

Cultural Heritage of Abkhazia (Apkhazeti)

Cultural heritage is a fair reflection of a nation's identity and must be taken into account in the course of settling ethnic conflicts. Moreover, being object of mutual care and pride it can serve as a powerful tool for bringing together conflicting sides. This is especially true in the case of conflicts caused and provoked by the third parties.

Cultural heritage offers important historical evidence and a source of information as well. Unlike written sources that may be falsified or biased, cultural heritage monuments exist in objective reality and are perceptible, tangible, right in front of our eyes. They do allow for a variety of interpretations, but their existence cannot be questioned and the reliability of the information offered by doubted. At the same time, cultural heritage is a fragile asset that may be easily destroyed during conflicts and military confrontations and it is our duty and responsibility to preserve it intact for the future generations.

Georgia is a country with rich cultural heritage that may be described as 'diverse homogeneity' or polyphony. Indeed, all the regions of this small country reveal distinct peculiarities in all aspects of their existence (habitus, dialects, character, music, architecture, etc), including in terms of artistic 'vocabulary'. At the same time, they display strongly pronounced similarities in terms of cultural mentality and artistic principles, which are different from those of other countries.

It would be interesting to view the cultural heritage of Abkhazia (Apkhazeti), one of the oldest historical provinces of Georgia, at least on three levels: local peculiarities; similarity with other Georgian regions and interrelation with East Christian, namely Byzantine culture. All three levels are distinctly pronounced in Abkhazian architecture and art. Numerous monuments surviving to the present day attest to the strong cultural and artistic integrity of the art and architecture of Abkhazia and other parts of historical Georgia.

Abkhazia preserves numerous remnants of old buildings, including Bronze Age tombs, cities, fortresses, bridges, palaces, churches and monasteries. It has 77 listed monuments dating from various periods.

Some churches are adorned with splendid sculptures, mural and mosaic paintings, which are the earliest samples of Christian art in the entire South Caucasus.

The cultural heritage of Abkhazia dates back to the earliest stages of human history. Of particular note are highly interesting works of the megalithic architecture of the Bronze Age, dolmens (e.g. Eshera dolmens daring from the third millennium BC).

Yet most remarkable is the architectural and artistic heritage surviving from the Christian period, which is represented by numerous churches, monasteries, palaces and fortresses. According to historical sources, Abkhazia played an outstanding role in founding a united Georgia Kingdom, which is further supported by cultural heritage monuments.

All forms of art are presented: architecture, mosaics, murals, manuscript illumination, stone reliefs, repoussé art, embroidery etc.

Throughout its long history, Abkhazian art followed the main trends and artistic traditions characteristic of all Georgian regions. Yet, at the same time it revealed some of the original traits, which were further developed

through close cultural relations with Byzantium. That the Abkhazian Church was under the jurisdiction of Constantinople till the late tenth century is natural. According to a widely spread assumption, the architecture of Abkhazia has more in common with Byzantine architecture than with Georgian architecture proper. This assumption is not correct. Everything proves the opposite. Unfortunately these issues have been tabooed during the Soviet time, while later it became impossible to conduct proper research in Abkhazia – we remain unaware of the state of preservation of these monuments. Anyway, the differences have been deliberately highlighted and the similarities neglected.

The earliest Christian churches in Abkhazia date from the fourth-fifth centuries. They belong to a basilica type. Presumably built with timber ceilings, these buildings must have been erected to the designs ‘imported’ from Greco-Roman world. The impact of the East-Roman and early Byzantine architecture is clearly visible, but already from the late fifth century the local artistic and construction traditions prevail. This is in line with the main trends of development of contemporary Georgian Christian architecture in general. This unity may be clearly seen in the typology, construction techniques and material, proportions, ornamental types, etc. For example, the Church in Old Gagra, dated to the sixth century, is a rare type of the so called ‘three-church basilica’ which is attested only on the territory of Georgia, especially in the East regions of Kartli and Kakheti. There are striking similarities between Gagra church and the contemporary architecture of historical Kakheti, East Georgia, in terms of the character of masonry, proportions etc. It appears as if the structure has been transferred straight from Kakheti. Very similar to the Kartalinian hall-churches is a 6th century, single-nave church in the Anakopia fortress.

This particular type of a ‘three-church basilica’ can also be seen in the following centuries (e.g. Abaanta 6th century, Ambara, 8th-9th centuries, Qiachi – 9th century, etc) providing further evidence pointing to the tight links and common traditions in the architecture of different regions of Georgia (e.g. a 6th century three-nave basilica at Tsandripsh (Gantiadi), which had vaulted ceilings distinct from flat timber ceilings characteristic of Byzantine basilicas).

Even the most ‘Byzantine’ examples, such as the Church of the Virgin at Dranda (8th c.) reveal many features characteristic of the architecture of the central regions of Georgia, namely of the famous church of the Holy Cross at Mtskheta.

Despite some Byzantine elements, the majority of domed ashlar churches of croix-inscrite type (e.g. 9th century Bzibi, 9-10th century Lichne, 10th century Mokvi, 10th century St. Simeon’s Church at Anakopia) are distinctly related to the architecture of Kartli. Even the decorative elements on the facades of these churches are closely related to the Kartalinian decorative system and ornaments; at the same time; wide arched porticos are characteristic of Kakhetian architecture.

It is true that the influence of Byzantine architecture is stronger in Abkhazia than e.g. in Kakheti, which can be explained by the location of Abkhazia and its age-old relations with the Mediterranean world since the establishment of Greek and Roman colonies. Situated in a diocese which long had been under Byzantine jurisdiction, a 10th century Cathedral at Bitchvinta is one of the most obvious examples of such influence. Yet, even this very ‘Byzantine’ structure has its squinches set in the pandatives, which is absolutely atypical of Byzantine architecture and can only be found in the Georgian designs, not to mention an extremely ‘un-byzantine’ rendering of the interior space, etc.

The late 9th century saw the beginning of a mounting increase of the influence of the architectural ‘vocabulary’ of Tao-Klarjeti, southern province of historical Georgia (now in Turkey), again across all historical regions of Georgia. One of the best examples was probably the domed church at Bedia, which was commissioned by King Bagrat III, the first King of united Georgia from the Bagrationi family. The church has been rebuilt for several times, but some 10th century fragments are still available. It is noteworthy, that in the early 12th century King David the Builder awarded the Bishop of Bedia with the title of Bediel-Alaverdeli. This meant the consolidation

of the main West and East Georgian bishoprics and symbolically implied the spiritual unity of the oldest kingdoms of Georgia.

Construction activities were not limited to church architecture: fortresses, palaces, bridges, etc still preserve in Abkhazia. The invasion and migration of the North Caucasian tribes and spreading of Islam pended the development of Christian architecture and the building work had to be limited to the reconstruction and repair of old structures. In the 19th century, under the Russian rule, some of the most venerated sites, such as the monastery of St. Symeon the Cannanite, were rebuilt and re-designed in pseudo Byzantine-Russian style, very different from the Georgian-Abkhazian architectural pattern.

Apart from architecture, stone reliefs, repoussé art and book illumination attest for the unity and homogeneity of the Georgian culture in the Christian period. For example, the famous golden chalice from Bedia which, according to Georgian inscriptions, was commissioned by King Bagrat III , is a masterpiece of Georgian repoussé art; the illuminations of the Mokvi Gospels (1300) are also among the best and most refined examples of this art.

The earliest examples of painting, namely the floor mosaics found in the Bitchvinta basilica, date to the 5th century and call up with floor mosaics at Dzalisa palace in central Kartli. Murals of different periods are preserved in the churches at Lichne, Bedia, Mokvi, Bitchvinta, Ckhelkari, Akafa, Pshaura, etc. Lichne murals are particularly remarkable for their exceptional value and being the mainstream of 14th century Georgian art.

Early examples of stone bas-reliefs are also to be found in Abkhazia, e.g. reliefs of the chancel-barrier from Tsebelda with unique and sophisticated iconographic program. There are significant similarities in the concept of plasticity, e.g. ox heads from Dranda and Bolnisi (East Georgia, Kartli) dated to the 5th century. Dwelling architecture has much in common with the dwelling structures in the West Georgia regions, so called 'oda-houses'.

In this rather brief survey we tried to demonstrate that the evidence built heritage provides attests to the strong cultural and spiritual unity, which helped to shape the national identity of the peoples and tribes inhabiting the territory of Georgia. Like in many European states (E.g. Italy, Germany, Greece), national cultural coherence and unity did exist in Georgia in spite of political and administrative fragmentation.

It is noteworthy that this spiritual and cultural unity was declared as early as the 8th century by one of the most famous and outstanding clergyman, St Grigol Khandzteli (Gregory of Khandzta), whose monastic activities spread across Georgia notwithstanding the existing political and administrative border restrictions, including in Abkhazia. According to him 'And Kartli [Georgia] consists of that spacious land in which the liturgy and all prayers are said in the Georgian language.'

The aforementioned holds true for Abkhazia as all the inscriptions whether made on stone, on metal or on paintings, are written in the Georgian language with ancient Georgian script *asomtavrulii*. This is very important for the genuine understanding of the situation on this land. Bedia Cathedral, e.g. has over eleven stone and fresco inscriptions containing numerous references to historical characters. There are many lapidary inscriptions on 11th century Ilori Church, one of the most respected holy sites in West Georgia. Of many fresco inscriptions surviving on Church of the Koimesis at Lichne, an 11th century inscription that mentions the apparitions of comet in 1066 is more remarkable. Inscriptions (mostly Georgian) on the walls of historical buildings or in the mural decorations bear witness to many noteworthy historical events, mention secular persons and clergymen.

Georgian restorers had for many years conducted conservation work on various monuments. We now need help and support in preserving this precious heritage, the state of which, most regrettably, remains unknown to us.

Everything that preserves from the past on the territory of Abkhazia sends and confirms one major message: by sharing the achievements of the neighboring peoples and combining them with their own initiatives and artistic perceptions, local inhabitants, disregarding their provenance, served as co-creators of the intrinsically diverse, but homogenous Georgian culture, even when due to various reasons, our small motherland was disintegrated and torn into peaces.

Samples of architecture, painting, metalwork and inscriptions are eloquent witnesses of all these. A common cultural horizon, common weltanschauung and common artistic mentality.

At this stage, it is more important to reveal and demonstrate unity and similarities rather than highlight differences. This statement can be supported by the well-known appeal made by an Abkhazian noblemen to the Russian Emperor in 1916: ‘We believe that the Georgians, related to us historically and through various circumstances, will ensure in all possible way the preservation of our national identity. We do understand that only the union with the Georgians will save us from numerous calamities and therefore in all circumstances and activities we are and will be together.’

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