Sacred topography of Anakopia fortress and its surroundings (Abkhazia)

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Abstract
The article highlights the Abasgians Christianization processes started by Byzantium in the VI century and their interaction with the Abasgians mythology. However, the traditional mythological representations and beliefs of the Abasgians were not supplanted by Christianity, as well as by the ancient philosophy. The topography of the early church buildings on the territory of Anacopia and its surroundings show that in the church buildings the Abasgian people preserved the ancient system of sacred places and their landscape-visual connections. The sacred meaning of Anacopia has been stably maintained for millennia, but has undergone transformations. According to a complex of sources, it was concluded that the sacred (cultural) significance of this place was the basis of the worshipers’ power over their fellow tribesmen; religious and political center around which a system of sacred topography had been formed up to the time of the Abkhazian kingdom.

Introduction
The pre-Christian worldview of the Abkhazians had features conducive to an adequate perception of Christian doctrine. These include, first of all, the hierarchical structure of the pantheon of Gods, headed by the eternal God Antsva, activities patrons and the elements on the second level, good and evil spirits on the third, which contributed to the perception of both the concept of the only God and the heavenly hierarchy in Christianity. The presence of a strong cult of ancestors and faith in the afterlife, agricultural cults of sacrifice in the form of an animal was also associated in consciousness with the main tenets of Christian system.

The factor that shaped the peculiarities of the Abkhazians’ Christian worldview was the traditional prevalence of the pantheon of Gods over naturalistic paganism and the presence of the only eternal supreme God Antsva (the Chaldean Anu, the “father of all Gods”).

The accumulated scientific data show that the local population’s Christianization was carried out under the legend that the peoples of the Caucasus are the share of God Mother. According to the church scripture, the lot that fell to the God Mother was taken by Simon Kananit and Andrew the First-Called. They arrived in Sebastopolis to bring the God’s word for the local environment. Not surprisingly, the early temples on the territory of Abkhazia are dedicated to the God Mother. The missionaries were well versed in the religious ideas of the local population, the Goddess Mother’s authority was so high that the Goddess Mother image replacement with the image of the God Mother did not cause a sharp rejection. Most likely, the modern Abkhazians ancestors’ Christianization met almost no resistance, and until the end of the VI century the process had been completed. From then until the XVII century, Abasgia appears in the sources as a Christian country.
Thus, the Anakopia Mountain and the territory adjacent to it since ancient times received the status of a large sacred shrine of the Abkhazians, a kind of center, the “heart” of the Abasgian people associated with the cult of the Goddess Mother, the Goddess of fertility, whose image was associated with a huge cave. The territory organization was subordinated to sacred meanings and was formed as a system of sacred places. The special status of this territory was preserved during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Material and method
The earliest church buildings on the Abkhazia territory in the places of a dominant landscape, traditionally revered by the local residents. With a high degree of certainty, it can be assumed that the sacred topography of the area was formed under the influence of pre-Christian beliefs, when the multiple cults were distributed in the area in a hierarchical order. The archaeologist Soloviev believed that the grotto lamb, located in the north of the Anhua village, was the oldest sanctuary of the Paleolithic era [6]. In the vicinity of Anacopia there are many natural grottoes and canopies, the sacred function of which has not been finally established. On the top of the Anakopian mountain, rather on the northern slope, there is a natural grotto - a cavity, which, in our opinion, has been a sacred place since ancient times. With the advent of ancient culture and religion in Abkhazia, the revered place was preserved on the top of the Anakopi Mountain, as the favorite place of the thunder God “Afy” - the lightning thrower. The sacred meaning of the grotto was preserved as a subordinate step in the cults’ hierarchy. Religious rituals conducted at the top of Anacopia apparently included the grotto worship, in which water was collected, used in sanctuary rituals. The consolidation of the Romans in coastal points on the Abkhazia territory marked the closer cultural and religious contacts of the local population with the ancient tradition carriers. We assume that on the top of the Anacopian Mountain in the ancient period there was a sanctuary, later surrounded by a monumental wall.

With the arrival of the Byzantine detachment in Anacopia in the 550s at the site of the sanctuary, preserving the cave located under it, the Byzantines build a Christian church - the first in the system of church buildings in the Anacopia vicinity. This temple on the top of the Anacopian mountain behind the fence of the citadel was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. From the medieval Georgian annals of the XI century the evidence of the Blessed Virgin Mary Anacopian Icon’s “miraculous” power came - “not a man-made scripture, but sent from above, about which no one knows who found it on the top of that mountain ...” [3].

However, the Anacopian Grotto did not stop functioning later. It was expanded by the stonecutters, the top plate was decorated in the form of a vault, in the center of which a cutting was made to support the structure with a wooden pillar. The grotto reconstruction, perhaps, pursued the goal of holding the Christian cults there - in a previously revered place, to familiarize the population with the Christian religion. Subsequently, in the Anacopia vicinity, presumably in the places of pagan shrines or near them, several more temples with a visual reference to the main temple were erected.

Church buildings in Anacopia and its surroundings and the system of their location were to serve several purposes. On the one hand, it is the implementation of Christian cults, on the other hand, it is the sacralization place, fastening to the previously existing points of a halo of holiness, as well as faith in God’s participation and the successful resolution of situations in the event of hostilities in a given territory or other adverse factors.

A cartographic analysis of all the temples location in this territory gives a base to make an assumption about the ancient sacral topography system existence around Anakopia Mountain and its cave. The center of the system is the top of the Anacopian Mountain, on which the main sanctuary dedicated to the Mother was located, the rest of the sanctuaries were located around on the elevated points and had a visual connection with the main object. And most of them are among themselves. It is possible to assume the reason for this both in the main sacred significance of the hierarchically main sanctuary in relation to the others, and the protective function of the system’s small sanctuaries, which are located around the main one.
For the period of the end of VI - VII centuries it can be stated that active temple construction was resumed in the vicinity of the main political center Abass, with the background of closer political and economic ties with Constantinople. It was during the 7th century that many churches were built on the Abasgian territory, sources of this time called the Abasgian people “Christ-loving”. By 660, the church organization of Abasgia had been represented by the “Archbishopric of Abasgia with its center in Sevastopol the Great” [2]. By this time, we attribute the beginning of the Abkhazian kingdom first stage formation, the rejection of archontat in favor of greater sovereignty [1].

In the middle of the VIII century the Abasgian Archbishopric, which was previously subordinate to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, becomes the Autocephalous Abkhaz Orthodox Church. At the Antioc Council, led by Patriarch Theophylact, the first Abkhazian catalikos John and the first bishop were ordained no later than 750. The Catholicos elects Pitsunda as its chair, not Sebastopolis. This act circumvented the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but had no negative consequences for the Abkhazian church, if the fact that Constantinople did not recognize the fact of autocephaly for several centuries is not taken into account, and most likely, parishes subordinate to the Church of Constantinople remained in Abasgia, that can be interpreted as actual dual church administration. Since then, the rise of church construction in the Abkhazian kingdom, which reached its peak in the 10th century, starts. However, the ruling dynasty relationship of Leonids and the Archbishop of Constantinople during the VIII - X centuries underwent changes. For example, at the end of the 9th century, the legal heir to the Abkhaz throne Bagrat with the military support of the Byzantine emperor Leo VI, took the Abkhaz throne back. Bagrat received the Byzantine Master title, which indicates the restriction of its sovereignty. His grandson Abkhazian king George II is also mentioned with the Master title. The letters of the patriarch of Constantinople to Bagrat’s son - Constantine III and his grandson George II hint at some kind of dependence on the Patriarch of Constantinople [1]. It is quite acceptable that the rapprochement between the two churches was mutually beneficial. Church parishes in the territory of Abasgia, subordinate to Constantinople, must have received more rights and freedoms, and the resumption of inter-church communication could explain the processes that led to the beginning of extensive construction activity under the rule of Constantine in the territory of Abkhazia itself and the adjacent lands of the Abkhaz kingdom.

On the border of the Anukhva, Armenian and Abkhaz villages on a natural hill, the remains of a church with a semicircular absis are preserved. Modern tradition attributes this object to St. George. The volumetric and spatial composition of the temple, its orientation to the northeast, indicate the early time of its construction. The nature of the masonry and the planning structure of the temple with a very large narthex suggest that the temple was built after the events of the 550s by the locals with the help of Byzantine immigrants back in the VI century. Between this temple and the temple of the Virgin on the top of the Anacopian Mountain, a visual connection has been established. “On the northern outskirts of the Anukhva village, in the Vsevelovka village, there are the ruins of a medieval temple. Now only its southern and eastern walls are left. The remains of the frescoes in the altar indicate that the temple was once decorated with beautiful wall paintings. At the end of the 19th century, the New Athos monks removed from the temple and took away the interesting architectural details with inscriptions; now these details are exhibited at the Abkhaz State Museum. “Based on the dedicatory inscription and graphic motif on the altar barrier plate, it is believed that the temple was dedicated to St. George the Victorious. It was a hall building with a horseshoe-shaped absis. Based on the art history analysis of the carved details of the altar, researcher L. Shervashidze attributes this building to the 11th century. [4] However, it is possible earlier dating it on the archaeological research basis. Due to significant losses, the object is a monument of archeology, which should be excavated.

Presumably at the end of the 7th century, construction of the hall church in Akuacha, located 5 km north of the Anakopia Citadel. At the same time, a visual connection is established between the Anakopia church, the temple (George) and the Akuach temple, which is also located on a hill. The temple is located in Akuacha, located in the eastern part of the Anhua village, on a dominant hill (400 m above the sea level) on the right side of the river Psyrdzkha, 5 kilometers away from Anakopia Mountain. The temple is a hall church, outside the rectangular shape. The horseshoe-shaped altar is
inscribed in the outer rectangle. Akuacha Temple is located on top of a ridge stretching along the right bank of the river Psirdzha, which is most often dried. To the south of the Akvach temple, on the same ridge, there is a natural tank of karst origin with a convenient entrance inside. Most likely, in ancient times the aisle and the cistern itself were expanded, in which several tons of rainwater, draining through the thickness of the natural calcareous arch, accumulate. It is likely that this “natural” miracle is the ancient masons’ work result, who chose the stone from here for the temple construction. It is well known that stone mined from the depths is easier to process, and the height of the flagstone layers from the cave of Akhapdza generally corresponds to the stones’ height in the temple masonry. Determining the time of the church founding by the data of historiography is difficult, due to the lack of epigraphic evidence. Analysis of the masonry mortar from the hall church near Anacopia (Akuach temple) showed the time 650-680, [5] which indicates a widespread church building in the VII century.

900 m (directly) away to the south-east of the Akuacha temple at an altitude of approximately 500 m above the sea level on the Athos (Akuyu) Mountain there is also a Christian hall temple with a large narthex, similar in masonry technique to the Akuacha temple. The temple also has a visual connection with the Virgin Church on Anacopian Mountain and other temples described. It is oriented to the South-East - 127 degrees.

In the north-west of the Anacopian mountain, at an elevation in the Achakva town, temple of Achana is located, having a pronounced early Christian spatial structure, as evidenced by the side rooms and the faceted apse. The temple is a part of the same visual communication system.

Temple on the Anakopia Mountain eastern ridge
The temple of the hall type on the Anakopia Mountain eastern ridge, outside the defensive walls, on an artificial terrace, towering above the gorge of the Psyrtskha river, in our opinion, is the second church object at the time of its construction. We associate the appearance of a new church on the eastern ridge of the mountain with the failure of Arab aggression near the walls of Anacopia in the 30s of the VIII century, which occurred according to the events contemporaries’ conviction, due to the God’s Protection. The location of the church indicates the special design of its creator. Despite the small size of the building, it was visible from the distant marine and land surroundings located southeast of Anacopia, and most likely symbolized the God’s mercy and intercession, sent down to Abasgia and its rulers.

Temple of Theodore Tyrone
The temple of the hall type near the southern wall of the second defense line, discovered and published by M. M. Trash, is referred to the X-XI centuries. He displays dating on the basis of decorated plates, as well as of the coins from burials in the temple. The need for church construction near the second defense line was caused by the increased number of its inhabitants, serving the Abkhaz kings’ residence, who needed worship places. Based on the sanctuary inscription on the throne plate, which we attribute to this temple, we should assume that the church was dedicated to St. Theodore Tyrone - a holy warrior, along with George and Dmitry especially popular in Asia Minor in the X-XI centuries. The images of holy warriors, the most common in the east of the Byzantine Empire, adapted well in the worldview of the Abkhaz, who had their unshakable spirit of the Nart heroes. It is not surprising that the church stories about the holy warriors of George, Theodore, Dmitry were supported and grafted on the religious worldview of the Abasgians. By the beginning of the 10th century, Abkhaz rulers had finally decided on the political model of the kingdom, in general outline copied from Byzantium.

Temple of the Holy Apostle Simon Cananit
The most significant architectural church building of the early Middle Ages in the capital city of Anacopia at that time was the church in the name of the Holy Apostle Simon Kananit, built during the heyday of the Abkhaz kingdom (IX-X centuries). It is a unique monument of the Abkhaz school of
church architecture. The church was built at the exit of the Psyrdzha river from the gorge in a picturesque place. It should be assumed that the reason for the cross-domed church construction in this place is due to a special event. Unfortunately, no dedication data has been preserved that would indicate in honor of who or what this temple was built. On the one hand, planning decisions, namely, building a temple according to the existing relief, may hint at an ancient burial site, which had a special aura of holiness. This would also explain the construction of a cross-domed church in a narrow gorge. On the other hand, it seems doubtful that it was about the apostle Simon Kananite, otherwise we should have looked for a church building of the 6th century on this site - the time when a powerful process of Christianization took place in Abasgia. It should be assumed that by the end of the 9th century, taking into account the three-century dominance of Christianity, the saints of the Abkhazian church could have appeared, one of which could be buried on the bank of the Psyrdzha river.

**Msyghwa Temple**

In 1962, the Abkhaz Council of the Georgian Society for the Protection of Cultural Monuments, under the leadership of V.P. Pachulia, carried out the intelligence work in the Anukhva village in order to identify the cultural monuments. The expedition recorded previously unknown monuments of antiquity, relating mainly to medieval times. The most striking monument is the medieval temple of Msyghva [4] - a cross-domed structure, which is in close proximity to the Anakopiysky temple of Simon Kananit. This monument is located on the western slope of Msyghva Mountain, at the beginning of the picturesque gorge of the Tskvara river, 3 km away from the seashore. “In the process of work in the vicinity of the temple, the ruins of another monument were discovered, close to the first one in many construction and technical methods of execution” [4]. In addition to the listed churches in various places of the Anukhva village, the foundations of at least two other small Christian churches are traced, which today are exclusively monuments of archeology.

**Summary**

1. Based on the presence of dated Christian monuments in the Anacopia vicinity, it follows that there is material evidence of the Christian community emergence earlier than the end of the 6th century cannot be available here. The first Christian church appears on the top of the Anakopia mountain, on the site of the main Abasgian sanctuary at the end of the VI century by the Byzantine builders’ efforts. Based on the presence of the marble parts remains brought from Prokoness, it can be assumed that the altar limit was composed of marble decor established according to the general Byzantine principles.

2. During the first Christian churches’ construction in the Anakopia Mountain region, the ancient system of arranging holy places at elevated points around the main sacred object on the top of the Anakopia Mountain was preserved, while maintaining the landscape-visual connections between them.

3. In the VIII –X centuries in honor of significant events, the churches were built inside the fortress - a hall church on the eastern ridge of the Anacopian Mountain, and a garrison hall church at the second defense line, which, in our opinion, was consecrated in the name of the holy warrior Theodore Tyrone.

4. By the end of IX-X centuries a new surge in temple building and church reform carried out by the Abkhaz kings can be attributed. Based on the updated Byzantine principles of the temple construction associated with changes in the liturgy, an Abkhaz architectural school is formed with its center in Anakopia. Cross-domed churches started being built. The cross-domed temple of Simon Kananit was built on a particularly revered site, the temple in the Anakopia citadel was rebuilt, the cross-domed church in Msyghva was built. The cross-domed composition is widely distributed throughout the Abkhaz kingdom. Anacopia and the Abkhaz architectural school for a long-time influenced Christianization and temple construction in the neighboring regions of the North Caucasus.

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