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GRIGORY G. GAGARIN'S 19TH-CENTURY FRESCOES AND DECORATION IN THE SIONI CATHEDRAL IN TBILISI¹

This paper presents the 19th-century project to decorate the interior of the Sioni Cathedral interior in Tbilisi with a fresco designed by Grigory G. Gagarin. This plan was implemented in the 1850s by order of the tsarist administration of the Caucasus Viceroyalty, which was led by Mikhail Vorontsov, a leading politician of the Russian Empire during Tsar Nicholas I's reign. The project is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi is considered one of the most important temples for members of the Georgian Orthodox Church – it is where the relic of St. Nino's cross is kept, an artefact particularly revered by Georgian Christians. Secondly, the repainting of the temple was part of Tbilisi's expansion, which was part of the 19th-century tsars' policy towards the Caucasus. The main goal was to transform it from an Asian city on the outskirts of tsarist Russia into a modern European metropolis. The administration planned to make Tbilisi the most important centre in the region and one of the most important places on the Russian Empire's map. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly, is the style of Gagarin's project. The frescoes, referred to by the author as Neo-Byzantine, exemplify the stylistic shifts that occurred in Russian painting during the 19th century, especially in Orthodox art and its Europeanisation. With reference to the aspects mentioned above, this paper analyses the iconography of the Dogmatic, the Saints, and the Marian Cycles, but its primary focus is on the Hagiographic Cycle. This cycle was a crucial part of Gagarin's project to decorate the Sioni Cathedral's interior. He had relative freedom in choosing the iconography, which allowed him to include particular local cults. Gagarin used the figures of saints such as St. Nino, St. Ketevan the Martyr, and the Thirteen Assyrian Fathers. He also adapted specific architectural parts of the temple to present and emphasise the saints' importance to Georgians. This paper aims to place Gagarin's project in a broader historical, cultural, and religious context. It attempts to understand Gagarin's respect for Georgian traditions and cults.

Keywords: Tbilisi, Grigory G. Gagarin, Sioni Cathedral, Georgia, South Caucasus, Orthodox art, Neo-Byzantine style

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The Sioni Cathedral, located in Tbilisi, is one of the most important religious sites for members of the Georgian Orthodox Church. It is the resting place of St. Nino's cross² and the burial site for distinguished Georgians. The cathedral's construction lasted for several centuries and was finally completed in the 7th century during the reign of Adarnasius I of Iberia. However, the final form of the cathedral was not achieved until several hundred years later, during the reign of David IV the Builder at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries.³ It became a temple in the central plan (a Greek cross) with a conical dome on a high tholobate⁴ typical of Georgian sacral medieval architecture from the 10th to the 15th centuries. The cathedral's interior plan utilises the cross-dome system, with the most significant area being the space under the dome. The arms of the cross are highly vaulted, and low rooms with a shed roof are located in the space between them.⁵ However, even in the 16th and 17th centuries, the building underwent continuous reconstructions and modifications, resulting in its current form.⁶

The Sioni Cathedral, located in the heart of the historical part of Tbilisi, known as Old Tbilisi, has faced numerous invasions by neighbouring countries throughout history. The interior of the church has been plundered and destroyed many times by aggressors; for example, during the Ottoman occupation of the city in the first half of the 18th century, there was an idea of converting the temple into a mosque.⁷ The cathedral suffered significant losses during the Persian attack on the city in 1795, where the interior was set on fire and destroyed. This fire destroyed the wooden gallery and iconostasis and covered the historic medieval

2 St. Nino (also Nina or Nona) – the saint patron of Georgia and a saint of the Catholic, Armenian and Orthodox churches; according to the hagiography, thanks to her, King Mirian III adopted Christianity in 337 as the state religion of the Kingdom of Iberia (also called Caucasian Iberia; at present part of Georgia), thus, Georgia became the second Christianized country in world history (after Armenia).

3 П. И. Иоселиани, *Описание древностей города Тифлис* (Тбилиси: Въ типографии главнаго управления намѣстника кавкаскаго, 1866).

4 The most significant examples of Georgian sacred architecture of the medieval times are Bagrat's Cathedral in Kutaisi from 1003 (Imereti region), Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta from 1029 (Mtskheta-Mtianeti region) and the cathedral church at the monastery in Alaverdi from approx. 1040 (Kakheti region); SHALVA AMIRANASHVILI, *Sztuka gruzińska* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1973), 255.

5 AMIRANASHVILI, *Sztuka gruzińska*, 255.

6 მამია დუმბაძე, *თბილისის ისტორია: 3 ტომად: ტომი 1: თბილისი უძველესი დროიდან XVIII საუკუნის ბოლომდე* (თბილისი: მეცნიერება, 1990), 285.

7 დუმბაძე, *თბილისის ისტორია*, 310.

frescoes with thick soot. The first attempts to renew the church's interior were made at the beginning of the 19th century.⁸ However, the real turning point in the fate of the Sioni Cathedral was Grigory G. Gagarin's artistic activities in its interior in the 1850s.

The new interior decoration of the temple was one of the numerous elements of Tbilisi's modernisation policy that took place in the 19th century. With the annexation of the Kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti in 1801 to the Russian Empire⁹, the tsarist administration decided to change the city's character from an Asian city on the outskirts of Russia into a European capital of the Caucasus region. As part of their urban planning efforts, architects undertook the expansion of Tbilisi beyond its historical centre and implemented measures to connect both banks of the Kura River. This policy intensified in particular from the 1840s when Mikhail Vorontsov took over the leadership of the administration of the newly created Caucasus Viceroyalty.¹⁰ The newly built buildings running along the frontages of the broad avenues gave Tbilisi an elegant and Western European style, transformed according to the Russian perception. The city grew, and its trendy neighbourhoods attracted foreign residents.¹¹ The expansion of Tbilisi through the introduction of multistorey tenement houses by the tsar's administration and architects was a remarkable feat that transformed the urban landscape and improved the lives of citizens. Tsarist architects planned and designed buildings according to the most popular and fashionable style at the time in the major cities of the 19th-century Russian Empire. Initially, they were created in the spirit of Russian Neo-Classicism, while the intensification of urban development in the 1840s brought an eclectic character to the architecture of Tbilisi. During the 19th century, tenement houses in Tbilisi were designed in the Neo-Renaissance or Neo-Baroque style, featuring elements from Islamic or Gothic architecture. Later on in the city's development, Art Nouveau style buildings also started to appear.¹² The newly constructed facades of

8 Ю. Д. АНЧАБАДЗЕ, Н. Г. ВОЛКОВА, *Старый Тбилиси: город и горожане в XIX в.* (Москва: Наука, 1990), 44.

9 DONALD RAYFIELD, *Edge of Empires* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2019).

10 HUBERTUS JAHN, "The Bronze Viceroy: Mikhail Vorontsov's Statue and Russian Imperial Representation in the South Caucasus in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *Russian History* 41, no. 2 (2014): 163-188.

11 RONALD SUNY, "The Mother of Cities: Tbilisi/Tiflis in the Twilight of Empire," in *City Culture and City Planning in Tbilisi: Where Europe and Asia Meet*, ed. KRISTOF VAN ASSCHE, JOSEPH SALUKVADZE, NICK SHAVISHVILI (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 17-58.

12 MAIA MANIA, *European Architects in Tbilisi* (Tbilisi: European Commission 2006), 9.

these tenement houses in the 19th century presented a stark contrast to the historic, low-rise residential houses of old districts like Kala or Isani, as well as the buildings around the sulphur baths of Old Tbilisi.

Thanks to the selection of Tbilisi as the capital of the Caucasus Viceroyalty and its architectural and industrial development, the city became an important centre of tsarist life in the North and South Caucasus.¹³ The families of Georgian aristocracy began to stay in the city more often, something which was connected to the fact that the members of the Georgian upper class (e.g., the Orbeliani family or the Chavchavadze family) held high official and military positions in the Russian Empire. Moreover, in the 19th century, Tbilisi gained new inhabitants from other parts of the Russian Empire – Russians, Poles, and other Europeans came to the city. The tsarist administration constructed a railway connecting Tbilisi, Poti and Batumi in the second half of the 19th century,¹⁴ significantly impacting the region's quality of life and socio-cultural development.

Several specialists from Petersburg and Moscow were sent to work in Vorontsov's administration in Tbilisi, including Prince Grigory G. Gagarin.¹⁵

13 RAYFIELD, *Edge of Empires*, 284–291.

14 MARIKA PIRVELI, "Tbilisi – etapy urbanistycznego rozwoju miasta," *Studia Regionalne i Lokalne* 31, no. 1 (2008): 33–38.

15 Prince Grigory Grigorievich Gagarin was born on in St. Petersburg on 11th May 1810 (29th April according to the Julian calendar) into one of the most prominent families of the 19th-century Russian Empire, whose history dates back to the times of the Rurik dynasty. As the eldest son of one of the tsar's diplomats and statesman – Grigory Ivanovich Gagarin – he spent most of his youth in the Western European cities of Rome, Siena, Verona and Paris, where he was not only brought up and educated but also developed his artistic passions. The Gagarin family's diplomatic work in Rome also allowed the young prince to study with Karł Brullov, who was staying in the Italian capital as part of a foreign scholarship from the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg. At last, together with the entire Gagarin family, Grigory Grigorievich returned to St. Petersburg at the age of 22 (1832). There, he began working in the Asian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire. Apart from administrative work, Gagarin also took part in two significant foreign delegations to Istanbul and Munich, where he spent several years. It is significant, however, that along with the development of his professional career in the administration of the Russian Empire, the young prince continued to deepen his artistic talent. In 1855, after years of work in the Caucasus Viceroyalty's administration, he returned to St. Petersburg, where he was appointed vice-president of the Tsar's Academy of Fine Arts by the Grand Duchess Maria Nikolaevna. He held this position until 1872, during which time he founded the Museum of Christian Antiquities and reformed the teaching and administrative systems. However, also he was one of the professors responsible for the so-called Revolt of the Fourteen.

A. В. Корнилова, *Григорий Гагарин. От романтизма к русско-византийскому стилю* (Москва: Искусство, 2001).

After participating in the Caucasian War, the prince gained knowledge of the region's culture. In 1847,¹⁶ he published his findings in his French-Russian language publication, "Le Caucase Pittoresque. Dessiné d'après nature par le prince Grégoire Gagarine, avec une introduction et un texte explicatif par le Cte Ernest Stackelberg"¹⁷ In 1848, he arrived in Tbilisi,¹⁸ where his experience led the tsarist administration to entrust him with cultural and artistic responsibilities. One of his main tasks in Vorontsov's administration in the Caucasus Viceroyalty was to create new fresco decorations for the interior of Sioni Cathedral.

On 4th October 1851, the administration of the Caucasus Viceroyalty initiated talks with the Georgian Exarchate Isidore regarding the commissioning of new frescoes for the revered Sioni Cathedral. However, work on the design of the new decoration of the interior lasted probably until 20th March 1852 because at that time tsarist officials, on behalf of Vorontsov, asked the Georgian Exarch to write appropriate letters to the Holy Synod in St. Petersburg requesting permission to begin work inside the cathedral in Tbilisi.¹⁹ In the same year, on 10th June, Gagarin began his artistic activities, and artists were hired from the region and beyond it by the tsarist administration to assist with his work on Sioni's interior, e.g., Greek artists who lived in Tbilisi were responsible for removing the plaster from the temple's interior walls, while artists from the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg were responsible for the later stages of work. Moreover, at Gagarin's request, the tsarist administration in Tbilisi ordered gold leaf from Moscow for 400 rubles (in silver), which the prince used for the new interior decoration of the temple.²⁰ Two years later, on 4th October 1853, at Gagarin's urging, the committee responsible for supervising the process of creating new decorations in the interior of the Sioni Cathedral interior sent a letter requesting the payment of an

16 GRIGORIY GAGARIN, *Le Caucase pittoresque* (Paris: Plon Frères, 1847).

17 The publication "Le Caucase pittoresque. Dessine d'après nature Gregoire Gagarine, avec une introduction et texte explicatif Ernest Stackelberg") was published in Paris in 1848 by the Plon Frères publishing house. The illustrative part contains 80 lithographs depicting genre scenes, landscapes, costumes, monuments of architecture and art. The text part, on the other hand, discusses and explains ethnographic, geographical and social issues.

18 КОРНИЛОВА, *Григорий Гагарин*, 154.

19 National Archives of Georgia (hereinafter NAG), Central Historical Archive (hereinafter CHA), inv. no. 488, sign. 16009, 1–2, 13–14.

20 NAG, CHA, inv. no. 488, sign. 16009, 17–18, 21, 68.

additional 1,600 rubles (in silver) for the continuation of his works in the temple – a request that was granted.²¹

Additionally, the committee's notes reveal that the prince decided to dismantle the triforium, which was installed in the temple following the Persian invasion of 1795, leaving the north wall bare.²² Gagarin also came up with a proposal to replace the iconostasis, which, like the triforium, was installed in the temple at the beginning of the 19th century and replace it with an object that the prince would design. Grigory Grigorievich argued that the wooden iconostasis, decorated with arabesques, did not match the Neo-Byzantine style of his frescoes inside the Cathedral.²³ Thus, he proposed creating a new, single-row iconostasis made of plaster and alabaster with silver ornamentation. Gagarin justified his choice of form by referring to the architectural tradition of early Christian temples. Additionally, the design of the new iconostasis included two additional vestibules on both sides (north and south).²⁴ The cost of realising the iconostasis was estimated at a total of 3,200 or 4,000 rubles (in silver) depending on whether the building of the side vestibules was approved. The additional elements of the iconostasis were not approved, however, and the final cost of the new iconostasis came to 3,200 rubles (in silver).²⁵

Gagarin based his design for the new interior decoration of the Sioni Cathedral on a canonical descending hierarchy.²⁶ One can easily spot the

21 NAG, CHA, inv. no. 488, sign. 16009, 127.

22 NAG, CHA, inv. no. 488, sign. 16009, 36.

23 In archival documents, Gagarin uses the term "Byzantine style," consistent with the narrative about the architecture of the Russian Empire of the time. Currently, architectural methodology refers to this stylistic variant as the Neo-Byzantine style. It should also be remembered that in the 19th century several varieties of national architectural styles developed, which, depending on the rule of individual tsars, were used in official state policy. Thus, chronologically, one should mention the Russian-Byzantine style, e.g., The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow designed by Konstantin Thon – a style dominant during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I; the Neo-Byzantine style, e.g., The Cathedral of St. Volodymyr in Kyiv designed by Alexander Beretti dominant during the reign of Tsar Alexander II; and the Neo-Russian style, e.g., The Church of the Saviour on the Spilled Blood designed by Alfred Parland, dominant during the reign of Tsar Alexander III and Nicholas II. EVGENIA KIRICHENKO, *The Russian Style* (London: Lawrence King, 1991).

24 NAG, CHA, inv. no. 488, sign. 16009, 66, 68.

25 NAG, CHA, inv. no. 488, sign. 16009, 79.

26 CONSTANTINE CAVARNOS, *Orthodox Iconography* (Belmont: The Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1977); CONSTANTINE CAVARNOS, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography* (Belmont: The Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1993); GHEORGHE GİRBEA, "The iconographic canon of Orthodox churches: History, Evolution, Symbolism," *International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences* 5, no. 14 (2019): 779-789; ELENA DRAGHICI-VASILESCU, "Development of Eastern Christian Iconography," *Transfor-*

Dogmatic Cycle, the Saints and Marian cycles, and the Hagiographic Cycle on the temple walls. According to the canon, the first of the mentioned cycles (the Dogmatic Cycle) is located in the highest storey of the temple with an image of Christ Pantocrator in the dome and the Virgin Mary in the apse. Moreover, the dome's pendentives are dedicated to depicting the choirs of angels, the images of the four evangelists during work at the lectern and their attributes. Gagarin's project is fully adapting the rules of descending hierarchy, as a consequence of which, the dome of the temple is covered with the fresco with Christ Pantocrator in blue and red robes, and also with images of angels and the four evangelists: St. Luke with an ox and St. Matthew with a man (on the north side), St. John with an eagle and St. Mark with a lion (on the south side).

Below, Gagarin used rich floral and geometric patterns to decorate the vault of the presbytery, which he also adorned with gold. He also added architectural elements to the design, including a colonnade with arcaded arches, creating a trompe-l'œil style effect of infinite space above it. Under each arch of the colonnade, the prince planned full-figure representations of the apostles, framing the image of the enthroned Christ, which was located on the central axis. Additionally, Gagarin placed a trompe-l'œil style balustrade above the colonnade, behind which appeared an image of a heavenly garden. In this garden, he positioned a Maestà-type image of the enthroned Virgin Mary, together with Archangels Michael and Gabriel and the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs Moses, Aaron, Abraham, and King David (on the north side), along with Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Jacob (on the south side). Gagarin used the architectural structure of the temple to showcase images of the Virgin Mary, the archangels, King David, and Jacob in the presbytery's conch. By doing so, he separated these images from the line of other Old Testament figures, which can be interpreted as Gagarin's artistic tribute to the Georgian nation – King David of the Old Testament was traditionally considered the ancestor of the Georgian royal family, the Bagrationi. Additionally, the figure of Jacob as an Old Testament patriarch, can be perceived as the progenitor of the Israelites and humanity. Moreover, a painting imitating a dark blue, starry sky covered part of the temple vault, which creates a beautiful contrast with the gold used by Gagarin to decorate the presbytery's surface by Gagarin.

When it comes to the Hagiographic Cycle, there is noticeable freedom in selecting images of the saints and the blessed, which largely depends on regional and local cults. In his design for the new interior decoration of the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi, Gagarin created a pantheon of saints whom Georgians especially revere because they influenced the fate of Christianity in the region. The prince decided to cover the surface of the four main pillars under the giant dome with full-figure images of saints and martyrs whom members of the Georgian Orthodox Church endowed with particular faith. Next to the temple's iconostasis, on the north side, Gagarin put the image of St. Nino, and on the south side, St. Ketevan the Martyr.²⁷ On the opposite side are figures of two East Georgian martyrs – St. Luarsab II the Martyr²⁸ (on the north side) together with St. Archil the Martyr²⁹ (on the south side). Gagarin also decided to decorate two other pillars at the junction of the space under the dome and the central nave. For this, he used images of St. George (on the north) and St. Alexandra of Rome the Martyr (on the south). Moreover, as part of his project, Grigory Grigorievich also adapted the surface of the pillars' architraves next to the main temple's nave. There, Gagarin placed four tondos with the busts of St. Hope and St. Faith (on the north side) and the images of St. Charity together with St. Sophia (on the south side).

Furthermore, Gagarin had envisioned adorning the rib vaulting of the Sioni Cathedral with tondos depicting the Thirteen Assyrian Fathers. These saints played a pivotal role in initiating monasticism in the regions of the early medieval Kingdom of Iberia, also referred to as Caucasian Iberia.³⁰ Looking at the rib vault above the central nave, we can find images of (starting from the north to the south): St. Abibos of Nekresi, St. Joseph of Alaverdi, St. Stephen of Khirsa, St. Zenon of Ikalto and St. Anton of Martkopi. Similarly to the mentioned rib vault, the vaulting located above the transept is also decorated with portraits of saints: St. Jesse of Tsilkani, St. Shio of Mgvime, St. David of Gareja and St. John of Zedazeni

27 St. Ketevan the Martyr (c. 1565-1624) – a queen consort of Kakheti, a kingdom in eastern Georgia, from the Bagrationi dynasty. She was a saint and the great martyr of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which canonised her in the 17th century.

28 St. Luarsab II the Martyr (1592-1622) – a king of Kartli, a kingdom in eastern Georgia, from the Bagrationi dynasty. A saint and martyr of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

29 St. Archil the Martyr (8th c.) – a prince of Kakheti, a kingdom in eastern Georgia. A saint and martyr of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

30 The Kingdom of Iberia (also called Caucasian Iberia) was a state existing in eastern Georgia between the 5th and the 6th centuries B.C. During Classical Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, it was a significant monarchy in the Caucasus region.

(on the north side), together with: St. Michael of Ulumbo, St. Pyrrhus of Breti, St. Thaddeus of Stepantsminda and St. Isidor of Samtavisi (on the south side).

As part of his project, Gagarin placed images of St. Nino and St. Ketevan the Martyr on the most exposed pillars, flanking the iconostasis. The location of the representations of these saints and their selection can be interpreted as Grigory Grigorievich's homage to the Georgian Christian tradition. St. Nino, widely recognised as the patroness of Georgia, is also seen as the progenitor of the Christianization of Caucasian Iberia during the rule of King Mirian III in the 4th century.³¹ Moreover, her characteristic attribute – a cross whose falling beams are tied with a strand of the saint's hair, has become Georgia's national symbol. Regarding the image of St. Ketevan the Martyr, it is crucial to understand that her depiction embodies Georgian resistance against the violent Persian invasions. St. Ketevan hailed from the Bagrationi dynasty and ruled Kakheti during the 16th and 17th centuries. After ten years of captivity with Shah Abbas I (called the Great), she rejected the demands of the Persian ruler that she abandon the Christian faith and convert to Islam. This resulted in her martyrdom.³² It is important, therefore, to understand the message conveyed by the placement of the images of both saints in Gagarin's project. The temple was planned so that as the faithful entered Sioni Cathedral, the first thing they saw would be St. Nino and St. Ketevan the Martyr, whose full-figure images form an iconographic whole with the depiction of the enthroned Mother of God surrounded by angels and King David and Jacob located in the presbytery. Thus, the correlation between the saints not only indicates that both women followed the path marked out by the Virgin Mary but also their connection with King David, who, as already mentioned above, is traditionally considered to be the progenitor of the Bagratids and St. Ketevan the Martyr, a member, therefore, of this royal family.

Furthermore, the images of St. Luarsab the Martyr and St. Archil the Martyr, which Gagarin's project placed on opposite pillars to St. Nino and St. Ketevan the Martyr, have a symbolic meaning not only in terms of nationality but also in connection with the centuries-long attempts to repel neighbouring invaders. Understanding the symbolic meaning behind

31 JAROSŁAW CHARKIEWICZ, *Gruzińscy święci* (Warsaw: Warszawska Metropolia Prawosławna, 2015), 9-19.

32 *Ibid.*, 127-131.

using the image of St. Archil in Gagarin's project is essential. It should be noted that St. Archil is considered to be the ancestor of King Mirian III, the first Christian ruler of the Kingdom of Iberia. St. Archil died a martyr's death during the Arab occupation of the Kartli and Kakheti territories in the 8th century.³³ A similar fate befell St. Luarsab the Martyr, who ruled the Kingdom of Kartia in the 17th century as that of King Luarsab II from the Bagrationi dynasty. As a result of the Persian invasion of his kingdom, he was taken captive by Shah Abbas I (called the Great) and spent seven years being held in Persia. Similarly to St. Ketevan the Martyr, the Kartlian ruler rejected the demands of Shah Abbas I (the Great) that he convert to Islam through him, and he died a martyr.³⁴ More importantly, however, Georgian theologians see an almost identical similarity in the fate of both martyr-kings in terms of their sacrifice for the Christian faith. Moreover, their images very often appear together not only in fresco paintings but also in icon art. Due to the decision of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the feast day of both martyrs, St. Luarsab the Martyr and St. Archil the Martyr, falls on the same day in the liturgical year.

The symbolism of placing the images of holy rulers in the temple is worth noticing. The images situated in the higher storeys of the building – Christ Pantocrator and the enthroned Virgin Mary, together with angels and Old Testament prophets – represent the heavenly world and embody the promise of eternal life after death. At the same time, the holy rulers are a bridge between the sacred and the profane. Their images have been elevated to tower over the members of the Orthodox community visiting the temple.³⁵ However, at the same time, Gagarin did not place them in the highest architectural storey of the building. It is also significant that the rulers depicted were martyrs who gave their lives for their faith while they were put to the test and tortured to abandon Christianity for Islam. Their images can be treated as a visual representation of fulfilled prayers and the salvation of their souls. As a group, St. Ketevan the Martyr, St. Luarsab the Martyr, St. Archil the Martyr and St. Nino can be understood to represent not only the rulers but also the Georgian nation, along with the saints who were responsible for the Christianization of their homeland. Thus, the faithful of the Georgian Orthodox Church who gathered in the

33 *Ibid.*, 63–65.

34 *Ibid.*, 123–126.

35 ANTONY EASTMOND, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1998), 200.

temple saw not only their canonised historical rulers but also the saints who led their nation out of paganism. This is essential because the role of Christianity in shaping Georgian national identity and nationalism has been significant and has continued to endure since the 19th century.³⁶

Gagarin's new fresco decoration of the Sioni Cathedral's interior, as already mentioned, also included structural elements: pillars and their archivolts located in the central nave of the temple. Grigory Grigorievich placed images of St. George and St. Alexandra of Rome, the Martyr, on the surfaces of the two pillars. Both full-figure representations are located at the same height as the other saints described earlier – St. Nino, St. Ketevan the Martyr, St. Luarsab the Martyr and St. Archil the Martyr. In order to comprehend the symbolism of St. George in Gagarin's project, it is important to acknowledge that the saint is not only traditionally canonised as a relative of St. Nino (who, according to tradition, was his cousin) but is also regarded as the patron saint of Georgia. Moreover, it is not surprising that St. George's image is positioned opposite that of St. Alexandra of Rome the Martyr, as her conversion to Christianity was strongly influenced by his missionary work. Next to images of St. George and St. Alexandra of Rome the Martyr, Gagarin put tondos with portraits of St. Sophia of Rome with her three daughters: the Saints Faith, Hope and Charity. The prince's choice of these particular saints and their location can be interpreted as a wish to create a transition between the central nave space – where he located the personifications of universal and fundamental Christian virtues – and the space under the temple's dome, where he located the figures of the essential Georgian saints who are particularly worshipped by members of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, St. George – a great martyr and a knight who defeated even the dragon – and St. Alexandra of Rome the Martyr his devoted disciple with unwavering faith in Christ, represent this symbolic transition.

The new frescoes in the interior of Sioni Cathedral also used images of the Thirteen Assyrian Fathers, who significantly influenced the development of the Christian faith in the Caucasian territories. They came to the Kingdom of Iberia in the 6th century, and their missionary activity contributed to the inhabitants of the early medieval cradle of Georgia abandoning the cult of fire and replacing it with monasticism.

36 STEPHEN JONES, "Georgia – A Political History Since Independence" in *After Independence: Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcolonial and Postcommunist States*, ed. LOWELL BARRINGTON (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 248-276.

One surprising fact is that Grigory Grigorievich placed the image of St. Stephen of Khirsa in the central position, at the main point of the ribbed vaulting above the temple's central nave. Gagarin's choice is astonishing, even though Christian hagiography calls the saint "the culmination of strength and knowledge,"³⁷ because this would seem a more suitable location for the portrait of St. John of Zedazeni, who was considered the spiritual leader and teacher of the other Assyrian monastic missionaries.

An analysis of Gagarin's new interior decoration project for the Sioni Cathedral yields three strongly noticeable issues. Firstly, the style in which Gagarin created the new frescoes – the green and blue paintings contrast with golden decorative motifs together with floral and geometric ornaments. In his notes and letters, the prince emphasised that his primary aim behind the creation of the project was to design a structure in the spirit of Neo-Byzantinism (referred to as "Byzantinism" in his surviving correspondence). Additionally, 19th-century residents of Tbilisi who had the opportunity to admire the finished temple also noted the "ascetic spirit of the Byzantine style" in his design of the temple's interior.³⁸ However, looking at the decoration of the interior of the Sioni Cathedral, it should be said that Grigory Grigorievich created the frescoes in the Western European style and was influenced not only Byzantine art, taking decorative motifs from the Byzantine Empire's architecture, e.g., horseshoe arches, but also Gothic styles, e.g., imitating medieval floral finials. Moreover, the decorative elements utilized by Gagarin in his project were derived from Medieval Georgian art, which was classified as a subdivision of Byzantine art in the 19th century. The prince employed different types of braids that can be found in adornments on the walls of medieval religious structures, including the external facades. As a result, the Sioni Cathedral's interior decoration by Gagarin is a complex example of the mutual penetration of Western European and so-called Oriental art in the 19th century. Grigory Grigorievich's passion for European art is, above all, visible in the style of the saints' figures, for which the main factor was Renaissance Italian art. However, Gagarin was not the only artist to be strongly influenced by this artistic period. The educational system of the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg, where the most

37 CHARKIEWICZ, *Gruzińscy święci*, 40–41.

38 TAMAR KHOSROSHVILI, "Zwizualizowany imperializm i narodowa identyfikacja. Kilka przykładów kościelnego malarstwa w Gruzji od 1801 do 1918 roku," *Przegląd Nauk Historycznych* 18, no. 2 (2019): 250–251.

talented students could gain scholarships, allowed them to spend time in Italy (mainly Rome) for their artistic research abroad. Also, thanks to this, they were able to interact directly with key artworks by the most significant Renaissance artists – Raphael's work was especially admired by members of the artistic community of the Russian Empire. This had a critical influence on Russian art in the 19th century, especially religious art, which began to be Europeanized after the reforms of Peter the Great, including, e.g., the closure of the icon art workshop operating within the Kremlin Armoury (Oruzheynaya palata).³⁹ While creating the Sioni Cathedral's new decoration, Gagarin used linear perspective and the play of light, both elements unfamiliar to Orthodox art before the reforms of Peter the Great. However, the prince did not wholly follow the trends dominant in Russian religious art of that era – he used identifying inscriptions of the saints (which he made using the Early Cyrillic alphabet) and the traditional gold colour.

Secondly, while analysing Gagarin's decoration of the Sioni Cathedral, another issue also appears, that of the rich Georgian heritage and culture. It can be said that Grigory Grigorievich tried to create a space where the inhabitants of Tbilisi would feel respect for local cults and traditions. The prince created a real pantheon of saints endowed with a particular faith and love by the members of the Georgian Orthodox Church, e.g., St. Nino, St. Luarsab II the Martyr or Thirteen Assyrian Fathers. Gagarin supplemented their images with scenes from the life of Mary the Virgin and Christ, obligatory for every Orthodox temple's interior, and with saints' figures from the Dogmatic Cycle, together with universal Christian iconography like the portraits of St. Sophia and her daughters – the Saints Faith, Hope and Charity. Furthermore, not only is the iconography of the hagiographic cycle evidence of Gagarin's respect for the traditions and heritage of the region, his placing of the figure of King David on the right side of the enthroned Mary the Virgin in the Dogmatic Cycle is a symbolic reference to the history of Georgia and its royal family – the Bagrationi dynasty. It is also worth noting that Gagarin dressed all the saints' figures in historical costumes, which he made appropriate for the era in which each individual lived. Thus, he portrayed St. Nino in a simple, light beige gown, St. George in the armour of a Roman legionary, and St. Ketevan the Martyr in a royal costume from the 17th century. As mentioned above,

39 BARBARA DĄB-KALINOWSKA, "Rosyjskie malarstwo religijne w XIX wieku", *Artium Quaestiones*, no. 3 (1986): 87–91.

Gagarin also used ornaments and decorative motifs characteristic of the region. These elements are connected with Georgian national identity and heritage. Georgian artists had used these to decorate religious buildings (their interiors and exteriors) since early medieval times. Arts like stone sculpture, manuscripts or goldsmithing were also important. Moreover, the richness of Georgian ornaments was already being studied by art historians of the 19th century such as Nikodim Kondakov, and at the beginning of the 20th century, such as Jurgis Baltrušaitis.⁴⁰

Thirdly, Gagarin's replacement of the iconostasis in the Sioni Cathedral should also be considered as part of the prince's desire to complete the work entrusted to him as best as possible. Surviving archives about the works in the temple show that in deciding to introduce this new artefact Gagarin aimed to create a better aesthetic coherence with his Neo-Byzantine-style frescos. It must be admitted that the iconostasis from the 19th century, inspired by early Christian art, does form a coherent whole with these frescoes. Unfortunately, sketches or designs of the earlier iconostasis from the beginning of the 19th century have not survived. According to archival notes from the 1850s, the Sioni Cathedral housed a wooden iconostasis decorated with intricate arabesque patterns. This information is valuable for anyone seeking to understand the history of the cathedral and its furnishings.⁴¹

Although Gagarin carried out work inside the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi on behalf of the tsarist administration of the Caucasus Viceroyalty, it can be said that during his activities, he tried to respect the heritage of the region: its art, architecture and traditions, which he had already explored. Grigory Grigorievich's solid knowledge of this subject is evidenced by his aforementioned publication "Le Caucase pittoresque," published in 1847. Furthermore, Gagarin also published several other publications about the Caucasus region, e.g., the French language "Scènes paysages, mœurs et costumes du Caucase" (1850), and two Russian language works published already after the prince's return to St. Petersburg "Памятники древней письменности и искусства. Происхождение пятиглавых церквей" [Pamyatniki drevney pis'mennosti i iskusstva. Proiskhozhdeniye pyatiglavyykh tserkvey] (1881) together with "Собрание византийских, грузинских и древнерусских орнаментов и памятников архитектуры" [Sobraniye vizantiyskikh, gruzinskikh i drevnerusskikh ornamentov

40 MARINA TEVZAIYA, *Georgian Ornament* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018).

41 NAG, CHA, inv. No. 488, sign. 16009, 78.

i pamyatnikov arkhitektury] (1897). The books comprising this collection showcase the cultural heritage of the Caucasus region through an array of graphic illustrations augmented by descriptions and explanatory text. These publications offer an unparalleled insight into the multifaceted nature of the region's cultural legacy, providing a captivating visual window into the richness of its historical and artistic heritage.

The decision to commission new frescoes for the temple was unrelated to any desire to commemorate a significant political event in the Russian Empire's history in this region, unlike the construction of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Tbilisi (in the second half of the 19th century), which was intended as a "thanksgiving" gift for the Russian victory in the Caucasian War. The tsarist administration of the Caucasus Viceroyalty ordered Gagarin to design new frescoes for the Sioni Cathedral because of the poor condition of the building, which was the consequence of setting fire to its interior in 1795 during the Persian attack on Tbilisi. Furthermore, Gagarin's design played an important role in transforming Tbilisi from an Asian city on the outskirts of Tsarist Russia into the most important city of the Caucasus Viceroyalty and one of the most significant in the Russian Empire. The tsarist authorities allocated appropriate funds to carry out activities which, as understood at the time, were to be of a conservatory nature, and the issue of the new interior of the Sioni Cathedral, to be designed by a Russian, was so crucial in the tsarist policy in the Caucasus that there is evidence in the archives that the progress of Grigory Grigorievich's work was discussed even with members of the Romanov family.

Interestingly, Georgians also referred to Gagarin's artwork in the Sioni Cathedral with undisguised satisfaction, as exemplified by the comment of the 19th-century Georgian historian Platon Ioseliani: "Prince Gagarin, who took upon himself the enormous effort of renovating the interior of the Cathedral [...]. Combining the knowledge of a painter, an architect and a connoisseur of ornaments, he carefully studied all branches of art, science and visual studies. The ancient temples, with which the Caucasus abounds, were an opportunity for constant reflection, mathematical conclusions, and tireless improvement for the zealous artist so that his well-known talent only fully developed, consolidated and took its present form here [...]. Prince Gagarin's talent requires space [...]. He creates monumental buildings and combines painting with architecture on a grand, majestic scale".⁴²

42 Иоселиани, *Описание древностей города Тифлис*, 103.

Gagarin's use of the neo-Byzantine style in the design of the new temple decoration can be justified, among others, by the prince's knowledge of the heritage of the region – especially the South Caucasus, which was shaped under the strong influence of Byzantine culture, but also the political situation. Numerous monuments of medieval art in which the region abounds, e.g., the mosaics in the Jvari monastery (6th century), the gospel from the Gelati monastery (12th century), or frescoes from the church of St. George in the Ubisi Monastery (14th century) show the interpenetration of Byzantine and Caucasian cultures and also reflect the heritage of the region. Gagarin must have been aware of how important the heritage of the Byzantine Empire was, not only among the region's inhabitants but also among the Russians, and that it is an element connecting both cultural circles.

Therefore, Gagarin's project to design the Sioni Cathedral's new interior decoration should be considered in terms of the internal policy of the Caucasus Viceroyalty and the tsars' international policy, together with the creation of the image of their empire. A watershed in the iconography used by the tsarist's administration is the coronation of Tsar Alexander II⁴³ in 1856 and its commemorative visual publications. This ceremony occurred several years after Gagarin's activities in the Sioni Cathedral (and generally in the Caucasus region). However, the fact that the prince acted on Vorontsov's instructions is crucial. Mikhail Semyonovich, as commander-in-chief and viceroy of the Caucasus, was famous for his progressive, liberal policies.⁴⁴ Because of this, Grigory Grigorievich's project can be assumed to reflect Vorontsov's attitude towards the region, which during his rule developed significantly in economic and social terms⁴⁵ – including the new-European character of Tbilisi. What is more, at that time, representatives of the region's elite cooperated with the tsarist administration of the Viceroyalty of the Caucasus – among them Georgians, e.g., Grigol Orbeliani, and Armenians, e.g., the Catholicos of the Armenian Apostolic Church – Nerses V.⁴⁶

43 RICHARD WORTMAN, "Vignettes of Empire: 'Asiatic Peoples' at Nineteenth-Century Imperial Russian Coronations," in *Picturing Russian Empire*, ed. VALERIE KIVELSON, SERGEI KOZLOV, JOAN NEUBERGER (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 171–178.

44 RAYFIELD, *Edge of Empires*, 284–291.

45 SUNY, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 63–95.

46 Ф. М. Кулиев, «Религия и власть в России: Роль Наместника Кавказа М. С. Воронцова в реализации религиозной политики Российской Империи на Кавказе в середине XIX в.», *Вестник Экспертного Совета*, no. 1 (2022): 105–109.

Under the rule of the tsars, the Russian Empire was a diverse nation in terms of ethnicity, culture, and religion. This diversity was also reflected in the official expeditions of the Romanovs to the Caucasus region, which took place during the reigns of Nicholas I, Alexander II, Alexander III, and Nicholas II. These expeditions covered both the northern and southern areas of the region.⁴⁷ Thus, depending on the ruler and his policy, the attitude of 'the ruler of all Russians' like, e.g., Alexander II or the autocratic 'old-Russian tsar' like, e.g. Alexander III, was represented.⁴⁸ Moreover, as early as the beginning of the 18th century the Russian elite had a strong sense of being the bearer and representative of European culture in Asia. This idea was almost messianic and gained particular notoriety in the early 19th century. It escalated in the 1840s when the belief that the Russians were to carry out a special mission to Europeanize Asia began to take effect.⁴⁹ Also, gaining strength at that time was the conviction about the anointing of the Russian Empire as a state whose aim was to play a unique role in the European and world political arena, as well as the idea of the Romanovs as protectors of all Orthodox nations – the institution of the Orthodox Church became the main bridge between the tsar and his subjects. This resulted from the Russian image of its nation as a possessor of extraordinary virtues that would testify to its uniqueness and superiority against other European nations – similar messianic beliefs are also noticeable in French and Polish social movements of that time. However, in 19th-century Russia, this concept had a robust reception.⁵⁰

47 HUBERTUS JAHN, "Visits of tsars to the Caucasus as Representations of Empire", in *Identities and Representations in Georgia from the 19th Century to the Present*, ed. HUBERTUS JAHN (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2021), 169–184.

48 ENDRE SASHALMI, "Façades of a Multi-Ethnic Empire Presenting and Publicizing the Coronation of the 'All-Russian Emperor,' Alexander III (1883)", in *Inter-Ethnic Relations and the Functioning of Multi-Ethnic Societies: Cohesion in Multi-Ethnic Societies in Europe from c. 1000 to the Present*, ed. PRZEMYSŁAW WISZEWSKI (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2022), 321–338.

49 VERA TOLZ, *Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26–31.

50 MARK BASSIN, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 37–68.



ILLUSTRATION 1. General Research Division, The New York Public Library. "Stennaia zhivopis' v Sionskom sobore, v Tiflise, ispolnennaia v 1853–1854 g. Poperechnyi razrez sobora" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed May 2, 2024. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47de-7b0c-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

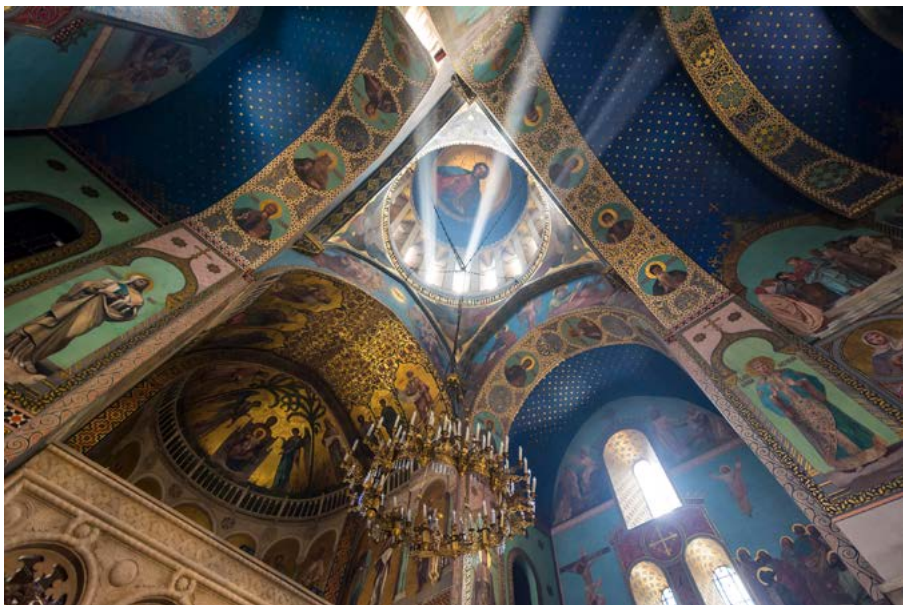


ILLUSTRATION 2. Interior of the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi; Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sioni_Cathedral_Tbilisi.jpg#file



ILLUSTRATION 3. *Iconostasis of the Sioni Cathedral in Tbilisi;* Marta Cyuńczyk's archival collection



ILLUSTRATION 4. General Research Division, The New York Public Library. *"Stennaia zhivopis' v Sionskom sobore, v Tiflise, ispolnennaiia v 1853-1854 g. Poperechnyi razrez sobora"* New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed May 2, 2024. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47de-7b0b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

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