

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
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean**

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Medieval Svaneti

Objects, Images, and Bodies
in Dialogue with Built
and Natural Spaces

edited by

Manuela Studer-Karlen

Michele Bacci & Natalia Chitishvili

MEDIEVAL SVANETI. OBJECTS, IMAGES, AND BODIES
IN DIALOGUE WITH BUILT AND NATURAL SPACES

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სიუ ლანჯედა შუიღებდ

სტუმარი ღვთისაა

The guest is a gift from God

This well-known Georgian proverb was a constant companion on our extraordinary and unforgettable journey to Svaneti and during the subsequent conference in Tbilisi in September 2022. We received an extremely warm welcome from our hosts, notably from the *mak'ilär* who so generously opened to us their churches and thus their incredible treasures. This book is warmly dedicated to them all.

Without the partnership of important institutions, this excursion and the publication of the present book would never have been possible. Great thanks are due to the G. Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation in Tbilisi, and the Svaneti Museum of History and Ethnography in Mest'ia. Working cooperatively with these important institutions was of unbelievable value for us. Moreover, we thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for its financial support for this publication.

My deepest thanks go to Ekaterine Gedevanishvili, Irene Giviashvili, Mariam Japaridze, and Tsitsino Guledani, for their manifold and tireless help and support during the trip and the conference. I wish to thank Ivan Foletti for including this volume in the Convivium Supplementum series, and I am deeply grateful in particular to Natália Gachallová who has cared for this publication with foresight and thoroughness. Finally, I would like to thank all the authors for their thoughtful contributions to this volume, and especially, of course, my two co-editors, Natalia Chitishvili and Michele Bacci, for their excellent and nice collaboration.



Svaneti and the Rhetoric of Distance

Michele Bacci & Ivan Foletti

The Brno-Fribourg-Tbilisi expedition to Upper Svaneti

The idea for this volume was born on the occasion of a scientific meeting held at the Chubinashvili National Research Centre in Tbilisi on September 16, 2022. The intended purpose was to gather specialists from different disciplines and different countries to reflect on the present state of research and the potential for new interpretative frameworks about the rich artistic heritage of Svaneti. The brainstorming that came out of this encounter, the efficacy of which was especially appreciated by the audience, was undoubtedly affected by the special emotional state some of the participants were in. These were the team members of the Czecho-Swiss research project *Cultural Interactions in the Medieval Subcaucasian Region: Historiographical and Art-Historical Perspectives*¹, who had just returned

1/View of Zhibiani (Ushguli community) with Mount Shkhara in the background

¹ SNSF Lead Agency project 197295, see <https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/197295>, coordinated by Michele Bacci; TAČR Lead Agency project GF21-01706L, see <https://starfos.tacr.cz/en/project/GF21-01706L#project-main>, coordinated by Ivan Foletti.

from a very intensive ten-day trip to the Upper Svan highlands that, while extremely rich in discoveries, had also been a challenge on both a physical and a psychological level.

The trip itself was the outcome of a long organizational effort, whose success was mainly due to Manuela Studer-Karlen's tireless work with the friendly assistance of Dr Ekaterine Gedevanishvili, and the constant in-situ support of Tsitsino Guledani, Mzia Guledani, and Mariam Japaridze. We had foreseen a rather busy program of visits for a quite large group that included the members of the Fribourg and Brno teams as well as some MA and PhD students, and was also joined by two external experts, Antony Eastmond and Irine Giviashvili. Overall, we managed to reach, examine, and produce photographic documentation of thirty-four medieval churches, mainly located in the ancient territories of "free", and only in two cases, "princely", Svaneti. The number is particularly remarkable even for compulsive photographers, especially if one considers the extent to which travel to and within the region may be hampered by such factors as the material state of the roads, unstable weather conditions, and the location of many monuments in hardly accessible spots in the mountains. In such a context, art-historical research cannot but be at odds with its still lingering, biased perception as an elitist exercise of aestheticism: if scholars really want to access artworks, they are expected to leave their comfort zone of museums, galleries, and libraries, put on trekking clothes and shoes, and expose themselves to several risks, such as physical exhaustion and unpleasant infections (not only the relatively common bowel upsets but also some odd viral flues).

Despite recent attempts at promoting tourism, Upper Svaneti is still to a large extent – from a Czech-Swiss perspective – a wild, scarcely populated, and remote mountainous region. Situated on the slopes of the central-northwestern Caucasus range, it stands out for its green forests and yellowish plateaus that create a dramatic contrast with the white color of the 3000- to 5000-meter-high peaks that surround the country and seem to wall it up from the rest of the world [Fig. 1]. Its airport, opened in 2010, can be serviced only by a twin-engine short-range aircraft, but flights are operated only in case of good weather. The most usual option to get there is by bus, along the recently paved road that connects Zugdidi to Mest'ia along the course of the Enguri river: in earlier times, the circulation was limited to marshrutkas and off-road vehicles. Our group chose the second option: after converging at Tbilisi international airport on the night of September 6, the participants faced a twelve-hour drive to their destination. In the following days, our movements were assured by three Mitsubishi Delica off-rovers, guided by local expert drivers [Fig. 2]. We had an undesired chance to test the high reputation this vehicle enjoys for its toughness when one of ours withstood the impact of a car that collided with it at full speed: luckily enough, none of the passengers was injured, and the van was only superficially damaged. At the same time, it was our *svani* drivers who opened a different, less academic, but no less important, window onto the world through which they were escorting us. For those of the generation that still remembered the USSR, Russian was the *lingua franca* that allowed us to talk about mountains, hunted bears, rough roads, devotional images, or the Russian and Soviet occupation. On the other hand, it was more difficult to interact with younger drivers, for which music worked as the easiest means of communication, with the songs of the rapper Bu ("Owl") building a bridge between the various members of the expedition. Chacha, the delicious local schnapps, generously provided by our drivers, acted as an accelerator for these cultural exchanges and introduced us to the ritualized approach to life that such hard-to-escape communal drinks and toasts still convey even in their secularized form². Thanks to all these aspects, the trips had a strong impact on our experience and opened many different perspectives on the mountains and sacred spaces we were traveling through.



Without such a special means of transport it would be impossible to reach most of the Svan villages, let alone the most isolated churches, many of which can only be accessed on foot, and after a long walk or climb. The experience of a Svaneti drive inescapably sparks thoughts on the extent to which asphalt roads condition our perception of geographic spaces: our intuition of distances, i.e. the way in which we mentally infer travel times from the cartographic representation of roads, is so dissociated from any embodied experience of natural environments, that we hardly accept that it may take hours to reach places that are just a few kilometers far from each other. Until a few years ago, even the main road in the upper valley of Enguri was unpaved and, once in Khe, drivers had to get out of their cars to open the wooden gate of the enclosure marking the boundaries of the K'ala community. The latter no longer exists, but this hamlet dominated by the hill of Lagurk'a at the confluence of the river with the Gurists'q'ali and Enguri streams still signals the transition from the modernized, tourist-friendly Upper Svaneti to its more traditional core at Ushguli, which can be reached only via an unsurfaced road that rapidly becomes impassable in case of rain or snow. Places that are off the main track are normally accessed through uneven trails and pathways crossed by rivulets and strewn with obstacles, such as stones, potholes, puddles, logs, muddy ground, and all sorts of animals.

Even more than in any other part of Georgia, cows, oxen, goats, horses, donkeys, and pigs [Fig. 3] live freely in the natural environment, and are therefore omnipresent, to such an extent that they cannot be dissociated from the visitor's embodied experience of the Svan landscape [Fig. 4]. The "modernity" that timidly intruded into Svaneti's life via the paving of the main road and the spread of electricity and wi-fi networks did not happen without a negative impact on animal life, which nevertheless goes on undisturbed in the more isolated villages. Coming from societies that hide, or even imprison animals in barns that can be hardly distinguished from warehouses or industrial buildings, one finds it

2/ Off-roaders on the trail to Lapsq'aldi (Tskhomari community), September 13, 2022

2 On the old religious meaning of toasts led by a *tamada* (from Cherkess *themate*, with the root *the-* associated with "God"), cf. Georges Charachidzé, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne: analyse structurale d'une civilisation*, Paris 1968, pp. 285–286.



hard to repress the feeling that sharing one's physical space with them, watching them, and even sensing their smell in the air may bring joy. Agriculture and cattle-breeding are, with tourism, the region's most important economic resources, and rely on traditional, and without any doubt, thoroughly sustainable methods: the use of mechanized tools is hampered by the distinctive features of the territory, and wooden ploughs drawn by oxen are still preferred by farmers. Milk and its by-products, especially cheese and butter, are the staple foods of the Svan diet: meat consumption is still to some extent ruled by local religious habits providing that cows or oxen should be sacrificed and eaten together by the whole village community only on major feasts.

Geographic remoteness as temporal distance

Visitors to Svaneti – not only from the Czech Republic or Switzerland, but also from the Georgian lowlands – can hardly escape the first, superficial, and certainly misleading, impression of being in an anachronistic context, dominated by a pre-modern sense of time punctuated by the cyclical rhythms of agricultural life. The hard accessibility of the region, the physical stress caused by its exploration, and its majestic mountain landscapes are experienced, either consciously or unconsciously, as indicators of simultaneously geographic and temporal remoteness. It is, for that matter, a sentiment deeply anchored in the post-colonial myth of modernity, synonymous with technological development, urban lifestyle, and an alleged cultural superiority (conforming to some “natural law of cultural evolution”, and thus implying different temporalities). This feeling is enhanced by the region's extraordinary heritage of buildings, mural paintings, painted panels, metalworks, manuscripts, and textiles dating mostly from the Middle Ages – an expression which, according to Georgian historical periodization, corresponds approximately to the long timespan between the seventh and the eighteenth century. The striking appearance of many church interiors, repleted with old furniture, monumental pre-altar crosses, images, and multiple décors, sparks their instinctive understanding as relicts of a distant



past, that miraculously survived the countless destructions, pillages, and damages commonly suffered by most ancient edifices located in Orthodox countries, including lowland Georgia. According to an often-repeated trope, Svaneti never really ceased to be “medieval”, as it constantly kept its freedom *vis-à-vis* foreign invaders and managed not only to protect local properties but even to safeguard, with its most precious objects and artistic achievements, the memory and identity of the ancient Christian kingdom³.

The unparalleled number of artworks from this period preserved in Svaneti – even if we adopt the Western European definition that restricts the medieval era between the seventh and the fifteenth century – is certainly enough to motivate art historians to explore the area: there is no doubt that such a wealth of hitherto insufficiently investigated materials cannot be found in any other Eastern Christian context. It is hard to escape the temptation of viewing the region exclusively as a game-preserve for “picture hunters”: its well-preserved mural décors that enable accurate analyses of their “programs”⁴, the multiplicity and variety of the objects stored in its churches, the hundreds of devotional images, conventionally known as “icons”⁵, made in different media and displaying all sorts of styles and imagery calling for publication and involvement in the global art-historical debate. Inasmuch as they may bear witness to practices and meanings that have left no traces in other parts of the world, a deeper knowledge of such artworks can help unravel historical conundrums that are relevant to medieval arts in general. Among the many discoveries we had the chance to make on our trip, we may mention, with many others, a fragmentary twelfth-century painted cross presently located in the southern

3/ A sow and her piglets in Ts’virmi (Ipari community)

4/ Landscape of Ileri (Ipari community)

3 Brook Larmer, “Medieval Mountain Hideaway”, *National Geographic* (October 2014), pp. 78–99; Marina Kevkhishvili, “Svanetien – das letzte Mittelalter Europas”, in *The Medieval South Caucasus: Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia*, Ivan Foletti, Erik Thunø eds, Brno (= *Convivium, Supplementum* [2016]), pp. 188–205.

4 For the notion of program and its conundrums, see e.g. *Le programme: une notion pertinente en histoire de l’art médiéval?*, Jean-Marie Guillouët, Claudia Rabel eds, Paris 2011.

5 For the historiographical background of the “invention” and often acritical use of this notion during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see e.g. Ivan Foletti, “L’icona, una costruzione storiografica? Dalla Russia all’Occidente, la creazione di un mito”, *Annali di critica d’arte*, XII (2016), pp. 175–194.



annex of the church of St George in Nak'ipari (Ipari community), which can now be added to the scant *corpus* of analogous artworks preserved in Orthodox countries before the fourteenth century [Figs 5–7]. It confirms the hypothesis that objects corresponding to this typological model, far from being exclusive to Western medieval arts as believed in the past, were widespread enough among the figural décors of Byzantine-rite churches⁶.

Yet, this approach may be problematic, if we look at the area uniquely as a repository of objects whose knowledge should fill the gaps of art-historical narratives focused on other regions, starting from lowland Georgia. Svan materials have traditionally been included into general introductions to Georgian arts: the development of icon painting, for instance, can largely be reconstructed from the images preserved in Svaneti, and questions should therefore be raised as to how they relate to local vs more general tendencies from a historical perspective⁷. Significantly enough, much more emphasis has been placed on pictorial or figural arts, and much less on architecture or sculpture, given that the latter looked to some extent less attractive, and certainly less capable to provide clues for the interpretation of artistic phenomena in the wider “national” space⁸. Exemplary in this regard is the situation in the Mest'ia Museum where the most spectacular room of all the collection is devoted to painted panels. The images are presented in chronological order with the aim to show the ideal “evolution” of artistic styles, in keeping with a distinctively



5/ Painted cross, Church of St George, Nak'ipari (Ipari community), late 12th century

6/ *Virgin Orant*, foot of the painted cross in Church of St George, Nak'ipari

7/ *Archangel on the* painted cross in Church of St George, Nak'ipari

Western-centric trope. The room itself, but also the accompanying explanations, show the full weight of the Eurocentric and modern historiographical tradition: as often in other European museums, the choice of the exhibits does not truly reflect their historical-cultural relevance for the specific context, they have been immersed in and have been informed rather by the early modern canon dating back to Vasari and privileging painting as one of three major arts, or “arts of drawing”.

Indeed, Svaneti is an exceptional place to show to what extent such a pre-modern approach may be misleading. In the churches we had the chance to visit during our trip,

-
- 6 The Nak'ipari cross (146 × 73 cm) has been hitherto overlooked by scholarship. The only well-preserved remnant of its original painting, displaying the image of the Virgin with crossed arms on her breast [Fig. 6], can be seen on the lower part of the vertical arm, whereas the outline of an angel can still be discerned on its top [Fig. 7]. In its dimensions and iconography, it is best paralleled by the painted cross in the Chazhashi Museum in Ushguli: cf. Rusudan Kenia, Valeri Silogava, *Ushguli*, Tbilisi 1986; Rusudan Kenia, “Predaltarnye kresty verxnej Svanetii” [Pre-Altar Crosses of Upper Svaneti], in *Srednevekovoe iskusstvo. Rus'-Gruzija* [Medieval Art. Russia-Georgia], Tbilisi 1986; Rusudan Kenia, Natela Aladashvili, *Zemo svaneti (shua sauk'uneebis khelovneba). Gzamk'olevi* [Upper Svaneti (Medieval Art). Guidebook], Tbilisi 2000, p. 100; Michele Bacci, “Echoes of Golgotha. On the Iconization of Monumental Crosses in Medieval Svanet'i”, in *The Medieval South Caucasus* (n. 3), pp. 206–225, sp. pp. 219–220.
- 7 Nina Chichinadze, *Medieval Georgian Icon-Painting. 11th–14th-Century Painted Icons from Svaneti*, Tbilisi 2011; Nana Burchuladze, *Kartuli khat'ebi* [Georgian Icons], Tbilisi 2016.
- 8 Rusudan Mepisashvili, Vakhtang Tsintsadze, “Zemo svanetis khurotmodzghvruli dzeglebi” [Architectural Monuments of Upper Svaneti], *Sakartvelos sidzveleni* [Georgian Antiquities], XVI (2013), pp. 339–349.

painted panels were largely outnumbered by hundreds of devotional images rendered in embossed silver or gold. In the dogmatics of art history, however, such objects largely continue, despite some voices singing out of the choir for more than a century, to be regarded as “minor arts”, thus deserving lesser interest⁹. The extraordinary metalworks dotting Svan churches can be pointed out as good arguments in support of a reversal of traditional hierarchies: almost lost in the rest of the Mediterranean, these objects played a key role in both personal and collective devotion: with their multifarious imagery and light-reflecting materiality, they were especially efficacious in evoking “iconic presence”¹⁰.

In a Subcaucasian context that has itself been viewed as the site of overlapping *Kunstlandschaften*, Svaneti stands out for its characterization as both a remote, decentered periphery and a crucial place for the study of medieval artworks, which are deemed to have been treasured and safeguarded for centuries in its village churches. The retrospective character attributed to the Svans as guardians of the oldest, and most authentic, Georgian heritage was paralleled in scholarship by an understanding of their culture in terms of resilience *vis-à-vis* modernity. Not infrequently, the art-historical and ethnographic gazes merged into an unconfessed, emotion-driven experience of Svaneti as an immersive journey into a distant past: if art historians went in search of surviving evidence of medieval arts, ethnographers were eager to record still extant manifestations of supposedly archaic, potentially pre-Christian, traditions and habits. Much of this feeling has been transmitted to later generations by the nineteenth-century travelers who visited the area after its annexation to the Russian Empire in 1857, and mostly looked at it as an exotic, long inaccessible, and culturally idiosyncratic country¹¹. The earliest scientific investigation of Svan monuments was the outcome of an expedition organized in 1910 by the Georgian archaeologist Ekvtime Taqaishvili with the involvement of the photographer Dimitri Yermakov, the architect Svimon Kldiashvili, and the Svan intermediary Ivane Nizharadze. The outcome of this fieldwork, described as “two months of exhausting travelling”, was the publication of a systematic, and still today precious, catalogue of the historical objects preserved in Svan churches¹². In 1931, another important trip promoted by the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi, with the notable involvement of Giorgi Chubinashvili, eventually set the grounds for the foundation of the Historical and Ethnographic Museum of Svaneti in Mest’ia in 1936¹³. It is important to remember how these early years of systematic studies of the region took place against an essential historiographical background: since the mid-nineteenth century, Georgia – integrated into the Russian Empire since 1801 – had been trying to build an independent cultural identity partly through art-historical research¹⁴. Embossed metal images then became one of the central elements in the construction of a historiographical myth, that of Georgia as a unique place precisely because of its ability to work precious metals¹⁵. Ekvtime Taqaishvili and Giorgi Chubinashvili participated in this trend with several studies on the subject in a very hostile context in which imperial and later Soviet historiography repeatedly, and up to World War II, tried to marginalize, as far as possible, the exclusivity of a “Georgian” artistic production, which was presented as indistinct from Armenian and provincial Byzantine arts¹⁶.

In Soviet times, fieldwork was conducted by several medievalists, including Tinatin Virsaladze¹⁷, Natela Aladashvili, Gayane Alibegashvili, and Aneli Vol’skaja¹⁸, Nicole Thierry¹⁹, Enzo Hybsch, and Adriano Alpago Novello²⁰. These were the years when, after the “Great Patriotic War”, the study of the art of the Soviet republics enjoyed a certain independence, but with a perspective clearly oriented toward Marxist canons²¹. In more recent years, reference should be made to Rusudan and Marine

- 9 For an overview of the issue, see e. g. *From Minor to Major: The Minor Arts in Medieval Art History*, Colum Hourihane ed., Princeton 2012.
- 10 Hans Belting, "Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions", *Material Religion*, XII/2 (2016), pp. 235–237; Bissera Pentcheva, "Glittering Eyes: Animation in the Byzantine Eikōn and the Western Imago", *Codex Aquilarensis*, XXXII (2016), pp. 209–226.
- 11 For the most important travelers, cf. Heinrich Julius Klaproth, *Reise in den Kaukasus und nach Georgien unternommen*, Halle 1814; Dmitrij Bakradze, *Svanetija*, Tbilisi 1861; Raphaël Bernoville, *La Souanétie libre. Épisode d'un voyage à la chaîne centrale du Caucase*, Paris 1875; Alexander Stojanov, *Putešestvoje po Svanetii* [Travel to Svaneti], *Zapiski Kavkazskogo otdela Imperatorskogo ruskogo geografičeskogo obščestva* [Notes of the Department of Imperial Russian Geographical Society], vol. x/3, Tbilisi 1876; John Buchan Telfer, *The Crimea and Transcaucasia, Being the Narrative of a Journey in the Kouban, in Gouria, Georgia, Armenia, Ossety, Imeritia, Svannety, and Mingrelia and in the Tauric Range*, London 1876; Praskovija Uvarova, *Poezdka v Pšaviju, Xevšuretiju i Svanetiju* [Journey in Pshavi, Khevsureti, and Svaneti], *Materialy po arkeologii Kavkaza* [Materials on the Archaeology of Caucasus], vol. x, Moscow 1904.
- 12 Ekvtime Taqaishvili, *Arkeologiuri ekspeditsia lechkhum-svanetshi 1910 ts'els* [Archaeological Expedition to Letchkoumi and Svaneti in 1910], Paris 1937 (republished in *Idem, Tkhzulebani* [The Works], vol. III, Buba Kudava ed., Tbilisi 2017). Cf. Giorgi Kalandia, "The Discoveries of Invaluable Treasures", in David Lordkipanidze et al. eds, *Keeper of the Treasure. Ekvtime Takaishvili*, Tbilisi 2012, pp. 69–91, sp. pp. 79–81.
- 13 David Lordkipanidze et al., *Svaneti Museum*, Tbilisi 2020.
- 14 An overview on the question is presented, for instance, in Ivan Foletti, Pavel Rakitin, "From Russia with Love. The First Russian Studies on the Art of Southern Caucasus", *Venezia Arti*, I (2018), pp. 15–33.
- 15 Alžběta Filipová, "For Beauty, Nation and God: The Creation of the Georgian National Treasure", *Venezia Arti*, I (2018), pp. 35–52.
- 16 See, for instance, the definition of "Georgian Art" from 1893: "The art that developed during the Christian era in Transcaucasia constitutes a branch of Byzantine art, which, due to local conditions and external influences, took on a peculiar shape. These conditions and influences were almost the same for both Armenia and Georgia. (...) Therefore, the art of the first of these countries resembles or, more accurately, merges with the art of the second to such an extent that they can be considered inseparable, under one common name 'Armenian-Georgian' or 'Georgian-Armenian' art". *Gruzinskoe iskusstvo* [Georgian Art], in *Ėnciklopedičeskij slovar' Brokgauza i Ėfrona* [Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary], vol. IX, 1893, Saint Petersburg 1890–1907, p. 788.
- 17 Tinatin Virsaladze, "Freskovaja rospis' xudožnika Mikaela Maglakeli v Matskhvariši" [Mural Paintings of the Painter Mikael Maglakeli in Matskhvarishi], *Ars Georgica*, IV (1955), pp. 169–231.
- 18 Natela Aladashvili, Gajane Alibegashvili, Aneli Volskaia, *Zivopisnaja škola Svaneti* [Svaneti School of Painting], Tbilisi 1983.
- 19 Nicole Thierry, "Note d'un voyage archéologique en Haute-Svanétie (Géorgie)", *Bedi Kartlisa*, XXXVII (1979), pp. 133–179; *Eadem*, "Note d'un second voyage en Haute-Svanétie (Géorgie). Iconographie cappadocienne et géorgienne: similitudes", *Bedi Kartlisa*, XXXVIII (1980), pp. 51–95.
- 20 *Art and Architecture in Medieval Georgia*, Adriano Alpagò Novello ed., Louvain-la-Neuve 1980; cf. *idem*, Enzo Hybsch, "Architettura del Grande Caucaso", *L'umana avventura*, Summer 1991, pp. 36–48.
- 21 To our knowledge, there is no historiographical study to date that analyzes the impact of Marxist ideology on art history studies in Georgia. We may mention that a similar process was undertaken, for Armenia and Czechoslovakia, by one of the authors of this text. Given the similarity of the two case studies explored so far, it seems legitimate for us to assume that similar mechanisms had to be used in the case of Georgia as well. See Ivan Foletti, Pavel Rakitin, "Armenian Medieval Art and Architecture in Soviet Perception: A *longue durée* Sketch", *Eurasistica. Quaderni di Studi su Balcani, Anatolia, Iran, Caucaso e Asia Centrale*, XVI (2020), pp. 113–149; and Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, "Medieval Art and Czechoslovakia: Between Nationalist Discourse and Transcultural Reality, an Introduction", in *Inventing Medieval Czechoslovakia 1918–1968*, *idem* eds, Brno/Rome 2019, pp. 11–20.
- 22 Kenia/Aladashvili, *Zemo svaneti* (n. 6); Marine Kenia, *Upper Svaneti. Medieval Mural Painting*, Tbilisi 2010.
- 23 On the conservation initiatives supported by the Stichting Foundation under the supervision of Rolf and Brigitta Schrade, cf. *Stichting Foundation, Former Beneficiaries*, available online at <https://horizonfoundation.nl/beneficiaries/former-beneficiaries>. Brigitta Schrade has authored a number of important contributions to the art history of Svaneti: cf. *Eadem*, "Götter oder Heilige: heidnische und christliche Glaubensvorstellungen der Swanen", *Georgica*, IV (1999), pp. 32–38; *Eadem*, "Byzantium and Its Eastern Barbarians: The Cult of Saints in Svanet'i", in *Eastern Approaches to Byzantium*, Antony Eastmond ed., Aldershot 2001, pp. 169–197; *Eadem*, "St. Maximus the Confessor as Monk and Hierarchy: Some Remarks on his Georgian Iconography", in *Maximus the Confessor and Georgia*, Tamara Mgaloblishvili ed., London 2009, pp. 227–250; *Eadem*, *Peripherie im historischen Kontext: Die Entwicklung Svanetiens zur Schatzkammer Georgiens von den Anfängen bis in das 17. Jahrhundert*, Tbilisi 2016; *Eadem*, "Ad crucem. Zum Jerusalemer Ursprung der georgischen Voraltdarkreuzen anhand früher Beispiele aus Svanetien", in *Krist'ianobis 20 sauk' une sakart'veloshi* [20 Centuries of Christianity in Georgia], Rismag Gordeziani ed., Tbilisi 2004, pp. 308–326; *Eadem*, "Byzantine Ideology in Georgian Iconography: Iconographic Programmes of Georgian Pre-Altar Crosses", in *Cultural Interactions in Medieval Georgia*, Michele Bacci, Manuela Studer-Karlen, Thomas Kaffenberger eds, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 115–142; *Eadem*, "Der 'Maler des Königs' Tewdore in Obersvanetien: ein Beispiel für ikonographische Programme der georgischen Wandmalerei des 11./12. Jahrhunderts", in *Neue Forschungen zur Wandmalerei des Mittelalters*, Ulrike Heinrichs, Katharina Pick eds, Munich 2019, pp. 93–107.
- 24 Antony Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*, University Park 1998. See his contribution in this volume.

and Nana Burchuladze²⁵, and the study trip organized by the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz-Max-Planck-Gesellschaft in 2010. At the same time, ethnographers soon became interested in Svaneti in more general investigations of the traditions of Georgian highlanders, even if perhaps with less emphasis than on other groups deemed to practice a more recognizably “pagan” religious system, such as Khevsurs, Pshavs, and Tushes²⁶. Svans themselves, starting in the nineteenth century with Archpriest Besarion Nizharadze, a native of Ushguli, contributed to collecting and documenting local traditions²⁷.

Given the limited number of written sources²⁸, both textual and epigraphic, most of the scholarship on Svaneti tended to focus on either material evidence or oral traditions. This led to a dichotomic understanding of local culture, based on a rather rigid distinction between historical and anthropological phenomena. These two basic approaches, developed independently as separate fields, long failed to thoroughly acknowledge the active role played by medieval objects in the Svan villagers’ experience of life, interpersonal relations, and the divine sphere. On the one hand, an overwhelming emphasis on the aesthetic significance of artworks downplayed their social “agency”; on the other hand, the rituals associated with icons and other material things were long viewed as relicts of a primeval, changeless religious way of thinking allegedly established in a remote “Indo-European” antiquity. In both cases, a major emphasis was placed on temporal distance.

Medieval objects and Svan rituals

The conceptual opposition between objects being worthy of art-historical appreciation and others belonging to the realm of folklore finds a reflection in the structure of the Mest’ia Museum, where the rooms reserved for the historical section are neatly separated from the ethnographic ones, even if the exhibits of both played an important role in Svan traditional culture. Again, we are in continuity with the break between major and minor arts evoked above. Nevertheless, the interpretative framework proposed by scholars did not result in a dramatic decontextualization of the exhibits and a subversion of their original meanings and functions. Even if state authorities, both in Soviet times and after the independence of Georgia, made all possible efforts to promote the museum as the sole institution responsible for heritage preservation, materialized by its conception as one of the little town’s most prominent landmarks, its relation to the wider regional context remains to some extent evident. Unlike other collections of Christian arts that were created through the appropriation by the state of ecclesiastical properties, the items seem to have not thoroughly lost their ancestral connection with the places where they were originally kept. Furthermore, many of the historical buildings housing old artworks, and scattered throughout the territory were declared separate sections of a museum which, as stated in a 2008 booklet, “goes far beyond its [architectural] borders”²⁹. Nevertheless, this solution basically aims to give a modern legal framework to a *status quo* grounded in ancient customary rights that conceive of the village communities as the exclusive guardians of local antiquities. The people of Ushguli stubbornly opposed the displacement of its treasures to Mest’ia and only accepted that they may be “enshrined” in one of the tower-houses in the hamlet of Chazhashi: the result is a museum which still retains the material and physical features of a domestic space, where the icons, metalworks, wood carvings, and textiles gathered from local families, be they on display or locked in an iron safe, still keep intact their bond to local society³⁰. It is common knowledge that many more objects, partly unknown to scholarship, are jealously preserved in private households.

In Svaneti, the musealization process that began in the Soviet period had to come to terms with a cultural context where the social life of objects, and their active involvement in rituals that manifest and enhance collective self-awareness, has so far prevailed over any emphasis on their historical or aesthetic qualities. This is a typical phenomenon for Marxist thinking which, in opposition to a “bourgeois” historiography, promoted a study of everyday objects regardless of their aesthetic value³¹. Such a focus on the social history of material culture – with what is commonly understood as “art” integrated into the broader category – has resulted in very stimulating publications, which did not really interact with art-historical studies³². In this context, artworks are deemed not only to belong but also to be indissolubly tied to the groups who take care of them in a sort of *do-ut-des* relationship: they serve as material counterparts to public oaths, acts of self-dedication, and communal feasts, and are therefore involved as “living” agents in the village’s yearly cycle of activities, associated with the alternation of seasons and agricultural works. For all that, in present times, both the state and the ecclesiastical institutions strive to assert their control on the territory in different ways, while many of the churches can only be accessed with the permission and collaboration of local communities.

This is particularly true with the so-called “treasury churches”, which are mostly tiny buildings associated with either the village’s central court (*svipi*) or a privileged location outside it, where precious objects of all kinds have been stored over the centuries. Such collections are attributed a pivotal role in the symbolic construction of communal identity by local communities. Altogether, they anchor interpersonal bonds to a precise spot within the living environment shared by the group and are therefore regarded as liminal places marking the invisible boundaries between different levels of reality: that of social exchange, the divine sphere, the world of wild nature, and the space reserved for the dead. A good example is the church of the Archangels in Lapsq’aldi, belonging to the community of Tskhomari. The place can only be reached via a long and demanding trail that climbs the steep slopes of a mountain covered with thick vegetation. Its exterior is unassuming, and the interior consists of a simple wooden vestibule, a diminutive and undecorated *naos*, and an even narrower *bema* with a masonry iconostasis and a single-block altar: a small window in the east wall is the only opening through which the sunshine

25 Chichinadze, *Medieval Georgian Icon-Painting* (n. 7); Burchuladze, *K’art’uli khatebi* (n. 7).

26 Vera Bardavelidze, *Svanur khalkur dgheobata k’alendari 1: akhalits’lis tsik’li* [Calendar of Svan Folk Holidays 1: New Year’s Cycle], Tbilisi 1939; *Eadem*, *Drevnejšie religioznye verovanija i obrjadovoe grafičeskoe iskusstvo gruzinskix plemen* [Ancient Religious Beliefs and Ritual Figural Arts of the Georgian Tribes], Tbilisi 1957; Mikheil Chartolani, *Kartveli khalkhis mat’erialuri k’ult’uris ist’oriidan* [From the History of the Material Culture of the Georgian People (The Hearth in the Svan House)], Tbilisi 1961; Charachidzé, *Le système religieux* (n. 2); *Idem*, *La mémoire indo-européenne du Caucase*, Paris 1987; Zurab Kiknadze, *Kartuli mitologia. 1. jvari da saq’mo* [Georgian Mythology. 1: The Cross and Its People], Kutaisi 1996.

27 Besarion Nizharadze, *Ist’oriuli-etnografiuli ts’erilebi* [Historical and Ethnographic Essays], Tbilisi 1962–1964.

28 Aleksej N. Gren, “Svanetskie teksty” [Svan Texts], *Sbornik materialov dlja opisanija mestnostej i plemen Kavkaza* [Collection of the Materials for Description of Places and Tribes of the Caucasus], x/2 (1890), pp. 76–160; G. & I. Nizharadze, “Svanetskie teksty” [Svan Texts], *ibidem*, xviii (1894), pp. 91–132; Pavle Ingoroqva, *Svanetis saist’orio dzegebi* [The Historical Documents of Svaneti], Tbilisi 1941; Valeri Silogava, *Svanetis ts’erilobiti dzegebi (x-xviii ss.)* [Historical Documents of Svaneti (10th–18th c.)], Tbilisi 1986–1988; *Idem*, “K’it’orta presk’uli ts’arts’erebi zemo svanetshi” [Donor Inscriptions on the Wall Paintings of Upper Svaneti], in *Svaneti*, Tbilisi 1977, pp. 43–82. Historical sources are generally written in Georgian, not in the local Svan language: on the latter, see Kevin Tuite, “Language and Emergent Literacy in Svaneti”, in *Endangered Languages of the Caucasus and Beyond*, Ramazan Korkmaz, Gürkan Doğan eds, Leiden/Boston 2017, pp. 226–243.

29 *The Historical and Ethnographic Museum of Svaneti*, Tbilisi 2008, p. 5.

30 Kenia/Silogava, *Ushguli* (n. 6), offers a catalogue raisonné of the museum collections.

31 Foletti/Rakitin, “Armenian Medieval Art” (n. 21), pp. 137–141.

32 A very good example of Marxist methodology and social studies in material culture is Oganés Halpahčjan, *Graždanskoje zodčestvo Armenii. Žilye i obščestvennye zdanija* [Civil Architecture of Armenia. Residential and Public Buildings], Moscow 1971.



8/ Interior eastern view with the “Cross of Christ” and the “Cross of the Armed Archangel”, Church of the Archangels, Lapsq’aldi (Tskhomari community)

9/ Medieval icons and crosses on the north wall, Church of the Archangels, Lapsq’aldi (Tskhomari community)

can penetrate the sacred space [Fig. 8]. Liturgical offices are performed rarely, on some yearly feasts, such as *lamp’roba*, the day of the community’s meeting with the dead: given that there is no sacristy, the sack containing the priest’s vestments is normally supported by the antlers of a deer on top of a wooden pole that stands in the middle of the church. Access to the building is granted, even to members of the clergy, by the local *mək’il*. This Svan word indicates the person who is attributed by the community or inherits from his family the role and right of holding the keys.

In Lapsq’aldi, the guardianship of the building is traditionally the prerogative of the Gugusiani clan. Our group is particularly thankful to the present *mək’il* named Levan, who not only allowed us to examine and take pictures of the extraordinary collection he is taking care of, but also generously enabled us to understand the ways in which the church objects are viewed and invested with meanings in Svan village communities. One can hardly escape wondering how it is possible that medieval artworks of all kinds were amassed in such a tiny and remote place: all walls are scattered with painted icons, chased images, as well as metal and metal-reveted crosses [Fig. 9]. Further objects, including pyxides, bowls, jewels, stamps, gems, revetments, and pendants, are preserved in an iron safe: the *mək’il* takes them out with reverence and shows them by candlelight, thus performing a sort of ritual [Fig. 10].

If it is evident that all objects are deemed to belong to a hallowed, site-bound assemblage, some of them stand out for their being carriers of narratives that bear witness to the specific connection of the place with the supernatural sphere. Particularly eye-catching are two huge crosses of different shapes erected on both sides of the iconostasis [Fig. 8]. The one to the right is known as the cross of the “armed archangel” and is chained to its support as it is deemed to have the potentially disruptive power of flying away. The one to the left is deemed to be especially worthy of worship on account of it being made of holy matter. According to one of the stories coalescing around it, a young man disrespectful



of traditional customs once infringed the taboo against felling and burning cherry trees: the blood that suddenly poured out from the cut on the trunk signaled that the order of nature had been destabilized, and that the offence could only be cleansed by transforming the injured wood into a monumental object that came to be known as “the cross of Christ”, thus ideally assimilating it to the Lord’s instrument of death. The story goes on to specify that the irreverent woodcutter, astonished at the human-like animation of the plant, touched the prodigious liquid, and left the imprint of his palm on the wooden surface. It was decided, so goes the telling, to cut out the shape of the hand on a golden leaf and to attach it to the silver revetment, as a memento of the miraculous sign [Fig. 11].

It would be easy to acknowledge that this story sounds much like the motif of the tree bleeding after being injured that is found in the lore of many agricultural cultures throughout the world³³. Much more important is to emphasize that the narrative is meant to invest a piece of church furniture, looking like many others preserved in Svaneti, with a distinctive “personality”, or pedigree: it explains why the object should not be regarded as just a liturgical cross, albeit standing out for its precious silver surface, but as the *locus* of a divine epiphany that is worthy of special devotion. It can be assumed that the legend was the outcome of a gradual process whereby the visual features of the cross ceased to spark intuitive associations with the ritual functions it was originally meant for and started being interpreted as signs pointing to something different³⁴. The previous existence of the cross as a tree was probably inferred from its unusual shape, consisting of two intersecting curvilinear, rather than parallelepipedal arms, that could easily

10/ The *mək'ıl* of Lapsq'aldi showing the church treasures by candlelight, September 13, 2022

11/ Hand-shaped ex-voto on the “Cross of Christ”, Church of the Archangels, Lapsq'aldi (Tskhomari community)

33 Angelo De Gubernatis, *La mythologie des plantes, ou les légendes du règne végétal*, Paris 1878, vol. I, pp. 284–285; James G. Fraser, *The Golden Bough*, London 1906–1915, vol. II, pp. 12–43; Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Bloomington, IN 1955–1958, no. F811.20 (bleeding tree).

34 On the notion of “iconotropy”, cf. *Iconotropy and Cult-Images from the Ancient to the Modern World*, Tomás García, Sandra Sáenz-López Pérez eds, New York 2022.

remind viewers of a trunk. The hand-shaped leaf was probably fixed to the metal surface as a votive offering. The outlines of palms and fingers surrogate the physical presence of individuals who long for supernatural protection and aim to be uninterruptedly involved in the sacredness of old churches: as such, they frequently occur as graffiti carved on the plastering of walls [Fig. 12]. For all that the function is fundamentally the same, the golden hand stands out for its distinctive materiality and integration into the metal revetment of an object invested with special qualities: its etiology responds to the need to make sense of a detail that has become elusive enough to puzzle, and potentially destabilize, its viewers.

Iconotropy and the *Nachleben* of Christian imagery in Svaneti

Recent studies made use of the *iconotropy* notion to describe the dynamics whereby the meanings of specific images come to be renegotiated by beholders who are no longer – fully or partly, unconsciously, or intentionally – aware of its original functions and associations. Such re-signification phenomena can be easily detected in the ways in which buildings, objects, and natural environments are generally approached and invested with religious qualities by the Svans. The latter can be understood as the outcome of a long process whereby “lived”, rather than “folk” or “vernacular”, religion gradually occupied the spaces formerly reserved for liturgical and other forms of institutionalized devotions. Saints, for example, have acquired multiple identities, depending on the different ritual contexts in which they are evoked: St George is not only, and to some extent no longer, the martyr and warrior celebrated in his icons, but also a real deity named *Jgðræg*, who is perceived as the lord of war and the privileged protector of men. In the local pantheon, he plays a role that is certainly not less relevant than the heavenly god *Xoša yerbet* and the latter’s minister on earth, *Tāringzel*, that is, the “Archangel”. The Virgin Mary has become *Lamāria*, who is described as the goddess presiding over women, their roles and social activities, and the spaces reserved for them. Many more figures – Barbara, Quiricus, and others – are associated with specific aspects and needs of rural life³⁵.

In the course of their history, Svans gradually lost memory of the saints’ hagiographic identities established in the Middle Ages. The village communities kept worshipping their heavenly protectors in their churches, even if they had become unaware of their deeds and merits, and eventually forgot that they were human, albeit divine-inspired, beings: they only knew that such figures, whom they could still contemplate in their glittering images, could be invoked under specific circumstances in the aim of satisfying specific needs. As in the past, their veneration was associated with specific sites, which largely corresponded to the locations of buildings that had been consecrated to them in ancient times. Old churches were appropriated by folk religion for the performance of rituals whose major outcome was to reinforce the group’s solidarity, reassert its gendered, social structure, and reassure individuals against existential troubles. The Byzantine hierarchical setting of sacred spaces, according to which the east end beyond the *templon* is deemed to be holier than the *naos* or the narthex, has been introjected by the Svans to such an extent that it was even reproduced in the structure of houses, where the eastern window, working as a visual focus for daily offerings, was attributed the same name as the altar space (*t’arbez*, from Greek *τράπεζα*). In both cases, rituals were, and still are, performed by old, authoritative men named *bap’är* (sg. *bap’*, from Greek *παπάς*) who operate in groups of three³⁶.

Churches are viewed as special distinctive spaces where the supernatural defenders of the community can be approached and encountered in and through their old images. Some of these buildings are more specifically experienced as pilgrimage shrines, associated with



periodical feasts. Once a year, the people of Hadishi (Ipari community) walk for about forty minutes through a deserted plateau to a diminutive building known as St George of Lichanishi, with the aim to perform a quite evident rite of passage: local boys are placed under *Jgðræg's* protection, which is offered as a counter-gift to the group's offerings. These include not only the usual sacrificial victims and bread, but also the so-called *yeati*, i.e. fir or pine poles fixed with a piece of cloth, which are put on display on the outside [Fig. 13]³⁷. The interior is so narrow that it can hardly accommodate more than six or seven people, whose attention is directed towards a "contracted" *bema* delimited by an iconostasis that is directly joined with the altar and the eastern wall [Fig. 14]. Its fundamental role in local devotions is demonstrated by the countless beeswax candles covering it. It can be wondered whether such an arrangement, being essentially unparalleled in the Orthodox world, was established since the construction of the church, assumedly in the eleventh century³⁸, or may be the outcome of a reshaping made when the sanctuary was intended more as a focus for "folk" rituals than as a space for liturgical performance.

In any case, built structures are perceived as elements of a wider sacred environment, which encompasses the surrounding land and reflects the gendered structure of domestic spaces. Regarded as dwellings of supernatural beings, such sacred precincts consist of a masculine area called *t'arbez* and a feminine area corresponding to the house hearth: the side-annex known as *ladbash* is the place used exclusively by women to make bread

12/ Roundel- and hand-shaped graffiti on the south wall, Church of St George, Lahili (Lat'ali community)

35 Charachidzé, *Le système religieux* (n. 2), pp. 286–287.

36 Nino Tserediani, Kevin Tuite, Paata Bukhrashvili, "Women as Bread-Bakers and Ritual-Makers. Gender, Visibility and Sacred Space in Upper Svaneti", in *Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces. Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus*, Tsypylma Darieva, Florian Mühlfried, Kevin Tuite eds, New York / Oxford 2018, pp. 46–69, sp. pp. 52–53.

37 Paata Bukhrashvili, "Lichenishi – dzeoba hadishis (zemo svaneti) temshi" [Lichenishi – A Holiday for Sons in the Upper Svan Community of Hadishi], *Amirani*, VI (2002), pp. 7–19.

38 Tatjana Šev'jakova, *Monumental'naja živoпись' ranнего srednevekov'ja Gruzii* [Early Medieval Monumental Painting of Georgia], Tbilisi 1983, p. 25; Kenia/Aladashvili, *Zemo svaneti* (n. 6), p. 57.

and boil the meat of sacrificed animals within a large cauldron [Fig. 15]³⁹. Once prepared, the food, accompanied by abundant libations of chacha, is offered in the sanctuary by the *bap'är*. The icons and precious objects preserved in the churches seem to materialize the presence of divine beings in the space where the *do-ut-des* relationship between the group and its heavenly protectors is ritually staged. When the *mak'il* of Lagurk'a asked us to stop taking pictures since the icons were "getting tired", we thought at first that he was joking. Indeed, he sincerely sensed that the images, as living beings residing in the sacred place, did no longer accept to be simply contemplated as historically or aesthetically relevant artworks [Fig. 16].

This has not much to do with any allegedly intrinsic "power" of images. Rather, it betrays an understanding of objects, and even assemblages of objects, as concretizations of the human-divine interchange, regardless of their shape, aniconic or figural appearance, or materiality. As detailed in Batiashvili and Aleksidze's essay in this volume, the *gandzi* notion conveys the idea that a community's life and well-being are inextricably linked to how the treasures stored in its churches are cared for and honored. The small church of St George in Lahili (Latali community) is house to a great many silver-reveted and painted icons, as well as metalworks and a manuscript: nevertheless, its most venerated item is a round bronze object [Fig. 17], which can perhaps be interpreted as the base of a *polykandelon*, the most sumptuous lighting device in Byzantine-rite churches. In this case, it can be assumed that the distinctive, odd-looking appearance and materiality of this fragmentary item sparked its perception as a thing that was especially worthy of worship; its shape was reproduced by local worshippers in the graffiti dotting the walls of the church [Fig. 12].

Svan culture as a historical phenomenon

The self-evident Christian roots of Svan religious beliefs prevented scholars from categorizing them as living manifestations of ancient "paganism" in the same explicit way as they did with the religious habits of eastern Georgian highlanders. If one accepts that practices recorded in our times may be indicative of archaic systems of thought, the logical consequence is to think of them in terms of (diachronic) resilience *vis-à-vis* (historical) change. The methodological weaknesses of such a view have been highlighted by several ethnographers and anthropologists who demonstrated that Christianity is the substrate for most traditions of the Great Caucasus, even if the memory of such a substrate has almost thoroughly faded away in some areas⁴⁰. An Orthodox background can be detected, for instance, in the Pshav use of the words "icon" and "cross" to designate their thoroughly aniconic cult places, and in a structuring of their sacred precincts that, albeit in an "extroverted" way, is modelled on the hierarchical distribution of church spaces⁴¹.

Pshav and Khevsur shrines are ruins of old buildings, or even heaps of ancient stones, that have been re-signified and re-shaped as distinctive, outdoor foci for collective rituals, located in privileged environmental locations and delimited by enclosures. In Svaneti, church spaces kept their original appearance and, at least partly, also their original functions, but were expanded with the addition of annexes and their perception as elements of larger sacred areas: for instance, the holiness of Lagurk'a extends also to the surrounding

39 Tserediani/Tuite/Bukhrashvili, "Women as Bread-Bakers" (n. 36), pp. 54–55.

40 Kiknadze, *Kartuli mitologia* (n.26); Kevin Tuite, "Highland Georgian Paganism – Archaism or Innovation?", *Annual of the Society for the Study of Caucasia*, VII (1996), pp. 79–91.

41 Paul Manning, "Materiality and Cosmology: Old Georgian Churches as Sacred, Sublime, and Secular Objects", *Ethnos*, LXXIII (2008), pp. 327–360.



13/View of the Church of St George of Lichanishi near Hadishi (Ipari community)



14/View of the "contracted" bema, Church of St George of Lichanishi near Hadishi (Ipari community)

15/Ritual annex for the preparation of food offerings (*lakbash*) near the Lagurk'a church in Khe (K'ala community)

16/The *mək'il* of Lagurk'a in the church interior, September 18, 2022

17/Fragment of a Byzantine polykandelon, venerated as a miraculous object, Church of St George, Lahili (Lat'ali community), 12th century



woods. The fact that their buildings never collapsed or deteriorated indicates that they were never abandoned by the village communities who at some point became mainly responsible for their maintenance and use.

If we genuinely want to understand the grounds on which so many old artworks were preserved in the area, we should free ourselves of any conscious or unconscious understanding of Svaneti as an anachronistic (“Indo-European”, archaic, or medieval) context. The “vernacular” practices in which church spaces and objects have been involved until our days, far from originating from uninterrupted “pagan” behaviors, were developed under specific historical circumstances in relatively recent times. By and large, this process can be described as the gradual construction of the country’s “remoteness” in the period between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. The large number of churches and monasteries embellished with mural paintings between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries, the patronage of local feudal lords recorded and displayed in church inscriptions and portraits [Fig. 18]⁴², as well as the activity of a court painter named Tevdore between the late eleventh and early twelfth century, bear clear witness to the wealth and political importance of the area in the Middle Ages⁴³. Many of the essays gathered in this volume emphasize the multiple ways in which Svan medieval arts bear witness to the relevant role played by the region and its active involvement in the cultural dynamics of the times. Irine Elizbarashvili and Irene Giviashvili investigate the architectural features of local monuments that either correspond to or differ from major trends in the lowlands; Salome Meladze highlights the decorative patterns that are indicative of the ways in which chancel screens were attributed specific functions and meanings; Nina Chichinadze offers thoughts on the simulated icons displayed in the *bema* of St Barbara in Khe and on their trans-medial efficacy; Marine Kenia illustrates the pervasive presence of Marian images in Svan décors, previously overlooked in the historiographical debate; Ekaterine Gedevanishvili focuses on a mural painting in the church of the Archangel in Iprari to demonstrate the sophisticated character of local iconography; and Manuela Studer-Karlen points to the painted décors in the Tanghili church as evidence of the interpenetration of images and liturgy in the shaping of sacred spaces and their ritualized experience.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Svaneti was only indirectly affected by the weakening of the kingdom and its gradual fragmentation into independent potentates. In many circumstances, according to contemporary chronicles, it became a shelter for aristocratic and even royal families during the Mongol invasion in the 1230s and Timur’s incursions in 1382–1393. It can be assumed that a great many of the icons, manuscripts, and metalworks preserved in Svan churches were transported in that period by refugees from the lowlands⁴⁴. Accordingly, the country came soon to be perceived as a unique treasury of precious objects from the whole of Georgia, as witnessed as early as in the seventeenth century by the Catholic missionary Cristoforo Castelli, a member of the Theatine order:

[...] the Svans are less smart [than the Abkhazians], but they have a better knowledge of the Faith of Christ, and have priests and most beautiful churches on the top of their mountains with images of Our Saviour Jesus Christ, the ever Virgin Mary and St George, as well as relics of great value transported to those mountains by pious Christians to avoid their destruction by the hands of the Persians and Saracens, who repeatedly ravaged those countries⁴⁵.

The multiplicity of materials, styles, imageries, and techniques that characterize the objects treasured in Svan churches is enough to corroborate the assumption that they were transported from other places. They include not only Georgian, but also Byzantine, Eastern Christian, Islamic, and Western European works. Among the latter, most striking



42 Eastmond, *Royal Imagery* (n. 24), pp. 73–91. More generally on donors' portrait in Georgia, cf. Gajane Alibegashvili, *Svetskij portret v gruzinskoj srednevekovoj monumental'noj živopisi* [The Donor's Portrait in Medieval Georgian Monumental Painting], Tbilisi 1979.

43 Unsurprisingly, Tevdore's role as "eponymous" master has attracted much scholarly interest: cf. Natela Aladashvili, Gajane Alibegashvili, *Rospisi xudožnika Tevdore v Verxnej Svaneti* [Paintings of the Painter Tevdore in Upper Svaneti], Tbilisi 1966; Aladashvili/Alibegashvili/Volskaia, *Živopisnaja škola* (n. 18), pp. 56–77, 102–120; Kenia, *Upper Svaneti* (n. 22); pp. 9–10; Kevkhishvili, "Svanetien" (n. 3); Schrade, *Peripherie* (n. 23), pp. 67–74; Nina Chichinadze, "'King's Painter' Tevdore and His Inscriptions", *Zograf*, XLII (2018), pp. 25–36; Brigitta Schrade, "Der 'Maler des Königs' Tevdore im Obersvanetien: Ein Beispiel für ikonographische Programme der georgischen Wandmalerei des 11./12. Jahrhunderts", in *Neue Forschungen zur Wandmalerei des Mittelalters*, Ulrike Heinrichs, Katharina Pick eds, Regensburg 2019, pp. 93–107; Michele Bacci, "L'artista e la sua autocoscienza tra XII e XIII secolo: prospettive mediterranee", in *L'artista medievale. Contesti, mestieri, famiglie (secc. XI-XIII)*, Rome 2022, pp. 37–63, sp. p. 43.

44 Schrade, *Peripherie* (n. 23), pp. 92–93.

45 Cristoforo Castelli, "Lettere", as in Patrizia Licini, "Cristoforo Castelli e la sua missione in Georgia", *Regnum Dei, Collectanea theatina*, XLI/3 (1985), pp. iv–226, sp. pp. 181–182: "[gli Svani sono] meno svigliati di intelletto, hanno però più cognizione della Fede di Christo, tengono Preti e Chiese bellissime sopra li monti con imagini di Christo nostro Redentore, di Maria sempre Vergine e di San Giorgio, e reliquie di considerazione portate in quelli monti da divoti Christiani per liberarle dalle ingiurie de' Persiani e Saraceni, che più volte hanno scorso quelli paesi". Cristoforo Castelli's mission to Georgia took place between 1632 and 1654. On the Theatine father's account and his drawings, see Bernadette Majorana, *La gloriosa impresa. Storia e immagini di un viaggio secentesco*, Palermo 1990.

18/ *The donor Mikael Chegiani and the Holy Mandylion*, mural painting, Church of the Savior, Hadishi (Ipari community), late 12th– early 13th century

are a ninth-century chalice or cup from the Holy Land, depicting scenes from the life of Christ⁴⁶, or a late-thirteenth-century Venetian rock crystal cross from Ienashi, now in the Mest'ia Museum⁴⁷. If the former may have reached the country as a *loca sancta* souvenir, the latter can be assumed, on account of its luxurious materiality, to have come as a diplomatic gift intended for the royal court. At the same time, as Nana Burchuladze emphasizes in this volume, a great many icons originating from Byzantium, Sinai, and other regions of the Eastern Mediterranean can be encountered in the shrines of Svaneti.

The massive arrival of precious imports in the region and the establishment of the sacred collections where they were stored and preserved must have had a strong impact on how local people understood their relationship with the divine sphere. They familiarized themselves with artworks of great aesthetic, and therefore emotional, impact, which were integrated into their daily life. Meanwhile, the disintegration of the old kingdom was accomplished: starting from the fourteenth century, the Dadeshkeliani family got control over the lower course of the Enguri and, gradually, also the western part of Upper Svaneti, whereas the latter's eastern area, known as "Free" Svaneti, organized itself as a federation of village communities, which remained independent until the Russian annexation in the nineteenth century⁴⁸.

In this special context, the Svan mountains became more and more isolated. In particular, seventeenth-century texts indicate that the ecclesiastical presence sensibly diminished over time. Both the Italian Catholic missionary Arcangelo Lamberti and the Arab Orthodox patriarch of Antioch Makarios III shared the view that the Svans were only nominally Christian. The former remarked that, even if no sign of piety and devotion could be detected in their behavior, they were at least ready to hear people speaking of religious topics⁴⁹. On the other hand, the latter was amazed at the laziness of the Mingrelian clergy, who did not care at all about their flock: the bishops of Tsageri and Tsaishi, in whose dioceses Svaneti was included, confessed to him to have never been there and told him that the inhabitants of the region were neither baptized nor instructed in religious matters, since there were no priests to instruct them – a story repeated even today by our drivers⁵⁰. Under such circumstances, local families took over the care of the religious buildings and de facto gained control over them. The consequences of such developments can be observed even nowadays. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the independence of Georgia, the Orthodox Church made efforts to reaffirm its presence in the region and reduce the role of village communities, the issue is therefore still a matter of political debate. Our expedition in September 2022 coincided with the official trip of the President of the Republic, Mrs Salome Zourabichvili, who did us the honor of joining our visits to Matskhvarishi and Lagurk'a. At the time, she acknowledged the important social role played by the treasury guardians by awarding them the same commemorative medal offered to museum directors during a public event⁵¹. To demonstrate the all-local importance of this tradition, the president did not hesitate to begin her speech in the local idiom, which she described as one of the region's incredible treasures.

The weakening of ecclesiastical control between the sixteenth and the twentieth century was paralleled by the development of vernacular religious practices that invested the traditional cultic foci – churches, icons, and collections of precious objects – with additional or distinctive meanings. Questions can be raised as to the extent to which such a re-signification either emerged as an entirely new phenomenon or was partially rooted in earlier usages. On the one side, it should be stressed that analogous "iconotropic" processes are known also from other regions of the Great Caucasus. For instance, the *gandzi* devotion due to Svan treasury churches can be compared to the enduring worship

of the wooden shrine of Wastyrdji (a warrior-god like *Jgðræg*) in Rekom, North Ossetia, which houses a multifarious collection of archaeological items, Christian objects, bells, old armors, and barbs of arrows offered by hunters as *ex-votos*⁵². This cumulative approach to holiness relies on the intuitive principle that a great number of multifarious and aesthetically attractive objects gathered in a sacred place bear material witness to the latter's uninterrupted frequentation by pious, gift-bringing worshippers, and therefore invest it with a distinctive status.

Strictly related to this principle is also the belief in the *placed-ness* and *site-specificity* of the holy. Shrines work as signifiers of the specific interaction that a human group can establish with specific supernatural “agents” in a specific site to obtain specific benefits. Each of the Svan villages tends to associate worship for the main divine protectors with distinctive locations that normally coincide with the churches carrying the corresponding dedications. This means that St George, the Archangel, or Mary are not invoked as such, but in their association with a religious building. In practice, the addressees of rituals and their material signifiers – their churches and their visual or aniconic “concretions” (images, precious objects) – end up merging in their worshippers' experience⁵³. As shown by Antony Eastmond's essay in this volume, the roots of this phenomenon can be traced back to the ways in which in medieval times saints were celebrated in their icons as special intercessors and defenders of specific groups. As documented in many inscriptions, their supernatural agency was inscribed in material locations, and it was only there that it could manifest its efficacy. Regardless of whether heavenly beings were regarded as saints or gods, what actually mattered was to ensure that they would be present and constantly benevolent in the community's living space.

In various ways, the essays collected in this volume contribute to the deepening of our knowledge of the extraordinary heritage of Svaneti and to breaching the barriers that separate art history from ethnography in the scholarly discourse. The specificity of Svan history makes this distinction thoroughly obsolete, as a first-hand, physical experience of its treasures immediately makes clear. If we were to look at local artworks as mere evidence of medieval aesthetic excellence, while ignoring their second life as interconnected elements of sacred assemblages, we would not understand their deeper meaning and a crucial aspect of their unique history.

46 On this object, cf. most notably Giorgi Chubinashvili, “Siriiskaja čaša v Ušgule” [Syrian Chalice in Ushguli], in *Idem, Voprosy istorii iskusstva. Issledovaniâ i zametki* [Issues of the History of Art. Research and Notes], vol. II, Tbilisi 2002, pp. 128–136; Emma Loosley Leeming, *Architecture and Ascetism: Cultural Interaction between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity*, Leiden/Boston 2018, pp. 62–72.

47 Kitty Machabeli, “La croix vénitienne des XIIIe-XIVe siècles en Svanétie”, *Iconographica*, xv (2016), pp. 93–101.

48 Schrade, *Peripherie* (n. 23), pp. 98–102.

49 Arcangelo Lamberti, *Relazione della Colchide, hoggi detta Mengrellia, nella quale si tratta dell'origine, costumi e cose naturali di quei paesi*, Naples 1653, p. 196.

50 Makarios III, Patriarch of Antioch, *History of the Conversion of the Georgians to Christianity*, Olga de Lébédew ed., *Codex 689 du Vatican: Histoire de la conversion des Géorgiens au Christianisme par le patriarche Macaire*, Rome 1905, pp. 39–40. Cf. Constantin A. Panchenko, *Arab Orthodox Christians under the Ottomans: 1516–1831*, Jordanville, NY 2016, pp. 341–343.

51 The event took place on September 11, 2022, in the Leo Pilpani Public and Folk Theatre of Mest'ia, cf. <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/president-awards-medal-of-honor-to-svaneti-treasure-guardians-deputy-director-of-svaneti-museum-of-history-and-ethnography/> [last accessed on March 25, 2023].

52 Vladimir Kouznetsov, Iaroslav Lebedinsky, *Les chrétiens disparus du Caucase. Histoire et archéologie du christianisme au Caucase du Nord et en Crimée*, Paris 1999, pp. 76–79.

53 Tserediani/Tuite/Bukhrashvili, “Women as Bread-Bakers” (n. 36), p. 49.