

## CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF THE EARLY BYZANTINE AND CAUCASIAN ARCHITECTURE

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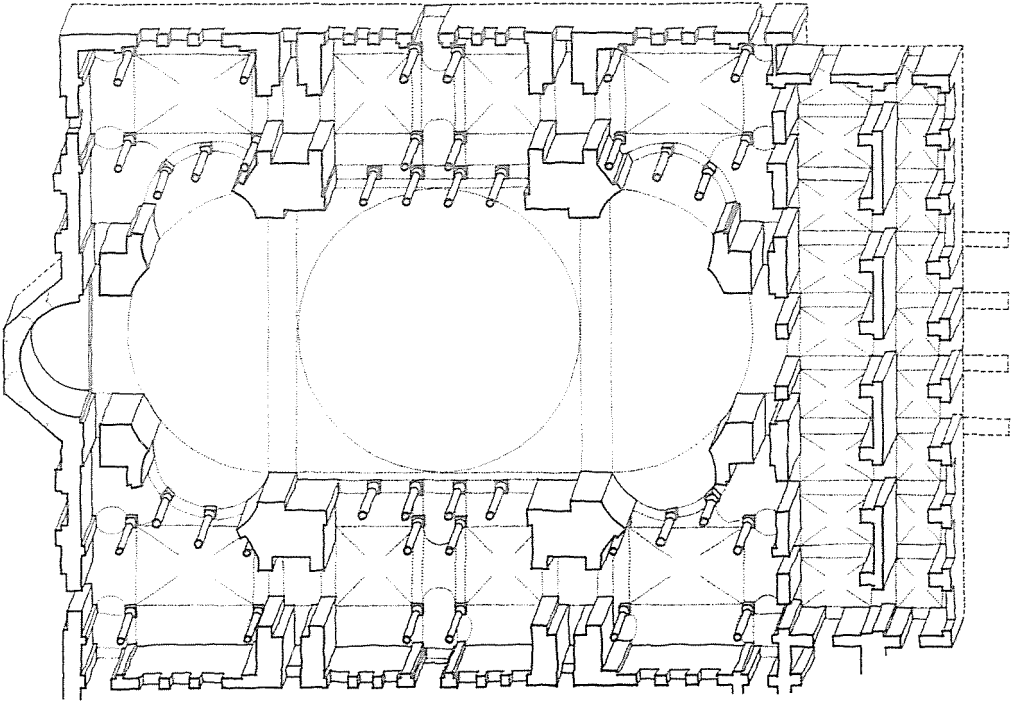
### Abstract

In accordance with the distinguishably differing historical circumstances the Byzantine (e.g. Constantinopolitan) and Caucasian (Georgian and Armenian) churches became elaborated diversely on the bases of their particular local traditions. Some of the outstanding examples of their architecture is analyzed in detail by the author of this article.

*Keywords:* Mediaeval Architecture.

No doubt, Early Christian and further Byzantine architecture was initially going to develop – as has been pointed out by a number of scholars specializing in the subject – mainly on the lines of the traditional classical imprint left by the legacy of the Late Roman Empire. However, we must not forget, that by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, emergent religious ideas of Christianity in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern World created substantial new architectural demands that differed essentially from the previous ones, from those of the Imperial Heritages. The enhanced, spiritual requirement of the Church can be summed up in one sentence: how would it be possible to represent in the already existing massive construction of the building activity the transcendental Spiritual Concept of the Faith, considered the church to be meant that of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Symbolic ways of thinking, which evolved long before the beginning of Christianity, mainly from classical Platonic ideas, evidently helped to provide a solution to this problem. Accordingly, the originally cultic spaces of the Church were now regarded as – and transformed into – symbolic images of the Christian Universe, where exquisite mosaics or paintings illustrated detailed scenes from the Holy Scriptures. By that way the spiritual meaning of an abstract space structure was interpreted by comprehensible pictures.

There is much to be said on the study of the development in the compositions of these Christian monuments. Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, in my opinion, the most important modification in the realm of church ar-



*Fig. 1.* Constantinople: Hagia Sophia. Axonometrical groundplan

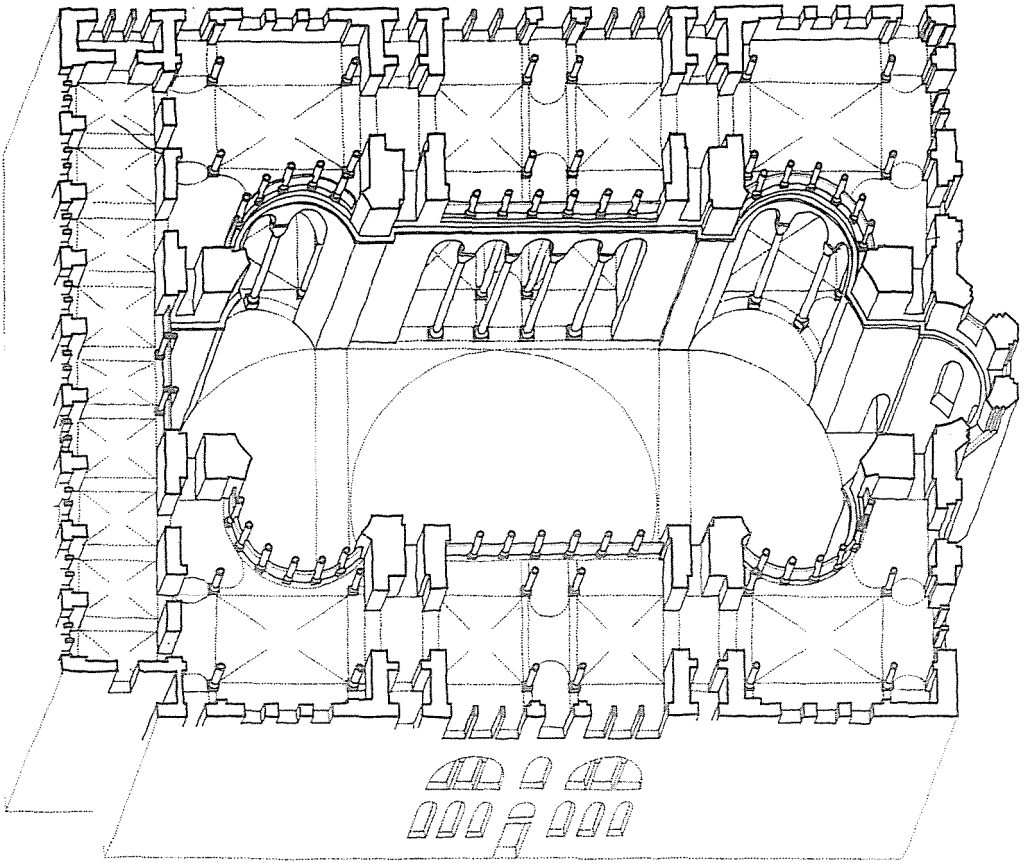
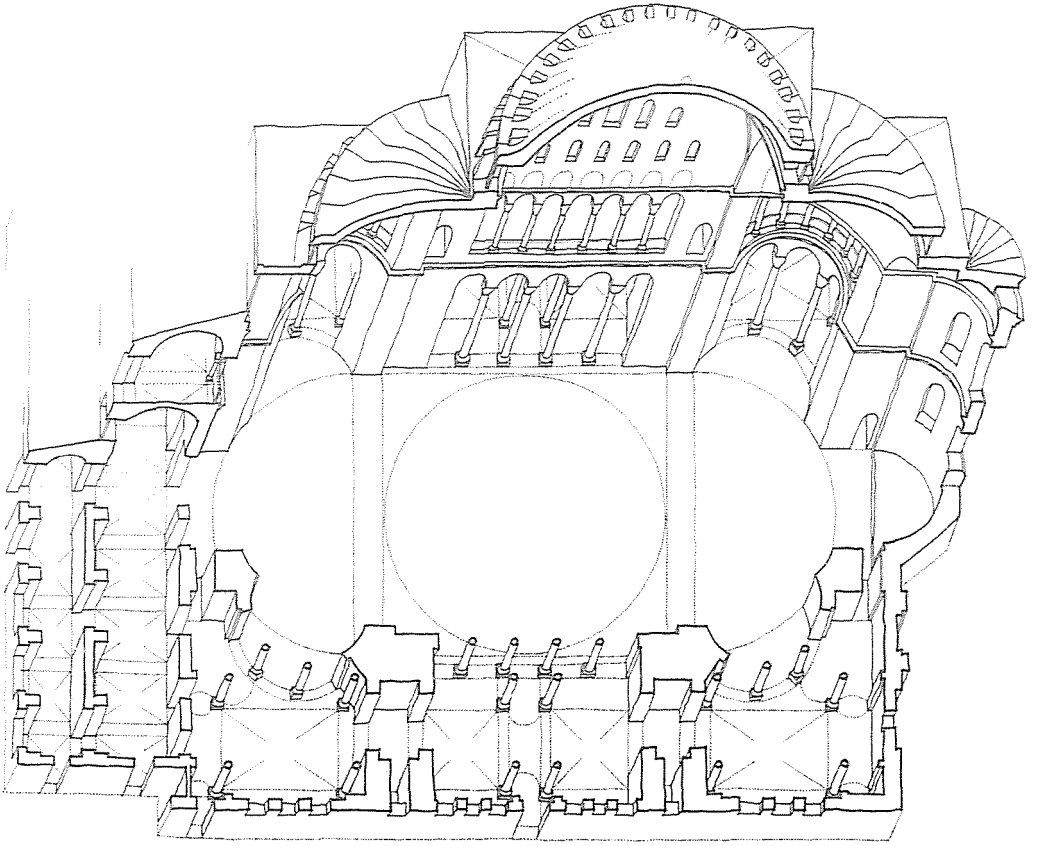
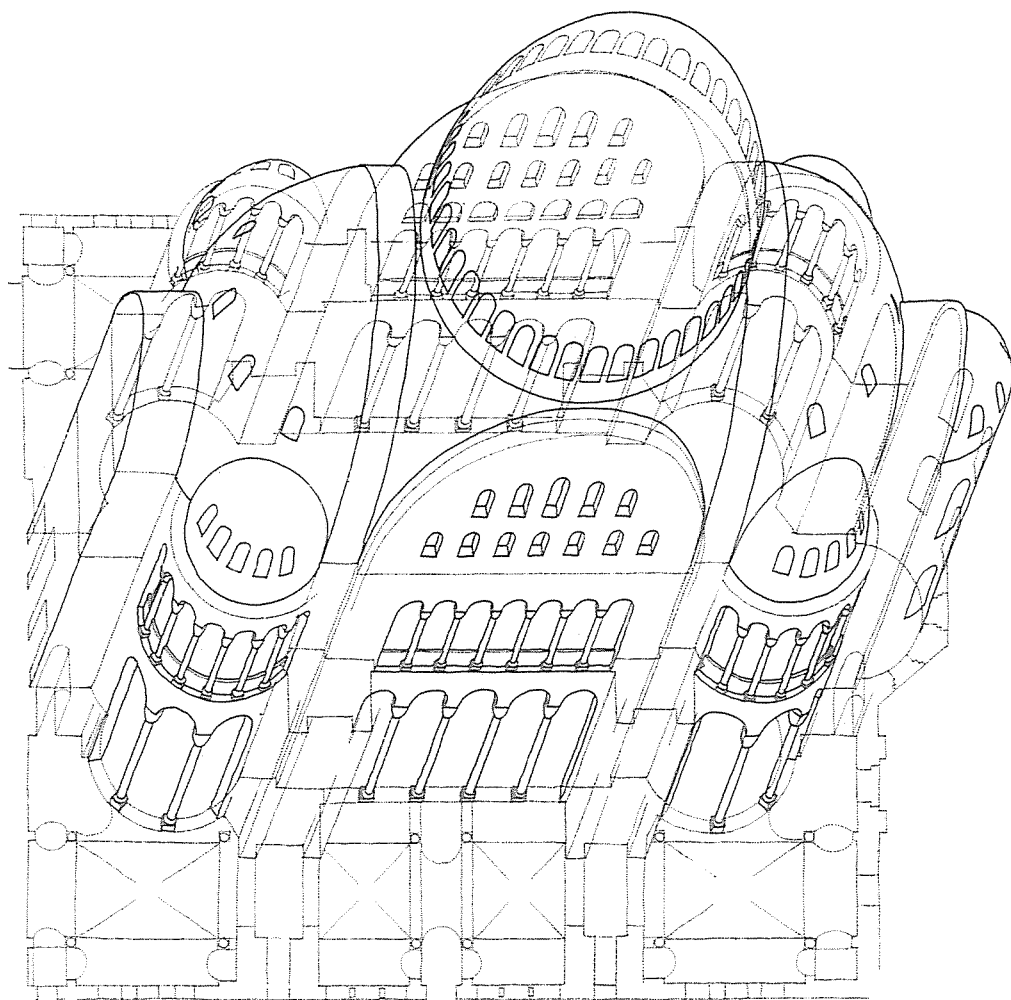


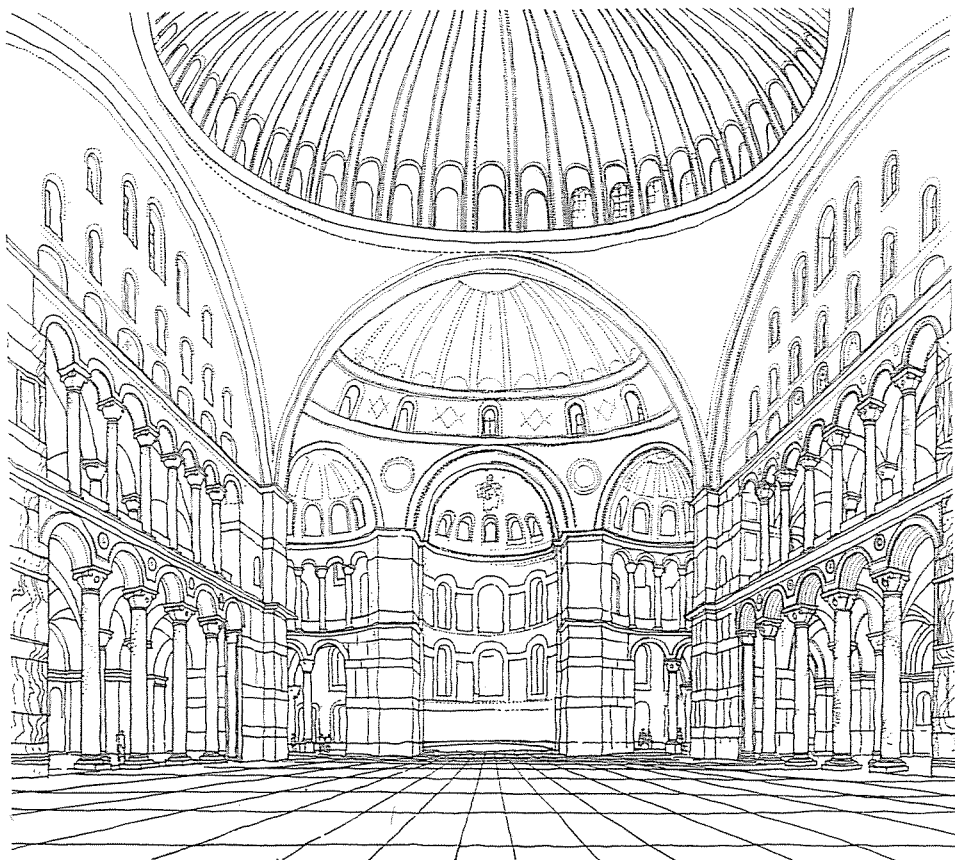
Fig. 2. Constantinople: Hagia Sophia. Axonometry



*Fig. 3.* Constantinople: Hagia Sophia. Axonometrical section



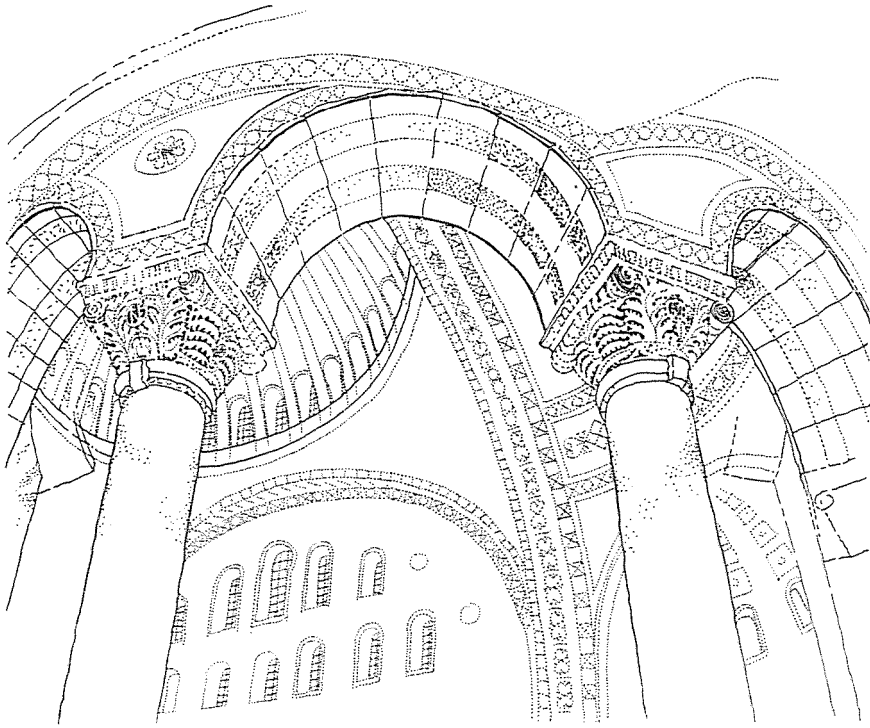
*Fig. 4.* Constantinople: Hagia Sophia. Axonometrical space structure



*Fig. 5. Constantinople: Hagia Sophia. Interior*

chitecture was manifested in the structural system of religious spaces and in the incorporation of their applied art, such as mosaics and paintings.

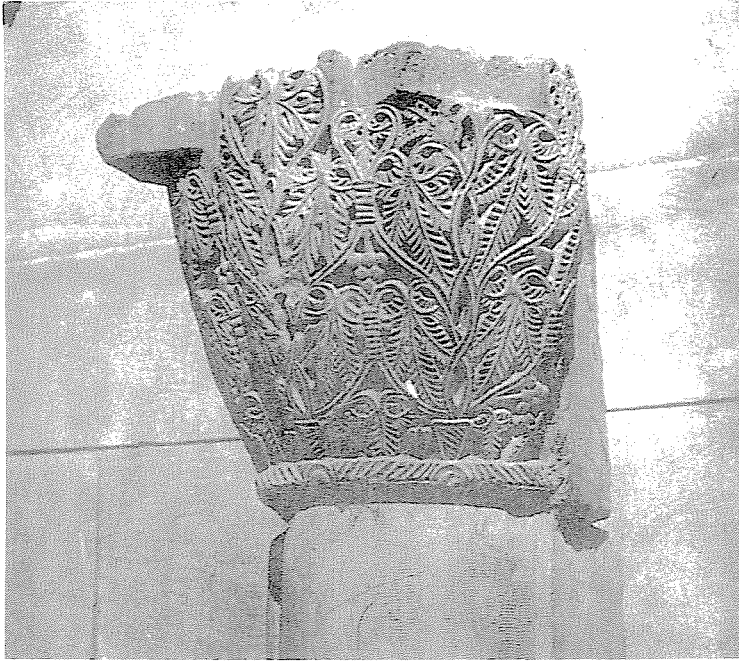
Significant result of that building activity was the emergence of baldachin-like domed sacred buildings of the Imperial works of Constantinople, many of them built in monumental forms as early as by the first part of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The most magnificent example of them is the so-called third Hagia Sophia rebuilt in the Byzantine capital under the reign of Iustinian. Here, where the State was closely allied with the Church, the space ensemble obviously represented the Cosmic Concept of that word, in accordance



*Fig. 6.* Constantinople: Hagia Sophia. Architectural detail

with the belief of Early Christian, Byzantine and later Mediaeval thinkers. As a result, the interior complexes were designed according to an exactly defined, strict hierarchical order. The tectonic elements of the architecture were hidden, either covered or concealed by columns and an elaborate latticework of decorations, so that the heaviness of the basically massive constructions seemed to have disappeared. The central space crowned by an extensively wide dome became virtually diffused by light and achieved an illusionistic effect of suspended weightlessness. In the brilliantly illuminated interior the Heavenly Hemisphere appeared as if it floated upon the row of the gleaming windows and was supported instead of massive piers by four spacious niches. At the highest celestial top of the structure, above the 'Earth Core', originally the symbolic sign of the Holy Cross took shape and gave deeper meaning to the golden mosaic brightness of the hierarchical summit.

Having studied the artistic innovations of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Constantinopolitan churches – also in Ravenna – of Iustinian period one is bound



*Fig. 7.* Capital going to hide the material stone core (Cairo: Coptic Museum)

to think that the visually light, luminous spaces of ecclesiastic monuments expressed the Christian Neoplatonic ideas of the known writers and poets of the time conveying the message that: 'Beauty is Light'.

Inside the sacred interiors of these churches a fascinating spiritual effect of the Christian Cosmic Concept was produced by the diffusion and reflection of the shimmering light and its refracted colours. The Spirit of this solemn era was brought to vivid life and given active existence by the liturgy. Having been participated in the symbolic drama of religious services the believers hoped to achieve a higher level of human existence through which they could appeal for Salvation.

Considering these facts it can be ascertained that in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, which can be regarded as the early height of Byzantine architectural development, Constantinopolitan churches had a sophisticated and refined interior atmosphere, characterized by specific features of architecture and their applied art representing the Cosmic Concept of the Church as well as the Imperial culture of that age.

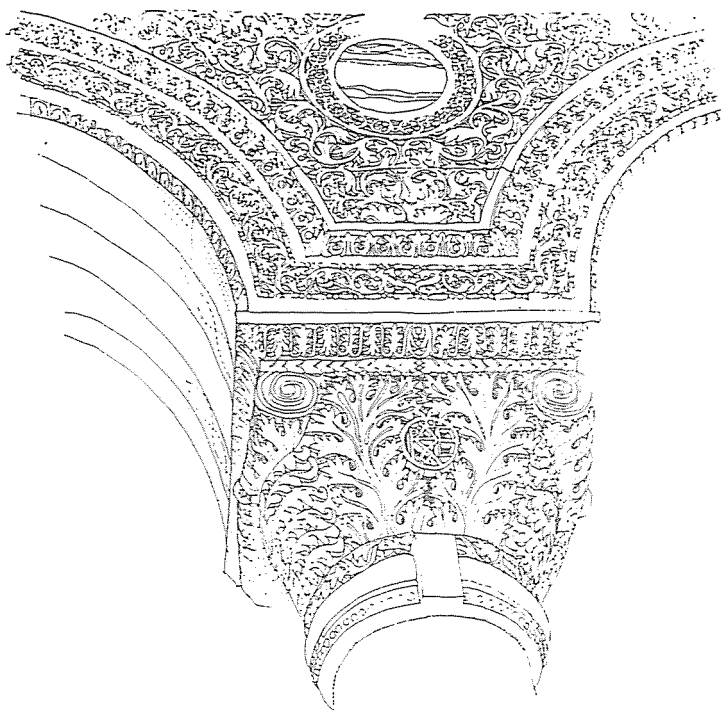




*Fig. 8.a.* Capitals going to hide the material core



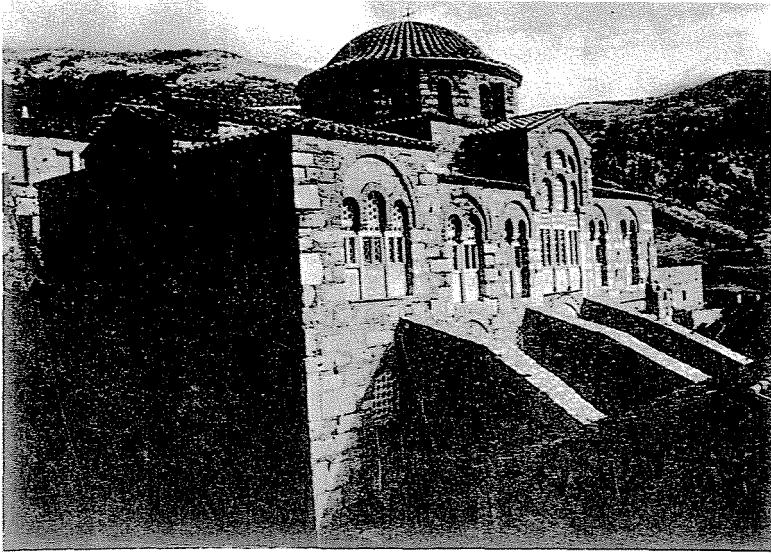
*Fig. 8.b.* Capital going to hide the material core



*Fig. 9.* Constantinople: Hagia Sophia. Capital and architectural surface structure

It has been observed, however, as previously mentioned, that, while the sacred interior composition of the churches was of primary consideration of the time, the outside embellishment of the buildings was regarded unimportant by the master builders of Iustinian period. It would be obviously erroneous to think that 6<sup>th</sup> century craftsmen of the Byzantine Capital would not have been able to enrich the external appearance of their churches had they wished to do so. Historical data suggest that they were not interested in it because of the actual circumstances.

The architectural evolution in the structural composition of Byzantine churches was going to be completed in the 10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, after the conflict of the Iconoclastic Controversy has been resolved. In modelling exterior and interior proportions of those churches several new attempts can be recognized: they were searching for a scale-link between human beings and the whole mass and façade ensemble by architectural details. This endeavour was manifested e. g. in the composition of Hosios Lucas, nearby Stiris. On the other hand, there is the same complex relationship of space structure as that of the liturgical process: joining the divine Height of

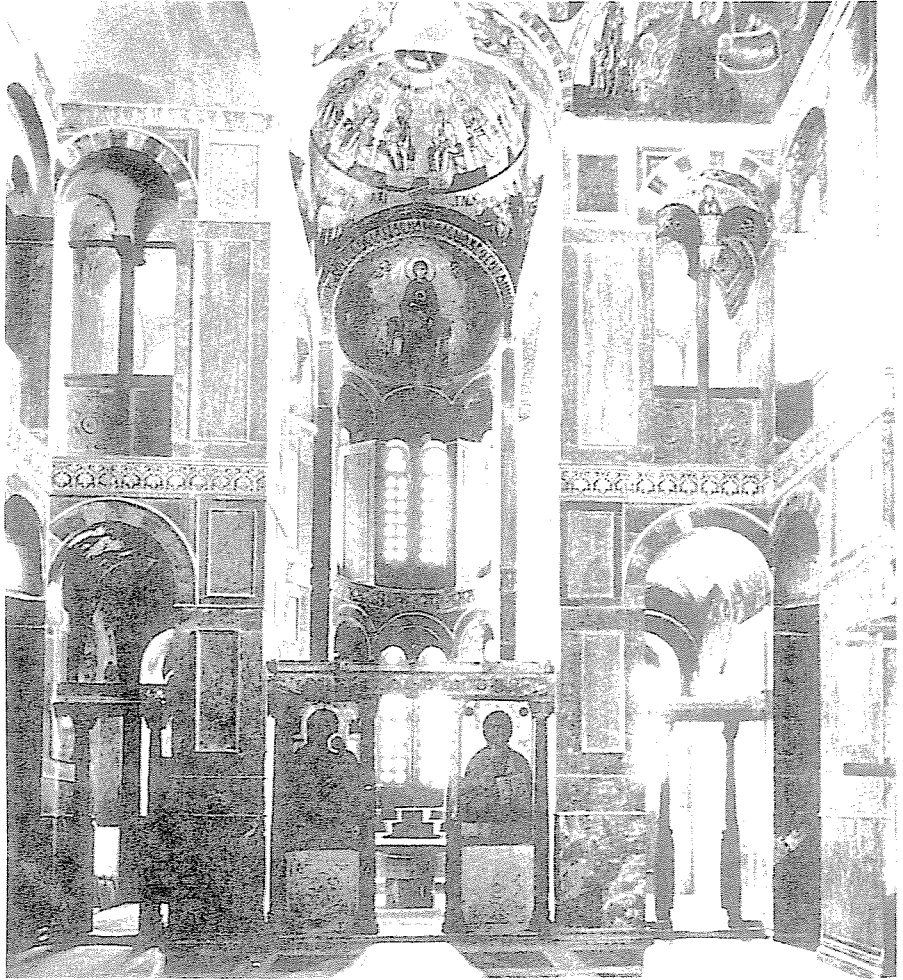


*Fig. 10. Hosios Lucas, nearby Stiris. Outlook*

the Heavenly Kingdom to the level of the Earth by displaying scenes from the New Testament in its applied mosaics placed on the spherical surface of the four corners between celestial and terrestrial parts of the church. Theotokos, the representation of Mother God became a link between these spheres in the main apse.

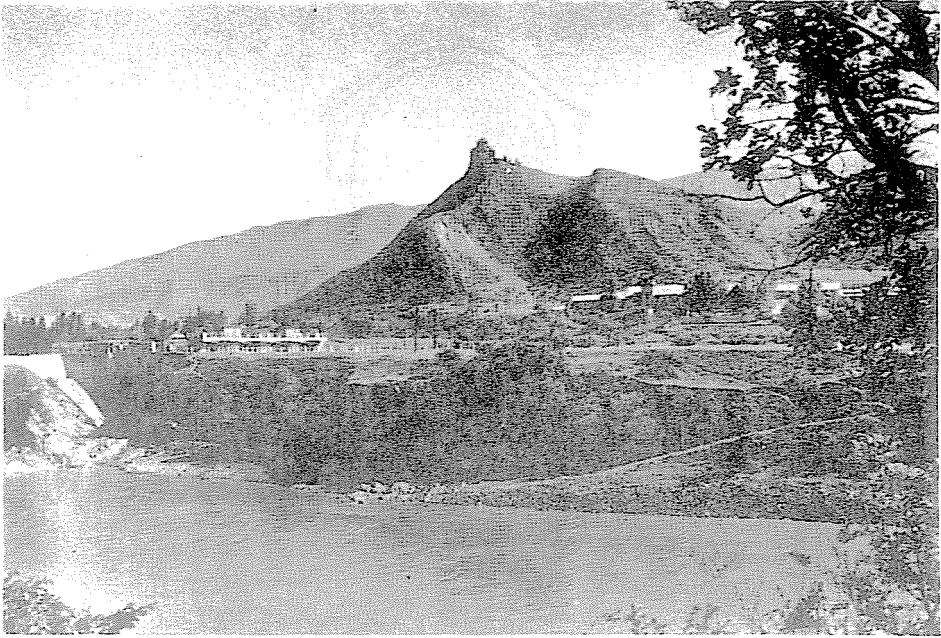
The further aim of my paper is to give a brief outline of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Century Caucasian architecture in comparison with the characteristic features of the Imperial examples created by Byzantine builders in Constantinople before the Iconoclastic period. The most effective way of doing this seems to be to analyze the baldachin-type domed cross in square churches especially the tetraconchs, of which numerous examples exist all over the Byzantine Empire as well as in Georgia and Armenia. Considering the characteristics of these Caucasian ensembles, they certainly resembled those of the Early Christian prototypes of the Eastern Provinces which were often dedicated to the Holy Cross or as martyria of Confessors in the main Bishopric Centres.

A representative of a 6<sup>th</sup> Century Syrian example was excavated in Seleuceia and is supposed to be the original martyrium of St. Thecla. Other variations of this composition were found in Apameia (Qal'at Mudiq) and in Sergiopolis Rusafa, where again the churches were connected to the Bishops' Palace. As a matter of fact, similar tetraconchs are known to exist in



*Fig. 11. Hosios Lucas, nearby Stiris. Interior*

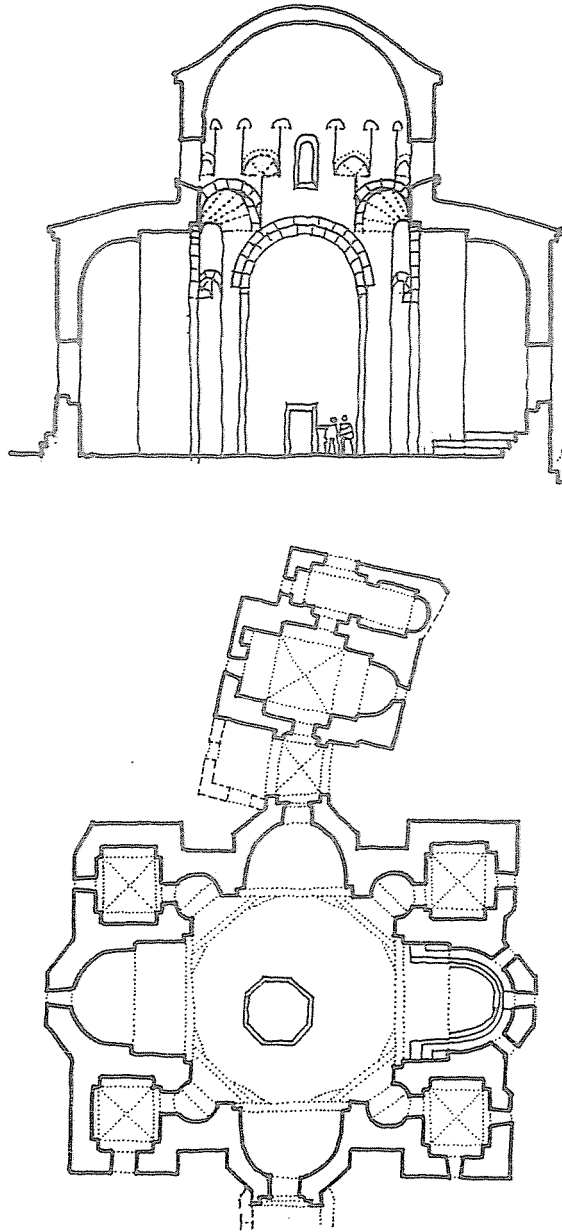
the Middle East, for instance also in the Metropolitan core of Mesopotamia in Amida, as well as in Egypt at Karm Abu Mena. Obviously, the famous Sergius and Bacchus Cathedral of Bosra is also a particularly beautiful example of the rather early tetraconch types. Domed cruciform churches were typical in East and West, e. g. in towns such as Antioch, Mediolanum, Sikhem, Epheos, Shasa, Jerash. In their sacred architectural compositions they accentuated the Cross as a symbol of Redemption in a tectonic way, which still differed from the sophisticated 6<sup>th</sup> century architectural style developed in Constantinople under the reign of Iustinian.



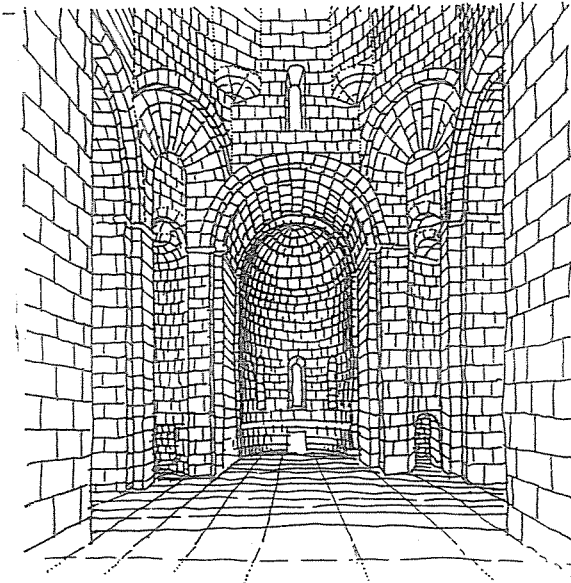
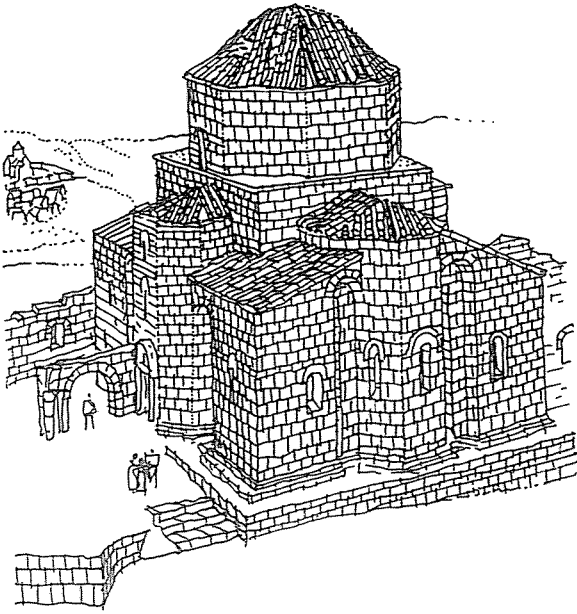
*Fig. 12. Djwari, nearby Mcheta. External view*

The spiritual aim of architecture acquired a new direction differing from the space illusions of the previous ones. It is a well known fact that as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century Emperor Constantine the Great and, in particular, his outstanding bishop, Eusebius, have already widely disseminated the miraculous event of the Holy Cross throughout the Christian world. In a short time, the worship of the sacred instrument of torture, the Cross on which Christ died, acquired an evocative meaning for architecture, and later its shape was going to be frequently used in architectural designs for various religious purposes. This symbolic composition represented for the believers the optimistic triumph related to Redemption. Its important message was definitively formulated by Ambrosius, the world-famous bishop of Mediolanum (Milan). His written text, inscribed on the cross-shaped building in Mediolanum made it clear: 'Forma crucis templum est templum victoriae Christi - sacral triumphalis signat imago locum'.

In view of the historical circumstances it is hardly surprising that in the Caucasian region, especially in the Eastern part of Georgia, named Kartli, the worship of the Cross became generally accepted and highly valued. This phenomenon was demonstrated not only by the religious disposition of the population based on close connection with the Middle East



*Fig. 13.* Djwari, nearby Mcheta. Groundplan and section



*Fig. 14.* Djwari, nearby Mcheta. Interior and outlook



*Fig. 15.* Djwari, nearby Mcheta. Architectural detail and applied sculptural motifs

(Syria, Palestine, Cappadocia, etc.) but even more expressed by the resolute determination of the people to gain victory over the Sassanid Persian invaders who – with their Fire cult – threatened the Caucasian Christians with extinction. In a characteristic way, Nino, the 4<sup>th</sup> century Cappadocian missionary, had already erected monumental crosses on the top of Georgian hills and mountains, because the symbolic meaning of the Holy Image enabled them to proclaim not only the Christian faith but also the spiritual authority of the local population against the hated invaders of the Persian fire-worshippers.





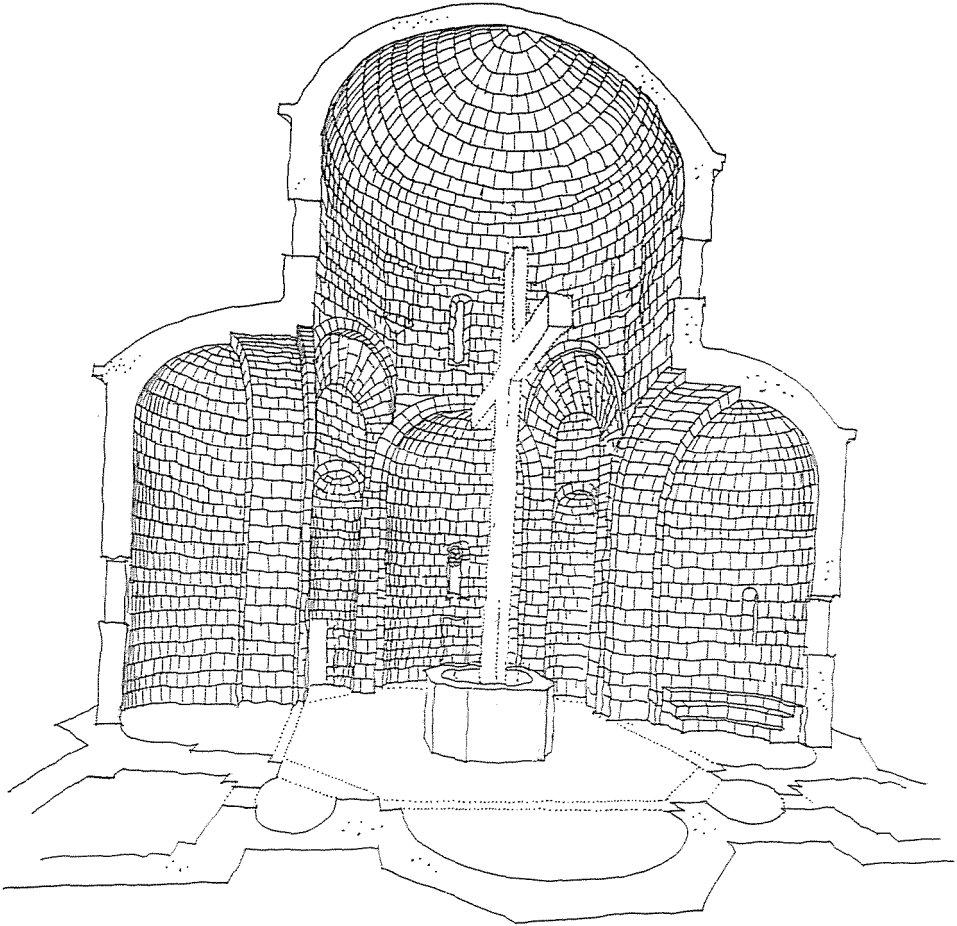
*Fig. 16.* Djwari, nearby Mcheta. Main entrance and above it the Victorious Cross on the tympanum

In view of all the facts known about the historical data and the situation concerning the Caucasian territories between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries – particularly in consequence of their desperate struggle for liberation – there were important reasons to reverse the Holy Cross in opposition to the fire-worshipping foreign invaders. Although, while it must be considered that Kartli, Georgia and Armenia all had a traditionally close ecclesiastical relationship with the Middle Eastern Christian Churches of Syria, Mesopotamia, Palestine and especially Jerusalem, in the field of religion, culture, architecture and art, it must also be admitted that they did not actually took up arms to fight under the sign of the Cross against the foreign occupants as the Caucasians.

By my opinion, several variations of the domed tetraconch, e. g. cross in square churches evolved in Kartli and its neighbouring regions and their architectural form also had a strong effect on the outlook of the expanding, hostile forces, while it expressed the proud resistance of the local Christian inhabitants.

This paper does not intend to investigate the extent of all the tetraconch churches in the Caucasian territories, it merely aims to enumerate a few of the most typical examples which are outstandingly significant owing to their spiritual influence. One of these is the 5<sup>th</sup> century church of the True Cross in Manglissi, and another one is the one devoted to Our Lady in Manglissi Dzweli. A more elaborate version of this design was built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century at the Bishopic centre of Ninocminda, where the arms of the cross were extended from the central domed octagonal core, and chapels were placed into the arms of the Cross in a diagonal pattern. The Cross shape, symbolically signifying Redemption was enriched by the central octagon since the figure eight was regarded in sacred writings as the sign of the Resurrection. This way, by introducing the octagon into the cross shaped form of the structure an additional symbolic meaning was achieved in the composition, because, according to Augustinus and Ambrosius, now not only the idea of Redemption was signified by the Cross but also the concept of the Resurrection by the addition of the symbolic meaning of the figure eight.

It hardly needs any proof that the development of Caucasian architecture not only inspired traditional culture but also had far reaching connections. Its extension can be seen in the establishment of the Convent of the Holy Cross, founded about the year 430, near Bethlehem in Bir-el-Kutt by the Iberian (Georgian) Petre. A similar importance may be attributed to the meaningful creative and cultural-architectural activity of Caucasian monks who, during the 6<sup>th</sup> century, resettled from Syria in the region of Kartli, mainly in Shio-Mgvime and David Garedja where, in this way, they reinforced the worship of the Holy Cross.



*Fig. 17.* Djwari, nearby Mcheta. Axonometrical view, in the middle the former Cross of Nino demolished later

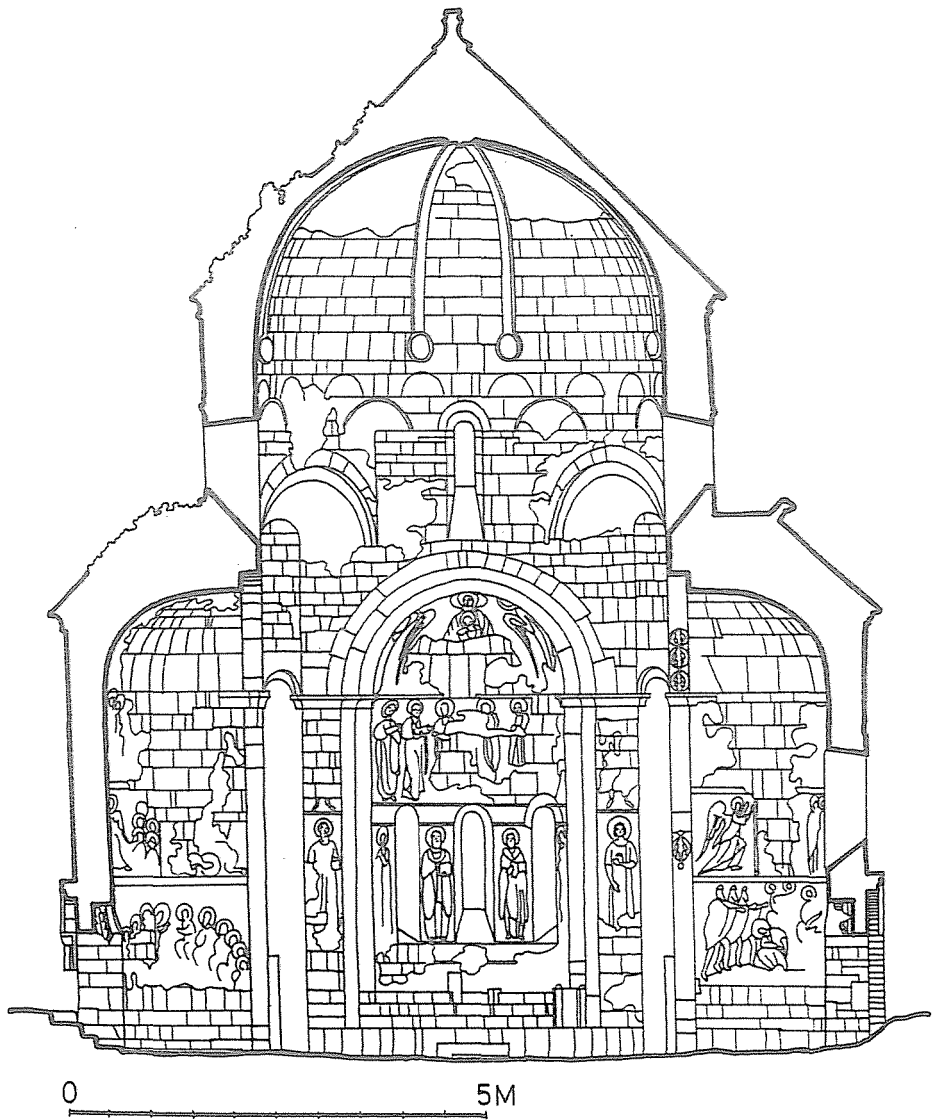


*Fig. 18.* Ateni: Sioni church. Outlook



*Fig. 19. Ateni: Sioni church, Cross on the facade*

It is remarkable that the symbol of Redemption, Nino's Cross was incorporated in the building of a grandiose Cathedral named as Djwari, meaning: Cross. Its monumental, cross shaped mass, which is different from its previously mentioned Byzantine predecessors, but similar to those of the Georgian and Armenian ensembles (either Ateni or Awan, Etshmiadzin, Hripsimein Vagharshapat and of another variant built at Zwartnotz



*Fig. 20.* Ateni: Sioni church. Cross motif on the dome. Wall paintings prepared by the 10th century

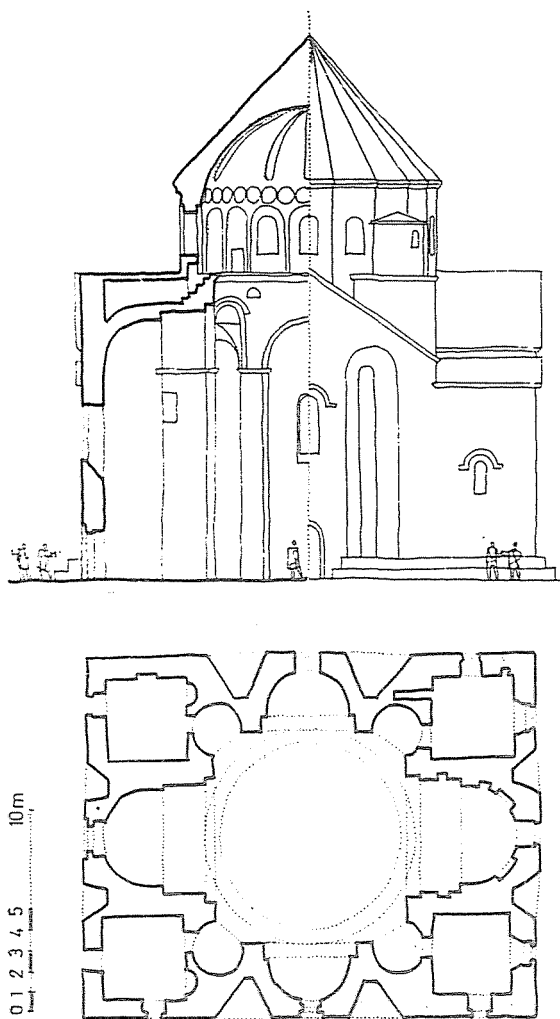


Fig. 21. a. Waghharshapat: Hripsime church. Groundplan and section

in the 7<sup>th</sup> century) could be seen to dominate the surrounding landscape, because the builders wished to proclaim their Christian faith from a distance to their invaders.

Finally the design of these grandiose central churches – for instance the interior of Djwari near Mcheta solemnly enclosing the redemptional symbol of Nino's Cross represented the shape of the Universe as conceived by the Caucasian Christians. That kind of composition probably embodied the substance of a Middle Eastern poem written of similar architectural works in Nisibis Edessa (Nisip Urfa) saying that '... dome is the Heaven



*Fig. 21. b.* Waghharshapat: Hripsime church. Axonometrical outlook

of Heavens where God is ruling; its four arcades are the four cardinal points ... these supports are the mountains of the world ... this building symbolizes Heaven and Earth where the choir of apostles, prophets and martyrs is unified by the Deity.' In addition to this concept – concerning the Caucasian examples – it seems notable that at the time of the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century the cross and octagonal forms often were joined in their compositions. In this way the symbols of Redemption and Resurrection integrated into one complex: so manifested the idea of their triumphant spiritual victory after their long lasting struggle of independence over the Sassanid conquerors.



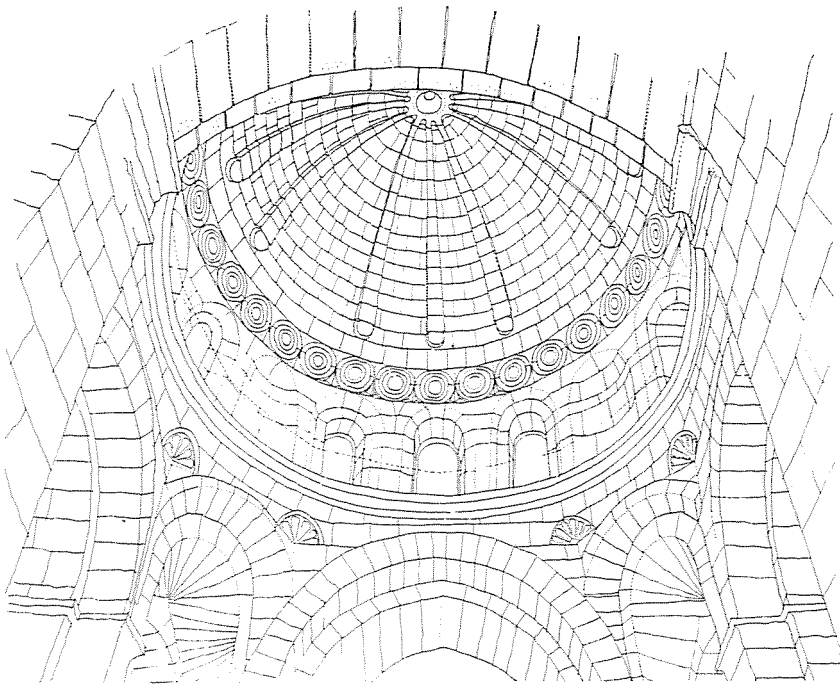
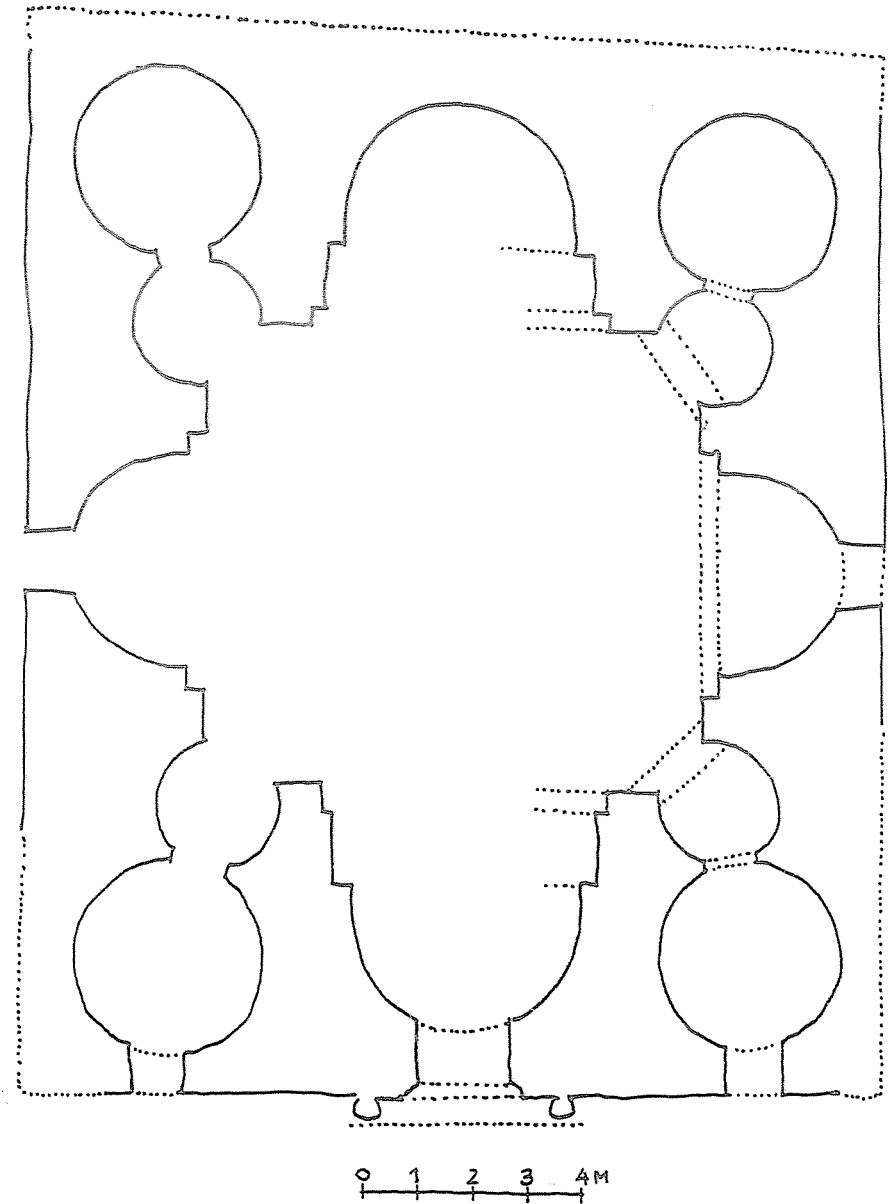


Fig. 22. Wagharshapat: Hripsime church. Cross motif on the dome

In the Caucasian church architecture referring to the fight for freedom were asserted by the sculptural details, often the diverse types of Cross compositions. Some characteristic examples survived for instance in the Georgian Djwari and Ateni from the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is remarkable that the same phenomenon appeared also in Armenia concerning the Hatchcars or the applied decoration of church façades. Numerous examples for instance in Georgia or in Armenia illustrate the point also in the 10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries as they achieved already good result against the new invaders, e. g. the Islamic.

Briefly summarizing a kind of conclusion: it seems to me proved that the Byzantine compositions – in the Empire where the State and Church had close connections – that were more abstractly full of philosophical meaning of Spiritual Christian Cosmic ideas, while the oppressed Caucasians, who had to fight for their faith and independence, concentrated considerably on worshipping the victorious sign of the Cross supplemented by the triumphal meaning of the octagonal symbol.



*Fig. 23.* Hripsime type: Awan. Groundplan

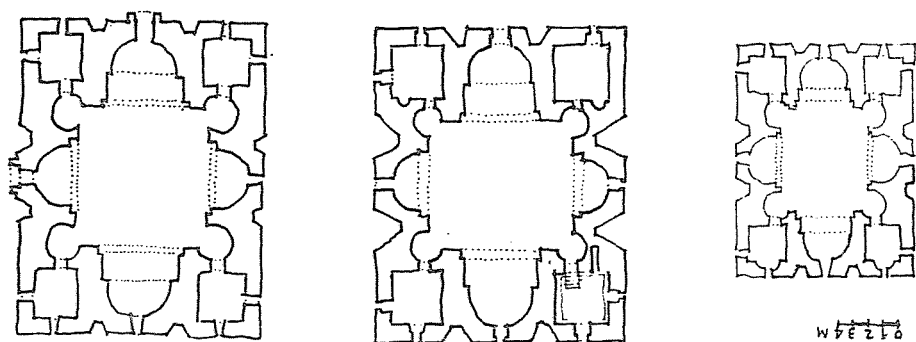


Fig. 24. Hripsime types: Targmancac, Hripsime, Garnaowit. Groundplans

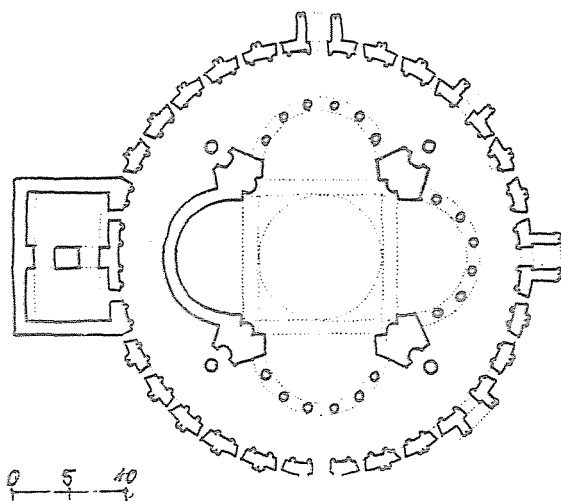
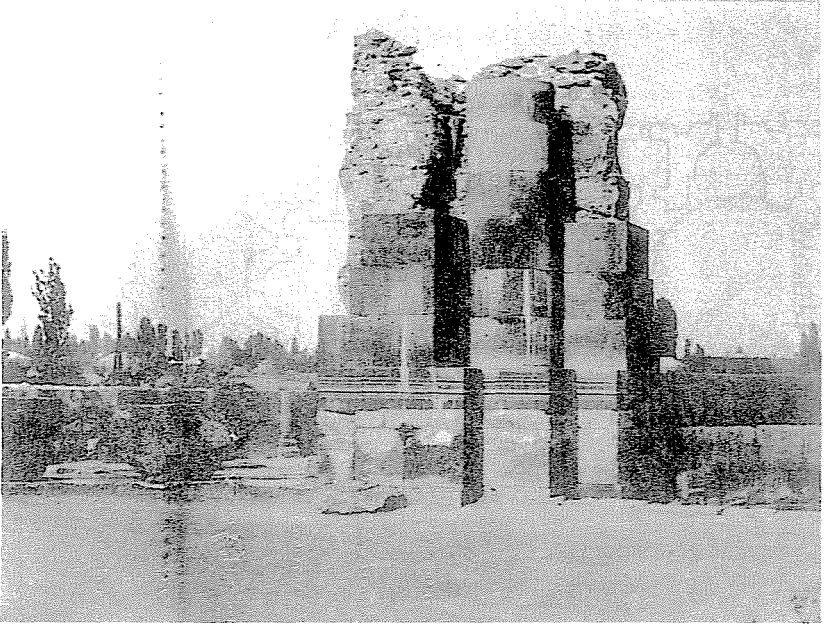
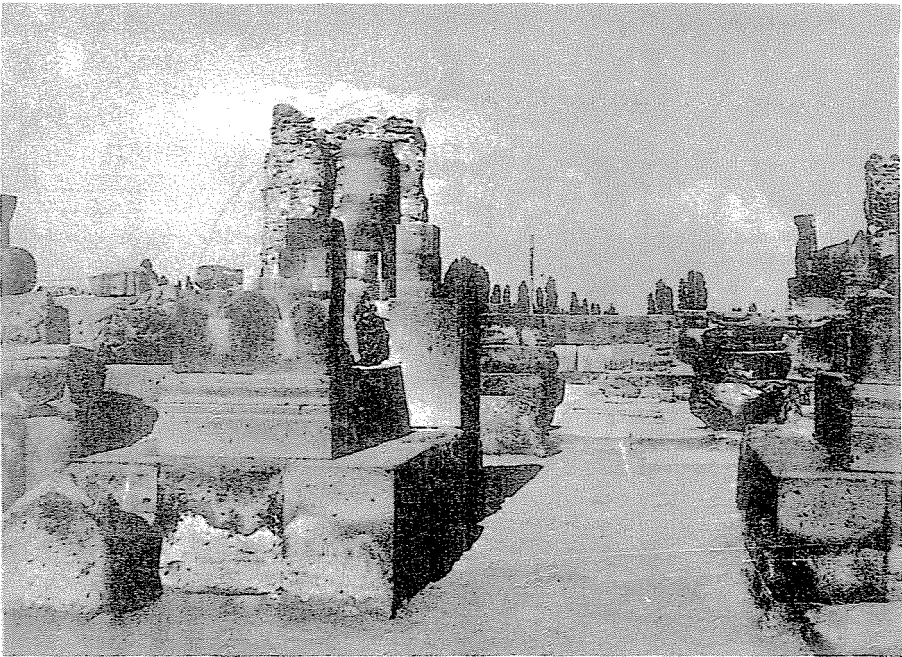
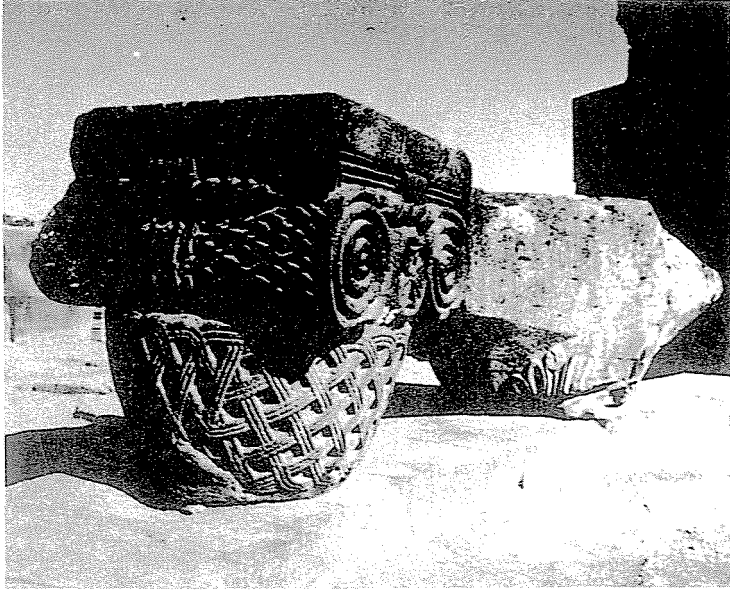


Fig. 25. Zwartnotz: Bishopric Cathedral. Groundplan



*Fig. 26. a. b. Zwartnotz. Architectural details*



*Fig. 26. c. d. Zwartnotz. Architectural details*

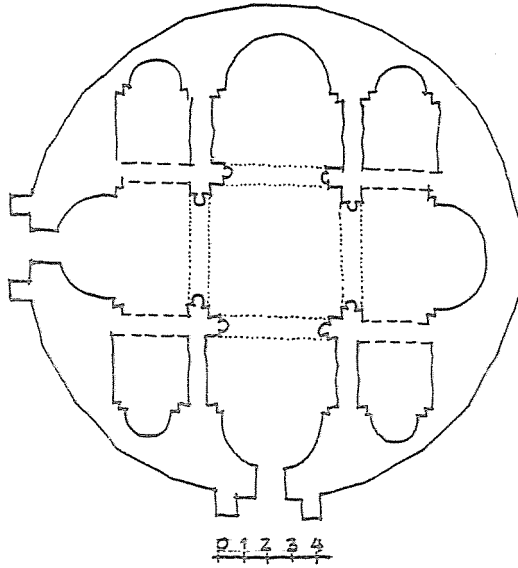


Fig. 27. Garni. Groundplan

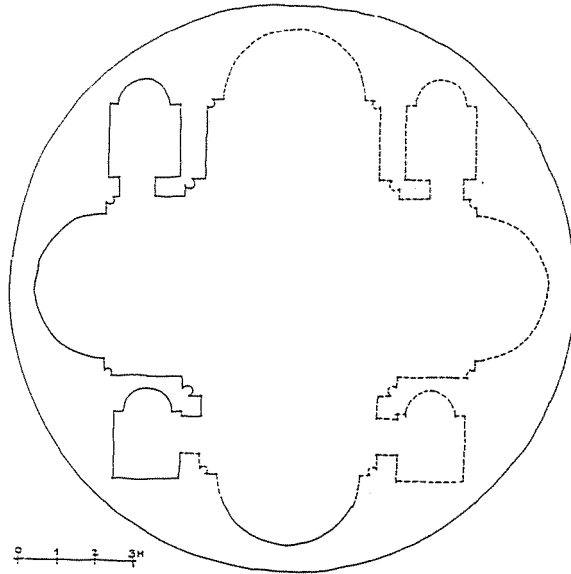
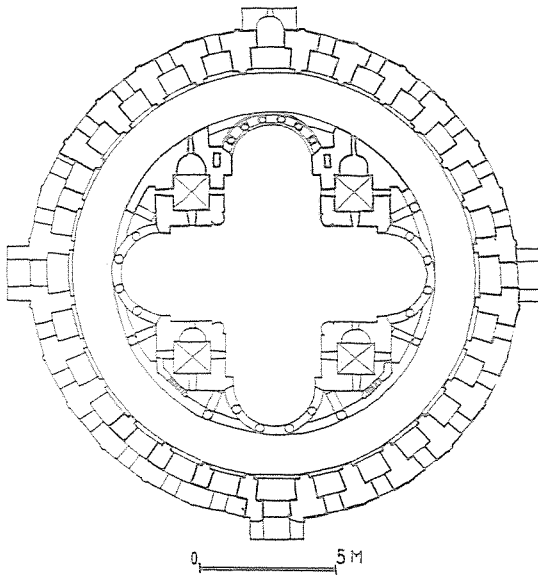


Fig. 28. Marmashen. Groundplan



*Fig. 29.* Sanahin. Victorious Cross over the portal



*Fig. 30.* Bana. Groundplan

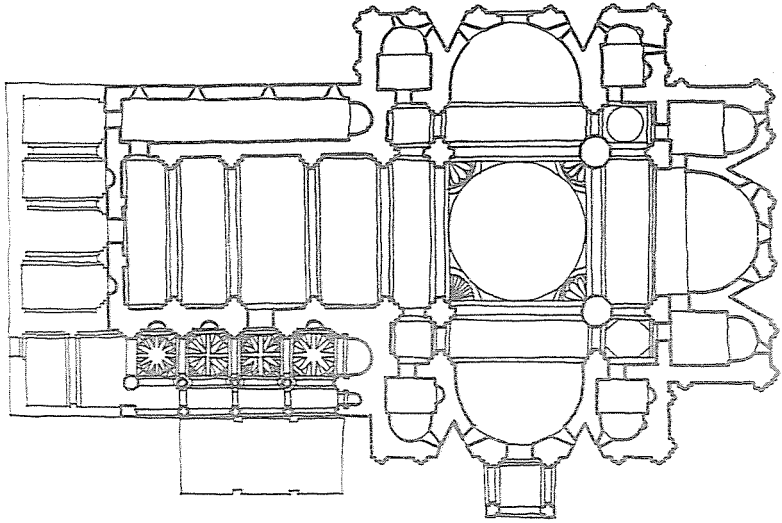
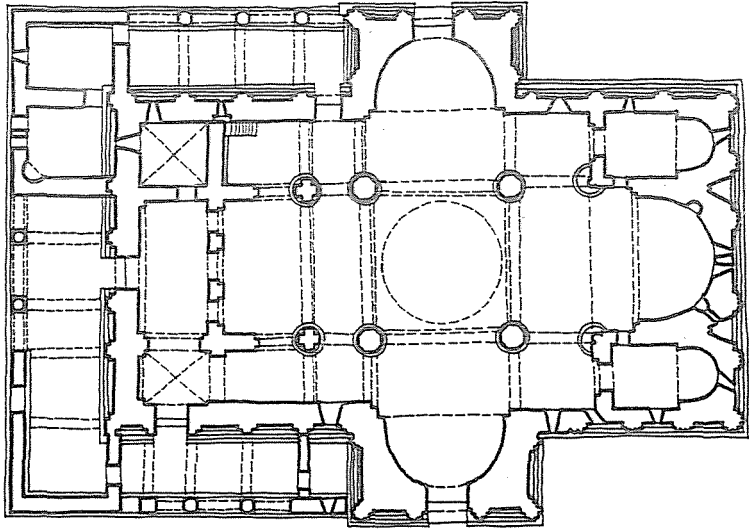


Fig. 31. Oshkhi: Cathedral. Groundplan



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Fig. 32. Kutaisi: Cathedral. Groundplan