


# The Ateni Sioni Church: Sacred Architecture and the Languages of Power in Medieval Iberia

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**Abstract:** This article explores the medieval Iberian Ateni Sioni Church, built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and renowned for its comprehensive mural cycle dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It draws particular attention to the church's architectural, topographical, and decorative parallels with a significant Georgian sacred site, the Church of the Holy Cross in Jvari. Rather than viewing these similarities as exclusively formal, the article offers an alternative perspective, focusing especially on the church's topography and exterior decoration. It examines the donor reliefs on the facade in relation to their spatial context and considers how pilgrims and worshippers engaged with them as well as their possible symbolic significance at the time of their creation. The study demonstrates that, in the medieval period, Ateni Sioni served not only as a religious monument but also as a powerful political statement – a visual embodiment of authority and faith.

**Keywords:** Pilgrim Art; Georgian Medieval Art; Ateni Sioni Church; Jvari Church; Sacred Topography.

## EN La Iglesia de Ateni Sioni: Arquitectura Sagrada y Lenguajes del Poder en la Iberia Medieval

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora la iglesia medieval ibérica de Ateni Sioni, construida en el siglo VII y reconocida por su amplio ciclo mural fechado en el siglo XII. Presta especial atención a los paralelismos arquitectónicos, topográficos y decorativos entre esta iglesia y un importante sitio sagrado: la Iglesia de la Santa Cruz en Jvari. En lugar de considerar estas similitudes exclusivamente como formales, el artículo propone una perspectiva alternativa, centrada especialmente en la topografía de la iglesia y su decoración exterior. Examina los relieves de los donantes en la fachada en relación con su contexto espacial y considera cómo los peregrinos y fieles interactuaban con ellos, así como su posible significado simbólico en el momento de su creación. El estudio demuestra que, en la época medieval, Ateni Sioni funcionaba no solo como un monumento religioso, sino también como una poderosa declaración política: una manifestación visual de autoridad y fe.

**Palabras clave:** arte de peregrinación; arte medieval georgiano; iglesia de Ateni Sioni; iglesia de Jvari; topografía sagrada

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Sacred Ecosystems in Georgian Gorges. 3. "Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder". 4. Symbolical Power of Reliefs. 5. Conclusions. 6. Sources and bibliographic references. 7. List of Illustrations

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### 1. Introduction

The region of Gori in Georgia is famous all over the world as the birthplace of Joseph Stalin. Far fewer people, in reality mainly only specialists, are aware that not far from the city stands the monumental Ateni Sioni Church. Yet this monument should be regarded as a major example of the extraordinary architectural tradition of medieval Iberia, whose significance

extends far beyond the region itself, making it one of the most important late antique monuments on a global scale. Built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the church at Ateni underwent many restorations and alterations (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The exact date of the church's construction is unknown, but the prevailing scholarly consensus places it during the reign of Nerses I the Great (682/86–689). See Guram Abramishvili,



Figure 1. View of the Ateni Sioni Church from afar.  
Source: 2025 Georgian Travel Guide.

The first significant intervention took place in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when, in addition to completing some restoration work, exterior decorations were added<sup>2</sup>. At the turn of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, King David IV the Builder of Georgia (1089–1125) commissioned an extensive mural cycle, which remains one of the most comprehensive and best-preserved examples of medieval Georgian wall painting to this day (Fig. 2)<sup>3</sup>. Further alterations and additions were made during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>4</sup>. After that period, the church remained largely untouched until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it was severely damaged by an earthquake in 1920 and later restored in 1940<sup>5</sup>. Based on a large number of travelers' notes, we know that for a long time, the church in Ateni remained a fairly popular destination, visited by many travelers and explorers<sup>6</sup>. This changed over time, and

today the church is largely forgotten and not easily accessible.



Figure 2. Murals in the apse.  
Source: Thomas Kaffenberger, 2017.

One possible reason for this neglect may lie in the way the church has been perceived in scholarly research since the 1940s. The church in Ateni was often regarded as a replica of the Church of the Holy Cross in Jvari (586–640) because of the numerous formal and stylistic features they share. The goal of this article is not to explore the origins of this established historiographical perspective<sup>7</sup>, but rather to propose an alternative view on such a perception, understood by historiography as a negative one. The hypothesis lying at the basis of the present article is that the Ateni Sioni Church should not be understood as a passive or inferior copy of the Church of the Holy Cross in Jvari, but rather as a deliberate and meaningful reconfiguration of a sacred model. The article argues that the church of Ateni was a prominent actor in the medieval Iberian sacred landscape, while simultaneously articulating political authority and reinforcing Christian identity. More generally, the study aims to contribute to the broader debate on the notion of the medieval landscape and its activation through sacred spaces and images, exploring how the environment can be shaped and interpreted through the interaction of natural settings and human cultural interventions<sup>8</sup>.

This hypothesis is explored through an interdisciplinary combination of methodological approaches that integrates architectural history, topographical analysis, epigraphy, and reception theory. Such a combination of perspectives allows the problem to be approached from multiple angles, offering a more nuanced understanding of the church as both

“Dva stroitelnykh perioda Atenskogo Siona” [Two Construction Periods of the Ateni Sioni Church], *Macne (Vestnik). Serija istorii, arkeologii, ètnografii i istorii iskusstva* [Macne (Newsletter). History, Archaeology, Ethnography, and Art History Series] I (1972): 32–55. For a summary of the discussion on the dating, see Armen Kazarian, *Tserkovnaja arkhitektura stran Zakavkaz'ja VII veka. Formirovanie i razvítie traditsii* [Seventh-Century Church Architecture in the Subcaucasian Lands. The Shaping and Development of a Tradition], 4 vols. (Moscow: Locus StanDi, 2012–2013), 401–2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> The literature on the murals at Ateni Sioni is very vast; see, for example, Tinatin Virsaladze, *Rospisi Atenskogo Siona* [Murals of Ateni Sioni], (Tbilisi: Khelovneba, 1984); Guram Abramishvili, “La datation des fresques de la cathédrale d'Aténi”, *Zograf* 14 (1983): 17–21; Antony Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1998); for the most recent study with further bibliography, see Irina Oretskaia, “Neskol'ko zamechanij o stile rospisej Atenskogo Siona” [Some More Observations on the Wall-paintings of Ateni Sioni], in *Iskusstvo vizantijskogo mira* [Art of Byzantine World], III, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyj institut iskusstvovedenija, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> Armen Kazarian, *Seventh-Century Church Architecture*, 398.

<sup>5</sup> Giorgi Chubinashvili, *Pamiatniki tipa Dzvari* [Monuments of the Jvari Type], (Tbilisi: Georgian SSR Academy of Science, 1948).

<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Dubois de Montpéroux, *Voyage autour du Caucase, chez les Tscherkesses et les Abkhases, en Colchide, en Géorgie, en Arménie et en Crimée*, vol. III, (Paris: Librairie de Gide, 1842–1846); Andrey Muraviov, *Gruzija i Armenija* [Georgia and Armenia], vol. III, (Saint Petersburg: Imperial Typography, 1848); Marie-Félicité Brosset, *Rapports sur un voyage archéologique exécuté dans la Géorgie et dans l'Arménie en 1847–1848 sous les auspices du Prince Vorontzof Lieutenant du Caucase*, (Saint Petersburg: l'Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1851); Praskovya Uvarova, *Khristianskie pamjat-*

*niki* [Christian Monuments], (Moscow: Typography of I. A. Mamontov, 1904).

<sup>7</sup> For a reflection on this historiographical myth, see Ivan Folletti and Margarita Khakhanova, “On the Road: At'eni Sioni in the Pilgrims' Eyes”, in *Approaches to Sacred Space(s) in Medieval Subcaucasian Cultures*, eds. Michelle Bacchi et al, (Brno/Rome: Viella, 2023), 185–209.

<sup>8</sup> See in this sense the seminal research by Veronica Della Dora, *Landscape, nature, and the sacred in Byzantium*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Denis Cosgrove, *Social formation and symbolic landscape*, (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

a material structure and a dynamic cultural and symbolic agent within the landscape.

Building on this, the following pages will be divided into three further sections. First, the topographies of the Ateni and Jvari churches will be discussed, with a reflection on the visual transfer of the sacred sites. The following section will analyze the exterior decorations of the church in Ateni in relation to their interaction with pilgrims and worshippers. Finally, the article will explore the possible symbolic meanings of the reliefs on the church's eastern facade and the motivations behind their commission.

## 2. Sacred Ecosystems in Georgian Gorges

Medieval churches in the Caucasus have often impressed medieval and contemporary viewers with their picturesque settings. For instance, one of the most important Iberian holy sites, the Church of the Holy Cross in Jvari, stands atop a hill overlooking a gorge, making it visible from afar and allowing it to visually dominate the surrounding landscape (Fig. 3)<sup>9</sup>.



Figure 3. View of the Church of the Holy Cross in Jvari. Source: Alexxx1979, Wikimedia Commons (CC-BY-4.0).

In neighboring Armenia, the placement of churches is also carefully considered and harmonized with the surrounding natural landscape. Thus, for instance, the holy Mount Ararat can be seen in a very “picturesque” way through the colonnades of Zvartnots Cathedral (641/42–661/62), while the church of Akhtamar (915–921) is set on an island at the heart of a lake creating a visual refrain between the shape of the little hill at the center of the island and the church (Figs. 4–5)<sup>10</sup>. The significance of the



Figure 4. Zvartnots Cathedral with a view of Mount Ararat. Source: Vahagn Grigoryan, Wikimedia Commons (CC-BY-4.0).

landscape in shaping Caucasian sacred topography – activated also by the liturgical performances – is hard to deny, and it has already been a subject of research<sup>11</sup>. A peculiar phenomenon in the Caucasus was the transfer or replication of holy sites, achieved through not only architectural means but also the careful selection of natural landscapes that topographically echoed sacred locations<sup>12</sup>. However, a more widespread phenomenon was the sacralization of space through architecture, monumental crosses, and decorative elements on church facades<sup>13</sup>. The

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the Church of the Holy Cross, see *Jvari. Church of the Holy Cross in Mtskheta*, ed. David Khoshtaria, (Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2008); David Khoshtaria, *Medieval Georgian churches: a concise overview of architecture*, (Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2023); and the recent comprehensive study by Antony Eastmond, “Art on the Edge: The Church of the Holy Cross, Jvari, Georgia”, *The Art Bulletin* 105, no. 1 (2023): 64–92.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding Zvartnots, see, for example, Eugene Kleinbauer, “Zvart’nots and the origins of Christian architecture in Armenia”, *The Art Bulletin* 54, no. 3 (1972): 245–62; Patrick Donabédian, *L’âge d’or de l’architecture arménienne : VIIe siècle*, (Marseille: Parentheses Eds, 2008); *Zvart’nots: The St Gregory Cathedral in History and Art Historiography*, eds. Nazénie Garibian and Anna Sirinian, (Bologna: Bologna University Press, 2026) (forthcoming), Regarding Akhtamar Church, see the comprehensive monograph with further references, *The church of the Holy Cross of Alt’amar: politics, art, spirituality in the Kingdom of Vaspurakan*, eds. Zaroui Pogossian and Edda Vardanyan, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Michele Bacchi, “The New Zion of Ot’kht’a”, in *Dynamics of Medieval Landscape Cultural Shaping of the Environment*, eds. Ivan Foletti, Martin F. Lešák, and Adrien Palladino, (Brno/Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 28–51, (= *Convivium Supplementum*); Thomas Kaffenberger, “Monastic Landscape(s). Rk’oni as Example of a Caucasian Multi-Church Monastery”, in *Approaches to Sacred Space(s)*, 139–85. Regarding the question of the ritualization of the landscape, see, for example, Christina Maranci, “Liturgical Landscapes: Text and Context in the Armenian Foundation Rite”, in *Sacred Spaces and Urban Networks*, eds. Suzan Yalman and A. Hilal Uguru, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021), 17–33.

<sup>12</sup> See especially the article by Bacchi, “The New Zion of Ot’kht’a”, 28–51. Regarding this phenomenon beyond the Caucasus, see, for example, Michele Bacchi, “Performed Topographies and Topomimetic Piety. Imaginative Sacred Spaces in Medieval Italy”, in *Spatial Icons. Performativity in Byzantium and Medieval Russia*, ed. Alexei Lidov, (Moscow: Indrik, 2011), 101–18.

<sup>13</sup> See Nazénie Garibian de Vartavan, *La Jérusalem nouvelle et les premiers sanctuaires chrétiens de l’Arménie. Méthode pour l’étude de l’église comme temple de Dieu*, (Yerevan: Isis Pharia 2009); Tamila Mgaloblishvili, “How Mtskheta turned into the Georgians’ New Jerusalem”, in *Visual Constructs of Jerusalem*, eds. Bianca Kühnel, Galit Noga-Banai, and Hanna Vorholt, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 59–66; Anthony Eastmond, “Jerusalem in the Caucasus?”, in *Tomb & Temple. Re-Imagining the Sacred Buildings of Jerusalem*, eds. Robin Griffith-Jones and Eric Fernie, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018), 211–32; Henriette Hofmann and Gerhard Wolf, “Licht und Landschaft: zur Sakraltopographie Mzchetas in Georgien”, in *Inszenierung von Sichtbarkeit in mittelalterlichen Bildkulturen. Prof. Dr. Barbara Schellewald zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Henriette Hofmann, Caroline Schärli, and Sophie Schweinfurth, (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2018), 21–47. For a general discussion of this topic, see *Novye Ierusalimy. Ierotopiya i ikonografija sakral’nykh prostranstv / New Jerusalems, Hierotopy and Iconography of Sacred Spaces*, ed. Alexei Lidov, (Moscow: Indrik, 2009). Regarding the sacralization of the landscape through architectural decorations and minor monuments, see Sipana Tchakerian, “Toward a Detailed Typology: Four-Sided Stelae in Early Christian South Caucasus”, in *The Medieval South Caucasus: Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia, and Georgia. Convivium. Supplementum*, eds. Ivan Foletti and Erik Thunø, (Brno/Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 124–43;

Ateni Sioni Church is an outstanding, yet overlooked, example of this phenomenon.



Figure 5. View of the Akhtamar Church from the lake. Source: Re:Cent, 2023.

Perched on a cliff and facing the gorge, the church became a prominent visual landmark within the surrounding landscape. Its position undoubtedly echoes the position of the Jvari church mentioned above – a resemblance that appears far from accidental, since the location is not the only similarity. Firstly, architecturally, both the Ateni and Jvari churches share the same form, which was common throughout the Caucasus in the late 6<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> centuries (Fig. 6/6.1)<sup>14</sup>. Secondly, both churches share the same decorative scheme on the exterior, namely the arrangement of reliefs on their facades. These three factors (topography, architecture, and decorations) have led the Ateni church to be regarded in the historiographical tradition – from the 1940s to the present – as a secondary and lower-quality copy of the Jvari church<sup>15</sup>. However, such a perception of the church seems to be far from reality<sup>16</sup>. I will return to the decorative scheme of the two churches later; at this point, it is important to discuss the similar location and architecture of the churches.

In the case of the Church of the Holy Cross in Jvari, its liminal and dominant position within

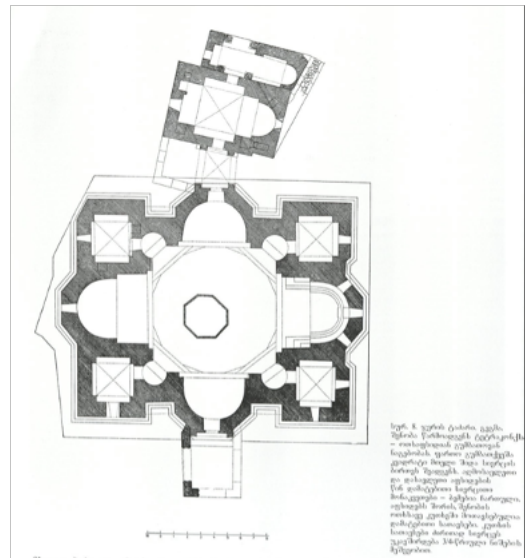


Figure 6. Ground plan of the Ateni church. Source: Mikhail Kalashnikov, *Tsentral'no kupolnyje kultovyje zdanija: Tsromi i Ateni* [Central domed worshiped buildings: Tsromi and Ateni]. Saint Petersburg, 1927.

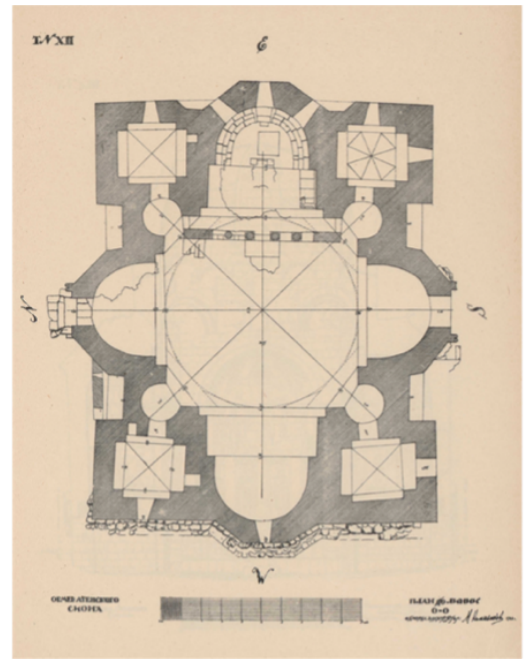


Figure 6.1. Ground plan of the Jvari church. Source: *Jvari. Church of the Holy Cross in Mtskheta*, edited by David Khoshtaria. Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2008.

Manuela Studer-Karlen, “The Pictorial Compositions on the Cross Stelae in Georgia (Fifth–Ninth Centuries)”, *Dynamics of Medieval Landscape*, 52–74; recently a conference took place at the University of Fribourg where this issue was widely discussed, see *Spaces, Landscapes, and Social Lives of the Cross in Medieval Armenia and Georgia*.

<sup>14</sup> Chubinashvili, *Monuments of the Jvari Type*; Tiran Marutian, *Arkhitkturnye pamjatniki. Zvarntots, Avan, Hripsime, sobor Anijskoj Bogomateri* [Architectural Monuments. Zvarntots, Avan, the Cathedral of Our Lady of Ani], (Yerevan: Khorurdain Grokh, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> Chubinashvili, *Monuments of the Jvari Type*; Edith Neubauer, *Gruzie. Od bájné Kolchidy po dnešek* [Georgia. From the mythical Colchis to today], (Prague: Vyšehrad, 1981); Virsaladze, *Murals of Ateni Sioni*, 13; Annegret Plontke-Lüning, *Frühchristliche Architektur in Kaukasien. Die Entwicklung des christlichen Sakralbaus in Lazika, Iberien, Armenien, Albanien und den Grenzregionen vom 4. bis zum 7. Jh.*, (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 316–17.

<sup>16</sup> Foletti, Khakhanova, “On the Road: At’eni Sioni in the Pilgrims’ Eyes”, 185–209.

the landscape has already been emphasized<sup>17</sup>. According to a treaty from 591, a new border was established that divided the Kingdom of Iberia into two spheres of influence – one under Byzantine control and the other under the Sassanid Empire. The border ran exactly through the place where, at the turn of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of the Holy Cross was built<sup>18</sup>. Thus, the church became not only one of the most important devotional sites in the Kingdom of Iberia – due to its location on the spot where Saint Nino is said to have erected a cross – but also a powerful symbol and visible landmark

<sup>17</sup> Eastmond, “Art on the Edge”, 64–92.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 64, 83.



Figure 7. Map of the Caucasus in the second half of the 18th century. Source: Ivan Foletti and Margarita Khakhanova, "On the Road: At'eni Sioni in the Pilgrims' Eyes", in *Approaches to Sacred Space(s) in Medieval Subcaucasian Cultures*, eds. Michelle Bacci et al, (Brno/Rome: Viella, 2023), 185–209.

of Christian faith and authority<sup>19</sup>. Given the significance and the role of the Jvari church in medieval Georgia, it seems that its evocation is not merely a coincidence, but rather a deliberate transfer of Georgia's crucial holy site into the Ateni valley. The decision to specifically imitate the Church of the Holy Cross becomes even more meaningful when we consider the strategic and cultural significance of the Ateni valley at the time the Ateni church was constructed. In the medieval Kingdom of Iberia, the valley of Ateni played a crucial role in the economic, political, and cultural spheres, as it was traversed by the road connecting the regions of Shida Kartli and Kvemo Kartli (Fig. 7)<sup>20</sup>.

In a more global context, the Ateni valley appears to have been one of the most convenient routes linking Byzantium with the East<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, the visual transfer of the holy Iberian site to the valley also conveys and relocates its symbolic significance, establishing the church in Ateni as a visible symbol of Christianity, faith, and power for the many pilgrims and traders passing through the valley.

### 3. "Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder"

The large number of travelers and pilgrims in the valley is confirmed by several circumstances. First and foremost, attention should be given to the valley's history, as well as the number and variety of buildings – both sacred and secular – found within

it<sup>22</sup>. From the earliest times, the region witnessed continuous conflicts driven by the struggle to control and dominate the valley. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the valley was under the control of the powerful feudal Baghvasi (Liparitid) house until it was eventually conquered by Bagrat III (960–1014), the first king of a united Georgia<sup>23</sup>. Once the valley came under the authority of the royal court, its prominence steadily increased over the centuries that followed, highlighting its strategic value and economic importance within the region. This is further demonstrated by the presence of architectural remains in the area, including several fortresses and more than fifty churches, with Ateni Sioni standing out as the most important and distinguished among them<sup>24</sup>. The church in Ateni can itself serve as further evidence, proving the vivid life of the valley in medieval and early modern times. The entire exterior surface of the building is covered with pilgrims' inscriptions in various scripts, from local Caucasian languages through Greek to Hebrew and Arabic (Fig. 8)<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen H. Rapp Jr., "Georgian Christianity", in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 137–56.

<sup>20</sup> Ioseb Alimbarashvili, "ტანას (ატენის) ხეობის მოსახლეობის დინამიკა (დემოგრაფიული, ეთნიკური და სოციალური ცვლილებები)" [Dynamics of the Population of Tana (Ateni) Gorge (Demographic, Ethnic and Social Changes)], ისტორია, არქეოლოგია, ეთნოლოგია, [History, Archeology, Ethnology, Gori State University] III (2020): 196–217.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> Sergei Makalatia, ატენის ხეობა: ისტორიული და ეთნოგრაფიული ნარკვევი [Ateni Valley: A Historical and Ethnographic Essay], (Tbilisi: Sakhelbami, 1957).

<sup>23</sup> Alimbarashvili, "Dynamics of the Population of Tana (Ateni) Gorge", 200. Regarding Bagrat III and his representation, see Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*.

<sup>24</sup> Makalatia, *Ateni Valley: A Historical and Ethnographic Essay*.

<sup>25</sup> Uvarova, *Christian Monuments*; Dubois de Montpéroux, *Voyage autour du Caucase*; Zaza Aleksidze, *Armjanskije nadpisi Atenskogo Siona* [Armenian Inscription of the Ateni Sioni], (Tbilisi, 1978); Parujr Muradjan, *Armjanskaja epigrafika Gruzii* [The Armenian Epigraphic of Georgia], (Yerevan: Armenian SSR Academy of Science, 1985); ქართული წარწერების კორპუსი, ლაპიდარული წარწერები : წიგნი III. ფრესკული წარწერები : ატენის ხეობა : ნაწილი I [Corpus of Georgian Inscriptions, Lapidary Inscriptions: Book III. Mural Inscriptions: Ateni Sioni Church: Part I], (Tbilisi: Georgian SSR Academy of Science, 1989).



Figure 8. Graffiti on the wall of the Ateni church.  
Source: Thomas Kaffenberger, 2017.

Given the absence of evidence indicating that the Ateni church was a major site of devotion – such as, for example, the presence of relics – it may be assumed that its prominence was largely due to its strategic geographical location. Nevertheless, although the church was probably not originally conceived of as a major pilgrimage site, evidence suggests that the flow of travelers and their engagement with the building played a crucial role in shaping its form and even led to notable changes in its appearance.

Such a situation – with travelers traversing the valley and seeing the church – is, I argue, fundamental for the analysis of the church's relief decoration, which will be examined below, from their perspective. Before discussing the case of Ateni Sioni, it is worth noting that the movement of believers and their interactions with sacred spaces generally played a central role in the experience of medieval Caucasian churches. Referring again to the Jvari church, we can observe that the entire space is designed around the movement of believers. The church is conceived as an inscribed tetraconch crowned with a large dome covering the entire space. From the central square, four apses extend outward, each linked by niches that lead to the four corner rooms<sup>26</sup>. Overall, the church's layout centers around a monumental cross placed at its core, highlighting its central role within the structure. The structure of the church thus essentially implies the movement of believers around the cross, making it not only the visual center of the church but also a spatial focal point (Fig. 9)<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Chubinashvili, *Monuments of the Jvari Type*; Eastmond, "Art on the Edge", 64–92.

<sup>27</sup> In general, regarding the worship of the cross in medieval Iberia, see, for example, Michele Bacci, "Echoes of Golgo-



Figure 9. Internal space in the Jvari church.  
Source: Re:Cent, 2015.

The exterior decoration of the church was likewise designed in response to the movement of pilgrims as they approached the building. In Jvari, the most richly decorated facade, featuring the most significant reliefs, is the eastern facade. That side has three apsidal windows, each with reliefs depicting church donors carved over it (Fig. 10).

The figures depicted in these reliefs could be identified through inscriptions that have survived to the present day. In particular, on the left relief, two figures are depicted with an inscription that states "St. Archangel Michael, have mercy on Demeter *hypatos*"<sup>28</sup>. In the middle of the apsidal ledge, a relief with a figure kneeling before Christ is located. According to the inscription, the relief features King Stephanoz I of Kartli: "Cross of our Savior, have mercy on Stephanoz, the Patrikios of Kartli" (Fig. 11)<sup>29</sup>. The relief on the right side of the apse depicts three figures identified by the inscription as Adarnese, his son Stephanoz II, and Archangel Gabriel<sup>30</sup>. The following lines are carved into the relief: "Holy Archangel Gabriel, aid Adrnerse *hypatos*"<sup>31</sup>. In addition to the reliefs and windows, many architectural details, such as niches and ornamental lintels, contribute to the appearance of this side. The south facade is the second-most richly decorated, featuring a large tympanum with two angels holding a Bolnisi cross along with a relief depicting a donor – likely Stephanoz II – kneeling before Christ (Fig. 12)<sup>32</sup>.

tha. On the Iconization of Monumental Crosses in Medieval Svaneti", in *The Medieval South Caucasus*, 206–24.

<sup>28</sup> Parmen Zakaraja, *Pamjatniki vostočnoj Gruzii* [Monuments of Eastern Georgia], (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983), 38–51; *Jvari. Church of the Holy Cross in Mtskheta*.

<sup>29</sup> Chubinashvili, *Monuments of the Jvari Type*, 142.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Eastmond, "Art on the Edge", 84.

<sup>32</sup> Natela Aladashvili, *Monumental'naja skulptura Gruzii* [Monumental Georgian Sculpture], (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1977); regarding the Bolnisi, see, for example, Giorgi Chubinashvili, "Bolnijsskij Sioni" [Bolnisi Sioni], in *Izvestija instituta jazyka, istorii i material'noj kultury im. akad. N. Ja. Marra* [Proceedings of the Institute of Language, History and Material Culture named after Academician N. Ya. Marr], vol. IX, (Tbilisi: Georgian SSR Academy of Science, 1940).



Figure 10. Eastern facade of the Jvari church with donor reliefs. Source: Re:Cent, 2019.



Figure 11. Relief of Stepanoz I, kneeling before Christ, Jvari church. Source: Re:Cent, 2019.

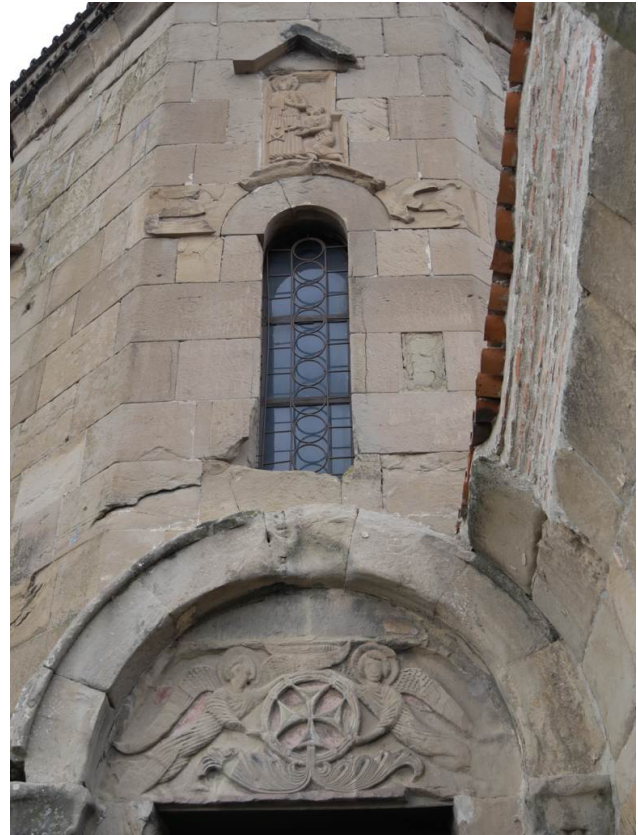


Figure 12. Southern facade of the Jvari church. Source: Re:Cent, 2019.

Given the topographical setting of the Jvari church, the architectural decision appears entirely natural. The only road to the church passes along the

eastern wall, giving travelers a clear view of the reliefs on the facade before bringing them to the main entrance on the southern side (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. People approaching the Jvari church.  
Source: Re:Cent, 2019.

In contrast, the western and northern facades remain largely hidden from view; a chapel stands very close to the northern wall of the church, while the western side directly overlooks a cliff<sup>33</sup>.

As mentioned in the first part, the arrangement of the reliefs in the church in Ateni corresponds to the scheme at Jvari, particularly in the placement and themes of the sculptural decoration. In the following description, particular attention will be given to those elements that closely correspond to the sculptural decoration of the Jvari church; however, it is important to note that the walls of the Ateni church also feature numerous unique reliefs and decorative elements from various periods.



Figure 14. Tympanum over the main entrance, northern facade of the Ateni church. Source: Thomas Kaffenberger, 2017.

In the case of the Ateni church, the main entrance is located on the northern side. Above it, the tympanum is placed, featuring a composition that echoes the relief at Jvari: two deer drinking from a spring (Fig. 14). Above the entrance, another relief depicts church donors with Christ. Similarly to the arrangement at Jvari, the most adorned side in the church is the eastern one, where the most important donor reliefs are placed. On this side, a relief of Christ holds a central position, situated over the middle apsidal

ledge, flanked by two figures of donors. Among the four figures, one stands out: the donor holds a model of a church while an angel soars above his head (Fig. 15). The reuse of the scheme is not particularly unexpected; what truly surprises and puzzles researchers is the deliberate decision to mirror it exactly, placing the reliefs analogously on the eastern facade. The eastern side of the Ateni church is currently basically invisible to visitors. The facade faces the cliff, and the platform between the church's wall and the gorge is about one meter wide, thus enabling pilgrims to observe its decorations.

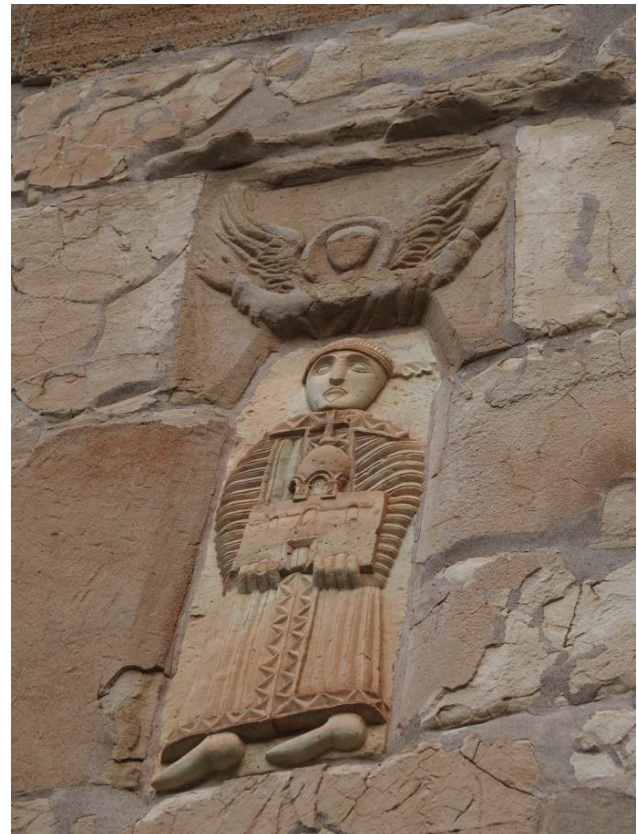


Figure 15. Relief with a donor presenting a model of the church, eastern facade of the Ateni church.  
Source: Thomas Kaffenberger, 2017.

It thus seems to create a paradox: the most important reliefs of donors and Christ are placed on a side that cannot be reached. This fact was one of the strongest arguments for considering the church as a low-quality "blind copy" of the Church of the Holy Cross<sup>34</sup>.

However, this view, widespread in the historiographical tradition, appears to be far from accurate. It is plausible to argue that the mentioned road, which ran through the valley, could have led along the bottom of the Ateni gorge, under the hill with the church, which corresponds to the best place for possible transit across the valley<sup>35</sup>. If this were true, it would mean that travelers along the road passed beneath the eastern facade of the Ateni church, making the reliefs visible to them. Taking into account that the reliefs were plausibly polychromed and visually stood out on the red-beige surface, the idea of their commission to be visible from the

<sup>33</sup> Regarding the chapel, see Kazarian, *Seventh-Century Church Architecture*, 316–24.

<sup>34</sup> Foletti, Khakhanova, "On the Road: At'eni Sioni in the Pilgrims' Eyes", 185–209.

<sup>35</sup> Alimbarashvili, "Dynamics of the Population of Tana (Ateni) Gorge", 196–217.

road becomes even more convincing<sup>36</sup>. Thus, the decision by the donors to place the reliefs on the side visible to passing pilgrims – thereby inviting them into the church – seems more than plausible, especially when considering the crucial role the valley played in medieval and early modern times<sup>37</sup>. The church's success in attracting pilgrims is evidenced by the element mentioned earlier: the graffiti left on its walls, written in six different languages. This serves as proof that, through its architecture and imagery, the church in Ateni was able to engage with the surrounding landscape, becoming a landmark for passersby.

#### 4. Symbolical Power of Reliefs

Although the replication of the Jvari scheme at the Ateni church does not appear to be a blind imitation because of limited skill or imagination on the part of its builders, it is nonetheless difficult to deny the repetition of the overall layout and the clear references to the Church of the Holy Cross. A further layer to the discussion is added by the questionable dating of the reliefs. To this day, there is no consensus among scholars on this issue: the two dominant hypotheses differ between dating the reliefs to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the period of the church's original construction, and the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the church underwent renovation<sup>38</sup>. According to scholars advocating for the second option, the donors depicted on the facade of the Ateni church have been identified as members of the Baghvashi (Liparitid) family, which possessed the valley in the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>39</sup>. Specifically, the figure holding the model of the church has been identified as Rata Baghvashi, with the figure beside him believed to be his son, Liparit Baghvashi (Fig. 16)<sup>40</sup>. Accepting this point of view, we can attempt to explain the donors' motivation for replicating the Jvari scheme and returning to its model nearly three centuries later, suggesting that a reflection on the possible symbolic meaning of the reliefs may offer further arguments for the question of dating.



Figure 16. Donor relief, eastern facade of the Ateni church. Source: Thomas Kaffenberger, 2017.

As mentioned above, the Jvari church was an identity-making place for medieval Iberia because of its liminal location. The reliefs of the commissioners on the eastern side also contribute an additional layer of meaning to the way the church was perceived in the times of its construction. As Antony Eastmond has argued, the donors' self-representation on the church's walls was a peculiar response to the division of the country into influence zones<sup>41</sup>. The rulers depicted on the facade were in power in both the Byzantine and Sassanid zones; they were trying to maintain good relationships with both superpowers. Therefore, in their depiction, we can observe a distinctive combination of Sassanian and Byzantine elements: on one hand, the donors are represented in Sassanian attire; on the other, the accompanying inscriptions refer to them using a Byzantine titulus<sup>42</sup>. However, the main resonating idea seems to be different – it is the emphasis on the distinct Christian Iberian identity. On the reliefs, the Iberian rulers are depicted with Christ and angels; they receive their power directly from Christ. Thus, the main idea conveyed through the decoration of the church is the legitimation of the power of the Iberian kings through divine blessing and a manifesto of their autonomy<sup>43</sup>.

If we now consider the context in which the church in Ateni was rebuilt in the 10<sup>th</sup> century through the prism of the symbolism found in the Jvari reliefs, it may open a new dimension for interpretation. The Baghvashi (Liparitids) appeared in Iberia at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and acquired a great number

<sup>36</sup> Regarding polychrome in the Middle Ages, see, for example, Sandra Saenz-Lopez Perez, "Coloring the Middle Ages: Textual and Graphical Sources that Reveal the Importance of Color in Medieval Sculpture", in *Zwischen Kunsthandwerk und Kunst: Die 'Schedula diversarum artium'*, ed. Andrea Speer, (Berlin: De Gruyter Brill, 2014), 274–87; *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways. Reconsidering Medieval French Art Through the Pilgrim's Body*, eds. Ivan Foletti, Katarina Kravčíková, Sabina Rosenbergová, and Adrien Palladino, (Brno/Rome: Viella, 2018). For the discussion particularly of relief polychromy in medieval Georgia, see Nina Iamanidze, "Painting the Stones: The Value of Color in Georgian Medieval Architectural Studies", in *Artists And Craftsmen on the road Georgian Medieval Architectural Sculpture in Interaction with Byzantine, Persian, Seljuk and Armenian Art*, eds. Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger and Nina Iamanidze, (Weilheim: Anton H. Konrad Verlag, 2024), 66–78. According to the author, "the use of paint on Georgian reliefs was more the rule than the exception".

<sup>37</sup> For a reflection on the role of decorations on churches and their interaction with people passing by, see *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*.

<sup>38</sup> For the first opinion, see Chubinashvili, *Monuments of the Jvari Type*; Kazarian, *Seventh-Century Church Architecture*, 400–401. For the second, see Abramishvili, "Two Construction Periods of the Ateni Sioni Church", 32–55; Aladashvili, *Monumental Georgian Sculpture*, 46–49.

<sup>39</sup> Abramishvili, "Two Construction Periods of the Ateni Sioni Church", 32–55.

<sup>40</sup> Kazarian, *Seventh-Century Church Architecture*, 400–401.

<sup>41</sup> Eastmond, "Art on the Edge", 64–92.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 83–84.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.



Figure 17. Ateni Sioni Church. Source: Thomas Kaffenberger, 2017.

of fiefs, becoming thus one of the most powerful and significant clans in medieval Iberia<sup>44</sup>. Over time, their influence grew, reaching its peak during the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the family held the post of *Amirspasalar* (High Constable) in the Kingdom of Georgia and fiercely contested power with the royal dynasty<sup>45</sup>. However, the conflict with the royal house did not originate in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, but began much earlier, soon after the clan first established itself in Iberia. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Baghvashi controlled the entire Trialeti Range, which included the Ateni valley, and which – as was discussed in Section 2 – was a crucial place for both economic and political reasons<sup>46</sup>. Given that King Bagrat III ultimately seized control of the valley, it is likely that the rivalry over these territories and the conflict between the two power factions persisted for many decades. Bearing this in mind, the motivation for commissioning the donor reliefs with references to the Church of the Holy Cross seems to gain further meaning. Through the replication of the Jvari scheme, possible donors were manifesting the idea of their power and independence in medieval Iberia, projecting this message to all travelers passing along the road. In so doing, they were simultaneously incorporating themselves into the historical line of Iberian rulers, thereby legitimizing their claim to power in the region or even country.

As demonstrated in other similar cases, however, I believe it is important to emphasize an additional aspect<sup>47</sup>. The very presence of the church and its images must be understood as a place of protection

for passersby, both physically – in a complex political situation – and spiritually. The experience of seeing the building decorated with crosses and angels must have been understood by pilgrims and passing traders as crossing a space where the power of evil could not prevail. The images on the church, animated by the movement of passersby, thus became guarantors of safety and protection through both the local authorities and divine power.

## 5. Conclusions

It appears that the example of the Ateni Sioni Church perfectly demonstrates how a historiographical myth could determine a large part of the following research, steering it along a single path. Because of the similarities that the church bears with the Church of the Holy Cross in Jvari, it was considered, for a long time and by many scholars, to be just a poor-quality repetition of the original model. However, deeper analysis shows that this perception of the building is far from the truth. All of the elements that led to the Ateni church being viewed as a copy actually possess their own significance and should be examined not solely in comparison with the Jvari church, but also within its unique historical, topographical, and cultural context. Thus, for instance, the reliefs – though nowadays hidden from public view – are in fact among the most significant decorative elements of the church, intended to not only attract pilgrims but also express the power and political autonomy of a prominent feudal clan that controlled the Ateni valley in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Although it can be argued that the church held great significance in medieval times – as evidenced by continuous renovations, additions, even royal commissions, and numerous pilgrim inscriptions – it is impossible to overlook numerous references to the church in Jvari. A possible explanation behind this similarity lies not in the builders' lack of skill or imagination, but rather a deliberate decision to transfer a crucial Iberian sacred site to the Ateni valley, along with its symbolic

<sup>44</sup> Cyril Toumanoff, "The Mamikonids and the Liparitids", *Armenica* (1969): 125–37.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Alimbarashvili, "Dynamics of the Population of Tana (Ateni) Gorge", 196–217.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Ivan Foletti, "Spaces for miracles: constructing sacred space through the body, from Conques to the Mediterranean, and beyond", *Convivium* 9, no. 1 (2025): 169–85.

significance. Taking into account the strategic place of the Ateni church in medieval times, it seems that the replication of the Church of the Holy Cross in the valley was a natural decision. Thus, the church in Ateni functioned throughout the centuries as both a visual landmark of the Christian faith and a testament to the power and independence of the Kingdom of Iberia (Fig. 17). At the same time, the case of Ateni Sioni shows how the interaction between nature and culture transforms the landscape, making it sacred. The images decorating the facade activate the surrounding context, creating a perimeter of sacredness and protection. Beyond its political dimension, therefore, this church must be read as a place where pre-modern nature is transformed and Christianized through sacred spaces and images.

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