The Syrian *bema* and the Georgian Pre-altar Cross: A Comparison of the Liturgical Furnishings of the Nave in the Two Traditions

**Nave Furniture and the Possible Liturgical Relationship of Syria and Kartli**

In his article ‘Les ambons syriens et la function liturgique de la nef dans les églises antiques’ André Grabar makes reference to the fact that nave-platforms of the Syrian type are, although rare, present in some churches outside northwest Syria and one of the examples he highlights is that of ‘Mzchet.’ In actual fact what Grabar was referring to was the large polygonal platform that dominates the church of Jvari, perched on its mountain outcrop to the east of Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Kartli (Fig. 24). Jvari dates to the first decade of the seventh century and the site upon which the church stands is pivotal in the Christian history of Georgia, as it is believed to be the place where St. Nino, the illuminator of Kartli, raised her cross for the first time.

This platform dominates the nave of the centrally planned church where it appears at first glance to be in the centre of the construction. A closer look reveals that it is actually subtly out of alignment with the building; a fact that is surely not coincidental, and the height of this stone structure is further emphasised by the large wooden cross standing at the centre of the platform. This cross is not ancient, but is in fact a replica of an earlier artefact that did not survive the Communist period of Georgia’s history and is one of a presumed line of such pre-altar crosses that have adorned the site. This phenomenon is echoed by the smaller platform that stands to the north side of the sixth-century Anchiskhati basilica in Tbilisi. Here the structure is noticeably smaller and less dominant, but here too the platform supports a (smaller) cross in a disposition echoing Calvary. So what is the link, if any, between Syria and Georgia if both regions appear to have an unusual disposition of liturgical furniture in their naves? Are these traditions linked or, as Grabar hinted, is this due a com-

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1 Grabar, André, ‘Les ambons syriens et la function liturgique de la nef dans les églises antiques’, *Cahiers archéologiques* 1 (1945), pp. 129–133.
mon strain of liturgical development between the two? What is the significance of the cross in these liturgical furnishings and are the two phenomena directly comparable?

While at first glance the parallels would seem to suggest a close relationship between the two traditions, further unravelling of these questions appears to lead us to a conclusion that whilst these similar nave dispositions seem to have sprung from a common root, in Georgia the use of a pre-altar cross could additionally be an echo of an alternative or possibly a parallel tradition that flourished in the mountain cultures of the High Caucasus. Therefore can we use the presence of variant nave-platforms and a particular devotion to the cross as evidence of Syrian-Kartvelian interaction in the field of liturgy or is there something else occurring? What, if any, parallels can we discern between the Syrian and Kartvelian liturgical traditions?

The Origins of the Liturgy in Syria and Kartli

When comparing the origins of the liturgy in these two locations we are faced with very different circumstances; Syria is the source of some of our earliest extant texts relating to the evolution of communal prayer and liturgical rites with fragments such as the Didache offering the first written evidence of early
liturgical practices. Therefore the region as a whole, and Antioch in particular, is exceptionally important for scholars seeking to understand the earliest origins of Christian ritual practice. However the picture becomes more complex in the fifth century as, prior to this date, there was perceived to be one Universal Church and although there were variations in practice all were technically doctrinally in agreement—even if this inclusive attitude was not applied to those who had been declared heretics. This situation was subject to radical change in the fifth century as a result of the momentous upheavals caused by the Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451) that resulted in permanent schisms with groups in the eastern Mediterranean breaking away from the majority and ultimately precipitated the formation of rival Churches complete with their own hierarchies, ritual practices and, naturally, their own claims to apostolic validity.

In the light of this seismic shifting of the Christian landscape there was, accordingly, a variation in ritual practices between these opposing groups although these differences often appear superficial to those unfamiliar with the finer points of ritual practice. This fifth century parting of the ways has been most clearly explained by Taft who elucidates the resulting Syrian traditions as follows:

Three principal liturgical centers had a major influence in the origins of these rites: Antioch, Jerusalem and Edessa. Of these only Edessa was a center of Syriac language and culture; the other two were Greek cities, though not without Syriac-speaking minorities.

The rite of Mesopotamia that developed into the Chaldean tradition is of Syriac origin and so its roots can probably be traced back to Edessa.

The West-Syrian Rite is a synthesis of native Syriac elements, especially hymns and other choral pieces, with material translated from Greek liturgical texts of Antiochene and hagiopolite provenance. This synthesis was the work of Syriac, non-Chalcedonian monastic communities in the Syriac-speaking hinterlands of Syria, Palestine, and parts of Mesopotamia, beyond the Greek cities of the Mediterranean littoral.

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2 For an introduction to the origins of the liturgy see Jones, Cheslyn, Wainwright, Geoffrey, Yarnold, Edward & Bradshaw, Paul, The Study of Liturgy, SPCK & Oxford University Press; London & New York, 1978, Revised Edition 1992.

3 p. 239, Taft, Robert F., The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West, The Liturgical Press; Collegeville, Minnesota, 2nd revised edition 1993.
Therefore this liturgical information can be applied to the architectural data from the previous chapter by equating the West-Syrian rite as being more closely associated with Syria and the East-Syrian tradition—referred to above as Chaldean—being the dominant liturgical tradition in Mesopotamia. Although there were some exceptions to this basic delineation of territory, notably the medieval Syrian Orthodox Maphrianate of Takrit in what is now modern Iraq, as a rule those Christians living under Sassanian rule were largely followers of the Church of the East and therefore East-Syrian by liturgical practice. The West-Syrian tradition straddled the Syriac and Greek-speaking worlds by being a hybrid liturgical tradition that took some elements from Syriac-speaking Edessa and melded them with the Hellenophone practices of Antioch and Jerusalem, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the location of the country meant that it absorbed both the Semitic and Gentilic currents of early Apostolic Christianity. However, whereas Syrian Christianity evolved and changed in reaction to the development of the faith and its evolving hierarchical and ritual practices, in Kartli there was an amazingly stable and static relationship with the liturgy that endured for many centuries.

From the outset the situation was different in Kartli; in the first place Christianity arrived in the country in the fourth century CE when, although an early date in the history of Christian expansion, was nevertheless a period which had achieved a degree of stability with regard to liturgical practice. It was in the late fourth century that we have the oft-quoted testimony of the pilgrim Egeria attesting to a very specific liturgy in Jerusalem with readings appropriate not only to the sacred locations but also to the Church seasons. The evidence of Egeria is particularly relevant as she is believed to have undertaken her pilgrimage only approximately fifty years before the earliest known Georgian language inscriptions were created at the monastery of Bir el Qutt, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The fact that the first dated Georgian inscriptions have been found in the Holy Land is no coincidence, as from the outset there has been a strong relationship between that region and Kartvelian Christianity, which has an exceptionally close emotional attachment to the lands where Christ lived, died and rose again.

As discussed in chapter one there is a long and peaceful record of a Jewish community in Kartli and the archaeological evidence from Urbnisi and Mtskheta in Shida Kartli points to a significant Jewish presence in both of these towns at the turn of the millennium and throughout the late antique era. There-

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4 Egeria, Trans. Wilkinson, J., *Egeria’s Travels*, Aris & Phillips; Warminster, 1999.
5 See note 29, chapter 1.
fore it is unsurprising that the medieval chronicles which purport to recount
the evangelisation of Kartli should feature Jewish characters prominently in
the *Vita* of St. Nino and that in marked contrast to much of the literature of
medieval Christianity, Jews resident in Kartli are portrayed in a positive man-
ner as upright, honourable members of Kartvelian society. These later sources
not only speak of the links of these Jewish Kartvelians with their original home-
land in Roman Palestine, but they also create a backstory where St. Nino herself
is purported to have grown up in Jerusalem as the niece of the Patriarch.

To underscore this hagiopolite relationship all the liturgical evidence demon-
strates that from at least as early as the fifth century onwards the Kartvelians
followed the Jerusalem liturgy.\(^{6}\) This situation continued until the medieval
period and much of the earliest information extant about the early Jerusalem
rite has been gleaned from the witness of the Armenian and Georgian texts:

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\text{Indeed, it might seem that the essential part of all pre-Islamic (before 638)
liturgical books of Jerusalem have been preserved, although very little in}
\text{Greek, their original language. Taft's 'Law of the paradox of the conser-
vative periphery' applies here. Notably the Caucasian periphery, that is,}
\text{the Armenian and Georgian churches, has contributed the most to pre-
serving the late Antique liturgy of Jerusalem. Of these two, the Georgian}
\text{witness is by far the most important, since while the Armenian witness is}
\text{more or less limited to an archaic version of the Lectionary, the Georgian}
\text{one appears to cover all the liturgical books of Jerusalem.}\(^{7}\)
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Therefore in terms of the liturgy we can see that Kartli followed the practices of
the Holy Land, specifically the Jerusalem rite, and despite the fact that this was
a Syro-Palestinian liturgical tradition there is no written evidence that suggests
that variant east or west Syrian rites were used in Kartli. However, although
this suggests a continuity of liturgical practice from the fifth century onwards

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6 Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, *Klarjuli mravalt'avi*, Dzveli k'art'uli mcerlobis dzeglebi 12; Tbilisi, 1991
With English summary, 'The Klardjeti Polycephalon', pp. 466–490, Frøyshov, Stig Simeon R.,
'The Georgian Witness to the Jerusalem Liturgy: New Sources and Studies', in Groen, Bert,
Hawkes-Teeples, Steven & Alexopoulos, Stefanos (eds.), *Inquiries into Eastern Christian Wor-
ship. Selected Papers of the Second International Congress of the Society of Oriental Liturgy, Rome, 17–21 September 2008*, Peeters; Leuven, 2012, pp. 227–268, Jeffery, Peter, 'The Sunday
Office of Seventh-Century Jerusalem in the Georgian Chantbook (Iadgari): A Preliminary
Report', *Studia Liturgica* 21 (1991), pp. 52–75, Renoux, Charles, 'Hymnographie géorgienne
ancienne et hymnaire de Saint-Sabas (Ve–VIIIe siècle)', *Irénikon* 80 (2007), pp. 36–69.

7 pp. 227–228, Frøyshov, Stig Simeon R., 'The Georgian Witness to the Jerusalem Liturgy.'
we cannot speak with any certainty of what was happening in the first hundred years of Christianity in Kartli. The archaeological evidence discussed in the earlier chapters has demonstrated that large fourth-century basilicas were constructed at this time and their complex architectural disposition suggests that these structures were built for a relatively evolved ritual purpose; therefore is it possible to argue that an east or west Syrian rite was in place until the evolution of the Georgian script and the dominance of the hagiopolite rite standardised the Kartvelian liturgical landscape at some point in the fifth century?

**Khati, Drosha and Jvari**

In his 1968 monumental study of pagan practices in Khevsureti in the Georgian Caucasus George Charachidzé discusses the symbiotic relationship between paganism and Christianity in a number of cult practices. Whilst his research has now been challenged and re-evaluated, notably by the research of Zurab Kiknadze, his work is still regarded as offering a solid, largely reliable, introduction to the complex Khevsur belief system that appears to mix variants of Christian belief with an underlying pagan world-view. The reason that this pagan society is relevant to a study of Christian liturgical practice is partially due to the fact that Georgian can at times seem an infuriatingly imprecise language, especially to somebody coming from a language like English where we have such a great love of synonyms. In this case the relationship between pagan and Christian practices in Khevsureti has been obscured by the use of the words *khati* (ხატი) and *jvari* (ჯვარი). In the lowlands these are taken to mean an image, most commonly a Christian icon, and a cross respectively. Up in the mountains they are used in a far looser sense to refer to a variety of holy items and the term ‘cross’ is often applied to the local sacred enclosures.

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8 Charachidzé, Georges, *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne. Analyse structurale d’une civilisation*, Librairie François Maspero; Paris, 1968.

9 Kiknadze, Zurab, *Kartuli mitologia, I. Jvari da saqmo*, Gelati Academy of Sciences; Kutaisi, 1996 also refer to the review of this work by Tuite, Kevin, ‘Highland Georgian Paganism: Archaism or Innovation?’, *Annual of the Society for the Study of the Caucasus* 6/7 (1996), pp. 79–91.

10 Or as Kiknadze would have it, the pagan worldview is a corruption of the underlying Christian substratum, having evolved after years of isolation from lowland society. See the article by Tuite above for a summary of this argument in English.

11 p. 71, Mühlfried, Florian, *Being a State and States of Being in Highland Georgia*, Berghahn; New York, 2014.
Aside from the fluidity of these terms, the real reason that the practices in Khevsureti are of possible relevance is due to Charachidzé’s references to the drosha.\textsuperscript{12} This large T-shaped sacred banner is described as being one of the central elements of Khevsur religious practice and in appearance was not unlike the Tau Cross, now associated most closely in the western imagination with the Franciscan Order. Charachidzé recounts how informants referred to the drosha being set up near the entrance to the sacred enclosure\textsuperscript{13} in a prominent position and this offers an intriguing suggestion; with such a well-documented pagan tradition of setting up a large cross-shaped banner at the entrance to a sacred precinct it suggests the possibility that there is some echo of this act in the Georgian Christian tradition of large pre-altar crosses. These are often traced back to the account of St. Nino, the evangeliser of Georgia, raising her cross on the hill that became known as jvari (Cross) to the east of the ancient capital of Mtskheta in the fourth century CE and, indeed there is, as mentioned above, a large polygonal platform at the heart of that early seventh century centrally-planned church to this day. Overall relatively few of these large bases that are presumed to have been used to display a pre-altar cross have survived; there is a (much smaller) platform that is placed in the northern aisle, rather than the central nave, of the originally sixth-century Anchishkhati Basilica in Tbilisi and until recently a similar hexagonal platform accessed by steps to the east and west stood before the sanctuary of the (now ruined) eighth to ninth-century church of Zhaleti in the district of Tianeti, north of Tbilisi—and, perhaps significantly, in the hinterland between the Georgian lowlands and its mountain cultures.\textsuperscript{14}

None of these three locations still possesses the original cross that would have been displayed on these platforms, but a number of these large wooden crosses with metal decorative plaques are still extant in the collections of the Georgian National Museum and they are particularly linked with Upper Svaneti where we have visual evidence showing that they were still in situ until the

\textsuperscript{12} A recent publication on ethnographical terminology defines drosha (დროშა) as meaning ‘flag’ and the ritual banner of the mountain people as a drosha khatisa (ძროშა ხატისა), see pp. 45–46, Nadiradze, Eldar, Concise Ethnographical Vocabulary of Georgian Material Culture, Meridiani; Tbilisi, 2016. Here the writer will use the word in the sense employed by Charachidzé and take it to mean the ceremonial tau-shaped banner used in Khevsur ritual practice.

\textsuperscript{13} Charachidzé, Georges, Le système religieux de la Géorgie païenne, vol. 1, pp. 212 ff.

\textsuperscript{14} This stone platform was removed to the safe keeping of the National Museum of Georgia in Tbilisi several years ago. Pers. Comm. with museum staff.
Intriguingly Charachidzé’s research pointed to underlying congruencies between the Svan and Khevsur belief systems that suggested that these two traditions had many shared practices before the two mountain cultures began to develop along different paths—a factor highlighted by their different linguistic development, where their respective languages may have divided as early as the third millennium BCE. Of course any hypothesis seeking to link these cross cults remains extremely speculative, but as the Svans remain the most active protectors of this tradition of the pre-altar cross, a tradition for which we have extant evidence in only a very few locations in the lowlands of Kartli, then it does add more circumstantial evidence to the supposition that the use of this kind of large cross could owe something to pre-Christian cultic practices instead of simply being a variation of the Christian tradition of veneration for the instrument of Christ’s passion. On the other hand the tau-shaped drosha could be a projection of the dedabodzi or central pillar, again tau-shaped, that held up traditional darbazi houses. If this was the case then we could be seeing two parallel belief systems that became intertwined and difficult to differentiate at some point between late antiquity and the mid twentieth century when ethnographers first recorded them in detail.

This symbiotic relationship between Christianity and Georgian mountain paganism could be reflective of evidence of much earlier Christian beliefs that still find an echo in the rituals enacted in mountain shrines. The question is, assuming that the above suppositions have any validity, is it possible to find any liturgical links between Syria and Georgia during this early period?

The Case of Nave Platforms and Other Liturgical Fitments: The Syrian Bema and the Imitation of Jerusalem

The nave-platform known as the bema in the Syrian tradition has been problematic for scholars because there is a distinct mismatch between the age and

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15 Pers. comm. with Kevin Tuite and Mikheil Abramishvili.
16 Tuite, Kevin, ‘Highland Georgian Paganism.’
17 See Nadiradze, Eldar, Concise Ethnographical Vocabulary, p. 33 for a discussion of dedabodzi (გდედაბოძი) which intriguingly he links to the cult of the tree of life.
18 The author is indebted here to Kevin Tuite for commenting on her thoughts about the relationships between Christian and pagan cross imagery. She is thankful to him for pointing out that such survivals are more likely to have moved from early Christian practice into later mountain belief systems rather than vice versa and she must make it clear that any errors of interpretation that follow are hers and hers alone.
location of the *bemata* still extant and the respective ages and locations of the texts that elucidate the liturgy of the *bema*. The physical evidence of these nave-platforms is largely located in the hinterland of Antioch, modern day Antakya, where they survive in approximately fifty churches with most of these being located on the northwest Syrian limestone massif. This is of especial interest in this context because this region is the only region in Syria that has been definitively proved to have a tangible link with Georgian Christians in late antiquity. First of all there is the celebrated reference to ‘Iberians’ visiting Symeon Stylites the Elder in Theodoret’s *History of the Monks of Syria* and secondly there are the accounts of interaction with Georgian monks in the sixth-century *vita* of Symeon the Younger and his mother, Saint Martha.

In earlier research this author has offered evidence to suggest that the ‘liturgy of the *bema*’ was influenced by liturgical reforms and teachings centred on Antioch in late antiquity, before the tradition appeared to die out when there was a retreat to the monasteries in the aftermath of a series of environmental and political changes that caused a fundamental change in the Christian landscape of the region from the seventh century onwards. This chronology is important because although we have the brief references to Iberians in the *vita* of the two Symeons in the fifth and sixth centuries respectively, it is from the eighth to the tenth century that the Iberians seem to have been most active in the monasteries around Semandag and the Black Mountain in the hinterland of Antioch. What is clear from all the evidence, the earlier hagiographical sources as well as the later archaeological and epigraphic data, is that the Iberian presence in this region was closely related to monastic practices and given that the Syrian *bema* was a phenomenon found exclusively

19 See Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema in Fourth to Sixth-Century Syrian Churches*, USEK, Patrimoine Syriaque vol. 2; Kaslik, Lebanon, 2003 (re-issued in a second edition by TSEC, Brill, 2012), pp. 94 ff.
20 XXVI, 11, 13, p. 165 & p. 167, Theodoret of Cyrhrus, Trans. Price, R.M., *A History of the Monks of Syria*, Cistercian Publications; Kalamazoo, 1985.
21 Chapters 103, 130, 131, 136 and 253 of the *vita* of Symeon and chapters 53, 54, 56, 57 and 65 of the *vita* of St. Martha concern Iberians. See Van den Ven, Paul, *La vie ancienne de S. Syméon Stylète le Jeune (521–592)*, t. Introduction et texte grec, v. Tràduction et Commen- taire, *Vie grecque de sainte Marie, mère de S. Syméon*, Indices, Subsidia Hagiographica 32, Société des Bollandistes; Brussels, 1962 & 1970.
22 Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema*.
23 Djobadze, Wachtang Z., *Materials for the study of Georgian monasteries in the Western environs of Antioch on the Orontes*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 372, Subsidia 48, Louvain, 1976, Djobadze, Wachtang, *Archaeological Investigations in the Region West of Antioch On-The-Orontes*, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH; Stuttgart, 1986.
in non-monastic contexts it therefore seems highly unlikely that the use of a Syrian-style nave-platform was transmitted to the Caucasus in this manner.

Instead we should perhaps turn our attention to another centrally located structure that may have caught the attention of Georgian church builders; that of the Anastasis Rotunda in Jerusalem and, at its heart, the Aedicula housing the empty tomb of Christ. Jerusalem has always occupied a particular place at the heart of Georgian Christianity with the links between the Jewish Community of that city and Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Kartli, being a pivotal part of the conversion narrative of the country; the Mtskheta Jewish Community are reported to have been amongst the first to accept the Gospel preached by St. Nino in the fourth century. The Conversion of Kartli (მოქცევაჲ ქართლისაჲ) also discusses the belief that the cloak of Christ was brought to Kartli by this community, and this forms the basis for the belief that the holy relic lies beneath the svetiskhoveli (the life-giving column) at the heart of the national cathedral—and which is indeed named Svetishkhoveli after the fabled column. It should also be noted that a medieval replica of the Holy Sepulchre has been built not far from the svetiskhoveli on the south side of the nave of the cathedral. So if we acknowledge this exceptionally close link between Jerusalem and Kartli, is it possible to relate this relationship to the phenomenon of pre-altar crosses and, more specifically, the polygonal bases that they rest upon?

In her recent work on three seventh century churches pivotal to the evolution of Armenian ecclesiastical architecture Christina Maranci considers the question of a ‘stone cylinder’ previously thought to have been an ambo at the church of Zuart’Noc’. She identifies this as an element of the programme that highlights the concept of mimesis and the desire in ‘the early medieval culture of the South Caucasus’ to recreate elements of the Anastasis Rotunda. Reading her discussion of how an early Armenian text describing the Anastasis Rotunda can be useful in unravelling the inspiration behind the construction of Zuart’Noc’ one can also see how this information can be applied to Jvari:

Seeming to attest to the offset position of the aedicula under the dome, the gallery level above the ambulatory, the position of the Passion relics in the gallery, and the height of the structure, this text is a treasure trove of information on the state of the Rotunda after the Modestan repairs. It is also of value for exploring the relationship between the Anastasis

24 Maranci, Christina, Vigilant Powers: Three Churches of Early Medieval Armenia, Brepols; Turnhout, 2015, pp. 139 ff.
25 p. 143, Maranci, Christina, Vigilant Powers.
Rotunda and Zuart’Noc’. The date of the text makes it particularly germane, as it coincides with the years immediately up to and including the foundation of Zuart’Noc’.26

Zuart’Noc’ was built in the reign of the Armenian Patriarch Nerses III (641–661) and was therefore constructed a generation after Jvari, which dates to the turn of the sixth and seventh centuries. What is immediately striking is that both of these monuments were constructed with an off-centre platform within a centrally planned space. Parallels could also be drawn by the fact that the possible ambo in Zuart’Noc’ has also been associated with a crypt and the platform at Jvari has been used to house a large cross. In fact all three elements can be taken as referring to the same symbolism if we refer to the liturgy as it relates to the bema. Here the cross and gospels descend from the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’ (the sanctuary) to the ‘earthly Jerusalem’ (the bema) for the liturgy of the word or the pre-anaphora. The enigmatic object referred to as the bema throne is in fact a form of lectern for both objects, which here represent the body and spirit of Christ.

If we take this further the east Syrian liturgical commentaries that record this rite present us with a highly developed cosmological reasoning, and this is particularly the case with the text known by western commentators as the Expositio27 which was probably written somewhere in the region of contemporary Iraq in the ninth century.28 Lassus and Tchalenko suggested that the cosmology of this text should be interpreted with the church interior understood in the following terms: apse = sky, altar = throne of God, qestroma29 = paradise, nave = earth, bema = Jerusalem, altar on the bema = Golgotha, cathedra = seat of the grand priest, the son of Aaron.30 If we bear this in mind we can see that a bema, ambo or any other structure occupying a central or slightly offset position in a church interior could be taken as a representation of (earthly) Jerusalem and that a cross or book placed or raised on this structure would be viewed as being upon Golgotha as a symbol of Christ. Therefore it could be argued that all these comparative nave furnishings are actually manifestations

26 p. 141, Maranci, Christina, Vigilant Powers.
27 Connolly, R.H., ‘Expositio officiorum ecclesiae, Georgio Arbelensi vulgo adscripta & Abrahæi Bar Lipeh interpretatio officiorum’, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 64,71,72,76, Scriptores Syri 91, 92 (1911–1915).
28 pp. 73–74, Loosley, Emma, The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema.
29 The raised area in front of the sanctuary but before the nave.
30 Lassus, Jean & Tchalenko, Georges, ‘Ambons Syriens’, Cahiers Archéologiques 5 (1951), pp. 75–122.
of a similar impulse to replicate Jerusalem/the Cenacle/Golgotha in a tangible sense within the liturgical process. If this is the case then we can highlight two possible streams of this influence passing from Palestine and Syria either directly, or via Mesopotamia, into Caucasian ritual practices.

The first stream is clearly a product of hagiopolite rites and this is the current that led to the desire to replicate the Holy Sepulchre in a symbolic sense. Maranci’s arguments are convincing in suggesting that this is the case relating to Zuart’Noc’. Although the disposition of the original church on the site of Svetiskhoveli in Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Kartli, is still being studied it is clear that there was an equation of the national cathedral with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the later middle ages as there is a medieval replica of the Anastasis Rotunda constructed in the south aisle of the cathedral (Fig. 25).31 Given the early adoption of the Jerusalem rite in Kartli it seems to be a reasonable assumption that the later construction of a replica of the Anastasis Rotunda was a direct continuation of the exceptionally strong Kartvelian devotion to Jerusalem.

It is possible to further support this argument with the evidence that the topography of early Christian Mtskheta was remodelled as an alternate Holy Land with the Christian monuments of the city and its environs named after notable Biblical locations and events; Svetiskhoveli was linked with the miracles of the Lord’s cloak and with a miraculous pillar raised by the power of the prayers of St. Nino32 and later became associated with the Holy Sepulchre. Jvari on the hill above the town was where St. Nino was believed to have first raised her cross and this was linked to Golgotha and the hill of the Crucifixion. In the environs of the town, Samtavro where St. Nino took up residence in a bush was later equated with the place of the burning bush on Mount Sinai. Another church was named ‘Getsamania’ (Gethsemane) and finally a fifth century church, believed to have originally been dedicated to St. Stephen, became known as Antiokia (Antioch). This phenomenon of physically trying to imprint a wider Christian sacred geography on the landscape of the Caucasus has long been recognised in Georgia, but is as yet a relatively understudied area of research33 and needs a great deal of further exploration before the origins and development of this trend are fully understood.

31 See Bulia, Marina & Janjalia, Mzia, Mtskheta, Tbilisi, 2000 and also http://architectureandasceticism.exeter.ac.uk/items/show/84 for images of this replica.
32 Wardrop, Margery, Trans. ‘Life of Saint Nino’, Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica 5 (1903), pp. 3–88.
33 The one book published on this issue thus far is Mgaloblishvili, Tamila, New Jerusalems in Georgia, Centre for the Exploration of Georgian Antiquities; Tbilisi, 2013.
Therefore if one current of influence comes directly from the effect of Jerusalem on Kartvelian ritual practice, what can we say about the *bema* which makes symbolic reference to Jerusalem, but which is only attested to in the literature and archaeology of Syria and Mesopotamia? Here the evidence is more difficult to interpret largely because we have so many gaps in both the literature and in the archaeological record. In the first instance all the textual and physical evidence for the use of the *bema* relates to northern Syria and Mesopotamia. We also face the conundrum, alluded to above, that whereas our archaeological evidence is overwhelmingly located in the hinterland of Antioch,\(^{34}\) the texts

\(^{34}\) Exceptions to this are Resafa in the central Syrian desert which is the most easterly example of a *bema* in Syria and, perhaps most notably, at Sulaimaniyeh, now located in Iraqi Kurdistan where we have the only surviving example of a *bet-šqaqonē* (the raised walkway that linked the sanctuary and the *bema*). This is leaving aside the question of mosaic
elucidating the symbolism of the bema, in particular those explaining its pivotal role in the process by which a church interior became a microcosm of the Christian universe, were all written to the east in Mesopotamia. This does not rule out that this form of liturgy entered Kartli from the east, but it is certainly a less linear route of entry than the hagiopolite influenced practices outlined above.

What we can say is that despite the equation with the Holy Sepulchre, the liturgical furniture found in some Kartvelian churches has very few parallels elsewhere in the evolution of the late antique and early medieval liturgy and therefore we should seriously consider whether or not these Kartvelian pre-altar installations were in any way influenced by the use of the bema in the liturgy of the word in some Syrian and Mesopotamian rites. The prevalence of the Jerusalem liturgical tradition notwithstanding, it is clear from the architectural and art historical analysis of the previous chapter that the development of the church as a building in late antique Kakheti and Kartli was strongly influenced by the architecture and decorative traditions of the Sassanian empire, which through most of the period under discussion was the dominant power in Mesopotamia. It would therefore make sense if some rituals were also translated into the region along with this influx of Mesopotamian material culture. Certainly although it cannot be said that the Kartvelian nave structures resemble the bema very closely, there could be a link in the fact that the cross as the instrument of Christ’s Passion and the central mystery of the Christian faith was displayed in the central nave of these churches in a manner analogous to the display of the cross and the gospel book on the bema throne (or ‘Golgotha’) in the Syro-Mesopotamian liturgy of the word. Intriguingly there is also another non-Christian parallel that could have influenced this practice and that is the bema festival of the Manichaeans where testimony suggests that the placing of an effigy of Mani on the bema was the most important event in their festival calendar. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kipiani, Mgaloblishvili and Rapp Jr all believe that there is evidence for a significant Manichaean presence in late antique Kakheti and Kartli and this practice of a pre-altar cross standing to represent both Christ and the instrument of his martyrdom could in fact be linked to the Manichaean rite in remembrance of the death of Mani.

Whilst there is not enough textual or archaeological evidence for us to definitively prove or disprove how precisely this current of Syro-Mesopotamian ritual

_bemata_, which have been discovered in the region around Apamea and possibly even further afield.

35 p. 63, Loosley, Emma, *The Architecture and Liturgy of the Bema*.
36 See chapter 5.
entered Kartvelian Christian ritual, whether or not the influence of the Syrian bema was a formative element of early Kartvelian pre-altar platforms may be supported by examining whether there are other strata of Mesopotamian rites interwoven with the hagopolite rituals of the early Kartvelian church and it is to this question that we shall now turn.

Before Chalcedon: The Question of The Church of the East and Its Possible Influence on Kartvelian Christianity

As the earlier chapters of this work have made clear one of the biggest impediments to the study of the Kartvelian Church is the fact that contemporary Georgian archaeology, art history and history views the period under discussion as very much ‘before and after’ the advent of the Georgian alphabet. This means that there are discussions of artefacts and buildings (for example) throughout the Roman era that end suddenly with the fourth century CE, before the thread is taken up in the fifth century CE with recourse to the (later) medieval texts relating to this era utilised in conjunction with the evidence of the material culture. Naturally history is not compartmentalised into neat boxes in this way and when strict periodisation is enforced it becomes far more difficult for the researcher to trace lines of continuity in the historical record. In the case under discussion this is exceptionally problematic as, as mentioned earlier, the evangelisation narrative relating to Kartli centres on the figure of an ‘unnamed captive woman’, later identified as a woman of Cappadocian origin named Nino, who converted the Kartvelian monarch, Mirian, at some point in the 330s. Thus far we have a straightforward expectation of Christianity entering from the west or southwest if we take into account the Vita of St. Nino which reports that the holy woman travelled to Kartli via Armenia.37

If we take this textual information in conjunction with the architectural evidence, which dates primarily from the sixth century onwards, with some churches dated to the late fifth century, a strong Byzantine influence over Kartvelian Christianity appears relatively straightforward. However, as highlighted in the previous chapter, when recent evidence from archaeological excavations is added into the equation the picture becomes more complex. Excavations in Kakheti have revealed fourth century church buildings that

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37 pp. 14ff., Wardrop, Margery, Trans. ‘Life of Saint Nino’, Studia Biblica et Ecclesiastica 5 (1903), pp. 3–88.
offer a far more complex web of interaction in the fourth and fifth centuries. The liturgical dispositions and artefactual evidence associated with these sites has appeared overwhelmingly east facing in orientation, but with a significant underpinning of Byzantine influence; what there has definitively not been is a significant quantity of Syrian evidence.

Evidence from the sites around Kvareli in Kakheti has yielded two synthrona, one in Chabukauri and one in Dolochopi. This is the only evidence of this liturgical feature yet discovered in the territory of modern Georgia and is indisputable evidence of western influence as they are relatively common from Syria and Asia Minor westward across the Mediterranean region. In addition bronze lamps found at both sites have clear parallels in the Byzantine world. In these respects although these buildings stand far out in the east of the Kartvelian world not far from the territory of what was Caucasian Albania, it is apparent that Byzantinizing influences had permeated deep into the land the Byzantines referred to as Iberia. On the other hand this was not the only empire to leave its traces on the region and the numismatic evidence found at the sites demonstrated a clear mercantile bias towards the Persian world. In addition, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the curious design of these ‘three nave basilicas’ could also suggest some kind of affinity with eastern architecture. What these sites lacked was any evidence suggesting that these early ecclesiastical structures were linked in any way to the evolution of church architecture in Syria. Interestingly they are contemporary with the first purpose-built churches we know of from the environs of Antioch and the Syrian limestone massif, sites such as the martyrium of St. Babylas at Qausiyeh in the suburbs of Antioch and the small village church at Qirq Bizeh on the Jebel Barisha and we can see no direct parallels with the monuments of this region in Kakheti; the Syrian buildings of this period were modest village basilicas or, if they were larger buildings of more significance, they had more complex floorplans—as with the four-armed martyrium of St. Babylas.

What we do not have at this early period are basilicas as large as those found in eastern Georgia. Certainly we may speculate that such structures may have existed within the city of Antioch and other major metropolitan centres, but we must remember that although they were located within apparently thriving towns at the time that they were constructed, the Chabukauri and Dolochopi basilicas were located in wealthy provincial centres rather than an internationally significant metropolis. It was not until the fifth and sixth centuries that comparably large and imposing churches were constructed at sites such as Brad and Ruweiha on the Syrian limestone massif, in the kind of provincial towns that are a more accurate reflection of the presumed size and status of the Kakhetian examples.
The problem that we encounter is that whilst it seems reasonable to suspect that many elements of Kakhetian ecclesiastical architecture entered the region from the east it is difficult to access the archaeological data to definitively support this hypothesis. The wars and periods of unrest that have consumed Iraq since the late twentieth century have made fieldwork in that country impossible and there remains a great deal of research to be done before we understand the origins of the Assyrian Christian presence in the Urumiyeh region of Iran. This leaves the east bank of the Euphrates in Syria and the Tur ‘Abdin region of southeast Turkey as the only alternative sites of investigation. In both cases, especially the Tur ‘Abdin, a certain amount of survey has been carried out but this has not been followed up with programmes of excavation. In addition the outbreak of the Syrian civil war stopped excavations in the Syrian part of the region from 2011 onwards and the overspill from this war has heavily impacted on the security of neighbouring provinces of Turkey meaning that there too such research has become untenable. Therefore we must leave aside our search for a relationship by comparing liturgical furnishings and artefacts for a moment and turn to what, if anything, can be gleaned from the liturgical congruencies.

An Eastern Calendar?

It has long been acknowledged that a significant study of regional liturgical calendars would be a useful tool in trying to understand the relationships between different denominations in the Middle East. This is because aside from biblical figures, early church martyrs and supranational saints (such as St. George) many saints have a very particular regional and confessional identity that allows the scholar to draw certain conclusions about the type of church present in a region based on the saints that are venerated. In addition variations in the liturgical calendar can also be a way of establishing the influences on a particular community. In contemporary Georgia many people in essence follow two festal calendars; these are the Georgian mountain dwellers who, particularly in Khevsureti and Tusheti, follow an ancient cycle of feast days related to their local deities in tandem with observing some or all of the Orthodox Christian feasts. As mentioned above, there are ongoing discussions amongst

38 Many thanks are due to Kevin Tuite, who alerted me to this issue with his question about whether the Pentecostal division was utilised in the Eastern and Oriental Church calendars.
anthropologists as to how exactly Christianity and local vernacular beliefs are intertwined in Khevsureti, Tusheti and, to a lesser extent, Svaneti. Nobody has yet tried to map the two religious calendars on to each other, but Tuite has observed that there appears to be congruence between the Khevsur festivals of Atengenoba and ostensibly Christian feasts held in Armenia and the Assyrian Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{39}

The timing of these festivals is related to an ancient system of dividing the year into seven ‘pentecosts’ of seven weeks and each ‘pentecost’ ending with an extra fiftieth day named the atzereth that took the year to 350 days plus a 15 or 16 day sapattum to equate to a full solar year.\textsuperscript{40} Carrington points out that not only is this division employed by later Christian calendars but ‘it is also in line with older Assyrian and Babylonian and Canaanite calendars.’\textsuperscript{41} Given the evidence that this early Christian calendar was linked to an ancient Assyrian method of measuring time it should be no surprise that the Pentecostal calendar is still followed by the Church of the East today.

Intriguingly the footprint of this ancient calendar can be seen in the festal cycle of not only the Assyrian Church but also the Armenian Church as well, although interestingly the West Syrian (Syrian Orthodox) tradition does not appear to follow the same pattern and in its summer feasts appears to be in line with the Chalcedonian Churches. This presumed Assyrian influence would seem to have ultimately evolved from an Assyrian festal rite into the Khevsur Atengenoba, the Armenian Vardavar and the Assyrian feast of Nusardel also known as ‘Assyrian Water Day’. Obviously this needs a great deal more study before these parallels are fully understood and the reasons for this relationship become clear. Suffice it to say here that the survival of an ancient calendar in the eastern Georgian highlands could well be related to the presence of Assyrian Christians in Kartli and Kakheti in late antiquity. There has been a great deal of speculation and a certain amount of academic work on how earlier Christian traditions have survived amongst the Svans in the west Georgian highlands because the Svans are a Christian society, albeit a syncretistic variant of Christianity that is strongly entwined with other pre-Christian beliefs. Because the Khevsurs and Tushes have fewer recognisably Christian traits in their belief systems they have thus far not been studied as a source of surviving early Christian influences in the same way.

\textsuperscript{39} Pers. comm. Kevin Tuite.
\textsuperscript{40} p. 366, Carrington, Philip, \textit{According to Mark: a Running Commentary on the Oldest Gospel}, Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1960.
\textsuperscript{41} p. 366, Carrington, Philip, \textit{According to Mark}. 
This congruence of three (Assyrian, Armenian and Khevsur) festal calendars is an issue that urgently requires more research. When we take this in conjunction with the tantalising possibilities offered by the ethnographical testimonies about the use of the *drosha* in cult enclosures and the raising of a pre-altar Cross in early Georgian churches, which appears to recall the ancient Mesopotamian *bema* liturgy, it is clear that these relationships offer a wide scope for exploration. Within the context of the current study, there was not enough time to reach a level of knowledge of Khevsur vernacular religion that was sufficient to enable a firm conclusion to be reached, but initial findings suggest that this area will prove a fruitful avenue of future research.