

# FIDELIO

Journal of Poetry, Science, and Statecraft



Spring 2001

\$5.00

# The Three-Church Basilica Type in Georgia

*The contemporary spirit is filled with multicultural and universal concepts, which regard all cultures as being equal. In other words, we need to enrich our own culture, and respect its minorities. Historical background may be useful in supporting this global idea. Georgia appears to be a good example, as a permanent recipient of different ethnic groups and confessions, treating them moderately. This article presents one of the specific expressions of this idea.*

Three-church basilicas present, indeed, a very special architectural appearance, and they are by and large concentrated in Georgia. These churches were built mostly in the Sixth-Seventh centuries. Who needed three separate chambers in a basilica, which thus restricted the space for the faithful? Christianity is a teaching, and a teaching needs an auditorium, and an auditorium demands a large interior. Why, then, is the Georgian case so unusual? This paper deals with the problem of providing a functional explanation for the three-church basilica type.

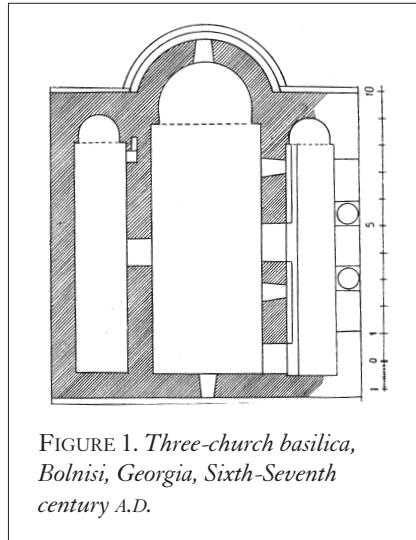


FIGURE 1. *Three-church basilica, Bolnisi, Georgia, Sixth-Seventh century A.D.*

Lines of columns are present in a normal basilica, whereas a three-church basilica is formed when the columns are replaced by interior walls [SEE Figure 1]. The purpose of these interior walls is still obscure.

We are greatly indebted to some brilliant contributions to this field. Ernst Badstübner<sup>1</sup> considers a Benedictine

presbytery [SEE Figure 2] to be derived from an Eastern Christian, possibly even Georgian, prototype, with a Swiss example [SEE Figure 3] being a transitional stage. In the Middle Ages, the small chambers of a presbytery served either for storage of the holy relics, or as an assembling area for the monks before prayer. Badstübner wants to regard the Georgian division of a church in the same way. This comparison remains hypothetical, requiring many arguments to prove that the Benedictine rules were the same as those of Georgia. And, if the Georgian type had been adopted by the West *via* Byzantium and the Mediterranean, as Badstübner thinks, why don't we find any remnants in those places? Theoretically, a division of a church is more a necessity, than an influence.

We remain inclined to think that Georgia's Zaza Aleksidze was quite accurate in his conclusion, that those separated spaces in Georgia served for the different Christian confessions—Monophysite and Diophysite.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there had been substantial confessional dualism in East Georgia (Iberia) in the Sixth-Seventh centuries, and those three-church basilicas could have served as an architectural compromise for the sake of unity. And Iberia was a special case of this solution. An additional three-church basilica comes from Egypt (Sixth-Seventh centuries), and is thought to be of Georgian origin.<sup>3</sup>

In the Sixth-Seventh centuries, Iberia, being a traditional ally of Byzantium, was badly threatened by the [Iranian] Sassanids, who made their attempt to

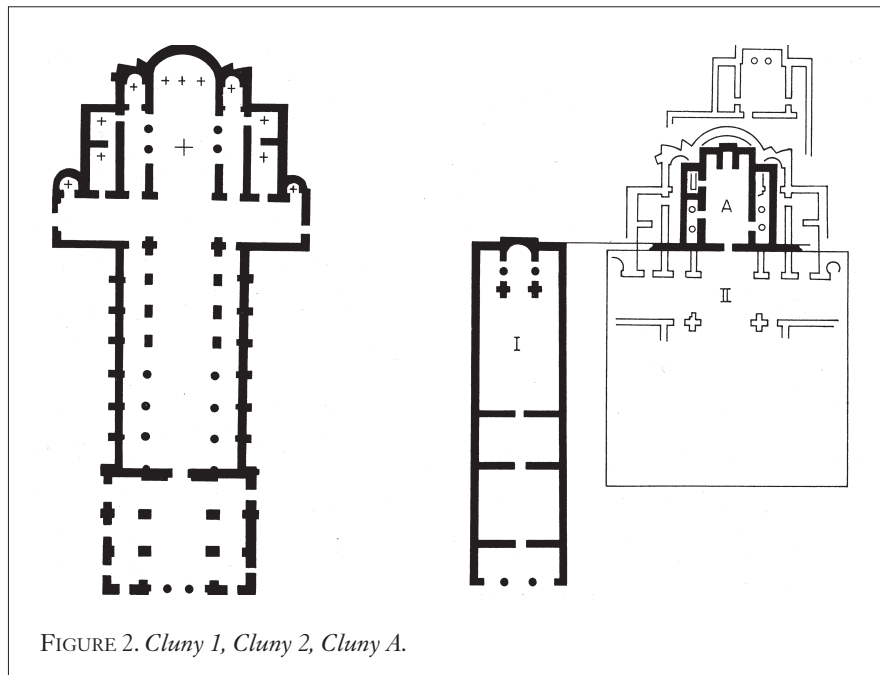


FIGURE 2. *Cluny 1, Cluny 2, Cluny A.*

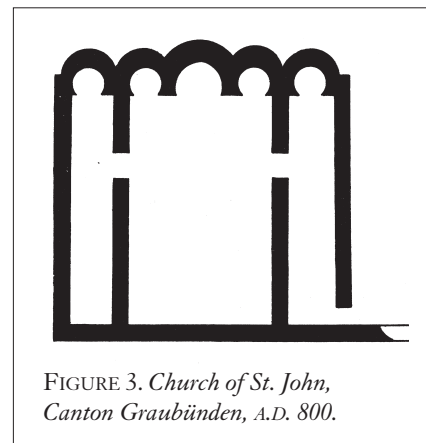


FIGURE 3. *Church of St. John, Canton Graubünden, A.D. 800.*

build an Asiatic empire, and who demanded that the Caucasian range be considered the outer boundary of their political influence. The Iranians supported the Monophysites, whereas the Georgians wished to be Diophysites, thus demonstrating their fidelity to Byzantium and Europe. However, most of the lower classes, inspired by Iranian aid and irritated by the local magnates, stressed their loyalty to the pro-Iranian branch of Christianity, as did some ambitious nobles. Moreover, the Armenian *receptio* (community) was present in Georgia, and they were faithful Monophysites. The situation seems to have been even more complicated by Iranian Zoroastrian proselytizing, conducted either by the Persian *receptio* dwelling in the Iberian cities, or by new native converts to the Iranian confession.

Thus, Diophysites, Monophysites, and even Zoroastrians, were present, and, in trying to maintain the national unity and social security of the country, one had to deal with them. What was to be done? Collect them in one place, ignore their confessional divisions, and not allow the appearance of truly separate—dominated by the Iranians—religious and political structures. The three-church basilicas were intended to serve this basic purpose, especially in the villages, where the serfs were rudely suppressed by their lords. Thus, although the village churches are very small, they are still divided into three sections. One could argue, that there was no place for the Zoroastrians in a Christian church, but we have to take into consideration the fact of Iranian (Sassanid) Zoroastrianism being largely influenced by European Mithraism, according to which even the date of birth of Mithras was fixed to the 25th of December.<sup>4</sup> The Armenians, inspired and strengthened by the support of Khosrau I, the Persian pro-Monophysite Shah, accused the Georgians of disloyalty to the Monophysite faith, and of loyalty instead to all of the Christian confessions, admitting even Nestorians to the churches. Of course, the Georgians would have preferred their country to have been neatly orthodox, but failing to achieve this comfortable situation, they tried to achieve a

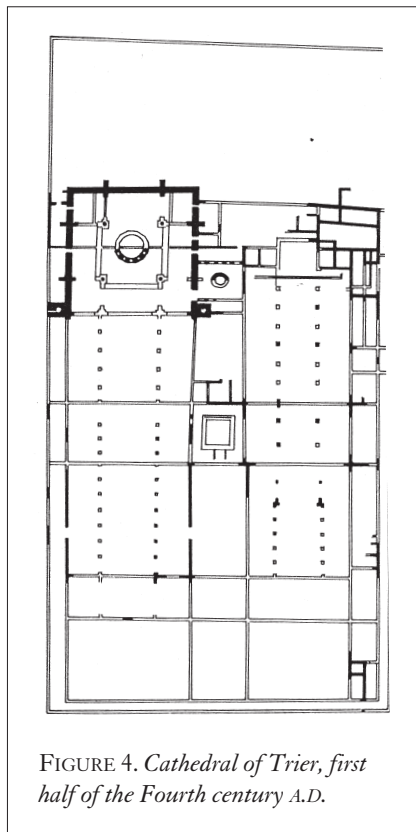


FIGURE 4. *Cathedral of Trier, first half of the Fourth century A.D.*

national—and not religious—unity, putting all the confessions into one church.<sup>5</sup>

Europe had faced the same problem earlier, in the Fourth-Fifth centuries, with the orthodox Christian folk, the Arians, and the Mithra-worshippers living together. So, we are inclined to expect something similar there. Indeed, the joint basilicas [SEE Figures 4 and 5], or a Mithraeum inserted into a Christian church (Santa Maria Capua Vetere, Santa Prisca at Aventine Hill), could have served the same purpose.

And, perhaps, the Egyptian case included three separate chambers, with

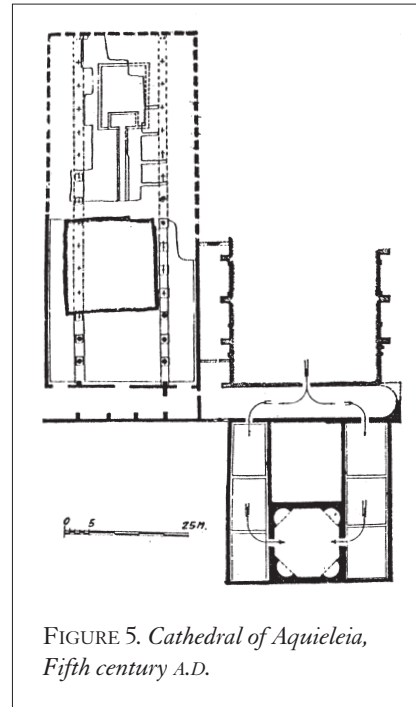


FIGURE 5. *Cathedral of Aquileia, Fifth century A.D.*

the Greek, Coptic, and Armenian languages being involved in the church service. It is thought that a certain Cyrus from Iberia extended his activity by founding the three-church basilica in Thebes in the Seventh century.<sup>6</sup>

This pattern of confessional pluralism has continued to be precisely maintained. Being largely an Orthodox country, Georgia still embraced different communities, such as Jewish (from the Second century B.C.), Muslim (from the Eighth century A.D.), Armenian, Roman Catholic, etc.

So, co-existence was easily achieved—which means that it can be achieved any time, anywhere.

—Dr. Nino Silagadze,  
—Prof. Dr. Tedo Dundua,  
Tbilisi State University

1. E. Badstübner, "Zum Ursprung des dreischiffigen Presbyteriums an Klosterkirchen des benediktinischen Reformmönchtums (ein Vergleich mit den Drei-Kirchen-Basiliken in Georgien)," *Georgica*, Jena-Tbilisi, Heft 7, 1984, pp. 77-81.
2. Z. Aleksidze, *Liber Epistolarum: Textum Armenicum cum Versione Georgica Edidit et Disputatione Commentariisque Instruxit* (Tbilisi: 1968), pp. 262-266.
3. U. Morrenet de Villard, "Una chiesa di

- tipo georgiano nella necropoli Tebana," in *Coptic Studies in Honor of Walter Ewing Crum* (Boston: 1950), pp. 495-500.
4. T. Dundua, *Christianity and Mithraism, The Georgian Story* (Tbilisi: 1999).
5. Z. Aleksidze, *op. cit.*, p. 191. Pope Gregory I is said to have been delighted by the religious toleration in Georgia.
6. Z. Aleksidze, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-272; also G. Chubinashvili, *Architecture of Kachetia* (in Russ.) (Tbilisi: 1959), p. 142.