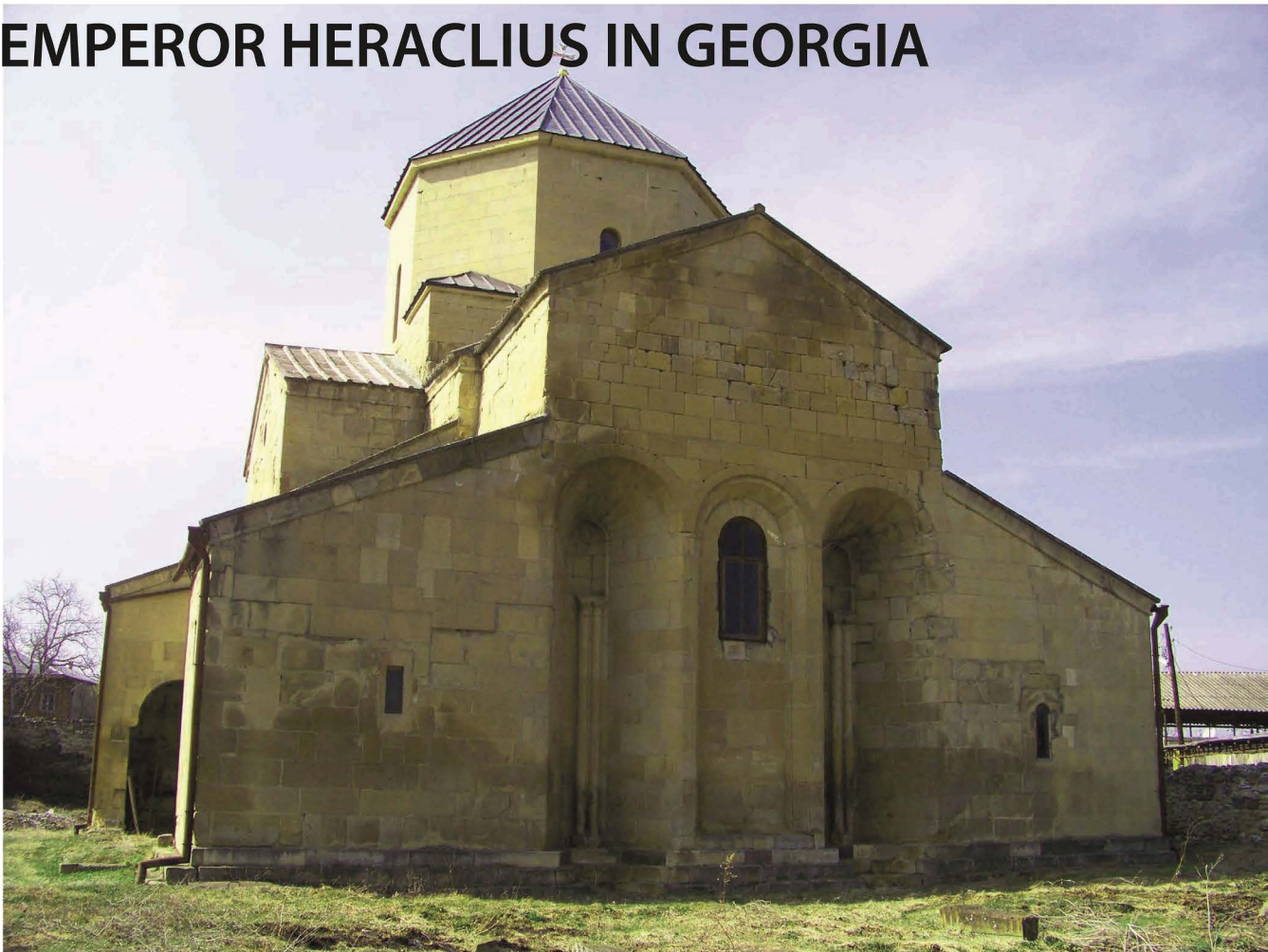


THE CHURCH AT TSROMI

BUILDING ACTIVITY OF THE EMPEROR HERACLIUS IN GEORGIA

DAVIT KHOSHTARIA
TBILISI GE

The church in Tsromi is one of the most important early Medieval buildings in the Caucasus both from the architectural and historical points of view. According to tradition, the church in Tsromi is erected on the place where St. Razhden the Protomartyr, a fifth-century Iranian convert to Christianity, was executed. The first martyrium on the site of St Razhden's execution in Tsromi should have been built already in the late fifth century. The construction of the extant church is associated with the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius who marched through Georgia in 627 during his military campaign against Iranians.



East facade of the Church at Tsromi. A recessed arch frames the window of the sanctuary. The arch is flanked by two deep and wide niches covered with conical vaults.

THE FIRST MARTYRIUM

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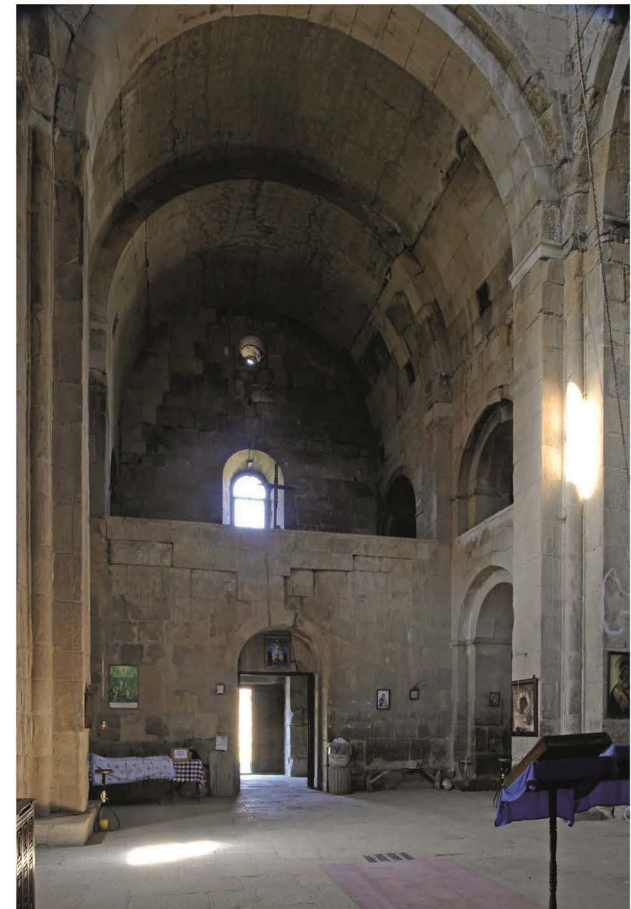
In the second half of the fifth century, Sasanian Iran retained political control over the kingdom of Iberia (east Georgia), but failed to spread Zoroastrianism there. King Vakhtang Gorgasal of Iberia (457-502), being a vassal of Iran, remained intransigent towards fire-worshipping. Razhden, an Iranian nobleman, served as a member of the guard of the Iranian princess and accompanied her to Iberia when she married King Vakhtang. Here Razhden converted to Christianity. Iranians did not forgive him for apostasy. He was taken captive and tortured to death by an Iranian commander in Tsromi.

The first martyrium on the site of St Razhden's execution in Tsromi should have been built already in the late fifth century. Its marble details have been found on the site and are now preserved in the interior of the church. They include fragments of marble and sandstone column shafts and a capital related to the late Antique varieties of the classical Ionic order.

This first martyrium in Tsromi was destroyed by the early seventh century. Apparently, its marble details were reused in the later church that has prevented them from disappearing.

THE EXTANT CHURCH

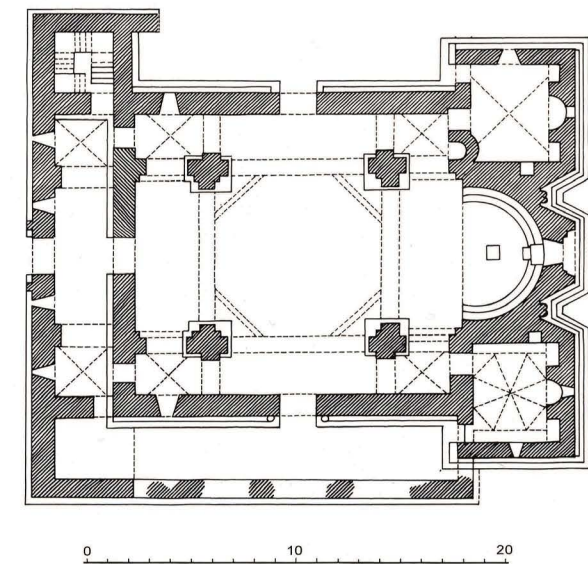
Construction of the second church at Tsromi coincided with the military campaign of the famous Byzantine emperor Heraclius (610-641) against Iranians. In 627, when marching through Georgia from Lazica to Tbilisi, he would pass the place of St. Razhden's martyrdom located close to the main historic road and most probably was informed about the martyr. Though there is no written evidence, considering great piety and harsh anti-Zoroastrian sentiments of the emperor one can assume that he was the initiator and donor of the construction of a new, larger church on the site of the earlier one. This supposition looks even more reasonable taking into account Heraclius' well-known enthusiasm for building. The magnificent size, ambitious architectural design, and high technical quality of Tsromi church also suggest the imperial patronage. Tsromi has never been a bishop's see, though its church is larger than many early Medieval Georgian cathedrals.



Interior view of the church looking west. The sanctuary on the east is balanced on the west with a narthex and an open gallery arranged above it.

Its size and design can be explained by the increased importance of the cult of St. Razhden in the context of Heraclius' politics towards Iran. The erection of a large imposing church on the site where Iranians martyred a convert to Christianity would be an action with a clear underlying message both for Christians and Zoroastrians.

Tsromi heralds new developments in the early Medieval architecture of the Caucasus. It is a cross-domed church with four free-standing piers supporting the dome. The walls inside and outside are fully faced with smoothly hewn large sandstone blocks. The architecture of Tsromi Church obviously continues local building practice. Its building technique and structural elements have little to do with Constantinople. It is obvious that the emperor did not invite the architect from his capital, but entrusted the work to local masons. To all appearance, Tsromi Church is an important imperial project initiated and supported by Heraclius and carried out by Georgian master builders.



Plan of the church. Together with the contemporaneous Armenian churches of the same type, Tsromi is one of the earliest cross-domed structures with four free-standing piers.



Fragments of marble and sandstone column shafts, the remains of the first martyrium in Tsromi.