



Japan Bilingual Publishing Co.

Cultural Arts Research and Development

<https://ojs.bilpub.com/index.php/card>

## ARTICLE

# From the Georgian Christian Art Treasure: Two New Exhibits of the University of Georgia in Tbilisi

Nana Burchuladze<sup>1\*</sup>, Giorgi Gagoshidze<sup>1</sup>, Ermine Magradze<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tamaz Beradze Institute of Georgian Studies, The University of Georgia, 77/a Kostava street, 0171 Tbilisi, Georgia

<sup>2</sup>Conservation Laboratory, the Fine Arts Museum, The Georgian National Museum, 1, L. Gudiashvili street, 0105 Tbilisi, Georgia.

## ABSTRACT

The Medieval Christian art treasures of Georgia are particularly rich in metal artifacts. These works are characterized by a wide typological, technological, iconographic, and stylistic diversity. Their chronology is extensive, and their composition is varied. This group mainly includes chased, engraved, or stamped crosses, icons, and liturgical items made primarily of gold and silver, though occasionally of copper or bronze. While a significant portion of these artifacts has already been studied, numerous examples of metal plastic arts, still unknown, lesser-known, and unstudied, remain in Georgian museums, churches, and private collections. The present article introduces two previously unknown ecclesiastical items made of silver, belonging to the Museum of the University of Georgia: a pendant icon and a reliquary cross, which are noteworthy works from functional, substantive, and artistic perspectives. This article serves as the first publication of these items. It aims to disclose their comprehensive research results and incorporate these artifacts into scientific circulation.

**Keywords:** Christian Art; Medieval Georgian Treasures; Art of Metalwork in Georgia; Pendant Icon; Reliquary Cross; The Museum of the University of Georgia

### \*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Nana Burchuladze, Tamaz Beradze Institute of Georgian Studies, The University of Georgia, 77/a Kostava street, 0171 Tbilisi, Georgia;  
Email: [n.burchuladze@ug.edu.ge](mailto:n.burchuladze@ug.edu.ge)

### ARTICLE INFO

Received: 4 May 2024 | Revised: 16 May 2024 | Accepted: 19 May 2024 | Published Online: 20 June 2024  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v4i1.189>

### CITATION

Burchuladze, B., Gagoshidze, G., Magradze, E., 2024. From the Georgian Christian Art Treasure: Two New Exhibits of the University of Georgia in Tbilisi. *Journal Name*. 4(1): 47–58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/card.v4i1.189>

### COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2024 by the author(s). Published by Japan Bilingual Publishing Co. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

In 2023, the collection of the Museum of the University of Georgia in Tbilisi was enriched with a small silver icon and a clerical cross from a private collection. Both items are double-sided. The icon depicts the Mother of God and the Child, while the cross features the “Crucifixion.” Both have engraved inscriptions of donors (*ktetors*—*in Greece*) on their backs, which are written in different Georgian scripts<sup>①</sup>.

The cross, marked with a seal, is precisely dated to 1873, while the icon’s date is determined as the 11th century based on its iconographic, stylistic, and paleographic data. Both items stand out for their original iconographic schemes and the artistic characteristics typical of their respective periods. Notably significant is the icon of the Mother of God, which, as it turns out, belongs to a group of Georgian artifacts of Byzantine trend.

## 2. Methods

For the study of the above-mentioned exhibits at the Museum of Georgia, the authors of the article employed the following methods: technical and technological research of the items, and their art historical and paleographic analysis.

## 3. Results

As a result of the integrated research of two new exhibits at the Museum of the University of Georgia, complete information regarding their material, manufacturing techniques, function, iconography, artistic style, and inscriptions becomes accessible to the scientific community and the wide public. Their study established that both arti-

① The Georgian language belongs to the ancient Kartvelian-Caucasian language group and is unique for having developed three writing systems over the centuries<sup>[1]</sup>. The earliest of these is Asomtavruli, which has been documented since the 4th-5th centuries both within Georgia and in Georgian spiritual centers near the Holy Land, such as Nazareth and around Jerusalem. The second script, Nuskhuri-Khutsuri, emerged in the 9th century as a modification of Asomtavruli. Around the same period, the third script, Mkhedruli, appeared and was widely used, and is still employed today in secular, state writing. In contemporary Georgia, the earlier two scripts are also in use, primarily in the Orthodox Church. As a result, in 2016, UNESCO included the three forms of the Georgian alphabet in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Notably, Georgian script characters are also encoded in Unicode, where they are presented in three distinct groups<sup>[2]</sup>.

facts were made of Silver. The icon, in addition, was gilded on both sides and was intended to be worn on the chest of nobleman. The cross turned out to be reliquary – for storing holy relics. Their attribution showed that the icon was made in Georgia in the 11th century, while the cross—probably in Russia (or by Russian master in Georgia) in the 19th century.

## 4. Discussion

The items of our research interest arrived at the university museum without any precise information about their history, owners, etc. Therefore, they had to be attributed from scratch. Their state of preservation required the intervention of a restorer of metal objects, and the donor inscriptions on both - a specialist in paleography and history. Along with this, the main part of the research was taken up by art history analysis. As a result of the comprehensive study of these objects, very interesting results were achieved. We present these exhibits in chronological order, taking into account their dating - first the icon, and then the cross. At the same time, in connection with the icon, we publish here several other, little-known icons of the same type from the Georgian collection of precious metal products. They should be of interest to specialists in Christian art and medieval metalwork as well. The exhibits of the university museum that we have studied differ significantly in the time of their creation. Therefore, we offer them to the reader in chronological order and firstly present the icon.

### 4.1. The Pendant Icon

The dimensions of the icon, excluding the bail, are 4.4x3.5x0.3 cm, with a bail height of 0.5 cm (weight of the object is 23 g). Initially, it was cast with bail, and later both sides were treated with an iron stamp to enhance the sharpness of the image and graphemes. Initially, both sides were covered with a relatively thick layer of gold amalgam, which is much better preserved on the surface; however, the gilding on the raised parts of the relief has worn off, resulting in the image currently being presented in two colors: gold and black. As for the back of the icon, due to carrying it on the chest, only a small trace of gold plating remains (**Figures 1 and 2**).



**Figures 1.** Front of the pendant icon of the University of Georgia.



**Figure 2.** The back of the pendant icon.

The central part of the icon's surface is recessed by about 0.1 mm and surrounded by a 3–4 mm wide frame. In the center on a smooth golden background is depicted the Mother of God with Child, and on the edges of the frame are paired semicircular columns intersecting in the middle

parts (in the upper part, instead of a knot, a hollow is visible). The elements of the icon's artistic decoration also include five large oval beads imitating large precious stones strung along the contours of the halos of Mary and Jesus. The presence of piercing holes in these beads indicates that a thin thread of silver wire with small pearls was threaded around the halo's circle. It is noteworthy that all four corners of the icon are deliberately rounded and the edges are slightly indented, giving its shape an irregular and more artistically interesting appearance.

As for the main depiction, it features a high relief representation of the Mother of God in a half-figure on a smooth background in the central part, with the Christ-Emmanuel sitting on her left hand. As Almighty God he raises his right hand in a gesture of blessing, while holding the symbol of the New Testament and teaching—a scroll—in his left hand. Mary extends her free hand toward her son, simultaneously imploring him and indicating that he is the Messiah and “the Truth Way” (from which this iconography gets its name—“Guide Mother of God” or *Hodegetria* in Greece). In the compositional scheme of the image, details such as Jesus's left foot, bent at the knee, and the closely embraced faces of mother and child draw attention, which is unconventional for the iconography of the Mother of God and Child.

The matter is that this icon unites two iconographic types of the Virgin: the so-called *Hodegetria* (Guide, Way-shower) and *Eleusa* (Tender, Merciful, Compassionate), a combination that is quite rare case in Christian art. The tilt of the Virgin's head and the face of Christ closer to Her face correspond to the type of *Eleusa*, but His right hand is clearly extended for blessing.

A similar “mixed” iconography can be observed on a fragment of the 11th-century stone altar screen from the Alaverdi Cathedral, where the Virgin Mary with Child is depicted under an arch <sup>[3,4]</sup>This stone image (24x24 cm) shows Mary holding the Child with both hands (**Figure 3**). She gently and tenderly pulls the body of Christ towards herself, but He does not touch the mother's face. Christ depicted as if frolicking on mother's lap. Thus, on the one hand, He is presented as a living, active child, but, on the other hand, in His pose one can see resistance to what awaits Him in the future as a sacrificial lamb. This iconographic scheme is partly reminiscent of a relatively

late type of the Virgin with Child so-called *Pelagontissa*, which became widespread in Byzantine art in from the 12th–13th century. As H. Belting thought, ‘*The contrast inherent in the double motif expresses a synthesis or revision of the other two versions. The poetic manner of conveying theological ideas addresses a beholder versed in rhetoric who enjoyed the subtle alliterations, analogies, and antitheses, in which a character depiction becomes a theological figure of speech*’<sup>[5]</sup>.



**Figure 3.** Stone image of the Virgin and Child from the Alaverdi Monastery 11th c.

Traditionally, *Hodegetria* is characterized by the separation of the faces of the Mother and the Child, with Mary’s hand extended toward Her Son and Jesus making a blessing gesture with his right hand, while in his other hand he holds a scroll, which makes this iconographic type particularly representative. In contrast, the *Eleusa* emphasizes a lyrical and intimate mood in its scheme. The affection between mother and child is conveyed through their embraced bodies and faces, as well as through Jesus’s hands wrapped around his mother’s neck. It is evident from this description that the author of pendant icon has skillfully combined elements of both iconographic schemes, achieving this with exquisite technique. It is also noteworthy that, in this way, he has ideologically enriched and deepened the content of the image.

As is well known, the aforementioned iconographic figures express distinct theological dogmas. *Hodegetria* represents the dogma of the Incarnation, while *Eleusa*

signifies the divine sacrifice. But since these dogmas are essentially the same, different iconographic variants only emphasize one or another aspect of dyophysite Christology. An example of this is the fact that during the period of controversy with the iconoclasts, the caressing of the baby was interpreted as an image of the passion of Christ and as a manifestation of the reality of his human nature<sup>[6]</sup>. In the university museum’s icon, however, the depiction of Christ simultaneously showcases both the incarnate, all-powerful God and the God-man sacrificed as an offering, who appeared through divine providence to redeem the sins of Adam’s lineage.

These renditions of the Virgin Mary’s icon have been known in both Western and Eastern Christian art since ancient times. Among them, *Hodegetria* is the older type, which was enshrined in the Temple of Odigonus after its transfer from Jerusalem to Constantinople in the 5th century, as the greatest sacred relic written by St. Luke. Due to the miracles attributed to it, it became a palladium of Constantinople and the entire Byzantine Empire, appearing first on imperial seals and later on the seals of patriarchs after the Iconoclastic Controversy<sup>[7,8]②</sup>. As for *Eleusa*, it is a later variant compared to the *Hodegetria* icon and became widespread in the countries of the Byzantine area from the 11th century onwards, including Georgia<sup>[8,6]</sup>. Since the main motivation for affection in its iconography is not the mother-son relationship but rather the foreknowledge of Christ’s upcoming crucifixion, images of *Eleusa* were often placed in the resting places of the deceased - such as the side-chapel of churches and in crypts<sup>[6]</sup>. For the same reason, icons of *Eleusa* are often placed or depicted where the Holy Gifts are prepared for the Divine Liturgy.

From an artistic perspective, ‘our’ icon finds parallels in 11th-century relief art monuments. Common features include the high relief of the representation, the orderly composition, figures clearly outlined against a simple background, classical proportions of body and facial features, heads and bodies rendered volumetrically, and sculpturally

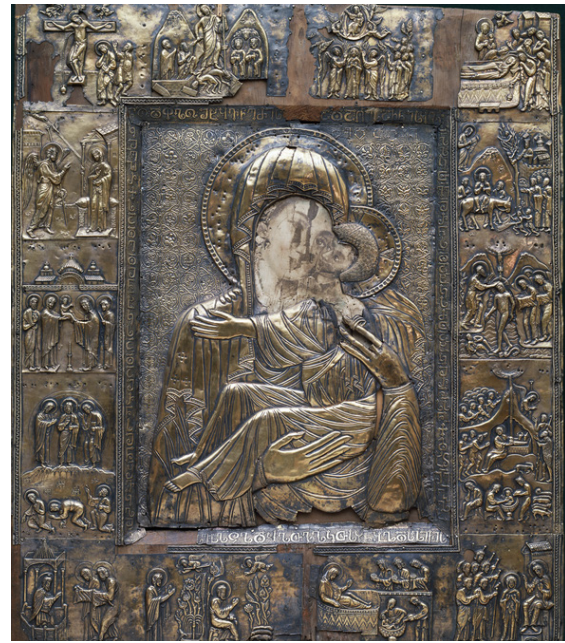
② From the 12th century, the icon of the Odigonus and its copies were displayed on the walls of Constantinople’s fortifications to protect the city during times of particular danger, as this miraculous image was believed to have protective powers<sup>[5]</sup>. From the perspective of the history of iconography, it is also noteworthy that in the earliest icons of the *Hodegetria*, the Virgin Mary was depicted full-length-either standing or seated on a throne. However, during the Middle Byzantine period (10th–13th centuries), the version where the Virgin is shown half-length became more prevalent<sup>[8,9]</sup>.

treated traits using effects of light and shade. The icon also draws attention with the frequent and intricate depiction of the folds in the garments, which are rendered so plastically that the body's form is clearly discernible beneath the fabric.

All the stylistic features mentioned above find analogies in notable examples of 11th-century Georgian art, such as the Christ Pantocrator icon forged by Theodore Gvazavaisdze from Ieli, the standing *Hodegetria* icon from Martvili, the icon of the *Eleusa* Virgin from Zarzma, the icon of Saint Simeon the Stylite from Laghami, and others<sup>[10]</sup>. Similar features of artistic style can be observed in 11th-century stone carving monuments of Georgian art, such as the reliefs on the iconostases of the churches at Zedazeni, Saphara, Khovle, Urkhvi, and Shiomghvime. Like 'our' icon, these reliefs are characterized by balanced scenes freely distributed over smooth backgrounds, figures with classical proportions, their upright posture and movement, measured gestures and emotions, as well as the plastic, flowing contours of the folds in their garments, with rounded body features precisely indicated beneath the fabric<sup>[3]</sup>. It is noteworthy that stylistically, the closest parallels to the miniature depiction of the pendant icon can be found in the figures represented in the composition of the 'Dormition of the Virgin' from the ivory triptych of Nikortsminda (**Figure 4**), in the scenes of the frame of the Zarzma Virgin icon (**Figure 5**) etc.<sup>[11]</sup>.



**Figure 4.** Central part of the ivory triptych of the Nikortsminda monastery 11th c.



**Figure 5.** Icon of the Virgin and Child of the Zarzma Monastery 11th c.

Notably, according to the research of G. Chubinashvili, the ivory triptych from Nikortsminda and Zarzma icon dates back to the 11th century. Triptych was inspired by samples of fine plastic art of the Byzantine tradition of the 10th–11th centuries<sup>[12]</sup>. The statement refers to well-known items from the treasures of Byzantine art, such as the Steatite and ivory icons of the 'Dormition of the Virgin' housed in the Museum of Art History in Vienna and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York one of the ivory covers-of a manuscript from the Munich collection depicting the same scene, etc<sup>[12, 13]</sup>. As for the Zarzma icon, there are many precisely dated parallels to it in the 11th century Georgian metalwork art<sup>[14]</sup>. It is noteworthy that the stylistic and iconographic closeness of 'our' icon is evident not only in relation to these Byzantine artifacts and the Nikortsminda triptych but also in the decoration of their frames. The identically depicted paired and intersecting columns serve as one of the key arguments for dating the pendant icon at the University of Georgia. Moreover, similar decorative elements are also quite common in the reliefs of 11th-century Georgian architectural monuments and small architectural structures such as alter screens<sup>[15]</sup>. Thus, the pendant icon can be placed within the group of ecclesiastic art monuments dated to the 11th century.

The paleographic data of the text inscribed in *Asomtavruli* on the back of the icon also corresponds to

this date (**Figure 6**). The inscription consists of six lines, which are engraved and appear monumental, despite being inscribed on a small area (3x3.7 cm). Its graphemes are stylized and characterized by curved stroke outline (the largest letter is 0.7 cm, and the smallest is 0.3 cm). The tild is drawn as a short horizontal line with a tapered stroke at the end. Two dots are used as spacing markers between words. The first letter in the third line, ‘T’ (Ⲑ), is connected to the letter ‘Á’ (Ⲡ). The inscription completely fills the back of the pendant icon and reads as follows:

*ALL\_HOLY QUENN, MOTHER OF GOD, MAY YOUR MERCY BE UPON YOUR SERVANT NIKOLOZ. AMEN.*



**Figure 6.** Drawings of the pendant icons’ texts.

The artistic level of the pendant icon and the embellished inscription suggest the high status of the donor Nikholas (Nikoloz in Georgian). It is difficult to determine whether Nikoloz was a secular or ecclesiastical figure; however, establishing the time of his life is possible through the artistic style and the paleography of the inscription. The curved stroke outline of the graphemes appears on Georgian epigraphic monuments from the late 10th century through the entirety of the 12th century. Specifically, the elongated ductus of the graphemes in this inscription and the form of the letter ‘a’ (ⲁ), characterized by a vertical line associated with its curve of the belly, suggest that its carving can be dated to the second half of the 11th century or the first half of the 12th century. However,

we believe that the inscription is more likely from the 11th century, as its graphemes closely resemble those found on the columns of the alter screens in Shiomgville, the inscriptions from Anukhva, Simoneti, and Ruisi, all of which are dated to the 11th century”<sup>[16]</sup>.

As for the purpose of the pendant icons, a passage from the writings of the historian of David the Builder clarifies this<sup>[17]</sup>. According to him: ‘There was a fight at some fortress in Kartli, the King stood at noontime in the entrance of his tent, dressed only in his shirt. Somebody shot an arrow from the fortress and hit a small golden icon of the archangel hanging on his neck, and so the Divine Powers saved him’<sup>③</sup>.

Because of their apotrophic function, the wearing of pendant icons on the chest was widespread among Christians in general. The practice of wearing such icons was already documented in early medieval Byzantium. Several significant examples of this category of icons have survived in the treasure of Christian art, made of ivory, steatite, or precious metals, and in some cases, they feature enamel images<sup>[13]</sup>. The owners of these items were primarily representatives of the state and ecclesiastical elite; however, among Pendants, there are also examples of lower quality, which clearly belonged to members of the lower class.

Pectoral pendant icons constitute a separate group in the treasure of medieval Georgian art<sup>④</sup>. Most of them are gathered in museum collections, while a few are stored in churches. They depict the Savior, the Virgin Mary, the Archangels, St. George, and others (**Figure7–10**). In some cases, these icons also feature succinct representations of scenes depicting specific feasts. Some of them have donors’ inscriptions on their backs (**Figure 11**) just like ‘our’ pendant icon. Some of them were sometimes used as medals. The medal, apparently, was a medallion with an image of St. George, the owner of which must have been a noble representative of the Georgian military nobility of the 12th century (**Figure 8**).

③ It can be confidently stated that the icon worn by the king would depict Michael the Archangel, the commander of the heavenly hosts, who was considered the foremost protector of kings and military leaders during the Middle Ages. It is not a coincidence that in Upper Svaneti, in a church painted by the king’s painter Thevdore in 1096, Jesus of Navarre is depicted before the Archangel Michael, whose facial icon is believed by researchers to represent David the Builder<sup>[18]</sup>.

④ In ancient Georgian, they are called ‘Shana’, or protective icons<sup>[19]</sup>.



Figure 7. Pendant icon with Christ-Pantocrator, the Virgin and Child and a donor (?) 10th c.



Figure 10. Back of the icon 13th c.



Figure 8. Pendant medal of St. George 12th c.



Figure 11. Drawing the donor's text of Christ's icon.



Figure 9. Pendant icon with Christ-Pantocrator 13th c.

## 4.2. The Cross

The second newly acquired item at the Museum of the University of Georgia is a clergy cross (Figures 11 and 12). This type of item is called a blessing cross because the clergy use it for the blessing of church relics and the congregation, as well as to bless the participants after the liturgy. The museum's cross consists of the cross itself (9.9x8.5 cm, weight 81,9 g.) and a conical hollow base attached to the bottom, which is 7 cm high and has a bottom diameter of 1.6 cm. The body of the cross is also hollow. It is created from two identical solid plates in the shape of a cross, which are joined together by an 8 cm high silver band that is applied along the entire perimeter of the lower plate (Figure 13). Given this information, it is evident that the cross is a receptacle and was intended for the storage

of relics, as indicated by the remnants of mastic found on the left end of the back plate of the cross<sup>⑤</sup>.



Figure 12. Front of the reliquary cross of the University of Georgia.



Figure 13. The back of the cross.



Figure 14. Inner view of the cross.

The condition of the item is not satisfactory; however, the surface decoration and the donor's inscription on the back are clearly visible. The plate is deformed in the center and at the lower arm—there is a dent, and the left side of the lower part is slightly sloping, likely due to holding the item in the hand for a long time. Additionally, the base is tilted, and numerous incidental light scratches can be observed on the front side. The stylized geometric ornaments on the ends of the cross's arms are almost

completely worn away. At the base, two holes can be seen, which were probably intended for attaching the cross to a wooden stand.

The cross has been poorly restored at some point. The upper plate of the cross is rigidly connected to the reliquary box through a tin metal, preventing the reliquary from opening.

The ends of the cross's arms are shaped like a trefoil, although this is not fully expressed on the lower arm. The lower part is straight, which would have made it convenient for attaching a handle. The entire perimeter of the surface is bordered by a complete band made up of short, dashed lines. There are also light dashed lines on the Golgotha cross and the section remaining below the mountain.

The central part of the surface features a lightly engraved depiction of the crucified Christ (Figure 15). He is shown on the so-called octagonal or Golgotha cross, depicted as deceased - eyes closed, head bowed, yet with an upright body and slightly bent elbows, with outstretched hands. The traditional inscribed title on the upper panel of the cross (INRH - "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" or IC XC - "Jesus Christ") is absent. Instead, the focus is drawn to the letters engraved on the arms of the cross, represented in the nimbus surrounding Christ - "ω-ο-ν," which encodes the so-called sacred tetragrammaton, one of the names for God referenced multiple times in the Old Testament in ancient Hebrew - 'Yahweh'<sup>⑥</sup>.

It should be noted that such an inscription of Christ in a nimbus is recorded relatively late in Byzantine iconography, specifically in the 13th to 14th centuries, and it is particularly widespread in Greece and Russia<sup>⑦</sup>. There are various arrangements of these letters on the arms of the cross in both Greek and Slavic traditions, however, the content of the text remains unchanged regardless of the distribution [20]. In the Greek version, the letter "omicron" is placed on the left arm, "omega" is at the top, and "nu" is inscribed on the right arm (ο-ω-ν). In contrast, the Russian version features the letters written in Church Slavic, with a different arrangement: "omega" is located on the left arm of the cross, "omicron" at the top, and "nu" on the right

⑥ Among the various translations of this name, the most widely used is 'I am who I am'.

⑦ In Georgia, the earliest depiction of the Savior with such an inscription in a nimbus is recorded on the 14th-century reliquary icon from Tsalenjikha [11].

⑤ Holy parts and relics were secured in the nests with a luting of mastic.



arm. Notably, the letters on 'our' cross follow the Slavic pattern, which, along with other indicators, suggests a connection between the depiction of the "Crucifixion" and Russian iconography.



Figure 15. Central part of the cross with the 'Crucifixion'

The master manufacturer's stamp, located on the left foot of the Savior on the surface of the cross, is also Russian. It indicates the 84th silver standard, the year of manufacture-1873, and the image of St. George the Victorious, striking a snake-like dragon, facing left to right. This is identified as the mark of the Moscow city hallmark<sup>[21]</sup>, confirming that the cross was made by a Russian master in Moscow and later brought to Georgia or master from Moscow made it in Georgia itself.

The object's Russian origin is indicated by the Slavic type of the crucified Jesus' face - a short and broad oval with a bifurcated beard, as well as the body's distinctly "fleshy" forms. Notably, there are also iconographic details found primarily in images of the "Crucifixion" created in Russia during the 18th and 19th centuries. For instance, our piece features two boards slanted towards each other at the base of the Golgotha cross, which were intended to stabilize the cross in the ground; in Christian iconography, they can be interpreted as the broken wings of hell's gates, upon which the Savior often stands in resurrection scenes, "trampling death by death." The bottom of the cross's horizontal arm features a generalized representation of the walls of Jerusalem, with four deep nail-like marks that

should be understood as references to the four nails used for Christ's crucifixion<sup>h</sup>.

It's noteworthy that, unlike the Russian depiction on the front of the cross, the Mkhedruli inscription on the back is executed with much deeper engraving by a different master, specifically a Georgian one. It is extensively spread out and written in large letters (Figure 16). The text begins on the upper arm of the cross, then moves horizontally across the arms before continuing the lower arm. The size of the text on the horizontal arms measures 8.2 cm, while on the vertical arms it is 7.8 cm; the largest letter is 1.2 cm, and the smallest is 0.3 cm.



Figure 16. Drawing of the donor's text of the Yakhsari cross.

The text reads:

*I, Mate Khutsuruali, donated this to the Church of Yakhsari.*

The shape of the inscription's graphemes also suggests a date in the 19th century, which coincides with the year stamped on the front of the cross.

As for *Yakhsari*, it is a mythological deity of the eastern Georgian highlanders, known for fighting against evil forces<sup>[22]</sup>, and it is also one of the epithets of St. George<sup>[23]</sup>. Several shrines and stone crosses related to *Yakhsari* are known in eastern Georgia<sup>[24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30]</sup>, but the toponym "Yakhsari Church" is confirmed only in Upper Alvani, in the Akhmeta municipality.

This is a three-nave basilica from the 9th-10th centuries<sup>[25]</sup>, named by the Tushetians who moved from Tusheti to the Alazani valley in the 19th century. According to

<sup>h</sup> In this form, the crucifixion nails are depicted on late medieval liturgical textiles—Georgian embroidered Depositions preserved in the Shalva Amiranashvili Museum of Fine Arts<sup>[28]</sup>.

the inscription, 'our' cross was donated by a certain Mate Khutsurali to the Church of Yakhsar. It is noteworthy that the representatives of this family were of Tushetian or Pshavian<sup>Ⓢ</sup> origin and they considered serfs of Yakhsari<sup>[31]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

The two new exhibits at the University of Georgia Museum are significant monuments of Christian art. One of them belongs to the category of pendant (protective, guardian) icons and was created in the 11th century by a highly skilled master who was well-versed in the contemporary Byzantine art of his time. The other item, a clerical reliquary cross, was made in 1873 by a Russian master from one of the Moscow's workshops. Both exhibits, in their iconography and style, serve as undeniable evidence of Georgia's political and cultural orientation. The icon was made during a period of close cultural ties between Georgia and Byzantium, while the cross reflects a time when the Georgian Church, its autocephaly abolished, was governed by exarchs appointed by the Russian Church's Synod, during which there was a deliberate shift to adapt centuries-old Georgian culture and art to a Russian model.

The 11th century belongs to the golden ages of the country's history. It is a time when the fragmented lands, divided into separate kingdoms, were united into a strong, centralized state by the Bagrationi dynasty<sup>[32]</sup>. This state, from the late 10th century through the 11th and 12th centuries, became a worthy ally of Byzantium and a successful defender of Christianity on a regional scale. It was an era of remarkable advancement in Georgian culture and art - especially in the field of metalwork. During this time, ecclesiastical and religious literature flourished, and large churches and monasteries of unique architectural forms were constructed. Their walls were adorned with frescoes and mosaics, exquisite icons were painted, and high-artistic cloisonné enamel masterpieces were crafted<sup>[33]</sup>. Georgian clergies were also actively engaged in leading religious centers abroad (Jerusalem, Antioch, Mounts Sinai and Athos, Constantinople, Cyprus etc.), where they served God not only through prayer, but also by creating manuscripts, icons etc.<sup>[34]</sup>. It is noteworthy that the icon of the Georgian University Museum dates back to such an

important cultural period.

As for the period during which the second item, the cross, was created - it was crafted at a time when Georgia had become a colony of Russia. In 1801 it was incorporated into the Russian Empire with the status of two provinces<sup>[35]</sup>. During this period, Georgian culture and art underwent a significant russification process<sup>[36]</sup>, which is evident in the Iakhsari Cross as well. This process continued for almost two centuries, and only after the collapse of the Soviet Union did it become possible to restore and modernize national cultural and artistic traditions in independent Georgia.

Thus, the artifacts examined in the article clearly demonstrate the epochal features of the development of the artistic culture of ancient Georgia.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, N.B. and G.G.; methodology, N.B. and G.G.; software N.B.; validation, N.B., G.G. and E.M.; formal analysis, N.B., G.G. and E.M. investigation, N.B., G.G. and E.M.; resources, N.B. and G.G.; data curation, N.B.; writing—original draft preparation, N.B., G.G. and E.M.; writing—review and editing, N.B.; visualization, N.B.; supervision, N.B.; project administration, N.B.; funding acquisition (no funding acquisition), All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Funding

This work received no external funding.

## Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

## Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

## Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

<sup>Ⓢ</sup> Tushetians and Pshavs are the names of Georgians living in the high mountains of Eastern Georgia in the regions of Tusheti and Pshavi.

## References

- [1] Rayfield, D., 2013. *The Literature of Georgia: A History*. Routledge, New York, US. pp. 15, 19–26.
- [2] Georgian National Commission for Unesco., 2016. The Georgian nomination “Living Culture of the three writing systems of the Georgian alphabet” has been inscribed on the UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The 11th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; November 28–December 2, 2016; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Available from <https://unesco.org/?p=1848&lang=en>
- [3] Dadiani, T., Kvachataдзе, E., Khundadze, T., 2017. *Medieval Georgian Sculpture*.: Printing house ‘Cezane’: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 236, 258–267, 532.
- [4] Gagoshidze, G., 2007. *Alaverdis tadzris tavadpirveli kankelis fragmentebi (Fragments of the Original Chancel-Barrier of the Alaverdi Church)*. Alaverdi Eparchy: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 24–31, 200.
- [5] Belting, H., 1994. *Likeness and Presence: The History of the Image before the Era of Art*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London. pp. 291, 73–77.
- [6] Etinfop, O., 2000. *Obraz Bogomateri: ocherki vizantiiskoi ikonografii XI–XIII vv (Image of the Virgin: Essays of Byzantine Iconography of the 11th–13th century)*. ‘Progress Tradicia’: Moscow, Russia. pp. 67–98.
- [7] Pentcheva, B.V., 2006. *Icons and Power. The Mother of God in Byzantium*. The Pennsylvania State University Press: Pennsylvania, USA. pp. 99–100, 178.
- [8] Kondakov, N., 1915. *Ikonographia Bogomateri, vol. 2, (Iconography of the Mother of God)*. Typography of Imperial Academy of Sciences: Peterburg, Russia. pp. 183–192.
- [9] Khuskivadze, L., 1973. tsilknis khati“, (Silkani Icon, Sabchota khelovneba, No. 11. Tbilisi: Publishing House ‘Khelovneba’: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 58–62.
- [10] Burchuladze, N., 2016. *kartuli khatebi (Georgian Icons)*. Karchkhadze Publishing House: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 27, 72–76, 186–189.
- [11] Burchuladze, N., 2023. *Shua saukuneebis sakartvelos kristianuli khelovnebis sagandzuri (The Treasury of Christian Art in Medieval Georgia)*. ‘Society of Iveria’: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 82–85, 98–107, 174–176.
- [12] Chubinashvili, G., 1970. *Rachinski triptych iz slonovoi kosti: Voprosi istorii iskusstva (Ivory Triptych of Racha: Problems of the History of Art)*. ‘Khelovneba’ Publishing House: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 206–235.
- [13] Evans, H. C., Wixom, W. D., 1977. *The Glory of Byzantium. Art and Culture of Byzantine Era A.D. 843–1261*. Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, USA. pp. 134–135, 154–156.
- [14] Chubinashvili, G., 1959. *Gruzinskoe chekannoe iskustvo, t. 1, (Georgian Metalwork Art, v. 1, v. 2)*. ‘Sabchota khelovneba’: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 208–212.
- [15] Khroushkova, L., 2007. *Les Monuments Chrétiens de la Côte Orientale de la Mer Noire. Abkhazie (IV<sup>e</sup>–XIV<sup>e</sup> Siècles)*. Brepols Publishers: Turnhout, Belgium. pp. 154.
- [16] Silogava, V., 2005. *Kartuli epigrapikuli damtserlobis istoriidan I. kidurtsaisruli damtserloba, mravaltavi, pilologiur-istoriuli dziebani, XXI (On the History of Georgian Epigraphic Writing System 1. Curved Stroke Writing System, ‘Mravaltavi’, Philological-Historical Studies, XXI)*. Georgian Academy of Sciences: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 448, 460, 462, 466.
- [17] Thomson R.W., 1996. *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles: The Original Georgian Texts and the Armenian Adaptation*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, England. pp. 352.
- [18] Gedevanishvili, E., 2023. *Iprari Murals. Reading of the Scene of the Apparition of the Angel to Joshua. Medieval Svaneti: Objects, Images, and Bodies in Dialogue with Built and Natural Spaces*. Brepols Publishers: Turnhout, Belgium. pp. 120–139.
- [19] Chubinashvili, D., 1984. *Kartul-rusuli lexikoni (Georgian-Russian Dictionary)*. ‘sabchota sakartvelo’: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 1394.
- [20] Zaigraykina S., Nimb, 2018, *Pravoslavnaia Entsiklopedia, (The Orthodox Encyclopedia), volum, 51, ‘Pravoslavnaia Enciklopedia’: Moscow, Russia. pp. 212–221.*
- [21] Goldberg T., Mishukov F., Platonova N., Postnikova-Loseva, M., 1967. *Russian Golden and Silver Art of the 15th–20th centuries (in Russian)*. ‘Nauka’: Moscow, Russia. pp. 175.
- [22] Ochiauri, T., 1967. *mitologiuri gadmotsemebi aghmosavleti sakartvelos mtianetshi (Mythological Traditions in the Mountainous Regions of Eastern Georgia)*. Mecniereba: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 20–21.
- [23] Kiknadze, Z., 2016. *Kartuli Mitologia (Georgian Mythology)*. Ilia State University Press: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 46, 250, 251.
- [24] Bakradze, B., 2008. *iakhsaris khati (Sanctuary of Yakhsari)*. In: Abashidze, I. (eds.). *Description of the Historical and Cultural Monuments of Georgia (in Russian)*, ‘Aleksandre Ghlonti’: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 73–74.
- [25] Dvali, T., 2008. *The Church of Yakhsari: Description of the Monuments of Georgian History and Culture (in Russian)*, ‘Alexandre Ghlonti’: Tbilisi Georgia. 107–108.
- [26] Jincharadze, D., 2008. *svetis angelozi: sakartvelos istoriisa da kulturis dzegilta aghtseriloba (Angel of the Pillar)*. In: Abashidze, I. (eds.). *Description of the Historical and Cultural Monuments of Georgia (in Russian)*, Volume 2. ‘Aleksandre Ghlonti’: Tbilisi,

- Georgia. pp. 203
- [27] Jincharadze, D., 2008. iakhsris satemo khati). In: Abashidze, I. (eds.). Description of the Historical and Cultural Monuments of Georgia (in Russian), volume 2, `Aleksandre Ghlonti`: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 337.
- [28] Jincharadze, D., 2008. iakhsris djvari (Cross of Yakhsari). In: Abashidze, I. (eds.). Description of the Historical and Cultural Monuments of Georgia (in Russian), Volume 2. `Aleksandre Ghlonti`: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 352.
- [29] Jorbenadze, B., 2008. iakhsris khati (Sanctuary of Yakhsari). In: Abashidze, I. (eds.). Description of the Historical and Cultural Monuments of Georgia (in Russian), volume 2, `Aleksandre Ghlonti`: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 416.
- [30] Nutsubidze, A., 2008. iakhsris khati (The Sanctuary of Yakhsari). In: Abashidze, I. (eds.). Description of the Historical and Cultural Monuments of Georgia (in Russian), volume 2. `Aleksandre Ghlonti`: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 304.
- [31] Ochiauri, A., 1991. Georgian Folk Holidays in the Mountainous Regions of Eastern Georgia (Pshavi) (in Russian). `Mecniereba`: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 53–54.
- [32] Metreveli, R., 2010. The Golden Age. `Artanuji`: Tbilisi, Georgia.
- [33] Kelly-Bucelati, M., Santambrogio, G., 2016. Georgia: Land of Gold and Faith. Identity and Otherness in the History of a people (in Russian). `Società Editrice`: Fiorentina, Italy.
- [34] Karanadze, M., 2018. The Georgian manuscript book abroad. 2018. Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Center of Manuscripts: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 7.
- [36] Burchuladze, N., 2023. Icons from Svaneti in the Context of Byzantine Painting. In: Studer-Karlen, M., Bacci, M., Chitishvili, N. (eds.). Medieval Svaneti: Objects, Images, and Bodies in Dialogue with Built and Natural Spaces, volume 2. Brepols Publishers: Turnhout, Belgium. pp. 184–207.
- [37] Avalov Z. 1940. The Independence of Georgia in International Politics. 1918–1921. `Headley Brother's`: London; `Hiperion` reprint edition. 1981, US
- [38] Burtchuladze, N., 2009. Contemporary Georgian Ecclesiastical Art. `Cezanne` Printing House: Tbilisi, Georgia. pp. 3–90.