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### **The Cathedral of Bana**

Ruins of a grand Cathedral is located on a top of a small hill in the Oltu valley, Erzerum Province (Turkey). Bana is one of the most important medieval church buildings in eastern Christian world.

According to the medieval Georgian sources, the cathedral of Bana was built during the reign of King Adarnase (888-923) by the hand of Kvirike Baneli, who later became the first bishop of Bana. This earliest date has recently been confirmed by means of 14C dating.

In 1032, King Bagrat IV (1027-1072) married the Byzantine Princess Helena, niece of emperor Romanos III Argyros (1028-1034), at Bana. The event is depicted in a wall painting from 1036 at the nearby monastery church of Oshki, showing the cathedral of Bana as a huge cylindrical building with a gallery above the ambulatory.

In the early twelfth century Bana fell to the Seljuk Turks, but it was retaken during the reign of Queen Tamar (1184-1213). The building structure was further strengthened in this period. In the mid-sixteenth century the south Georgian provinces of Tao-Klarjeti came under Ottoman rule. As a consequence, the cathedral of Bana ceased to function as a place of Christian worship.

The German Botanist Karl Koch still saw Bana in its complete state in 1844. He noted some "Muslim" alterations of the building.

During the Crimean war (1853-1856) Ottoman troops converted Bana into a fortress. The dome of the building collapsed in 1875, and Bana suffered heavily under artillery fire during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878.

When the Georgian historian Ekvtime Takaishvili surveyed Bana in 1902 and 1907, only the eastern apse and the adjacent chambers were still standing.

Large parts of the remaining east apse were destroyed by earthquakes in 1983 and 1984.

The remains of the cathedral of Bana lie on a top of a hill in the valley of the river Penek Su. The closest modern settlement, the small hamlet of Penek, is some 1.5 km away, but in the Middle Ages Bana itself was the site of a town that also served as the residence of the local Bagrationi rulers. Nothing of this remains today. Only archaeological excavations can bring this historically important place back to light.

The site, which is visible from a long distance, is dominated by the impressive ruins of the former cathedral. Although only parts of the east apse, the southern half of the ambulatory wall, and part of the barrel vault that connects the two, remain fully intact, Bana is still the best preserved of all the churches of its building type – the so-called tetraconch with circular ambulatory. Due to its ingenious construction that involves massive square pillars housing vaulted chambers on several levels, the whole cathedral was preserved until the mid-nineteenth century.

The surroundings are scattered with pieces of the former cathedral building that was blown up during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. In front of the north side of the ruins of the cathedral are vaulted underground chambers that have never been investigated.

Problematic are the uncontrolled illegal excavations that are going on at Bana today. Nothing is known of the potential findings. Furthermore, important data are lost for ever, due to the disturbance or complete destruction of the archaeological context.

The walls of the cathedral at Bana are constructed of stone blocks facing a mortar and rubble core. For the cladding of the exterior and interior of the building mostly yellow/reddish blocks of stone, evenly quarried and with smoothly finished surfaces, were employed. Light grey/greenish stone blocks were used for later repairs. Wooden beams inserted into the mortar core functioned as tension rods.

Typologically, Bana belongs to a rare type of cathedral churches that only occur in the south Caucasus, the so-called tetraconch with circular ambulatory. In Bana, the structure is enriched by chambers placed in the corners between the four exedrae. The ambulatory wall was further strengthened by an arcade that may or may not have supported an upper gallery. There are different reconstructions of the building's contested, but it is clear that it must have had three stories surmounted by a central dome on a drum.

The cathedral of Bana is closely connected to the restoration of Georgian kingship in 888. A <sup>14</sup>C analysis carried out in 2012 confirms the earliest possible date of construction around the turn of the ninth-tenth century. However, the building reflects older prototypes, most of all the Armenian cathedral of Zvartnots from the mid-seventh century, thus testifying to the interaction and cross-fertilisation between two East Christian cultures of the South Caucasus during the early Middle Ages.

The cathedral of Bana once displayed the richest collection of Classical elements of any early medieval building in the South Caucasus. This raises important questions about the connection of this apparently deeply provincial region in Eastern Anatolia to imperial capital and artistic centre of Constantinople.

For five centuries, Bana functioned as the funeral church in which the Georgian kings and their consorts were buried. Undoubtedly there must be a crypt, which today lies beneath the debris of collapsed building parts.

Bana also played an important role in Turkish history. However, the changes which the building most probably underwent while it was under Seljuk rule, are not fully understood today. Furthermore, Bana is a rare monument in Eastern Anatolia that witnesses of the military history of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, later additions to the church building that turned it into a fortress, like the buttressing tower in front of the east side of the ambulatory wall, have been evaluated as dispensable by those in search of treasures and building materials, and have thus been removed.

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