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Church of the Holy Cross in Manglisi

The cathedral of Manglisi, also known as Manglisi Sioni and dedicated to the Holy Cross until at least the 15th century, is one of the first important sites of Christian faith in the country and remained of central cultic importance far into the medieval period – as we will see when discussing the structure in detail. The current building is a result of at least three large construction campaigns: one in late Antiquity, one in around 1020 to 1027, as is revealed by several recorded inscriptions, and a last one in the 1850s, resulting in the loss of many original features.

In terms of historiography, the church was rarely in the focus of scholarship. While it created considerable interest in the early days of scholarly investigations in the mid-19th century, when many of the now-lost inscriptions were recorded, only two articles of the 1920s (Chubinashvili, Shanidze) and a monographic treatment of the 1960s (Dvali) followed. This is even more surprising as the church remains a unique exception among the many 11th century churches of Georgia in several aspects, as well concerning the typology of the architecture as the – presumed- history of its creation.

First building phase

The church is one of the most ancient foundations in Kvemo Kartli. The legendary account of the Kartlis Tskhovreba claims that it was King Mirian himself, who had asked the emperor Constantine to send Greek stonemasons and carpenters to erect the church. Constantine would have accepted this and not only sent stonemasons but also gave them valuable relics – the suppedaneum of the True Cross and the nails of the crucifixion in order to help endow the church of Manglisi and that of Erusheti.

This legend is of central importance for understanding the unique building history of the church – even if, in fact, the bishopric was only established under King Vakhtang I Gorgasal of Iberia (*449 †502/522) in the years between 472 and 484. A bishop of Manglisi appears in synodal lists of the early 6th century, and we might assume that a cathedral was in existence at that point. In the early 7th century, the Armenian catholicos forbids his people the pilgrimage to the venerated relics of Manglisi and thus indirectly confirms a thriving cult and supraregional importance of the church.

Since the work of Chubinashvili, the first church is imagined as a tetraconch inscribed in an external octagon, of which everything but the eastern conch would be inscribed in today's building. Indeed, the peculiar shape and remarkably low proportions of the medieval church testify to this: in the 11th century, the Late Antique church was only encased in a new shell of ashlar and equipped with a new eastern end and porches. One peculiar feature of the first church remains: small chambers with apses placed in the wall strength in the corners between the conches, which originally were open towards the exterior and possessed doors to the interior. The closest parallels to this arrangement can be found in the later 5th century churches of the Kathisma and on Mount Garizim in Palestine, both erected at biblical memorial sites. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of centralised triconch or tetraconch buildings of the late antique period had a memorial function or marked important sites of veneration. Thus, it is probable that this shape was chosen in connection with the veneration of the Cross relics mentioned already in the early legends.

The eastern end of this building, replaced in 1020, is of uncertain shape – it might have mirrored the western half, with a conch and small spaces in the diagonal axis, or have shown a more

classical tripartite choir. As a consequence of this uncertainty, we also cannot confirm that the first Manglisi church indeed played a key role in the development of the Jvari-type, as sometimes postulated, or is rather part of a parallel development.

Finally, one might wonder if a tetraconch church of the rather modest dimensions still perceivable could have served as pilgrimage / memorial church and cathedral at the same time. Perhaps, one might speculate, there was a second church, a basilica more in line with the architectural standards of early cathedrals in Georgia. This would have been abandoned in the medieval period, when building activities were focused on the revalorisation of the venerated and venerable centralised structure.

Second building phase

In the early 11th century, during the reign of George I. (1014–1027), son of Bagrat III., the original building was enlarged and adorned with sculptural decoration of the period. The remodelling of the church entirely changed the exterior appearance. In the first step, a rectangular transept-like bay and an adjoining tripartite choir with central apse and two pastophoria was added – following the standard scheme of Georgian architecture of the period. Subsequently, the original building was fully encased in a new outer shell of ashlar and a high dome drum was erected, encasing a dome resting on pendentives. Finally, two porches were added to the west and south.

Building joints help to distinguish the phases, most prominently one at the junction between choir and northern wall, indicating the latter's posteriority. The western porch seems to have been a decision taken during the encasing of the old core, while the southern porch belongs to a third phase but cannot be much later than the rest.

Sculptural decoration is – rather unusually – limited to the blind arcades of the porches and the dome drum as well as the carved window frames. These are all heavily restored in the 19th century, even if a drawing of Giorgi Gagari of the 1840s confirms that the church never collapsed, making its dome drum one of the few preserved from the 11th century, together with Nikortsminda (the domes of Oshki and Ishkani are slightly older). However, one has to treat many parts of the sculptural decoration with care, as various idiosyncratic details such as the façade crosses were added rather arbitrarily.

In any case, the medieval remodelling created a church very much in the style of the 11th century, but different from the newly erected ones of the period. Its rather low proportions and the dominance of the centralized nave underline this difference just as much as the importance given to undecorated surfaces of well-cut large ashlar masonry.

It is here that we have to briefly talk about possible reasons for the remodelling. Already the fact that the building was remodelled, and not rebuilt from scratch requires explanation: it appears to be the only case for such a procedure in 11th century Georgia, at least among the more prominent churches. Together with the apparent intention to somewhat update the decoration, but not hide the differences to cotemporary new buildings, it seems clear that there was an agenda to visualise the old age of the church even after the remodelling. This can be connected to the tradition of a pilgrimage, of a relic veneration at this site – according to legend one of the longest lasting traditions of a relic veneration in the entire country. This tradition was supposed to remain visible, to be conveyed by the shape of the 'upgraded' church. The medieval beholder would presumably not have taken note of details such as ornamental decoration in the same way we do this now; however, he would have been able to distinguish aspects such as spatial shape, proportions or the dominance of plain ashlar walls. All this must have been aided by an oral narrative certainly present on site, which would have additionally 'activated' the memorial qualities of the building (to use a term coined by Stephan Albrecht in the discussion of similar strategies of conveying tradition through architecture in the abbey of Saint Denis).

Unfortunately, the building inscriptions, which were recorded, do not tell us who commissioned the rebuilding, but in turn are rather clear on the dates. Eugene Brosset's translation of the lost

southern octagon window inscription, originally containing the donor's name, is as follows: "In the name of God, through the intercession of the Living Cross, I was considered worthy, me, the poor [...] to build this holy church, to pray for my soul. It was the year 240 [1020]" He found another now lost fragment, mentioning a consecration in 1027, while Shanidze mentions another previously overlooked fragment, which reads "[...] during the reign of Giorgi, ruler by the God over the East, *Novelisimus*". This, together with another fragment mentioning 1020, it appears clear that the remodelling took place in around that year, with another consecration – perhaps of the southern porch, which was added later and possesses its own apse – in 1027. All this indeed falls into the reign of Giorgi – and, additionally is confirmed by the sculptural decoration absolutely typical for the 1010s and 1020s.

Controversy about who commissioned the church was sparked by the reading of an inscription in the apse of the southern porch, below the window, today half covered by a 19th century altarpiece. Brosset read the last decipherable word as "Baghou[...]r[...]\"", which he completed to Baghouach Liparit. Ever since, the idea was entertained that the church was indeed remodelled on behalf of the Liparitids, relatives of the powerful Armenian Orbelians and engulfed in a "family feud" with the Bagritids during much of the 10th and 11th centuries. Even if the inscription is evidently not sufficient to confirm the assumption, we additionally possess a manuscript of 1047, executed in the convent of the Holy Cross of Manglisi and commissioned by Liparit *Eristaw of Eristaws* – this confirms the close relations of the family to the site in Manglisi around 20 years after the remodelling. Additionally, the church possesses many parallels in shape and decoration to the monastery church of Katskhi, which served as family mausoleum to the Liparitids during much of the period in question: this church is of characteristic octagonal shape as well, perhaps indicating an inspiration from or reference to the building in Manglisi.

Finally, if we accept this theory to be true, the remodelling of the ancient church with a strong interest in showing its ancient roots, would have been a purposeful political statement. The honour to be responsible for the revaluation of one of the oldest sites of veneration in the country would have reflected on the family's tradition, shown its status as equal to that of the Bagratids and in a way legitimating the family's claim for power. Manglisi would, in this reasoning, have become for the Liparitids what Jvari was for the Bagratids.

Paintings

The remains of medieval paintings in Manglisi, presumably executed after the remodelling of the building in the 1020s, are fragmentary. Still covering the entire church in the 1840s, the restoration of the 1850s seems to have wiped away all but those of the drum and dome.

In the centre of the dome the Glory of the Cross (also e.g. in Timotesubani, Ishkhani), which is a rather usual scene but in the case of Manglisi receives a double importance, as it refers to the veneration of the cross relic as well. Further references to the cross are made in the portal gable and in the porch vault (the design of which is closely related to models originating perhaps in Oshki).

A small figure riding on a lion has been interpreted as Saint Mamasor personification of the sun (elaborate?/discuss?)

In the drum, Christ is shown as central part of a Deesis with the Virgin and John, as well as eight prophets.

Remarks on individual building parts

(for the discussion during the visit)

Eastern end: the typical layout developed in the 7th century (Jvari/Saint Hripsime in Vagharshapat) and further developed until the medieval period. This type (with flat eastern wall and two pronounced niches between the apses) for the first time in its 'perfection' in Tsromi

(626-634).

The Manglisi solution is much closer to the 7th century examples than to contemporary ones: niches have the same height as the central window and are subsumed under a common hood mould, instead of a continuous blind arcade (in Manglisi only used for the porches).

A possible model would be Samshvilde (759-777), at 20 km distance but today largely destroyed. The non-hierarchical treatment of the heights appears also on some Armenian examples of the 11th century, for example Marmashen.

Octagon:

The folded roof structure is particularly typical for Armenian churches, such as Xckonq (1025) or Marmashen (1029), there usually only applied to the dome itself. A folded circular roof for the lower zone of a centralized building is rather to be found in Georgia: Bochorma from the 10th century and Katskhi, 1010-14.

The dome drum is most comparable to Katskhi (before the 19th century restoration) and Nikorts'minda (before 1014). A difference lies in one small but decisive detail: the introduction of a triple colonette in the blind arcade, where other contemporary churches resort to a double colonette. While not changing the overall appearance a lot, this detail demonstrates an understanding of the systematic connection of the colonettes with the arches above: in Manglisi, the outer arches of the blind arcade are merged on top of the capitals, logically requiring a third, central support below the capitals, while for example those in Nik'orts'minda die into each other a good bit above the capital. The triple colonette system is in use much later for such prominent buildings as the Church of the Virgin in Gelati (after 1106).

Porches:

Most remarkably, the southern porch possesses a central pronounced vault and an apse to the east. It appears to have not only functioned as a transitional entrance space but also as an in some ways autonomous chapel in dome-hall shape. The combined porch/chapel type as it appears in Manglisi appears to be a development originating from the tradition of 'Dreikirchenbasiliken' of the 6th century. The church of Oshk'i, before 973, possesses a small open porch to the south of the central triconch structure and another one along the southern side of the nave, mirroring a closed elongated space to the north, both with eastern apses embedded in the wall strength. Structurally the later examples differ: already in K'umurdo, before 1000, we find a fully developed porch-chapel of a single bay, whereas the southern porch in Nik'orts'minda originally did not possess an apse, the current chapel to its east being a later addition.

The strong presence of commemorative inscriptions as well in Manglisi as in K'umurdo might indicate a use of these spaces in memorial contexts.

Inscriptions of the Holy-Cross Church in Manglisi mentioned by Brosset 1851, Brosset 1859 and Shanidze 1926

I. Building Inscriptions

1. Southern Octagon Window – lost

Brosset 1851 [2]: "... to commemorate my soul, mine, of the bishop Cuirice [Khatchce], who was considered worthy to build this Holy Church ..."

Brosset 1859 [4]: "In the name of god, through the intercession of the Living Cross, I was considered worthy, me, the poor [...] to build this holy church, to pray for my soul. It was the year 240 [1020]" Shanidze 1926: mentioned, but not republished

2. Inner Southern

Brosset 1851 [4]: "C[...] has built this great church in the easterly year 240 [1020]"

Brosset 1859 [6]: "[...] this great church was built, it was the year 240 [1020]"

3. Unknown (Above a Window or doorway?) – lost
Shanidze 1926 [3]: “[...] during the reign of Giorgi, ruler by the God over the East, *Novelisimus*”
4. Stone Fragment – lost
Brosset 1859 [10]: “Glory to you, Lord, [...] was consecrated in the month of February, the first day of the moon, in the year 247 [1027]”
5. Fragment in the Precinct Wall – lost
Brosset 1851 [3]: “[...] Gabriel has built”
Brosset 1859 [5]: “[...] Gabriel has built”
Shanidze 1926 [10]: did not find the inscription
6. Western Porch – not traceable
Shanidze 1926 [8]: illegible except for “[...] bishop of Manglisi [...]”
7. Precinct Tower
Brosset 1859 [11]: “Christ Lord, have pity with Arseni, bishop of Manglisi, and the artisan Theimouraz. In 355 [1647]”
Shanidze 1926 [11]: “Christ God have mercy with the master craftsman and archbishop of Manglisi Arsen, February 355 [1647]”

II. Memorial Inscriptions

8. Southern Porch, Next to Apse Window

Brosset 1851 [6]: “Holiest Lord [...] archangel, we offered for an agape, in favour of our son; the priest and the bishop will read mess for him for two days. Whoever changes this, will pay for his sins. Christ, have mercy of Baghou[ach and of Tzkhov]r[eba]” (Alternative ending: Baghou[ach Lipa]r[it])

Brosset 1859 [8]: “On 8th of November, feast of the Archangel, I made an offering for an agape, in favour of [...] all the priests and the bishops who will read mess. Whoever changes this, will pay for his sins. Christ, have mercy of Baghou[ach Lipa]r[it]”

Shanidze 1926 [7]: “On the 8th of November, the day of Archangels [I] donated an agape to [commemorate] Tevdore son of Vachinai with evening prayers [liturgy], whichever priest will be pray for him. Whoever changes this, will pay for his sins! Christ have mercy on **Bagatur!**”

9. Southern Porch, Pillar Base in the Eastern Half

Brosset 1859 [9]: “[...] I established an agape [...] Whoever changes this, will pay for his sins.”

Shanidze 1926 [6]: “ The day of Saint John I donated an agape for every night with evening prayers [liturgy]. Who changes it, will pay for his sins. “

10. Southern Porch, Eastern Outside Wall

Brosset 1851 [5]: “Lord, remember the soul of Chalwa and of Constanti Ghodomis-Dze”

Brosset 1859 [7]: “Lord, remember the soul of Chalwa and of Constanti Ghodomis-Dze”

Shanidze 1926 [1]: “Our Lord, commemorate the soul of Ghodom’s sons [...and?] of Constanti”

11. South-Western Octagon Window

Brosset 1851 [1]: “Christ have mercy for Aboulidze”

Brosset 1859 [2]: “Oh Christ, have mercy for Saba Aboulidze”

Shanidze 1926 [2]: “Christ forgive Abolira”

12. South-Western Octagon Corner – very abraded

Brosset 1851 [1]: “Christ have mercy for Saba Bibilouri”

Brosset 1859 [1]: “Oh Christ, have mercy for Saba Bibilour”

13. Southern Porch, North-Western Pilaster of the Central Bay

Brosset 1851 [1]: “Lord, have mercy for the soul of Soula Saqwarelidze, amen”

Brosset 1859 [3]: “Lord, give peace to the soul of Soula Saqouarelidze. Amen!”

Shanidze 1926 [4]: mentioned.

14. Southern Porch, North-Eastern Pilaster of the Central Bay

Shanidze 1926 [5]: mentioned as fragmentary

III. Other

15. Dome

Shanidze 1926 [9]: mentioned as fragmentary