

CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean
Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova



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Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval
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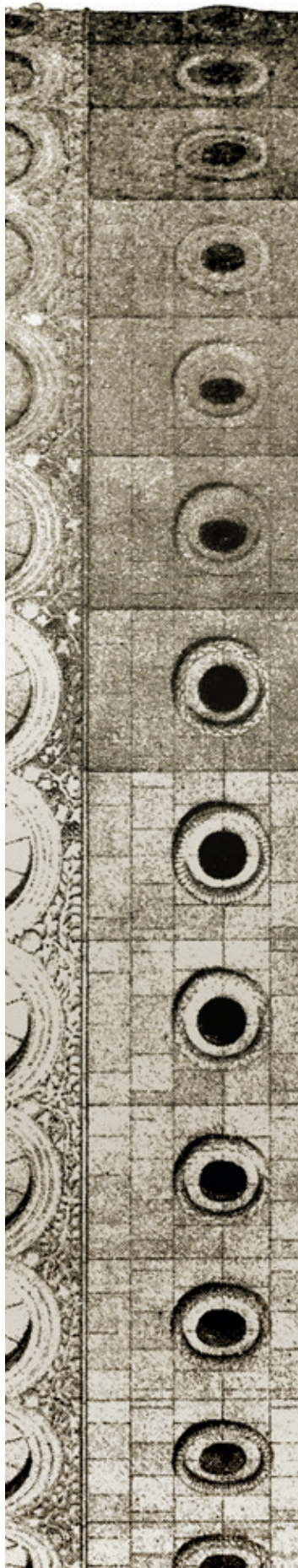
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The Medieval South Caucasus

ARTISTIC CULTURES OF ALBANIA,
ARMENIA AND GEORGIA

Edited by Ivan Foletti and Erik Thunø
with the collaboration of Adrien Palladino



THE MEDIEVAL SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Map 1 / Albania, Armenia and Georgia at the apogee of their expansion in the Middle Ages

The Artistic Cultures of the Medieval South Caucasus

Historiography, Myths and Objects

Ivan Foletti & Erik Thunø

After only two years of the periodicals existence, *Convivium* was confronted with the need to introduce a format of monographic issues more closely focused on the current interests and “hot topics” of medieval studies. The outcome is this new series of *Supplementa*, the first of which will serve as an introduction to what its editors have chosen to call the “artistic cultures” prevalent during the Middle Ages in the region of the South Caucasus.

Although far from comprehensive in terms of material, chronology and geography, the volume intends to raise awareness of a region whose artistic wealth and cultural diversity has remained relatively unknown to most medievalists. Stretching from Eastern Anatolia and the Black Sea in the west to the Caspian Sea in the east, and from the snow-capped Great Caucasus mountain range in the north to the Armenian highlands in the south, medieval

southern Caucasia was originally divided into the kingdom of Caucasian Albania (which mainly existed on the territory of present-day republic of Azerbaijan), Greater and Lesser Armenia, and western and eastern Georgia, that is, the kingdoms of Lazica (Egrisi) and Iberia (Kartli) respectively. Together, these entities made the South Caucasus a true frontier region between Europe and Asia and a place of transcultural exchange. Its official Christianization began as early as in the fourth century, even before Constantine the Great founded Constantinople or had himself been converted to Christianity. During the subsequent centuries, the region became a well-connected and strategic buffer zone for its neighboring and occupant Byzantine, Persian, Islamic, Seljuk and Mongol powers. And although subject to constantly shifting borders, the medieval kingdoms of the South Caucasus remained an internally diverse yet shared and distinct geographical and historical unity. Far from being isolated, these cultures were part of a much wider medieval universe. Because of the transcultural nature and elevated artistic quality of their objects and monuments they have much to offer in the field of art history, which has recently been challenged to think more globally in terms of transculturation, movement and appropriation among medieval cultures.

A rapid glance at the articles in this volume and their accompanying illustrations should suffice for the recognition of what is a staggering corpus of artistic treasures manifest across all the media from the centuries following the early Christianization of the South Caucasus to the Mongol invasions in the early thirteenth century. The various objects and monuments discussed by the authors – enamels, icons, monumental crosses and four-sided stelae, secular and religious buildings, mural painting, coins, illuminated manuscripts and mosaics – may sometimes seem familiar, at other times less so, or occasionally may even appear downright exotic, strange, and considerably different from the medieval art typically presented in the established canon of western and Byzantine art history. Indeed, the works discussed in this volume originate in a variety of places including the former Armenian and Georgian territories in eastern Turkey, the mountainous and quite inaccessible region of Svanet'i in north-western Georgia, and the former kingdom of Caucasian Albania. The picture that emerges from this vibrant ensemble is anything but homogeneous. It is a challenging and eye-opening cluster of materials and represents, in fact, only the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, it is the vastly assorted geographical, historical

and cultural origins of this important artistic heritage that has led the editors to collect the articles under the title “artistic cultures”. Although sharing a specific area on the world map that exposed them to the same powerful neighbors, their fluctuating borders, shifting political entities and alliances, and changing fortunes helped to define the medieval kingdoms of South Caucasasia as a dynamic and diverse web of artistic traditions that prospered through interaction with one another as well as with their neighboring powers.

Viewing the artistic heritage of the South Caucasus from a regional perspective rather than only focusing on, say, Armenia or Georgia, while at the same time acknowledging its diversity, interconnectedness and association with other medieval societies, is long overdue. As we learn from several of the articles in this volume, however, the conjunction of a long and turbulent history with the priorities and prejudices evolved within the field of art history, and topped by obstacles of a practical nature, are factors that have shaped a complex historiography. Yet they also help to explain why this fascinating region still stands on the fringes of medieval art history. Barriers of many kinds – linguistic, geographical, political, nationalistic, racial, religious and ethnic – have not only made it difficult, sometimes impossible, for outside scholars to access the South Caucasus, but have also torn the interrelated cultures apart and isolated them from each other and from the rest of the world.

It is therefore not surprising that in the attempt to release the artifacts from their former artificial and delimiting parameters and to discuss them on their own terms and within a wider geographical perspective, in almost every article in this collection historiography looms large and is dealt with from a variety of perspectives and traditions. Two historical figures, in particular, are repeatedly alluded to because of their dominant and continuous impact for over a century: the Russian art historian Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925), and the Polish-Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski (1862–1941). The latter’s racial theories and their influence on the scholarship of Armenian church architecture have been extensively researched. This volume therefore begins with Ivan Foletti’s discussion of Kondakov’s scholarship, which was profoundly marked by the Russian political situation under Emperor Alexander III (1881–1894). Also crucial to an understanding of the South Caucasus is that, viewed from the Russian perspective, no difference existed between Georgia and Armenia, since both were considered to be part of the same province. As the motivating

protagonist of the *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, Kondakov also bears particular relevance to *Convivium*. The importance of the *Seminarium* with respect to the medieval South Caucasus and the perception of the region's status within a broader international context at the beginning of the twentieth century is discussed by Francesco Lovino, who demonstrates that in the Russian émigré context the region was transformed into a stage of conflict for patriotic claims and nostalgia for the *ancien régime*. This aspect is all the more important as the *Seminarium* played a pioneering role in discovering Southern Caucasia for Western research.

Past scholarship, as Patricia Blessing argues, has not only upheld firm divides within the South Caucasus, but also between Armenia and modern day Turkey. This has generated narratives separating the Islamic religious and secular architecture of Anatolia from Armenian Christian buildings, while ignoring the existence of a regional style facilitated by movement and exchange along the region's trade routes that crisscrossed borders and connected monuments, whether Christian or Islamic, secular or religious. By questioning categories such as "Armenian" or "Islamic" to describe the monuments of the region, Blessing's article provides an interesting counterpart to Christina Maranci's contribution on medieval Armenia's perhaps most famous architectural monument, the seventh-century church at Zuart'noc'. Through a brief historiographical overview, it becomes clear that classifications like "Byzantine", "Syrian", "Holy Land", and "Armenian" are artificial constructs that poorly apply to a seventh-century architectural culture of such remarkable fluidity in style and ornament. That the search for origins typically ignores the context in which the various forms interact and generate meaning, is taken a step further by Antony Eastmond. In his analysis of the famous Khakhuli triptych, he reminds us that the question of whether its central icon of the Mother of God (surviving only in a few enamel fragments) should be labeled "Georgian" in terms of its manufacture, as is generally assumed, or "Byzantine", as Eastmond argues here, matters less than its use and display in a Georgian context. Indeed, this icon, possibly a gift from Emperor Basil II (976–1025), first served to mark Byzantium's debt to Georgia but subsequently became a liability as relations with Byzantium shifted, and Basil became the aggressor rather than the debtor.

The contributions by Maria Bulia and Mzia Janjalia, Sipana Tchakerian, and Erik Thunø look across the present day national borders which sometimes very artificially have separated

Armenian from Georgian medieval cultures. In focusing on the thirteenth-century fresco program in a Georgian church that since 1921 has been located on the other side of the border, in northern Armenia, Bulia and Janjalia explore the way varied and fluid artistic traditions across the South Caucasus converge in a monument which in the past was made subject to nationalistic discourses on both side of the border. By suggesting a new typology for the four-sided stelae – a unique kind of stone monument scattered across the South Caucasus between the fourth and eighth centuries – Tchakerian demonstrates how a treatment of the arts based on the artificial borders created by nationalistic Armenian and Georgian art historians can be supplanted by a regional study based on visual features alone. By contrast, Thunø shows on the basis of a few case studies that Armenian and Georgian artistic cultures alike appropriated the trappings of rulership and other visual features from their larger neighboring powers with the aim of advancing specific political and cultural agendas. Also termed “cross-cultural dressing”, this type of appropriation, which endowed frontier civilizations with agency, allows Thunø to approach the visual culture of the South Caucasus in the broader historiographical context of center *versus* periphery.

The scope of this volume is not limited to Armenia and Georgia, but extends to the kingdom of Caucasian Albania, which was likewise Christianized in the fourth century, but began to disintegrate during the Arab conquests of eighth century. Annegret Plontke-Lüning introduces us to a series of little known early Christian churches from a vanished medieval Christian world, churches that though unfamiliar to most medievalists, were not created in a vacuum, but fully embedded in the broader artistic culture of the medieval world. Lynn Jones takes us further into this forgotten culture and argues on the basis of a medieval history of the Caucasian Albanians that while cultivating close ties to neighboring Armenia, the ways in which the Caucasian Albanians associated themselves with the cult of relics, gift giving, artists and nature, at once distinguishes this kingdom as its own culture and enriches our view of the medieval world.

The artistic cultures of the South Caucasus, however, are further diversified if we look at particular areas within the region itself. An illustrative case in point is the mountainous and isolated province of Svanet’i in northwestern Georgia. Marina Kevkhishvili introduces us to its geography and history and shows how between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, while cultivating contacts with other Christian centers such as Jerusalem, Svanet’i

saw the production of numerous high quality illuminated manuscripts, churches decorated with monumental fresco programs, icons, and what is particular to this region, monumental altar crosses many of which are still in their original locations. The latter, typically adorned with silver revetments, are the subject of Michele Bacci's article, which outlines the early history of the crosses and examines their liturgical function. By seeking parallels in places such as Crete, Byzantine Cappadocia and Russia, Bacci is able to tie these Svanetian crosses to the Golgotha of Jerusalem, a connection revealing both the importance of the cult of the Cross in medieval Georgia, and the close contacts it cultivated with the Holy City during the Middle Ages.

What becomes apparent from the articles in this collection is the wide range of methodologies applied. Indeed, beyond representing more "traditional" art historical methods such as iconographic or formal analysis, this volume may also be considered a barometer of the directions in which the discipline in general, and scholarship on southern Caucasia in particular, are moving. Increasingly important, for example, is the investigation of historiography, cultural fluidity and cosmopolitanism. Research on the South Caucasus, moreover, entails facing the very question of the origins and development of Christian art itself, reexamining the model of center *versus* periphery, and dealing with unfamiliar types of artifacts. As an introduction to the artistic cultures of the South Caucasus, the present collection aims at reopening the debate in a way that is both more nuanced and – given the historiographical considerations emerging throughout the volume – also less conditioned by biases that have afflicted past scholarship on this isolated yet strategic geographical area. The intention behind the volume is thus not only to introduce new avenues of research but also serve as a compelling reminder that southern Caucasia merits a more central place in the scholarship of medieval art history.

To conclude, we wish to express our gratitude to all the persons and institutions who have enabled us to bring this project to fruition. In particular, thanks are due to the Research Council and the School of Arts and Sciences of Rutgers University, to the Fonds des publications de l'Université de Lausanne, to the Société Van Walsem of Lausanne and finally to the Faculty of Arts of the Masaryk University.