sample of the "three church basilica" in Georgia. Sometime later - in the 6th-9th centuries, this simplified variation of the basilica was widely spread all over Georgia and, in particular, Kakheti region. The remains of the lime-plastered walls of this primary 2-4 stone masonry building were well preserved under the floor of the basilica naos and the northern by-pass interior; it seems this church consisted of a central hall with rectangular sanctuary to the east and circular galleries (from the north, west and south). Along the galleries, to the north and the south of the sanctuary, rectangular-shaped pastophoria were arranged. Due to fragmentary nature of the construction remnants, we cannot say much about the planning peculiarities of the first chronological phase of the Dolochopi temple for the present, except for the fact that it was also based on a wooden structure covered with roof tiles; the edges of the roof were beautified with clay antefixes in the style of the larger basilica (Fig. XVII). Therefore in the previous layer of Dolochopi Basilica, the remnants of the smaller basilica were confirmed (it was slightly shorter than Chabukauri Basilica).

During the excavations of the floor of this initial temple, tangible material characteristic of the 4th century was found (Tab. XVIII); so consequently the building must have been constructed at the same period of time. On the basis of the stratigraphical picture revealed at the excavation site, the ancient basilica was destroyed in the last quarter of the 4th century (possibly as a result of an earthquake). Back then, the ruined church in one of the areas of Nekresi - a politically and economically strong city, must have been replaced with a newer one not long after. Perhaps, in the first half of the 5th century, a grandiose basilica was built on the platform created as a result of levelling the ruins of the older one. The building of a larger basilica soon after the disaster is also evident from the similarity in the church construction techniques and decorative design of these two basilicas, while the ceramics used (especially tile types and antefixes), do not differ stylistically or in size from one another.

Thus, resulting from our archaeological research carried out for the last few years, three large basilicas, having rather exquisite architectural style and constructed with a distance of only several decades between each other, built in one and the same city of the Iberian Kingdom, have been discovered. This circumstance rather evidently attests that very soon

after proclaiming Christianity as the state religion in Georgia (in 326 AD), during the 4th century and throughout the entire 5th century, large Churches were built designed in compliance with the canonical requirements of the Roman and early Byzantine Christian liturgy.

At a glance, there is nothing is unusual in this conclusion: nowadays scientists universally recognize the fact that Georgia in general, and in particular the Iberian Kingdom situated in its eastern part, represented a constituent part of the early Christian world; consequently the following propositions were considered as true by Christian cultural historians of different countries almost a century ago: after proclaiming Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, countries being under its political and cultural influence constructed grandiose churches personifying symbolically the power and mightiness of the new religious belief. In order to attract the newly converted population of these countries towards prayers and liturgy on a massive scale, there was a programme of creating temples and basilica-type buildings were regarded as the most appropriate, due to their spatial and planning peculiarities. That is why, after merely half of a century, basilica-type temples, approximately of an analogical planning design, but more or less different in craftsmanship and creative variety, became widespread throughout these regions; however, the typological diversity of the basilicas within the given regions affected their sizes - the attendance of the maximal quantity of congregation at liturgy and prayers represented the rigorous goal of civil or religious leaders in all provinces of the Roman Empire or other Christian countries.

Despite all this, it should be stated that in most works of famous Georgian art historians almost throughout the entire 20th century and even nowadays the ancient state and Christian cultural traditions, are covered absolutely differently. These rather strange versions hastily elaborated by representatives of the Georgian art historical school in relation to the given problem in the 1920s, have not experienced substantial evolution for decades. For example, even today in the works of these researchers we can find propositions supposing that allegedly, unlike the whole early Byzantine world and countries within its cultural circle, the Iberian authorities, during more than a century after the recognition of Christianity as the state religion, built exceptionally small churches based on the oral descriptions of missionaries about the temples of leading Christian countries and that this was due to an inadequate perception of liturgical processes performed there.

Even recently Georgian art historians have refused to revisit this almost dogmatic, not documentarily confirmed opinion, stating that in order to revise the described proposition, they require tangible materials at hand - i.e., they could not find above-ground remaining samples of large churches, built in the 4th or even last quarter of the 5th centuries in East Georgia with objective dating signs. They have failed to consider that such monuments were not revealed even 15 years ago through archaeological methods.

Taking into account the original trends of church architecture in the early Byzantine world, for us it is apparent that the first or further generations of Georgian architectural historians should have given more consideration to the Georgian ancient written sources - Ckhovreba Kartvelta Mepeta (The life of Georgian kings) and Moqcevai Qartlisai (Baptizing of Georgia) for information about the Christian affiliation of Kartli immediately after conversion, as well as the construction of the first temples in the country under the guidance of invited architects from Constantinople who came to Georgia together with the first clergymen. If the respected researchers had compared the data provided in the historic sources about church architecture within other countries of the Christian world

with the conclusions that had been already published in numerous scientific editions abroad, and worked in close cooperation with professional archaeologists, they would have also started searching the underground remnants of Christian churches in Georgia. These were adapted to the general planning of temples characteristic for the Roman and early Byzantine world during the 4th and first half of the 5th centuries (of course, taking into consideration local construction traditions).

Nowadays it is very difficult to discuss why Georgian art historians assumed the unrealistic interpretation that at the dawn of church building, Christian basilicas which were only slightly different from Roman and early Byzantine-type churches, could not have been built in our country; the explanation why such buildings had not been preserved until nowadays should have been rather logical: with a high degree of probability, they should have taken into account that for as a result of almost continual military incursions throughout Georgian territory, these temples were razed to the ground, or their extremely damaged remains have been reconstructed beyond recognition at various places, here and there (as we are aware, ruins of the afore cited basilicas of similar rank have been unearthed abroad, mostly destroyed to the foundation level after their excavations).

We cannot say precisely why it happened; however, long-term archaeological investigation of these monuments was regarded by scientists as unnecessary and they aimed at identifying the earliest Georgian churches among the constructions within reach of their observable space, built in compliance with not entirely formed stylistic and planning schemes, in some cases hardly determinable chronologically as well as functionally.

Such an approach towards research problems resulted in the fact that this large group of scientists identified a miniature chapel, built upon the burial vault of the monastery, and situated 2-3 kilometers from the newly found basilicas, with the most significant Christian temple which, according to historic sources, was constructed in the city of Nekresi in the 4th century (instead of the spatial, canonically-planned basilicas, discovered by us); and currently this small chapel is represented as one of the primary monuments of Georgian church architecture in textbooks on art history published by them.

Although we already have established and well-formulated views regarding the monumental construction of important Christian churches built in large Georgian cities and, in particular, the ancient basilicas of the Nekresi former settlement across the 4th century, we nevertheless conducted archaeological research in the miniature chapel of Nekresi monastery in order to finally clarify its function and construction date. Our archaeological research has revealed the ancient foundation of the building that stands on the pedestal with a complicated system of tombs. Buildings of such a structure have many parallels with the architecture of Eastern Christian monasteries, where they are known as Memorial Chapels. The Nekresi chapel might have had the same function and it couldn't have been built earlier than the 6 th century, when the monastery itself was founded. Such dating coincides with the artefacts that belong to the 6th-9th centuries and were revealed by archaeological research.

As it seems, in the nearest future, in order to dispel this firmly established, although false position the Georgian art history, we will have to further intensively disseminate the architectural as well as archaeological researches, conducted around each monument of the above mentioned category of Georgian church art throughout Georgia and abroad.



