

## Inventing, Transforming and Discovering Southern Caucasus Some Introductory Observations

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The roots of Caucasus or the whole of northern Georgia with its surrounding territories, known under different names, are immensely important for historians and archaeologists. This importance was perpetuated in many monuments that have unfortunately been deprived of the necessary attention to this day and have not been studied accurately, and for the enlightened audience it is as though they never existed. (Ioseliani 1844)<sup>1</sup>

With these words, in 1844, Platon Ioseliani introduced an essay – one of his earliest written in Russian – dedicated to the churches of Tbilisi and its surroundings. In the reflections of Ioseliani, for centuries historical Georgia (the kingdom of Kartli) were constantly in danger because of its powerful neighbours, and for years its historical and archaeological studies had very little space for development. The premise implied by Ioseliani, who was Georgian but a subject of the czar, was that the order guaranteed by Georgia's annexation to Russia would finally offer the region the 'peace' necessary for a real history of the country to be written.

More than 170 years have passed since Ioseliani wrote these lines and the world has changed in many ways. The history of studies dedicated to the artistic history of the South Caucasus, however, has not always followed the linear path Ioseliani hoped for. Furthermore, to this today, in some parts of the region, the conditions for the study of history (of art and in general) are problematic. Just over a year ago, Foletti visited the Kars region with his students, the site of

the historical capital of medieval Armenia, Ani (fig. 1), where many monasteries and isolated churches can be found (Kevorkian 2001, cf. in this volume Maranci's essay with the associated bibliography). In a breath-taking landscape, the monuments of medieval Armenia take form, in dialogue with the landscape, creating very picturesque conditions (Maranci 2009). A visitor to Ani, however, will be surprised at the monuments' dilapidated state. Those who are familiar with the city's history – once the capital of the Armenian Kingdom – will be again surprised at an information panel describing a city that reached its peak in the years following the conquest of the Seljuk Turks (Sim 2004), and which is utterly devoid of any mention of the Armenian presence. The monuments in ruin seem to have been compromised mostly by time. This situation changes dramatically, however, for monuments located just a few kilometres away, like Horomos, Khtzkonk, or even Mren (Vardanyan 2015; Sin 1999; Maranci 2013). These marvellous architectural works are literally collapsing under our eyes, vandalised with graffiti and damage hard to attribute to time alone. And if that were not enough, some tomb robbers were caught in Horomos. Today, no authority seems to deal with the safeguarding of these monuments, which is a key to the history not only of the Caucasus, but of all Mediterranean culture.

Looking at photographs from the early twentieth century makes the situation even more alarming: the images show that Horomos and Khtzkonk were still active monasteries, and in an excellent state of conservation, in 1900 (figs.

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Figure 1. *The Cathedral of Ani*. 2017. © Center for Early Medieval Studies Brno

2-3). In the case of the Khtzkonk monastery, from the 1920s to the present, four buildings have literally disappeared, while one bears traces of destruction that cannot have been caused by time. All the evidence seems to confirm that these buildings were intentionally destroyed with modern, probably military means (Fontana 2018). The desecrated tombs, with scattered human bones, only serve to confirm this tragic situation.

The first question is how this can be possible in 2017. The answer is not easy to pinpoint, but the evidence collected in a recent study by Tania Fontana indicates that we are facing a phenomenon that could be defined as “cultural genocide” (Fontana 2018). The roots of this destruction process of Armenian monuments go back to the years of Atatürk. The drive to erase the traces of the Armenian presence in Anatolian lands seems to have gone hand in hand with the official doctrine of the Turkish state. The latter, especially following the Second World War, started to strongly deny the events of 1915, recognised in most studies as the “Armenian genocide” (Lemkin 1944; Yeghiayan 2015). The destruction of art objects then became an explicit instrument to erase the memory and the very traces of reality. And while in recent years, for iconic monuments like Akhtamar and Ani, which in 2015 was included in UNESCO’s list

of international heritage, the Turkish state has started to take care of the region’s heritage, this does not seem to be happening for monuments outside the attention of international authorities (UNESCO 2015).

This situation is obviously reflected in the history of studies: it was made difficult for Armenian scholars to visit monuments in Turkey, while the Turkish viewpoint was influenced by the country’s political situation, where speaking about Armenian culture and the violence of the past was a problem throughout the second half of the twentieth century (Bobelian 2009). Unsurprisingly, it is especially Western scholars (sometimes of Armenian origin) who dedicate themselves to the study of the region, even in recent years (Thierry 2000; Donabédian 2008; Maranci 2013).

What is described here unfortunately demonstrates that to this day the peaceful state Ioseliani hoped for in 1844 has not been achieved for the whole of the South Caucasus. The history of the region, divided by ethnic and religious wars and control from outside forces, still carries traces of violence that make academic work difficult. In this sense, the solutions proposed in recent years (Foletti, Thunø 2016; Skhirtladze 2017), to think of the entire region as a place where extraordinary cultures came together in constant dialogue, could be a partial solution. In order for



Figure 2. A.A., *Khtzkonk Monastery in 1900. 9th-12th.* © Wikimedia Commons



Figure 3. *Ruins of the Khtzkonk Monastery in 2017. 9th-12th.* © Center for Early Medieval Studies Brno

this viewpoint to lead to a solution, though, we should remember that, in addition to common traits, there are in the region unique cultural identities that must not be denied or diminished. One model could be important for the region's future: the concept of "Shared Heritage", developed in recent years in research being performed in Heidelberg and Dortmund (Arendes, Samida, Schüppel 2018). The basic idea, materialised in contemporary multi-ethnic Germany, is to transform the perception of a specific artistic monument into an object whose value is shared as human heritage.

While this could be one of the possibilities to encourage the safeguarding of the region's heritage, as well as its study, the situation is now much more complex. Whether we like it or not, despite many efforts in recent years, the South Caucasus remains a peripheral reality in the study of medieval art history.

### The Creation of a Province

This is a long process that cannot be fully examined here, but we want to quickly mention a few of its salient points, which will be discussed in the following pages. This is not the time to retrace the entire history of Christian peoples in the Caucasus in the last century in detail (Rayfield 2012; Mahé, Mahé 2012). However, in a few words, the political situation has severely limited, and unfortunately still partly limits, the development of a solid and independent historiography.

For almost the entire nineteenth century, the region had the status of a vice-royalty, a province of Russia. In this period, the South Caucasus was regularly presented as Byzantine outskirts (Bakradze 1873; Kondakov, Tolstoj 1891; Foletti 2016). The studies advanced by then were of course important, but they were clearly limited by the region's subjection, as demonstrated by the study of Foletti and Rakitin in this volume. A local historiography was still able to emerge in the second half of the nineteenth century, as the works of Filipová and Grigorian show. The possibility of more complete and independent studies is evident in Georgia starting with the collapse of the tzardom. On the Armenian side, the events of 1915 and the dramatic situation in the following years did not allow any development of study (Bobelian 2009). In any case, this brief interlude ends with the two countries joining the Soviet

bloc. From the end of the 1920s, which coincided with a strong wave of Russification (Martin 1998), to the years after Stalin's death, space given to the region's Christian art was – for reasons of anti-clerical politics and a Russian-centric conception of the empire – reduced to the minimum (see Filipová in this volume). In the case of Georgian art, there was the literal disappearance, for more than 20 years (1921-1945), of what has been called the "Georgian national treasure", a story told by Filipová. In the following years, then, with the earliest general studies, perspectives were influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology: fundamental attention was dedicated to forms and artistic techniques, while the iconographic content was set aside (Chubinashvili 1959). Furthermore, the almost complete isolation from the West, difficult access to literature, and heavy censorship in the USSR influenced studies, often making them difficult to access for the Western public. It is not surprising that Soviet historiography continues to consider the artistic production of the Caucasus as essentially peripheral (Lazarev [1967] 2014).

After the fall of the USSR and the birth of national states, with initially very limited resources, Armenians and Georgians began to study their national heritage with a new verve and immense effort, which resulted in hundreds of articles and dozens of overviews (Burchuladze 2016; Khostaria, Natsvlishvili, Tumanishvili 2012; Chichinadze 2011; Hacopian 2014; Grigoryan 2015). For obvious reasons, however, after centuries in which their cultural identity had been diminished by the Russian and then Soviet empire, their approach was determined by a desire for 'revenge', regarding both content and form. In local production, therefore, we can find partly nationalist arguments, often presenting the local culture as an independent and uninterrupted tradition whose roots can be traced back to antiquity. Also, the strong limitation surrounding which scientific production was allowed to be published in languages other than Russian before the fall of the Soviet Union meant that the extensive scientific publication in Armenian and Georgian was inaccessible to scholars lacking competence in those languages. Furthermore, the economic situation of local universities was, in the 1990s and the early 2000s, far from being positive, a situation that was reflected in the objective difficulties of research. In this regard, libraries that had limited funds for the purchase of up to date scholarship should also be considered.



Figure 4. *Joseph Strzygowski*. 1900 c.  
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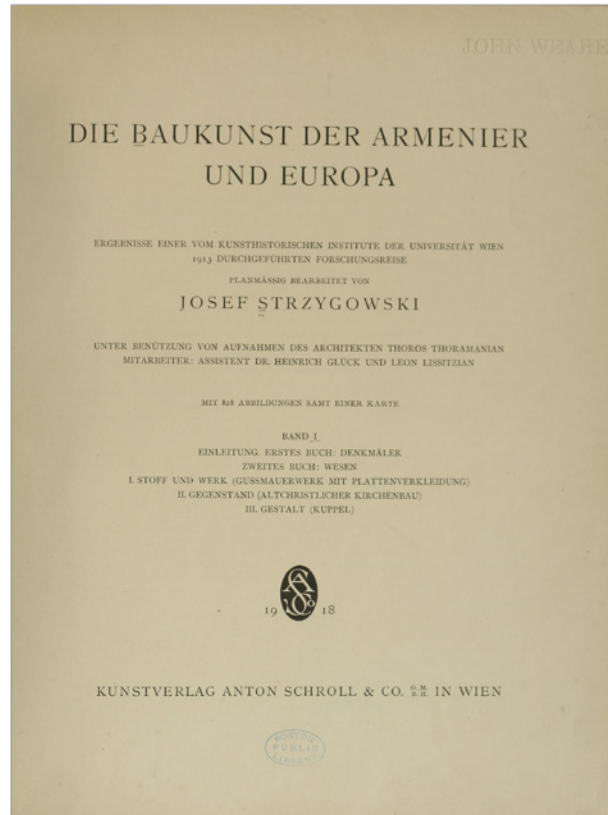


Figure 5. *Title Page of the Book Joseph Strzygowski. Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa*. 1918

This situation is complemented by studies promoted in the West. Attention to Armenian art can be noted in Mechitarist monasteries already by the end of the eighteenth century (see Contin in this volume). The real turning point in interest came, as indicated in the essays by Grigoryan and Riva, around 1900: the Armenian diaspora then became one of the drivers of international interest in the region's artistic production. One of the most authoritative voices focusing on Armenian art, however, comes from Austria. The fundamental study by Josef Strzygowski was published in 1918 (Strzygowski 1918; Maranci 2002). The figure of Strzygowski (figs. 4-5), to whom a collective volume was very recently dedicated, is highly complex because of his racial arguments, giving rise to his explicit sympathy for the National-Socialist party (Foletti, Lovino 2018). Extremely influential in the interwar period, his legacy fell in disrepute after 1945 (Elsner 2002). It is, however, thanks to Strzygowski that in Fascist Italy a special interest in Armenian art developed, with antithetical positions, which Stefano Riccioni addresses in this volume. And it

is perhaps also in this hidden legacy that a keen interest in the art of the Caucasus would emerge in Italy in the 1970s (Gandolfo 1982; Alpago Novello 1980; Alpago Novello 1990; Fontana 2018), an era that Marco Ruffilli discusses here. Again regarding Armenian art, we should mention the works of the diaspora, spread throughout the West (cf. a summary by Maranci 2015).

As regards studies on medieval Georgia, there are some, for example, coming from scholars in the circles of *Cahiers Archéologiques* and promoted by André Grabar (Palladino 2018). These are works by figures like Nicole Thierry (Thierry 1975), Hans Belting (Belting 1979), and Tania Velmans (Velmans 1980). In these studies, however, what interests the Western scholar the most is Georgia's relationship with Byzantium. The impression seems to be that the stereotypes formulated at the end of the nineteenth century by a figure like Nikodim Kondakov in Russia (Kondakov 1890) survived in the DNA of Western research on Georgia. Unsurprisingly, Georgian art (like Armenian art) is presented at the bottom of summaries of Byzantine art (Cutler,

Spieser 1996). The question remains whether that viewpoint, present with some regularity in Western studies, should be considered in relation to the Cold War. In a world almost impenetrably divided by the Iron Curtain, with the Eastern bloc profoundly isolated and self-referential, one gets the impression that the regions at the margins of the empire 'naturally' became the provincial expression of the Byzantine empire (Foletti 2017).

### A New South Caucasus?

On a general level, in spite of a general limited interest, over the years, in the West and in Russia, few scholars have studied the heritage of the Caucasus with consistency and quality: the very important research by the Thierrys (Thierry 1987, 2000) in the second half of the twentieth century and, in more recent years, the work of Antony Eastmond (Eastmond 1998, 2016), with his fundamental study to the art of Georgia, and of Patrick Donabédian, on the Armenian side (Donabédian 1981, 2008, 2010). In Russia, at least the work of Armen Kazarjan must be mentioned (Kazarjan 2000, 2007, 2012).

In recent years, however, there has been a boom in interest in studies on the Caucasus in the 'West'. Especially after the exhibition at the Louvre in 2007 (Durand, Rapti 2007), innovative and in-depth research has been supported in various spaces of art-historical geography. The *Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz*, under the leadership of Gerhard Wolf, dedicated significant resources to a photographic campaign in Georgia. Michele Bacci, professor at the University of Fribourg, has encouraged important studies, linking the reality of the Caucasus with the entire Mediterranean space (Bacci 2016; Bacci, Kaffenberger, Studer-Karen 2018). Between the universities of Brno and Rutgers New Jersey, a synergistic project has yielded a collective volume dedicated to the entire region during the Middle Ages (Foletti, Thunø 2016). Finally, we should also mention the colossal work of Cristina Maranci (Maranci 2001, 2002, 2013, 2015, 2017) who, with the patience of a Carthusian and wide-ranging reflection, is bringing one medieval Armenian monument after another back to

the knowledge of the international audience. Finally, in September 2018, an exhibition dedicated to Armenian art (Armenia 2018) was opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. These are very positive signs for the future.

Our impression, however, is that, in this context, where a real dialogue is starting to be established between East and West (Skhirtladze 2017; Kazarjan 2018) a broader theoretical and historiographical reflection is now more necessary than ever. It is only on a historiographical basis - which allows us to understand and deconstruct certain founding myths for studies in the last two centuries - that the fracture between 'domestic' and 'foreign' research can overcome truisms deeply rooted in the history of studies. Furthermore, considering the current state of monument conservation, especially in Turkish Armenia, returning to nineteenth-century studies is essential to understanding the ancient aspect of these works of art, as demonstrated here in a masterful essay by Cristina Maranci.

This issue of *Venezia Arti* is the result of a recent collaboration connecting Masaryk University of Brno and Ca' Foscari University of Venice that, we hope, will be the first in a series of projects and publications: scholars from diverse cultural origins come together here to reflect on the roots of our thinking on the Caucasus. Several points of view will be examined: Russian, Georgian, Armenian, and 'international'; the time frame stops at the Second World War. A conference has already been announced for February 2019, in Venice, dedicated to the period after the Second World War. Our hope is that this volume can open up a series of studies, key to understanding a region with extraordinary culture, which merits an all-around reconsideration.

With this issue we would like to announce the creation of an international research project: *Seminarium Caucasicum. Studies in Art on Medieval Caucasus (and Beyond)*. Led by Michele Bacci (University of Fribourg), Ivan Foletti (Masaryk University) and Stefano Riccioni (Ca' Foscari University of Venice), this project aims to promote regular meetings dedicated to the arts of the region, as well as actions for its preservation.

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