



MEDIEVAL ARMENIAN SCULPTURE AT THE CROSSROADS OF ARTISTIC TRADITIONS

Online Workshop

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AIEA
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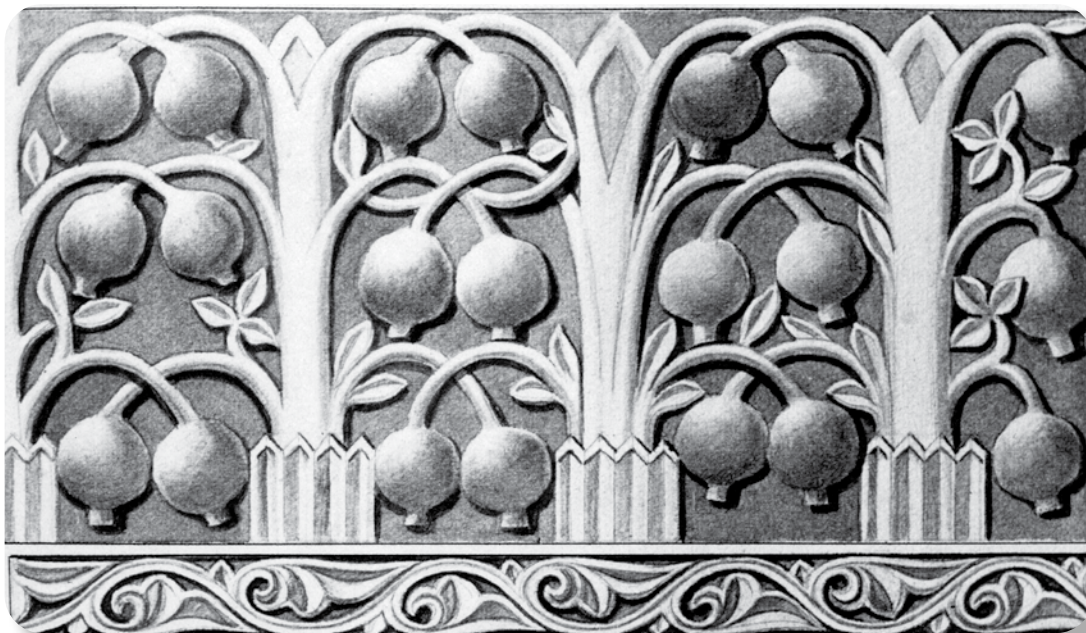
Organizers: Zaruhi Hakobyan, Lilit Mikayelyan

PROGRAM

- 1. Svetlana Tarkhanova** (Israel Antiquities Authority)
Between the Negev and the Capital: Ecclesiastical Architecture and Liturgical Furnishings in Early Byzantine Rahat
- 2. Nina Iamanidze** (Collège de France)
Devotion and Visual Power: Reconsidering the Interplay between Image and Ritual in Early Medieval Georgian Sculpture
- 3. Emma Loosley Leeming** (University of Exeter)
The Stylites in Georgia: Tracing the Stylite Tradition in Medieval Georgian Iconography

SHORT BREAK

- 4. Diana Grigoryan** (Independent Scholar, Armenia)
The So-Called Church with Pomegranate Decor in Ani (Preliminary Observations)
- 5. Grigory Trefilov** (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow)
Donor Portraits and Images of the Theotokos in the Monumental Sculpture of Vayots Dzor (13th to 14th Centuries)



ABSTRACTS

Svetlana Tarkhanova

Israel Antiquities Authority

Between the Negev and the Capital: Ecclesiastical Architecture and Liturgical Furnishings in Early Byzantine Rahat

During two excavation seasons conducted at Rahat in 2020 and 2022, numerous remarkable architectural elements were uncovered. While the majority of these elements are dated to the Early Byzantine period, two are of Roman origin. They were discovered in secondary use—as components of walls or benches—or dispersed among various structures in Areas D (subareas D1 and D2) and F (subareas F1 and F2), without a clearly identifiable function. Notably, none of these elements were found in situ.

In Area D2, the foundations of a triapsidal, three-aisled basilical church were uncovered, measuring approximately 19 × 29 meters. This structure is attributed to Stratum

V (5th–7th centuries CE). The church appears to have been almost entirely dismantled and repurposed for domestic use during the Umayyad or early Abbasid periods (Strata IV [7th–8th centuries CE] and III [8th–9th centuries CE]). Concurrent with the dismantling of the church in the Early Islamic period, two substantial buildings were constructed in Area F1, some distance from the church: a large square mansion (ca. 30 × 30 m) to the south, and a smaller structure to the north.

The rich assemblage of Early Byzantine ecclesiastical architectural elements was documented, analyzed, and categorized into three principal groups:

1. Constructive Elements: This group includes sets of columns (notably a V-type Corinthian capital bearing mason's marks, numerous lathe-turned column drums including one with a relief cross, and a marble Tuscan base), as well as decorated doorway components (pilaster capitals and a distinctive lintel).
2. Liturgical Furniture: Items in this group comprise parts of ciboria (numerous colonnettes and two small Corinthian capitals), chancel screens (fragments of plates and posts), and altar tables (including a small plate featuring a lead tube and several legs).
3. Liturgical Objects: This includes a reliquary, represented by a dark grey marble cover.

Additionally, a typical Early Roman Jewish ossuary was discovered. Petrographic characteristics suggest that it was carved from gir stone and must have been transported from Judea or Shephelah—an occurrence that is both unusual and significant. One possible explanation for its presence at this remote site is that it was repurposed as a reliquary in the church, possibly brought along with relics.

Further, a considerable number of marble tiles were recovered in secondary use within the flooring of the Early Islamic mansion. Taken together, the assemblage reflects a complete and traditional program of sculptural decoration, characteristic of churches in Palaestina Tertia. It includes both locally produced limestone elements and imported Proconnesian marble artifacts of exceptional quality—materials also found in Constantinople. These imported elements likely arrived during the church's second construction phase, when it was modified from a monoapsidal to a triapsidal basilica, a transformation observed in other churches in the Negev.

The diversity and quantity of architectural components suggest that they may have originated from more than one church, raising the possibility that additional ecclesiastical structures remain to be discovered in the vicinity. Finally, the presence of a Middle to Late Roman horned altar offers evidence for religious continuity at the site, marking a transition from pagan practices to Christianity.

Devotion and Visual Power: Reconsidering the Interplay between Image and Ritual in Early Medieval Georgian Sculpture

Early medieval Georgian sculpture reveals a complex interplay between material objects, images, and ritual practices within the Christian liturgical context. The images on stelae, baptismal fonts, crosses, and other church furnishings articulate Christian doctrines and actively participate in ritual actions, such as cross veneration, baptism, funerary rites, or the Eucharist. Their iconographies convey nuanced theological and liturgical meanings: depictions of Christ's baptism alternate between adult and child forms to reflect distinct baptismal rites and theological emphases. Funerary monuments combine imagery and inscriptions to invoke divine protection, commemorate the deceased, and reinforce communal beliefs about the afterlife, while Eucharistic imagery reconstructs ritual performances within the sanctuary, visually translating liturgical actions and sequences to guide and shape worshippers' engagement. Together, these visual programs illuminate both the practical functions of objects in ritual contexts and their capacity to mediate theological concepts, embody devotion, spirituality, and cultural memory. In this framework, images function as active participants in early Georgian Christian worship, demonstrating the power of visual culture to communicate, reinforce, and enrich the liturgical experience in medieval Georgia.

The Stylites in Georgia: Tracing the Stylite Tradition in Medieval Georgian Iconography

The representations of Symeon Stylites on the chancel screens preserved from Shiomghvime and Zedazeni monasteries in Shida Kartli are widely known to anyone who is familiar with medieval Georgian iconography. Both are dated to the 11th-12th centuries and, along with a similarly dated silver-gilt icon (now held in the collection of the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts, but formerly part of the liturgical treasure of a church in Laghami Village, part of Mestia Community in Svaneti). These three images form the core of our understanding of medieval Georgian Stylite imagery.

However, as I have argued elsewhere, these are not the only forms of Stylite imagery still extant from medieval Georgia. Moreover, rather than being perceived as the sole Stylite heritage in the region, they can be viewed as a representation of the 'triumph of orthodoxy' by offering a reaffirmation of Chalcedonian Orthodox identity during a period when Georgia was reaching the apex of its power and cultural influence. Recent research by Irakli Tezelashvili has underlined the power struggles beneath the surface of Georgia's 'Golden Age', where influential clergymen sought to remind rulers, such as Davit Agmashenebeli, that reputations could be both made and destroyed by the messages conveyed through images decorating the monasteries and cathedrals across the region. Viewed through this lens, the increased interest in depicting Symeon Stylites the Younger—famed for his staunch defence of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy at a time when wider political upheaval had led to the withdrawal of Georgian clergy from the Black Mountain and their presumed return to their ancestral heartlands in the Caucasus—can be read as a very specific reaffirmation of a pact between the Church and the State.

This paper will begin with a brief overview of variant forms of Stylitism (and its imagery) in Georgia before moving on to a consideration of the images on the chancel screens of Shiomghvime and Zedazeni monasteries to consider why, specifically in the 11th-12th centuries, the resurgence of this tradition in Georgia occurred.

The So-Called Church with Pomegranate Decor in Ani

(Preliminary Observations)

The medieval city of Ani is known for its churches built mainly between the 10th and 13th centuries: they have either survived intact or remain in a semi-ruined state. Researchers have primarily focused on the study of their architecture, sculptural decoration, paintings, and inscriptions. However, there is a group of churches—little known to the wider audience—that stand out for their architecture and decoration. These churches, uncovered during archaeological excavations (1892–1893, 1904–1917) in Ani led by N. Marr, have remained outside the scope of scholarly attention (not to count several exceptions). The main sources for their study are archival photographs, the descriptions of N. Marr and I. Orbeli as well as the drawings and reconstructions of architect T. Toramanian and other participants of the excavations (N. Tokarsky, G. Chubinashvili, etc.).

In 1909 excavations were carried out in the Church of the Holy Apostles and the courtyard surrounding it. These excavations uncovered the foundations of buildings which almost completely surrounded the church and had been constructed over several centuries. Of particular interest is a small church located to the south of the southern narthex of the Church of the Apostles. It had a single nave ending in a semicircular apse. Only the lower part of the walls, rising no more than one metre above the floor level, were preserved; therefore, there were no indications as to how many windows the church had, what their form was, or how they were arranged. The church had a single entrance opening from its southern side. The lack of historical records and the uncovered remains of the church do not allow for a precise dating; for this reason, researchers rely on a slab carved with pomegranate trees — their branches bearing fruit and leaves — which was uncovered in front of the southern wall of the church. Considering that the pomegranate motif has been used in Armenian art since the early Middle Ages, researchers have dated the slab to the 7th century (N. Marr), the 7th to 8th centuries (I. Orbeli), or the early 11th century (G. Chubinashvili). However, a more detailed stylistic and compositional analysis indicates that the slab should be traced back to the 12th to 13th centuries.

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Donor Portraits and Images of the Theotokos in the Monumental Sculpture of Vayots Dzor (13th to 14th Centuries)

The establishment of personal contacts between Armenian princes and Mongol khans and their deputies in Persia in the second half of the 13th century allowed the Armenian lands to gain certain privileges. As a result, the dynasties ruling the principalities of Syunik, Vayots Dzor, and Khachen—formerly vassals of the Zakarian princely family—were able to achieve independence. The relative political and economic stability of Syunik Principality in the second half of the 13th century and in the first half of the 14th fostered the development of the Vayots Dzor artistic school centered in the monastery of Gladzor and its university. The activity of this school was linked with the production of a significant number of illuminated manuscripts, intensive monumental construction, the emergence of new types of churches and their structural elements as well as the decoration of church façades (particularly tympana) with monumental sculptural programs.

The topic, employing methods of iconographic and comparative analysis, will demonstrate that the iconographic programs of Vayots Dzor church decoration range from simple scenes of the donor's intercession before the Virgin in tympana to complex compositions and schemes combining funerary and eschatological iconography in which the donor portrait occupies a distinct space. Although the development of these iconographic programs is of a rather non-linear nature, certain evolutionary features can be traced. Masters of the late 13th century, reviving the art of monumental sculpture in Armenia, could rely only on local traditions and their own experience. This explains their attempts to compress an entire complex iconographic program into a single tympanum and their occasional misunderstanding of the specific elements of iconography.

Later monuments among which the tympana created by Master Momik and his disciples between the 1320s and 1330s stand out display both external influence and the artistic freedom of the master himself who shaped a coherent iconographic program within the decorative framework of the monument as a whole.

