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**XVI CENTURY GEORGIAN WALL PAINTING, DEPICTION OF
EMPEROR CONSTANTINE AND SAINT QUEEN HELENA
ALONGSIDE WITH KTETOR PORTRAIT OF KING LEVAN**

MA Thesis in Late Antique, Medieval, and Early Modern Studies

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by

Salome Gviniashvili

(Georgia)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,
Central European University Private University, Vienna, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Master of Arts degree in Late Antique, Medieval, and Early Modern
Studies.

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU.

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Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, **Salome Gviniashvili**, candidate for the MA degree in Comparative History, with a specialization in Late Antique, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies, with a specialization in Interdisciplinary Medieval Studies declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the meaning of portraying King Levan as ktetor alongside the Byzantine Emperor Constantine and Queen Helena, approximately one century after the fall of Constantinople. The paper delves into the strategic use of art and iconography by the ktetor to project and legitimize his political power and religious authority. For this, it reviews and conducts a comparative analysis of all the images of King Levan. In addition, the paper examines King Levan's royal ideology at different stages of his life. A review of deeds, documents, and later historical sources, along with an artistic analysis of the paintings, reveals the symbolic meanings of these portraits. The paper also explores the broader historical and cultural significance of Emperor Constantine and Queen Helena in Georgian art and how their images were used to convey political and religious messages.

The analysis enhances our understanding of how King Levan utilized art and iconography to strengthen his legitimacy and authority, positioning himself as a defender of Christianity and a new Christian leader of the East in a post-Byzantine context. This research contributes to the field by highlighting a relatively unexplored period in Georgian history, emphasizing the nuanced ways in which royal ideology and self-representation were formed and communicated through visual means.

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Introduction

The Byzantine Empire and Christian Georgia had a complex relationship, involving many conflicts. Nevertheless, Byzantium represented one of Georgia's main Christian allies and partners at all stages. The fall of Byzantium and the emergence of non-Christian empires in the region posed a great threat to Georgia. It is likely that the fall of Byzantium was one of the main contributing factors to the later events in Georgia, which resulted in its disintegration. Soon after the fall of Constantinople, Georgia fragmented into kingdom principalities in 1495, leading to the emergence of the Kingdom of Kartli,¹ the Kingdom of Kakheti,² the Kingdom of Imereti,³ and Samtskhe-Saatabago.⁴ All these kingdoms were ruled by members of the Bagrationi family. These kingdoms developed differently in the centuries to come, although all of them tried to unite Georgia under their crown, but none succeeded. During this turbulent time, from the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Kakheti managed to maintain peace with the neighboring empires and, due to its strategic geopolitical location, became a conduit for their trade routes, which advanced the kingdom economically.⁵

Along with the economic advancement, King Levan initiated a reconstruction program, with special emphasis given to the restoration, construction, and painting of church buildings. In seven of these churches, portraits of King Levan, as ktetor (founder), have been preserved to this

¹ Kingdom of Kartli: Located in central Georgia, Kartli encompassed areas around the historic capital of Tbilisi.

² Kingdom of Kakheti: Situated in Eastern Georgia, Kakheti covered regions in the Eastern part of the country, bordering modern-day Azerbaijan.

³ Kingdom of Imereti: This kingdom was located in Western Georgia, comprising territories in the area around the Rioni River.

⁴ Samtskhe-Saatabago: Positioned in the southern part of Georgia, Samtskhe-Saatabago included areas in the region of Meskheta, near the border with modern-day Turkey and Armenia.

⁵ Tea Kutelia, *Грузия и Сефевидский Иран (по данным нумизматики)* [*Georgia and Safavid Iran (According to Numismatic Data)*], Tbilisi, Metsniereba, 1979, pp. 14-25

day. All these portraits are special and interesting in their own way; however, one of these portraits is particularly notable. In Alvani church of John the Baptist, alongside the ktetor portraits of King Levan and a very damaged portrait next to him, St. Nino, Emperor Constantine, and St. Helena are represented in a row. It is the main image I will discuss and analyze in this thesis.

The research aims and methods

The primary aim of this thesis is to explore the significance of portraying King Levan alongside the Byzantine Emperor Constantine and Queen Helena approximately one century after the fall of Constantinople. This research delves into the historical context of King Levan's reign and seeks to understand how the depictions of Emperor Constantine and Saint Helena were utilized to reflect or shape King Levan's royal ideology. Such an analysis will consider how these images articulate his position as a Christian ruler amidst the religious and political upheavals of the region. In order to do so, I have studied deeds and other documents from the time of King Levan, as well as later written sources about his reign. With comparative analysis of these written sources against the paintings I explore the symbolic representations found within these artworks. This investigation aims to understand the meanings of these symbolic images within the context of King Levan's portraits to determine what they reveal about his royal ideology and self-fashioning. This entails a detailed examination of how these iconic figures were depicted and the ideological messages they contained through their presence in wall paintings that portray King Levan. The analysis also includes an examination of the importance of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena throughout time, along with an artistic analysis of paintings from this period.

Tracing these themes through different layers of analysis, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which King Levan used art and iconography to project and legitimize his political power and religious authority in post-Byzantine Eastern Christianity.

Although there is extensive research on the portraits of Georgian kings and their royal ideology, most of it focuses on the relatively early period in Georgia's history of Georgia, before its disintegration, when it was a strong and powerful kingdom. For example, Antony Eastmond's "*Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*" discusses the royal imagery in Georgia between the ninth and thirteenth centuries.⁶ Research also continued after the eighteenth century because, at this time, historical sources began to be collected, and new and existing information was recorded. Although King Levan's ktetor portraits have been researched before, the focus was more on their identification. The royal ideology of King Levan and how this can be read through the analysis of portraiture has yet to be explored. My aim is to explore small nuances of this relatively unexplored period of Georgian history through an analysis of King Levan's royal portraits, shedding light on his ideology and ambitions.

Contemporary sources detailing Georgia's history during the sixteenth century are scarce. However, we can piece together information from various documents, including deeds, inscriptions on historical monuments, and observations recorded by travelers and historians from adjacent countries, occasionally referencing Georgia and its people. In my examination of sixteenth-century Georgia, I significantly rely on eighteenth-century sources. The focus on recollecting historical data and the Georgian chronicles started during this time. One of them is Georgian scholar, historian, and cartographer Vakhushti Batonishvili's *Description of the Kingdom*

⁶ Antony Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University press, 1998

of Georgia, written in the eighteenth century.⁷ Despite the significant temporal gap, his account is invaluable. He likely had access to sources and oral histories that were still relevant among the people of his time, offering a comprehensive source of information. To ensure the accuracy and enrich the narrative of my study, I will corroborate Vakhushti's descriptions with relevant primary sources. This includes scrutinizing inscriptions on historical monuments, studying the ktetor portraits of kings on these sites, A small number of deeds and letters written by king Levan and exploring the works of non-Georgian travelers and writers whose writings provide crucial insights into the period.

I also draw on observations from Antony Jenkinson, an English merchant travelled from Russia to Iran through Kakheti and Dalmatian envoy Simon de Lilli, who was an ambassador of King Ferdinand of Austria and also was travelling to Iran through the territory of the kingdom of Kakheti. Their accounts briefly mention King Levan. Another essential source I use is the writings of eighteenth-century Georgian monk and scholar Timote Gabashvili, derived from his memoir book- *“The Traveling”*. Gabashvili's detailed observations of historical monuments—both those that still stand and those that have been lost or damaged—provide invaluable insights. His descriptions not only shed light on the physical aspects of these artifacts but also offer a glimpse into the cultural and historical context surrounding them. Gabashvili's work is particularly useful for understanding the fate of demolished or damaged artifacts, enriching our comprehension of Georgia's rich heritage and the changes it has undergone through time.⁸

I also rely on *“The Continuation of the Life of Kartli”* (Georgian chronicles), written during the reign of Vakhtang the Sixth of Kartli in the eighteenth century. Vakhtang the Sixth,

⁷ Vakhushti Batonishvili, საქართველოს სამეფოს ისტორია [History of the Kingdom of Georgia] Tbilisi, 1963.

⁸ Timote Gabashvili, *ბიძისგანა* [The Traveling] Tbilisi, 1852.

together with a commission of educated men, collects the Georgian historical sources available up to that time and establishes the form of unified historical writings.⁹

Thesis structure

This first chapter of this thesis delves into the ktetor portraits of King Levan. These portraits serve not only as artistic representations but also as historical documents that provide insight into the era and its cultural ethos. This chapter establishes a chronology of these portraits by conducting a comparative analysis of historical sources and the paintings themselves. Through this analysis, this chapter reveals how the image of King Levan was created and developed over time, reflecting both his personal aspirations and broader socio-political dynamics.

In the second chapter, the focus shifts to King Levan's ideology, particularly his self-fashioning as King of kings and his efforts to ally his kingdom with Christian forces. This exploration is crucial for understanding how Levan's political actions and artistic patronage were influenced by his religious beliefs and the strategic needs of his kingdom. The chapter examines how his ideology manifested in his governance and shaped his interactions with both local and international Christian entities.

The third chapter focuses on the images of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena as key figures in Christian history, whose depiction alongside King Levan in Georgian wall paintings is particularly significant and interesting. This analysis investigates the ideological context of these figures, the form and meaning of their depiction, and their roles within Georgian historical and art historical narratives. Furthermore, it explores the potential connections between these iconic

⁹ Vakhtang VI and the group of educated men, სწავლ. კაცთა, ქც-ის გავრძელება [Life of Kartli, Volume VI, continued] It is written in eighteenth century but, I believe, that the sources, which are not available for now, could be available for them in eighteen century, that's why, I rely on their discussions and information.

figures and King Levan, trying to understand why their image was included in his ktetor portraits and what this inclusion tells us about the royal and religious symbolism of the time.

The thesis concludes with a synthesis of the findings, which enhance our understanding of how art, religion, and monarchy interacted during a pivotal but less-investigated period in Georgian history. This conclusion not only ties together the individual elements examined throughout the thesis but also highlights their collective impact on the cultural and political landscape of King Levan's Kingdom of Kakheti.

A Brief History of Sixteenth Century Kakheti

As the Georgian historian Ivane Javakhishvili mentions, relations between the kings of Kartli and Kakheti have been strained for various reasons since Georgia's disintegration into kingdoms and principalities.¹⁰ One such reason was their mutual aspiration to unify these two kingdoms, as both coveted the throne of the united Kartli-Kakheti. At the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century, Aleksandre I ruled over Kakheti and actively spearheaded the reconstruction efforts within the kingdom. He diligently fostered peaceful foreign and domestic relations through diplomatic negotiations. His diplomatic rapport with King Constantine II of Kartli resulted in the establishment of borders and a prevailing atmosphere of good neighborliness.¹¹ This does not mean, however, that Aleksandre I did not seek to merge the Kingdom of Kartli with Kakheti and did not see the unification of these kingdoms under his throne.¹²

¹⁰ Ivane Javakhishvili, *ქართველი ერის ისტორია [History of the Georgian Nation]*, vol. 4 (Tbilisi, 1967), p. 214.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² მცხეთის სიგელი 1503 [Mtskheta deed of 1503].

Prince Giorgi, the son of King Aleksandre of Kakheti, held a different viewpoint from his father concerning the pursuit of a peaceful policy. He strongly opposed his father's approach, believing that the sole feasible method to unite the kingdoms of Kartli and Kakheti lay in conquering the Kingdom of Kartli through warfare. Determined to execute his idea promptly, he disregarded the firm opposition from his father, Aleksandre I, and his younger brother Dimitri. Despite their earnest pleas to refrain from shedding the blood of their brethren—the people of Kartli and Kakheti—Prince Giorgi persisted in his plan and launched an invasion into Kartli with his forces.¹³

In the “*Life of Kartli*”, we read that, in 1511, Prince Giorgi assembled an army and launched an attack against his father and brother.¹⁴ He killed his father, blinded his brother, expelled him from the kingdom, and declared himself king. As a result of this action, he entered history under the name of Av-Giorgi (Giorgi the Evil).¹⁵ However, Av-Giorgi’s efforts did not yield success. Despite marching into Kartli multiple times, he failed to achieve significant results.¹⁶ In 1513, during another campaign, Av-Giorgi was captured. He was imprisoned in Ksani and subsequently killed.¹⁷ Following the death of the King of Kakheti, the throne was seized by the King of Kartli, David X. This change in rulership posed a clear threat to Av-Giorgi's young son Levan, the potential heir to the throne, and his mother, Queen Elene.

Feudal lords of Kakheti refused to switch allegiance to the new king and took every measure to safeguard the prince and the queen. They concealed them within the residence of

¹³ Vakhtang VI and the group of educated men, სწავლ. კაცთა, ქც-ის გავრძელება [*Life of Kartli, Volume VI, continued*] p.422

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Vakhtang VI the group of educated men, სწავლ. კაცთა, ქც-ის გავრძელება [*Life of Kartli, Volume VI, Continued*], vol. 47, p. 906.

¹⁶ Ibid. 906-907.

¹⁷ Ibid. 909.

Garsevan Cholokashvili, a relative of the queen and the "Sakhlukhutsesi" of the king's family.¹⁸

The Kakhetian feudal lords effectively shielded them and provided the prince with suitable education and training, preparing him for kingship when the opportune moment arrived.¹⁹

From the Iran-Ottoman war that began in 1514, Shah Ismail I of Iran directed all his forces toward the South Caucasus to prevent Ottoman dominance in the region. Advancing beyond the South Caucasus, he entered Kartli. The Shah of Iran commanded a substantial and potent army, leaving David X with no viable option but to render the Kingdom of Kartli as a vassal of Iran. Exploiting the ongoing turmoil within the Kartli kingdom, the feudal lords of Kakheti took action, and in 1518, Prince Levan was consecrated as the King of Kakheti in Bodbe, where St. Nino, who converted Georgia to Christianity, is buried.²⁰

Seeking to bolster King Levan's authority, the Kakhetian lords sought an alliance and deemed the Duke of Guria (Western Georgian province), Mamia Gurieli, the most suitable candidate. They established a connection with him and sought to strengthen this bond by arranging a marriage between the king and Gurieli's daughter, Tinatin.²¹ King Levan and his allies, with effective foreign and domestic policies, thus managed to revitalize the weakened Kingdom of Kakheti, which had been grappling with internal and external conflicts during the sixteenth century.²²

¹⁸ Sakhlukhutsesi was a high-ranking official of the king and prominent feudal lords in late feudal Georgia, who performed economic, financial, and administrative functions.

¹⁹ Vakhtang VI the group of educated men, *სწავლ. კაცთა, ქც-ის გავრძელება* [Life of Kartli, Volume VI, Continued], 47:910–12.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Nodar Asatiani, *კახეთის სამეფო მეთხუთმეტე - მეთექვსმეტე საუკუნეებში* [The Kingdom of Kakheti in the Fifteenth-Sixteenth Centuries] (Tbilisi, 1989), p. 335.

²² Vakhushti Batonishvili, *საქართველოს სამეფოს ისტორია* [History of the Kingdom of Georgia] (Tbilisi, 1963), pp. 238-239.

When Shah Ismail dispatched his commander to subjugate the Georgian kingdoms and strengthen the borders of his realm, the King of Kakheti, recognizing his limited options in the face of overwhelming Safavid military might, concluded that yielding to certain demands to establish peaceful relations with Safavid Iran was not a matter of clever strategy but a necessary act of survival. Consequently, they extracted a promise from the shah that guaranteed non-interference with the Kingdom. Consequently, several messengers travelled from Western countries to Iran through Kakheti, taking advantage of the kingdom's strategic location. This arrangement played a crucial role in facilitating communication and logistics within the coalition, highlighting Kakheti's pivotal position in the regional geopolitical landscape.²³

During King Levan's reign, numerous churches were constructed, including the Archangels complex in Gremi and the The New Shuamta monastery. By his decree, the Church of the Holy Trinity in Alvani, the Church of St. Nicholas in Matani, Vedreba in Bakhtalo-Zegan, Alaverdi Monastery, Ninotsminda-Khisri monastery, the Church of Bartsan, White St. Georges church in Atkuri, among others, were restored or renovated. Hall churches such as the Gremi Hall Church, Akvaneti John the Baptist Hall Church, and Sabatsminda church in Kardanakh, were constructed in various locations. Additionally, several basilicas and hall churches like the Holy Trinity in Khashmi, John the Baptist church in Sabue, church complex in Matani, and John the Baptist church in Alvani restored and painted.²⁴

²³ One of the messengers sent to Iran from Austria mentions that he visited “imperor Georgianis Vicino perse”, which Lajos Tardy thinks could be King Levan. See Lajos Tardy, *Beyond the Ottoman Empire: 14th-16th Century Hungarian Diplomacy in the East*, Szeged: Universitatis Szegediensis de Attila József nominata, 1978, p.206. Antony Jenkinson, in *Hakluyt's Voyages*, selected and edited by Irvin R. Blacker, New York: Viking Press, 1965, pp. 107-108

²⁴ Vakhtang VI and the group of educated men, სწავლ. კაცთა, ქ.ც-ის გავრძელება [Life of Kartli, Volume VI, continued] p.910–15.

Chapter 1 King Levan's Ktotor Portraits

In this chapter, I will discuss and analyze the ktotor portraits of King Levan. My aim is to uncover and interpret the messages conveyed by the expressions in these portraits. I will explore what these portraits suggest about the intentions of the ktotor (in this case, King Levan) and artist and how they reflect the social and personal context of their creation. By analyzing the nuances of these portraits, I aim to reveal the diverse narratives they create that uncover the worldview and aspirations of King Levan at different stages of his life. Through this examination, I aim to provide a deeper understanding of how these portraits functioned as a kind of medium for storytelling and ideological expression in the context of Georgian royal culture.

Seven portraits of King Levan have been preserved to this day. From these, we only know the exact dates of the earliest and the most recent portraits. The earliest dates back to 1518, and the most recent to 1574.²⁵ Although the exact dating of the other portraits is impossible, we can establish a potential date for those portraits based on the choice of figures, their possible age and clothing. Although the portraits of King Levan of Kakheti are a particularly interesting subject in the history of Georgian wall painting, there is a lack of research on this issue. Many scholars have mentioned information about King Levan's paintings, but only art historians Nana Burchuladze and Marina Vachnadze have extensively studied them.²⁶ Burchuladze focuses on identifying the

²⁵ First inscription is inscribed on Kashmi trinity church in the tympanum of Western wall. It is demolished, but we can still read "King Leon" and "1518" (inscribed in old Georgian). The last one says "With help of the greatest King Leon, we built a church of archangel Michael and Gabriel, in the choronicon 7085 August 29 day 4, when the archbishop was Saba.... Monk Protosyngellos from Thessaloniki."

²⁶ Nana Burchuladze, "მეფეთა პორტრეტები ალავერდის ტაძრის მონასტულობაში" [The Kings' Portraits in the Alaverdi Cathedral's Paintings]. *ალავერდის ეპარქიის ისტორიის ფურცლები* [Papers of the Alaverdi Eparchy], vol. 1, Tbilisi, 2007. Marina Vachnadze, "ლევანკახთა მეფისა და თინათინ დედოფლის პორტრეტული გამოსახულებები" [The Portraits of King Levan and Queen Tinatin]. *ძეგლის მეგობარი* [Dzeglis Megobari], no. 33-34, Tbilisi, 1973.

unknown figure in the portrait at Alaverdi Cathedral, while Vachnadze examines the unknown portrait in the John the Baptist church of Alvani.

The ktetor portraits of King Levan occupy a special place in the history of Georgian wall painting, distinguished by their remarkable quantity, varied forms of representation, and unique layout. While there are no exact records of the relationship between builders and painters in the sixteenth century, it can be inferred that King Levan, who placed great importance on his own image, likely had a role in the painting process. Considering the extensive construction, restoration, and painting of churches in the relatively small region of the Kingdom of Kakheti—all funded and overseen by King Levan—it is probable that he would have been aware of who his portrait would be adjacent to or its form.

1.1 King Levan's ktetor portraits in the first half of his reign

The first known portrait of King Levan is depicted in the Khashmi Trinity Church, which was painted in the first year of King Levan's reign (fig.1). The church is located on the border of the Kartli kingdom, under whose dominion was the kingdom of Kakheti before the reign of King Levan. Displaying the portrait of King Levan in this church can be seen as strengthening and marking of the borders of the Kingdom of Kakheti. The portrait is located east of the northern row of piers. This church is the sixth-century Basilica of the Holy Trinity, which was restored and painted at the beginning of the sixteenth century during the reign of King Levan. The figure of King Levan appears at first glance to be far away from all other figures. Still, on the north side of the nave, there are Holy Warriors, St. George, and St. Demetrios, which accompany him from the other side (Fig.2). Although the Holy Warriors can be observed only from the nave differently from ktetor portrait, as the warriors are represented on the north wall of the nave. The portrait of

King Levan can only be perceived from the east. The Holy Warriors, depicted as St. George and St. Demetrios, are shown in warrior's attire, signifying their role as protectors. Known historically for their defense of Christianity, they are aptly represented here as guardians of the king's portrait.²⁷ Given their title as Holy Warriors and their storied past, it is evident that they symbolically safeguard a Christian king who relies on their divine protection. It is an iconographic pattern in post-Byzantine wall paintings to observe holy warriors as defenders of Christian faith; for instance, in numerous Serbian churches, warriors are represented next to the ktetors (Fig.3).²⁸ The figure of King Levan is adorned in Byzantine royal robes embellished with precious stones and the symbol of the double-headed eagle. He is represented as a young, short-bearded man with a model of the church in his hand. The Byzantine influence on the attire is clear from the fact that he wears a decorated tunic and a bejeweled loros, which is an important component of Byzantine royal garments.²⁹

King Levan is the last king of Kakheti depicted dressed in this way, as after him, even his son Aleksandre, following his father's death, is depicted only in Persian clothes.³⁰ It was customary for Georgian kings to be depicted in Byzantine royal garments, especially after Byzantine influence on Georgia became stronger. Following the Arab invasions, which disrupted the region from the seventh to almost the eleventh century, the Georgians identified Byzantium, a Christian empire, as a crucial ally in protecting their Christian faith. To counteract the political and cultural

²⁷ Marine Bulia, Nino Tsitsishvili, and Temo Jojua, "Saint Demetrios in Medieval Georgian Art" (Tbilisi: G. Chubinashvili Center, 2023). Published with the financial support of the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia, Grant Agreement No. FR-18-3030.

²⁸ Elisabeda Dimitrova, "The Days of St. Emperor Constantine and Helena," paper presented at the Fifth Symposium on Byzantium, Nish, June 3-5, 2006.

²⁹ Maria G. Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images: Byzantine Material Culture and Religious Iconography 11th-15th Centuries*. Leiden, 2003, pp. 18-20.

³⁰ While the Kingdom of Kakheti was already a military ally of Persia during the time of King Levan, their influence on the Kingdom of Kakheti was quite strong.

pressures exerted by the invasions, they established a political alliance with Byzantium, trying to strengthen their security and preserve their Christian heritage.³¹ In this regard, it is interesting that in the portraits of King Levan, we find the symbolism of a double-headed eagle as a well-known emblem of the Byzantine Empire.³² This motif, originated from Asia Minor, was prevalent in Phoenician and Mesopotamian cultures before becoming established as an imperial symbol in Late Byzantium.³³ It indeed had an influence in the wall paintings created in this period and we find this symbol on the clothes of the image of the builders created on the territory of Byzantium and in its neighbors.³⁴ We do not find this symbol in early Georgian wall paintings; only after almost a century had passed since the fall of Constantinople, we find it for the first time in the decoration of King Levan's garments. In my opinion, this not only reflects stylistic choices but also underscores the Kingdom of Kakheti's aspiration at the time to associate itself with the Byzantine Empire. Since the Kingdom of Kakheti, during King Levan's reign, was caught between two Islamic empires and constantly struggled to protect Christianity, it saw itself as the Christian legal heir of the Byzantine Empire in its region (See the further discussion about it in Chapter 3.2). The use of the royal symbol of the last years of the Byzantine Empire, the double-headed eagle, in the decoration of King Levan's clothes can be seen as emphasizing this ideological connection.

In Khashmi Trinity Church, we also find an inscription of King Levan, which is enclosed in the tympanum of the door on the Western wall (Fig.4). Although the inscription is badly

³¹ Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 4.

³² Bernhard Karl von Koehne, "Vom Doppeladler" [*On the Double-Headed Eagle*]. *Berliner Blätter für Münz-, Siegel- und Wappenkunde* (in German), 6, 1871–1873, 1–26.

³³ Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov., "Оценка у заметки по истории средневекового искусства и истории" [*Notes on the History of Medieval Art and History*] Prague, 1929, pp. 166-177.

³⁴ For example, we observe several examples in 13-century painting at Raška. See Đorđe N. Đekić., and Dragana Milić, "Motif of the Single-Headed and Double-Headed Eagle in Raška in the 13th Century." *Baština, Priština – Leposavić*, sv. 56, 2022. Faculty of Philosophy, Niš. Also, 13 century portraits of ktetor -Prince Stefan Vukanović in Morača Also in 13-14 century examples from Serbia: In Mileseva Ktetur portrait of Serbian King Stefan Prvovenčani, Portrait of the founder's wife, chapel of Saint Simeon in Studenica, etc.

damaged, small details are still legible. It mentions King Leon/Levan as the rebuilder of the church and dates the construction to 1518. The door is part of a larger composition consisting of a row of figures interconnected by interlocking arches (Fig.5). The first figure is painted within an arch. Above the doorway, we see the upper parts of two arches, which are interrupted by the door. After the door, the pattern continues with two more arches, each containing figures painted inside them. The row of figures is tripartite, beginning with the image which is greatly damaged, however from iconographical pattern I suggest that it is St. Nino, renowned as the Christianizer of Georgians. Her iconography requires her to be depicted in ascetic clothing to emphasize her lifestyle, and she must also hold a cross of vines tied with her own hair.³⁵ Her image is followed by the door with its inscribed tympanum. The series ends with the images of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena, both of whom are holding a cross in the middle. In this instance, the identifying inscriptions are missing.

We find the same pattern in the painting of the John the Baptist church of Alvani, which dates back to the 8th and 9th centuries and was restored and painted during the reign of King Levan. During this period, a brick bell tower was added to the church. Additionally, a large brick fest hall with expansive windows offering stunning views of the Alazani Valley was constructed during this time.³⁶ A series of figures similar to Kashmi trinity church, is located in the same place on the lower register of the west wall of the church. This painting is accompanied by identifying inscriptions, which support my hypothesis about the identification of the figures as St. Nino, Emperor Constantine, and Queen Helena. Like at Khashmi Trinity Church in Alvani, we also observe the same pattern of a row of life-size figures in the lower register of the west wall.

³⁵ Marjory Wardrop, *The Life of Saint Nino*, vol. 5, Clarendon Press Series Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990

³⁶ Giorgi Chubinashvili, *Архитектура Кახетии [Architecture of Kakheti]*, Tbilisi, 1959, p. 94. It is considered to be King Levan's fest hall, where he would hold royal receptions.

However, unlike the Church of the Holy Trinity in Khashmi, there is no doorway here. The arches, which in the other case began and were interrupted by the doorway, are used here to frame the figures.³⁷ The sequence begins on the left with the image of St. Nino. It is badly damaged, but the inscription has survived, which confirms that the image indeed represents St. Nino. The sequence ends with the images of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine and his mother, St. Helena (Fig.6). The portraits are dressed in Byzantine royal robes, except St. Nino, though the style of garments is similar to those in the images of Khashmi Trinity Church, there is no double headed eagle involved in the decoration of the tunic of ktetor or emperor. The third figure in this sequence is a portrait of King Levan of Kakheti, depicted in the attire of Byzantine emperors and holding a model of the church.³⁸ Next to the portrait of King Levan, second in the row, there is a heavily damaged, crowned figure also dressed in similar clothing (Fig.7). This figure has been subject to various interpretations. Initially thought to be the image of Queen Tinatin, King Levan's wife, it was later determined to represent a man, not a woman, due to scratch marks on the face, interpreted as indications of a beard (Fig.8).³⁹ A comparative analysis reveals that the artist, or group of artists, who worked on Alvani's painting used long beards to depict men of a similar age in the church. Even in the case of this damaged figure, the scratches used to denote the beard are relatively longer than those on the figure of King Levan. Therefore, we are likely dealing with the figure of a king older than King Levan. This may be the father of King Levan, Giorgi II, also known as Av-Giorgi.

³⁷ On the upper register of the Western wall both in Khashmi and Alvani the dormition of Virgin is represented.

³⁸ The portrait of King Levan in the Church of the John the Baptist of Alvani is identifiable by an inscription, which has unfortunately become badly damaged over time. This inscription was last legibly read by art historian Marina Vachnadze in 1973. It contained the name 'Leon', a name often used to refer to King Levan in historical sources and which appears in other inscriptions as well. See M. Vachnadze, "ლეონკახთა მეფისა და თინათინ დედოფლის პორტრეტული გამოსახულებები" [The Portraits of King Levan and Queen Tinatin]. *ძეგლის მეგობარი [Dzeglis Megobari]*, no. 33-34, Tbilisi, 1973, pp. 44-47.

³⁹ In the Church of John, the Baptist of Alvani, the technique of outlining contours through scratches is employed alongside the preparatory drawing throughout the church. This same method is evident in the figure previously thought to be Queen Tinatin. Through careful observation and proper lighting, I observed that this figure actually had a beard, marked with scratches similar to those found on other male figures in the church.

If the portrait was created shortly after King Levan's enthronement it would make sense to emphasize that King Levan legitimately inherited the throne from his father. This would likely be seen as an appropriate gesture from the author of the painting. Moreover, we find a probable figure of Av-Giorgi in other portraits of King Levan, which I will discuss later.

The artistic choice to depict the ktetor next to St. Nino and Emperor Constantine and Queen Helena in the church's artwork is intriguing. From life events of king Levan (discuss in Brief history of sixteen century kingdom of Kakheti in introductory part) it can be surmised that part of society might have viewed the legitimacy of King Levan's enthronement questionable. This skepticism could stem from the historical context wherein the Kartli kingdom's authority extended over the Kakheti kingdom, and King Levan's enthronement occurred amidst the weakening of Kartli's power.⁴⁰

King Levan's coronation took place in the Monastery of St. Nino in Bodbe, where St. Nino rests, which could explain why the artist initiated the row with her image. As mentioned before, St. Nino was this Christianizer of the Georgians, and her image thus has to be connected to the concept of Christianity. The depiction likely aimed to reinforce the legitimacy of King Levan's crown, suggesting that his ascension to power was divinely sanctioned regardless of the above-mentioned political circumstances surrounding his enthronement. However, it remains a point of interest as to why, almost a century after the Byzantine Empire's fall, the artist chose to include Emperor Constantine and St. Helena. We can assume that King Levan saw himself as a new

⁴⁰ Vakhtang VI and the group of educated men, სწავლ. კაცთა, ქ.ც-ის გაგრძელება [*Life of Kartli, Volume VI, Continued*], 47:910–12.

Constantine, and his artist aimed to depict him accordingly. This visual parallel likely aims to reinforce King Levan's connection to the historical lineage of Christian rulers.⁴¹

As Jonathan Harris argues in his book “The Lost World of Byzantium”, the concept of a new Constantine is linked with leaders who reconstruct and rebuild ‘Constantinople’ to make it the Center of Christianity.⁴² For Harris ‘Constantinople’ could be viewed as an allegory for the Jerusalem which is either restored or simply made the center of the Christian faith. King Levan's actions align with the idea proposed by Harris: he completely rebuilds his kingdom partially destroyed by inner conflicts and transforms it into Christian hub, which could be seen as new Constantinople. He constructs and renovates numerous churches inside and outside of his kingdom. According to Timothe Gabashvili, King Levan financed monasteries on Mount Athos, a claim supported by his portrait in the refectory of Philotheou monastery. He also contributed financially to the restoration of the ruined tomb of Christ and the liberation of Golgotha from the Tatars.⁴³ His involvement in saving the tomb of Christ connects him even more closely to St. Helena, who found the true cross. King Levan's actions are tied to the defense of Christianity and the reinforcement of his title as a Christian leader. He is a king who strives to preserve the Christian Kingdom of Kakheti and therefore fashioned an ideological connection with Emperor Constantine. King Levan's mother, moreover, was named Elene (the Georgian variant of Helena). This connection potentially deepens the association between the figures of St. Helena and Emperor Constantine with King Levan's self-fashioning, in addition to his construction and restoration of

⁴¹ Giorgi Kalandia, Irina Saganelidze, Irakli Zambakhidze, *Textile from Georgia*, Saqartvelos Xelovnebis Sasaxle, 2017.

⁴² Jonathan Harris, “The New Constantine.” In *The Lost World of Byzantium*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

⁴³ Timote Gabashvili, *ბიძისგან [The Traveling]* Tbilisi, 1852. pp. 127-147

churches and monasteries. He was involved in some of the largest church building projects in the history of the Kingdom of Kakheti and beyond.

Although we do not have the date of the church of John the Baptist in Alvani, because the painting of the west walls of Alvani and Khashmi, discussed above, mirrors each other's program, the overall program of both churches is similar, and such a similarity of program is not found in other paintings, I assume that they can be contemporaneous with each other or, if not contemporaneous, painted in close temporal proximity.

The undated portrait from Nekresi, from the Church of the Nativity of the Holy Virgin, could be considered next in the chronological sequence. This church is situated within a monastic complex from the 6th century. The Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary itself dates back to the 6th to 7th century.⁴⁴ As mentioned earlier, the uniqueness of the portraits of King Levan lies in the fact that they were created at different stages of his life and therefore provide us with biographical information about him. In the Nekresi portrait he is accompanied by family members: Queen Tinatin and the young, beardless Prince Aleksandre as identified by the inscription (Fig.9). King Levan as ktetor of the church again holds a model of it. Considering that Prince Aleksandre was born in 1527 and appears in the portrait as a boy not yet mature, I infer that the Nekresi portrait was likely created in the early 1540s. The portrait's placement is also unique, situated in the Western part of the south wall. Mirroring the figures in Khashmi's ktetor portrait, King Levan here also dons a crown adorned with precious stones and robes akin to those of Byzantine emperors, decorated with double-headed eagles. Queen Tinatin and Prince Aleksandre are similarly garbed

⁴⁴ Giorgi Chubinashvili, *Архитектура Кახетии [Architecture of Kakheti]*, Tbilisi, 1959, p. 94.

in Byzantine attire. Similar to Khashmi, here we see Holy Warriors in the vicinity of ktetor portraits.

We observe a similar image to the one at Nekresi in the Akhali Shuamta monastery, which was built in the forties of sixteenth century.⁴⁵ In Shuamta, the portrait of queen, king and the prince, identified as the ktetor portrait is situated to the west of the space between the northern arms (Fig.10). This composition is included in the scene of the life cycle of Virgin Mary, in one of the partially demolished scenes, and it does not have the inscriptions.⁴⁶ This ktetor portrait of King Levan is tripartite, similar to the one at Nekresi, and features representations of King Levan, Queen Tinatin, and the beardless Prince Aleksandre. The queen and king are depicted with crowns, while the prince is uncrowned. Unlike in Nekresi, none of the figures in this case hold a model of the church. Instead, they simply stand in a supplicatory pose, facing north. Their attire is distinct. They are not depicted in the Byzantine ceremonial loros. Instead, they wear long dresses adorned with a saltire and a single button at the chest, likely indicative of a woolen cloak.⁴⁷ Queen Tinatin, who built Akhali Shuamta Monastery as her burial place, is portrayed along with her family in a manner that emphasizes her humility from the outset. In my opinion, this portrayal aligns with the Christian view that humility is one of the greatest virtues. The painting in front of them is lost, but we can see the surviving details of the architectural form. Although in this case we do not have an identifying inscription, the art historian Marina Vachnadze identifies these figures as the family of

⁴⁵ Chubinashvili, *Архитектура Кახети* [Architecture of Kakheti], Tbilisi, 1959, p. 446.

⁴⁶ Vachnadze, "ლეონკახთა მეფისა და თინათინ დედოფლის პორტრეტული გამოსახულებები" [The Portraits of King Levan and Queen Tinatin]. *ძეგლის მეგობარი* [Dzeglis Megobari], no. 33-34, Tbilisi, 1973, pp. 44-47.

⁴⁷ Vakhushhti Batonishvili, *საქართველოს სამეფოს ისტორია* [History of the Kingdom of Georgia] Tbilisi, 1963, p. 25

King Levan from historical sources and by comparing them with the portrait in Nekresi.⁴⁸ Although we do not have the exact date of the painting of the Akhali Shuamta monastery, if we assume that the portrait is indeed a ktetor image of King Levan's family, we can deduct from the image of the young prince Aleksandre that the painting of Akhali Shuamta can be dated back to 1540s, like the paintings of Nekresi.

1.2 Paintings made during the last period of King Levan's rule

King Levan's policy changes towards the end of his reign. He becomes even more focused on saving his kingdom and, as mentioned in the historical review, he is trying his best to communicate his plight to other Christian countries. During the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Kakheti was geographically and politically positioned between two powerful Islamic empires: the Ottoman Empire to the west and the Safavid Empire to the southeast. These empires frequently exerted pressure on the Christian kingdoms in the Caucasus, including Kakheti, making the preservation of Christianity a great challenge for its leaders.

Towards the end of his reign, the ktetor portrait of Alaverdi Cathedral was completed, which is located five kilometers from Alvani church. Alaverdi monastic center was active from the eleventh century onwards and was hugely important for Georgia and especially for Kakheti, since it was the largest cathedral in this region (in the kingdom in the sixteenth century). Alaverdi was restored and painted during reign of King Levan⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Marina Vachnadze, "ლეონკახთა მეფისა და თინათინ დედოფლის პორტრეტული გამოსახულებები" [The Portraits of King Levan and Queen Tinatin]. *ძეგლის მეგობარი [Dzeglis Megobari]*, no. 33-34, Tbilisi, 1973, pp. 44-47.

⁴⁹ Vakhtang VI and the group of educated men, *სწავლ. კაცთა, ქ.ც-ის გაგრძელება [Life of Kartli, Volume VI, Continued]*, 47: 910–12.

The portrait in the upper register of the southern arm of the Alaverdi cathedral features King Levan and his son, Prince Aleksandre, dressed in ceremonial attire, similar as other portraits of King Levan. King Levan is again depicted holding a model of the church. Both of them have halos and are blessed from above by the Holy Spirit. Alongside these regal figures, also in ceremonial dress, is a smaller-sized crowned figure without a halo; he reaches up to the shoulders of the images of the prince and the king (Fig.11). This smaller figure is interpreted by Nana Burchuladze as the father of King Levan, Giorgi II.⁵⁰ The different form and placement of this smaller figure highlight the artistic freedom afforded to those commissioned to paint the church. As mentioned in the historical section, King Levan's father, Giorgi II, committed severe acts against his own family to achieve his goal of uniting with the neighboring Kingdom of Kartli. He killed his own father, blinded his brother, and banished him from the kingdom. Despite this, he did not achieve what he desired; he lost the throne of the Kakheti Kingdom, and the Kakheti Kingdom temporarily became part of the Kartli Kingdom. This created a threat for his own son, while he was his only heir and Kartlians could kill him to not have the successor of Kakheti throne. As a result, he did not have a good reputation. However, King Levan offered many prayers for his father's soul and sought to atone for his sins, as we can see in Mtskheta deed of 1537.⁵¹ According to Burchuladze, his sin is represented by presenting him as a small person, without a halo, even though he is still part of the royal family. This portrayal serves to visually communicate the consequences of his actions, despite his royal status.⁵² The artists worked within the traditional

⁵⁰ Nana Burchuladze, "მეფეთა პორტრეტები ალავერდის ტაძრის მოხატულობაში" [The Kings' Portraits in the Alaverdi Cathedral's Paintings]. *ალავერდის ეპარქიის ისტორიის ფურცლები* [Papers of the Alaverdi Eparchy], vol. 1, Tbilisi, 2007, p. 57.

⁵¹ Mtskheta deed of 1537: King Levan pays donation to church to pray for his father's sins.

Sargis Kakabadze, *ისტორიული საბუთები II წ.* [Historical Deeds, Book II]. Tiflis, 1913, pp. 33-36.

⁵² Nana Burchuladze, "მეფეთა პორტრეტები ალავერდის ტაძრის მოხატულობაში" [The Kings' Portraits in the Alaverdi Cathedral's Paintings]. *ალავერდის ეპარქიის ისტორიის ფურცლები* [Papers of the Alaverdi Eparchy], vol. 1, Tbilisi, 2007

iconographic framework but occasionally adapted it to better meet the ktetor's intentions. We observe holy warriors next to image of the ktetors in Alaverdi as well. We can assume here as in previous cases, they also represent a protector and defender of Christianity and in this case Christian ruler, who himself is portraying himself as defender of Christianity.

The ktetor portrait of King Levan in Gremi is relatively modest, with the king's attire being less ostentatious than in other depictions. The Archangels Church of Gremi is located in the new capital founded by King Levan.⁵³ Gremi existed before, King Levan built a city in this territory with a royal castle, a church dedicated to the archangels and new infrastructure. The king fortified Gremi with a robust defensive wall and equipped it with all the necessary defense mechanisms of the era, including secret tunnels. He also introduced innovations in urban planning that were previously unknown in the Kakheti area, such as sewage and water supply systems. One of the advantages of Gremi was its location; from any point along the fortification wall, it was possible to spot approaching dangers and alert others.

Even if the archangel church of Gremi was not originally intended as King Levan's burial place, it held special significance for him, as he built it as a major attraction in his newly founded city.⁵⁴ This church is part of the Gremi complex, a marvel of Georgian architecture, which includes the royal Church of the Archangels, a fortress, and a royal residential tower. The complex reflects a fascinating blend of traditional Georgian masonry and a local interpretation of contemporary Iranian architecture.⁵⁵ As I mentioned in the brief history of sixteen century Kakheti, the Kingdom of Kakheti was a military ally of Iran, they were closely connected with each other, which had a

⁵³ Parmen Zakaraia, "პ. ზაქარაიას ნაქალაქარ გრემის არქიტექტურა" [*Architecture of the Demolished City of Gremi*]. Tbilisi, 1975.

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Museum History and Artifacts: *Gremi Museum*. Tbilisi: Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia, 2014.

logical impact on the various traditions spread in the Kingdom of Kakheti, including the ways and methods of construction.

The portrait of King Levan is located to the west of the northern transept of Gremi, directly above the underground crypt where King Levan is interred (Fig.12).⁵⁶ The portrait of the king is accompanied by holy warriors, as was the case in Nekresi and Alaverdi. As Marina Vachnadze notes, in Gremi, King Levan is presented in relatively modest, less festive clothes, which make him look more like a monk than a king; however, he is still wearing a crown, while he wanted to be remembered as humble person, because the modesty is one of the most important virtue in Christianity. In this case, the figure of the king, who is holding a model of the Gremi church, is depicted devoting it to the Virgin Mary, who is enthroned with child. A Greek inscription mentions a monk from Thessaloniki, who could be among the painters of the church (Fig.13): “With help of the greatest King Leon, we built a church of archangel Michael and Gabriel, in the Choronicon 7085 August 29 day 4, when the archbishop was Saba.... Monk Protosyngellos from Thessaloniki.” The Greek orientation is proven by the fact that this ktetor image of King Levan follows a well-known iconographic pattern. This type of ktetor devoting a church to the enthroned Virgin Mary with child, is often found in other Eastern European paintings of the Greek stream. This is the case, for example, in the later ktetor composition at Piva Monastery dating to 1604–1605 (Fig. 14) or at Hieromonk Ananija, nartex of the Holy Trinity church near Pljevlja, dated 1592 (Fig. 15), etc.

⁵⁶ Vakhushti Batonishvili, *საქართველოს სამეფოს ისტორია [History of the Kingdom of Georgia]*, Tbilisi, 1963, p. 276. The Archaeological expedition of the Georgian National Museum found King Levan’s crypt in front of his portrait in 2021.

We also see the portrait of King Levan on Mount Athos (Fig.16), and we learn about his activities from Timothe Gabashvili:

And this monastery was built by the sons of Davidian-Solomonian Pankrations of Kartli- King Leon of Kakheti, the father of King Aleksandre and King Teimurazi's grandfather, because of their legacy and their donations, it has been preserved for centuries to remember, and king Levan sent a donation to a holy father Philotheou, who was independent governor. That is why they named the Philotheou monastery. Because of their contributions the kings Leon and his son Aleksandre, are depicted in the dining hall of the monastery. King Leon is represented as a figure tall, old, figure, with a long nose, with grey hair and a beard, dressed in a crown and a podir, and King Aleksandre is a younger, with black hair, both of them are wearing crowns.⁵⁷

Therefore, we can assume that, just like in other locations, the ktetor portrait of King Levan is also found on Mount Athos, owing to his donations. The portraits are depicted in the refectory of the Philotheou Monastery. In this depiction, King Levan and his son Aleksandre are portrayed with a model of the church between them. They are being blessed by Christ Emmanuel from heaven. Both figures are crowned. The composition in the Philotheou Monastery resembles that of the Alaverdi Monastery. However, the figure of King Levan could be considered a representation of a much older man than in Alaverdi and, unlike in Alaverdi, the Philotheou composition does not include the additional small crowned figure mentioned earlier.

⁵⁷ Timote Gabashvili, *მიმოსვლა [The Traveling]* Tbilisi, 1852 pp.49-60

ხოლო არს ესე მონასტერი აღშენებული დავითიან-სოლომონიანთა პანკრატონთა ძეთაგანისა ქართლისა და კახეთისა მეფის ლეონისა მიერ, ბატონის თეიმურაზის ბაბუის მამისა, რამეთუ წარმოუგზავნიათ და თვისითა საფასითა აღუშენებია სახსენებლად საუკუნოდ და თავსმდგომი და გამგე ყოფილა სულიერი ვინმე მამა ფილოთეოს. ამისთვის სახელად უწოდეს ფილოთეოს მონასტერსა მას. რამეთუ აღშენებელნი მეფენი ლეონ და ძე მისი ალექსანდრე პალატსა შინა სახიან მტკირთელი მონასტრისა მის. რამეთუ მეფე ლეონ ხატია ტანითა მომაღლო, მოხუცებული, მწითური, ცხვირკავი, თმითა და წვერითა სპეტაკი, მოსილი გვირგვინითა და პოდირითა, ხოლო ალექსანდრე მეფე ჰასაკითა მცირე მშვენიერი სახილავი, თმითა მოშავო, მოსილი იგითა გვირგვინითა. “

Conclusion

Portraits of King Levan are different from earlier Georgian examples is evidenced by the fact that, in Georgian wall painting, portraits of kings and other ktetors are typically placed directly on the north wall of the entrances.⁵⁸ More rarely, they are found on the south or west walls. The placement of King Levan's portraits is not consistent; differently from older traditions, they are located in various parts of the church. The reason behind this new arrangement could be the assumption that King Levan invited artists from abroad; we find similar placement in other Eastern European paintings. Inscriptions in the Gremi church suggests that the unconventional placement of King Levan's portraits may be attributed to the fact that the King had invited artists from Greece. The inscription mentions Protosyngellos from Thessaloniki, who, according to Tinatin Kaukhchishvili's interpretation, painted the Archangel Church of Gremi.⁵⁹ When we compare the paintings of King Levan with each other, we will notice obvious artistic similarities, Considerations of color selection, the treatment of form, the rendering of clothing drapery, and the management of light and shadow are essential for the analysis of these artworks. Along with the artistic similarity, the iconographic program is also similar, the content of the painting of the altar and the distribution of the twelve great feasts of the Christian Church in the church space are the same in all churches. On the altar, we see the Nicopea-type Virgin with Child, guarded by archangels. On the second register, we observe scenes of the heavenly liturgy-eucharist with wine and bread, where Jesus, as the high priest, gives wine and bread to the apostles.⁶⁰ Additionally, on

⁵⁸ Iuza Khuskivadze, "იუზა ხუსკივაძე - XVI საუკუნის ქართული კედლის მხატვრობის ისტორიიდან" [On the History of 16th Century Georgian Wall Paintings]. Khelovneba, 7-8 (1992), pp.16-19.

⁵⁹ Tinatin Kaukhchishvili, "ბერძნული წარწერები საქართველოში" [Greek Inscriptions in Georgia]. Tbilisi, 1951, pp. 339-346.

⁶⁰ In Gremi church the scene of heavenly liturgy is on fourth register and there is the last supper presented on a second.

the third register, we observe portraits of saints and prophets. These similarities indicate their connection, and from this we can conclude that all the paintings must be related to the same school. If an artist was brought to paint the Gremi church, he or other artists must have participated in the painting of other churches.⁶¹ The paintings of King Levan have one more thing in common: Greek inscriptions are actively used here along with the ancient Georgian script.

All the ktetor images of King Levan form part of a single narrative, they function as a medium for storytelling. Depending on how, in what form, and with whom King Levan is depicted, we can gather various insights about him. For example, we can discern at what stage of his life he commissioned the painting of this or that church and how the king presented himself, or practiced self-fashioning, when he commissioned these church paintings. The figures of holy warriors and the Holy Virgin are strongly emphasized in almost all paintings. They may symbolize a form of protection and further reinforce King Levan's image as a defender of Christianity. In some instances, the portrait of King Levan or his ktetor inscription is presented beneath the scene of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary or King Levan dedicates the church to the enthroned Virgin with child. As Jonathan Harris notes, when discussing Michael VIII as the new Constantine, he enters Constantinople, the city of Constantine, before the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary. This is a symbolic gesture, as the Virgin Mary is the patroness of Constantinople.⁶² In the case of King Levan, we can also assume that to emphasize his royal ideology and connect it with the concept of the new Constantine, the depiction of the image of the holy Virgin so close to his portrait may be significant.

⁶¹ Art Historian Iuza Khuskivadze briefly mentions King Levan's paintings and directly calls them the paintings of school of Mount Athos. Khuskivadze I., "იუზა ხუსკივაძე - XVI საუკუნის ქართული კედლის მხატვრობის ისტორიიდან" [On the History of 16th Century Georgian Wall Paintings]. *Khelovneba*, 7-8 (1992), p. 27.

⁶² Jonathan Harris, "The New Constantine." In *The Lost World of Byzantium*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015, p. 282

The symbolism of the double-headed eagle, which we see used for the first time on the clothes of Georgian kings, as well as the representation of Emperor Constantine and Queen Helena next to King Levan and possibly his father, Giorgi II, are significant. In the following chapters, I will explore why King Levan, Emperor Constantine, and St. Helena are depicted so closely together and what the subtext of this composition could be by analyzing King Levan's royal ideology and his self-fashioning.

Chapter 2 King Levan's Royal Ideology in Its Historical Context

This chapter explores King Levan's royal ideology within its historical context, which will enable an analysis of why King Levan is depicted in close proximity to Emperor Constantine and St. Helena, positioning him as their equal, ichnographically and visually. I will analyze how King Levan presented himself and what was his royal ideology. In order to do so, I will discuss the royal title of King Levan, its transformation during his reign, and how he positioned himself in the international arena amongst other Christian powers.

Among the titles of King Levan, we find the term "King of kings" at the beginning of his reign, while he uses simply 'king' towards its end. The former term had been part of the titles of Georgian kings since the time of David IV the Builder, i.e., from the 11th century. It could be related to the biblical term, where Jesus is referred as King of Kings.⁶³ There is other interpretation of this term as well, as Sofia Vashalomidze suggest, it might be related to the Iranian term 'shahan shah', which signifies a king who is superior to other kings and dominates them.⁶⁴ After the disintegration of Georgia, 'King of kings' disappeared from the title of the kings of individual kingdoms. Nevertheless, the king of Kakheti, Levan, still referred to himself as King of Kings. This title of King Levan does not align with his historical background, since he was king of Kakheti and never the king of other kings. It is intriguing to understand why King Levan uses this title and how this title may provide insight into his self-fashioning and royal ideology. In Section 2.1, I

⁶³Timothy 6:15, Revelation 1:5 Revelation 17:14 Revelation 19:16 Revelation 19:11-16

Byzantine emperors are not called King of Kings, they were called emperors, while emperor is also King of Kings βασιλεὺς τῶν βασιλευόντων (in Greek)

⁶⁴ Sophia, G. Vashalomidze, *Die Stellung der Frau im alten Georgien: georgische Geschlechterverhältnisse insbesondere während der Sasanidenzeit* [The Position of Women in Ancient Georgia: Georgian Gender Relations Especially During the Sasanian Period]. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag. 2007p. 151.

discuss why the title ‘King of kings’ might have been part of his title at the beginning of his reign and why he renounces its use towards the end of his reign. Section 2.2 reviews King Levan’s relations with foreign Christian powers and his attempts to connect with them. This was likely an effort to find additional support and power against the Islamic Empires, from which the Kingdom of Kakheti and its remaining Christian were in great danger.

2.1 “King of Kings”: Levan (Leon) of Kakheti

After the disintegration of Georgia in 1495, the last king Giorgi VIII became Giorgi I the king of Kakheti. As mentioned above (in the historical section), the son of Giorgi I, King Aleksandre fostered peaceful relations with neighboring kingdoms, but his son, prince Giorgi of Kakheti, the father of King Levan, differed from his father’s peaceful policies and sought to unite the kingdoms through conquest rather than diplomacy. Ignoring pleas from his family, prince Giorgi launched an invasion of Kartli in 1511. He blinded his brother and killed his father, as they were against his military intervention. He became King of Kakheti Giorgi II, but he refers to himself as “King of kings”, who united all of Georgia in the donation deed of Mtskheta 1511. This deed, which has the seal of King Giorgi the Second, represents a donation for Mtskheta, which was the religious center of Georgia, as well as a request for forgiveness of his sins:

The one who united Georgia from both sides of the Likhi range, who owns both of the thrones, who strongly rules Abkhazia, Georgia, kingdom of Hereti, Kakheti, Armenia, king who has connection to David and Solomon, King of Kings, Giorgi and our beloved son Leon, we give you many thanks ... 1511.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Mtskheta deed of 1511; Tedo Jordania, *Chronicles and Other Material of Georgian History and Writing: Collected, Chronologically Arranged and Explained*. Vol. 2: 1213 to 1700. Tiflis, 1897. p. 217

Giorgi II does not only refer to himself with the full title, he refers to himself as the unifier of Georgia. The statement that he united Georgia, even if only temporarily, is not confirmed. Therefore, we can consider the possibility that this unity was merely his self-perception or the expression of his desires. Despite the fact that all Georgian kingdoms were ruled by representatives of the Bagrationi family, the kings of Kakheti appear to have harbored even greater claims and held illusions of superiority over other kingdoms, since the last king of the united Georgia became the king of Kakheti. They still envisioned themselves as the rightful heirs to the throne of a united Georgia.

In contrast to his father, King Levan pursued a peaceful policy as much as possible, but he also referred to himself as “King of kings” as we can read in his deeds from the beginning of his reign. One of these deeds is the donation deed of Mtskheta 1527, which is accompanied by the signature of King Levan: “we King of Kings, patron Leon and our wife Tinatin... and our sons Giorgi, patr. Iese patr. Aleksandre and patr. Elimirza, we donate to you...”⁶⁶ King Levan is also mentioned with his full title in the deed of 1532: “crowned by god patron Levan and our mother queen of the queens Elene and our wife queen Tinatin and our sons Giorgi and Iese, we give you this book”.⁶⁷

In another deed in which King Levan refers to himself as King of Kings, he gives the village of Akura and its territory to the church. The purpose of this donation could be to further strengthen the goodwill of the church towards him and his family:

We, King of Kings, Patron Leon and our beloved sons and sons of the sons, Patron Iese, Patron Teimuraz, Patron Bagrat, Patron Aleksandre and Patron Elimirza and our future, relatives of the king and queen, we give you a deed with

⁶⁶ The rest is lost. Mtskheta deed 1527; Tede Jordania, *Chronicles and Other Material of Georgian History and Writing: Collected, Chronologically Arranged and Explained*. Vol. 2, 1213 to 1700. Tiflis, 1897, 369

⁶⁷ Mtskheta deed 1532; Jordania, *Chronicles and Other Material of Georgian History and Writing: Collected, Chronologically Arranged and Explained*. Vol. 2, 1213 to 1700. Tiflis, 1897, 374

which we know and you have proof of it that the village Akura and its neighbourhood is yours.⁶⁸

In later deeds which are also related to the church and the transfer of territories or donations to it, such as Ninotsminda deed 1553 and Mtskheta deeds 1556 and 1566, King Levan calls himself just “we, King Leon”, not “King of kings”:

We, king and Patron Leon and our sons Patron Giorgi, Iese, Aleksandre, Elimirza and Davit give you (Zakaria of Ninotsminda (bishop) and Ninotsminda) Ghala⁶⁹ of Azamburi, and what the monk (slave of church) can harvest there. We do not have to ask its Ghala; its Ghala has to be for the church and we do not have to ask to have it for ourselves. It is not changeable, date: 1553.⁷⁰

We, King Leon and our sons, patron Aleksandr... We present to you this donation book (deed). Your tax collectors, Giorgi and Dimitri, to whom we have granted 16 families of upper Ganukhi, are known to us. We have informed Mtskheta and Kniaz Nikoloz that we appoint him as Mouravi⁷¹ and you are to give Ghala to the bishop. We do not want anything from it. During our rule in 1563... Mtskheta⁷²

In the deed of 1566, King Levan again refers to himself as ‘king’ and not as ‘King of kings’: “By the will of God, the king, the patron, Leon, and the patrons of the sons and daughters-in-law, Iese, the patron Teimuraz, the patron Aleksandre and Elimirza.”⁷³

This raises the question of why King Levan refers to himself as "King of kings" at the beginning of his reign but stops doing so later on. From historical accounts, we know that he did not pursue a policy of conquest like his father, who perceived himself as the king of a united Georgia. As I mentioned above, ‘King of kings’ was part of the title of the kings of the united Georgia. The most plausible explanation might therefore be that he followed in his ancestors’

⁶⁸ Akura deed Georgian central historical archive, F-1449, # 1600

⁶⁹ “Ghala” could mean both harvesting and its outcome.

⁷⁰ Ninotsminda deed 1553; Kakabadze, S. Historical Documents. Vol. 3. Tiflis, Tbilisi, 1913, 382-383

⁷¹ A mouravi is a tax collector, who rules a territory.

⁷² Mtskheta deed 1556 Tedo Jordania, *Chronicles and Other Material of Georgian History and Writing: Collected, Chronologically Arranged and Explained*. Vol. 2, 1213 to 1700. Tiflis, 1897. 287

⁷³ 1566 deed Georgian central historical archive, F-1449, # 1753;

footsteps, believing that the throne of the united Georgia was rightfully his and that it was only a matter of time before he could claim it.

It should be noted that members of the Bagrationi royal dynasty, to which King Levan belonged, were considered descendants of the biblical prophet David according to the eleventh-century Georgian historian Sumbat Davitis Dze.⁷⁴ He states that the original representatives of the Bagrationi family, along with their brothers, arrived from Israel in the first half of the sixth century.⁷⁵ This might be why they often refer to themselves as the “Sword of the Messiah.”⁷⁶ Consequently, they believed that one of their primary functions was the protection of Christianity. King Levan also embodies this idea, consistently linking all his actions with the strengthening of Christianity both domestically and abroad. In the case of David IV, the Builder and Demetre I, there are inscriptions on their coinage that refer to them as the swords of the Messiah, the King of kings (Fig.17). In this case, therefore, the concept of the king and the sword of the Messiah are closely connected. In the same way, King Levan may have presented himself as a king and a defender of Christianity.⁷⁷

The idea of King Levan being King of kings is actively implemented in his foreign politics. For example, Emperor Ferdinand of Austria’s Dalmatian envoy Simone de Lillis, who visited Georgia around 1530s, referred to the Georgian King as “Imperator Georgianis Vicino Perse” (The Emperor of Georgians near Iran [Persia]).⁷⁸ From the account of Simon de Lillis, we can assume

⁷⁴ Sumbat Davitis-Dze, *The Life and Tale of the Bagratids* (ცხოვრება და უწყება ბაგრატიონთა ჩუენ ქართველთა მეფეთას), 1994

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Twelfth-century coins of David IV the Builder and Demetre I have been discovered, on which they are referred to as the “king of kings” and the “Sword of the Messiah.”

⁷⁷ Sandro Nikolaishvili, “Byzantium and the Georgian World c. 900-1210: Ideology of Kingship and Rhetoric in the Byzantine Periphery.” PhD diss., Central European University, 2019., pp. 165-166.

⁷⁸ Tardy, Lajos. *Beyond Ottoman Empire*. Budapest, Universitas Szegediensis de Attila József Nominata, 1978; Original from, the University of Michigan; Digitized, May 14, 2008., p. 197

that his international image was greater than his actual conditions, as from Simon de Lillis's perspective, he was the emperor of Georgians and not just the King of Kakhetians.

The shift in King Levan's self-fashioning in the second half of his reign is intriguing. In his later deeds, after the 1550s, he began referring to himself simply as king rather than King of kings. This may suggest that, towards the end of his reign, he gives up the idea of reestablishing a united Georgia and focuses on the reign of his own kingdom. As discussed in the previous chapter, this perspective is reflected in his ktetor portraits: at the beginning of his reign, he is depicted in Byzantine imperial robes, complete with imperial symbolism. Towards the end of his reign, the visual representation of King Levan changes, and in the churches of Akhali Shuamta and Gremi he is no longer represented in the original royal decorated clothes. Rather, he visually becomes a king and no longer a king of king. Towards the end of his reign, his portrayal shifts to one in relatively modest attire, suggesting a change in how he wished to be perceived or remembered, which may also be related to his Christian faith: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."⁷⁹

As Madona Keadze points out, this shift from "King of kings" to "King" by King Levan serves as further evidence that his primary interest was in securing the Kingdom of Kakheti and uniting Georgia was not his true intention.⁸⁰ I concur with Keadze's analysis, although I believe this applies more to the latter half of his reign than the initial period. In the first period of his reign, as we have seen, he referred to himself as King of Kings and strove to establish family ties with neighboring kingdoms, which may be seen as way of easy accession to them later. Despite his initial aspirations for unification, King Levan was unable to achieve this goal. Even if he had

⁷⁹ Matthew 23:12.

⁸⁰ Madona Keadze, "*King Levan of Kakheti*." PhD diss., Telavi I. Gogebashvili State University, 2002. p. 57.

succeeded, it becomes evident that it would have been challenging for him to combat the numerous external and internal enemies to maintain a unified Georgia and survive as a Christian kingdom in a region dominated by Islam. Consequently, he was content with the prosperity of his own kingdom and focused his efforts on protecting and preserving what he had.

2.2 King Levan and foreign Christian powers

King Levan actively tried to establish a connection with other Christian kingdoms and actively financed the Georgian churches in Mount Athos and Jerusalem. Due to the lack of written sources about Georgia in the sixteenth century, we have to rely on sources created in the eighteenth century. The reliability of these sources is confirmed by their agreement with the works of art that have survived from the sixteenth century. Most information about King Levan's foreign policy comes from the eighteenth-century Georgian writer and traveler Timote Gabashvili. He was a well-educated monk, well versed in philosophy, theology and the history of religion. He served as a monk in various monasteries in Georgia and later even occupied the throne of the bishop of Kutaisi.⁸¹ In his memoirs *The Traveling*, he describes his pilgrimage and his visit of Georgian churches abroad. He provides significant insights into King Levan's foreign policy initiatives for safeguarding Georgian churches and Christian sites.⁸² Gabashvili details King Levan's pivotal financial contributions (discussed in chapter 1.2), particularly in Jerusalem and at Mount Athos, thereby offering valuable historical perspectives, while most of the sources are lost and we can have general ideas about them only from Gabashvili's description. King Levan's contribution to

⁸¹ Tedo Jordania, "Description of the Manuscripts of the Tbilisi Church Museum", I, p. 119.

⁸² Timote Gabashvili, *ბიძიბეგლას [The Traveling]* Tbilisi, 1852 Gabashvili relies on sources, some of which still existed in his time and no longer exist today, which he personally saw during his travels, and oral sources, which are still alive almost two centuries later.

Jerusalem is confirmed by Ottoman sources which mention that King Levan, together with King Bagrat of Imereti and Atabag of Samtskhe, asked the Ottoman Sultan for permission to visit Jerusalem in 1524.⁸³ Gabashvili recounts King Levan's efforts in the restoration and protection of important religious sites. Notably, he describes how King Levan, referred to as Leon, actively participated in the efforts to restore Christ's tomb, which had been damaged by Persian and Turkish forces. King Levan organized financial offerings and contributed to the reinstatement of places associated with the Passion of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, he dispatched the holy Father Joakim with a significant donation that led to the embellishment of Christ's tomb with marble.⁸⁴

Gabashvili also highlights King Levan's role in preventing the Tomb of Christ from being destroyed by the Tatars at Golgotha. The marble on the leg of the Jerusalem's Patriarch throne had an inscription which acknowledges King Levan's efforts to safeguard this sacred site, expressing a desire for his name to be remembered along with his descendants. This marble is lost nowadays and we know it only from Gabashvili's account.⁸⁵ Additionally, King Levan's support for the Georgians at Mount Athos was significant. Gabashvili's account emphasizes King Levan's financial contributions, enabling the rebuilding of a monastery.⁸⁶ This information is supported by a ktetor portrait of King Levan and his son Alekandre in the Philatheou Monastery's refectory (see Chapter 1.2).

King Levan actively communicated his challenges to the Christian world, highlighting his precarious position between two Islamic empires. Despite being a military ally of Islamic Iran and

⁸³ Kirzioğlu, *Osmanlılar'ın Kafkas-Elleri'ni Fethi (1451-1590) [The Ottoman Conquest of the Caucasian Lands (1451-1590)]*. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1998, p.99.

⁸⁴ Gabashvili, *მომოსვლა [The Traveling]* (Tbilisi, 1956) p. 52 There is no more information about holy father Joakim in historical sources, we know that he was priest, sent by King Levan with donations.

⁸⁵ Timote Gabashvili, *მომოსვლა [The Traveling]* Tbilisi, 1852, pp. 49-60.

⁸⁶ Timote Gabashvili, *მომოსვლა [The Traveling]* Tbilisi, 1852, pp. 49-60.

facing pressure from the powerful Ottoman Empire, he sought support from Christian nations to maintain his and his kingdom's Christian faith, especially in the face of potential demands to convert his religion. To seek this support, he established communication with Christian merchants and ambassadors who traveled to Iran through the territory of Kakheti, or simply happened to be in Kakheti on the way. To this end, he communicated with the ambassadors Pietro de Negro and Simon de Lillis, to whom he told of his problem that due to the growing strength of the Islamic forces, the Christian future of the Kingdom of Kakheti was threatened. King Levan entertained ambassador personally, tried to make the best possible impression, to prove that he and his kingdom were worth saving. As we have seen, in his account, Simon de Lillis' calls King Levan an emperor, who hosted him well and told him that he was in difficult circumstances. Showing the best possible version of himself could be an important strategy for King Levan to make Simon de Lillis more interested in Kakheti's problems and to spread the word to other Christian countries.⁸⁷

In addition to that, we read in reports by the English merchant Anthony Jenkinson during his travels in the South Caucasus.⁸⁸ In his narrative, as presented in *Hakluyt's Voyages* selected and edited by Irvin R. Blacker, we learn of a poignant instance where the Georgian king, trapped between the relentless pressures of the Great Turk and Iranians, sought aid from Christian nations.⁸⁹ Jenkinson recounts an encounter with an Armenian envoy, sent by the Georgian king to seek assistance. The king's plight was severe, yet he dared not communicate directly for fear of interception. Jenkinson advised the envoy to approach the Emperor of Russia for support, offering

⁸⁷ Rudolf Neck, 1952. "Diplomatische Beziehungen zum Vorderen Orient unter Karl V." [Diplomatic Relations with the Middle East under Charles V.] *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs* [Communications of the Austrian State Archives] 5: p.86.

⁸⁸ Antony Jenkinson, in *Hakluyt's Voyages* selected and edited by Irvin R. Blacker NY: Viking Press, 1965.

⁸⁹ Antony Jenkinson was also considered as Russian king's agent merchant by E. Mamistvalishvili, Elene Mamistvalishvili, *საქართველოს საგარეო პოლიტიკა და დიპლომატია, I (XV-XVI სს.)* [Georgian International Politics and Diplomacy in the XV-XVI Centuries], Tbilisi, 2009.

guidance on a safe route through Chircassi, leveraging the king's familial ties with its ruler. Further, Jenkinson dispatched Edward Cleark to explore trade opportunities in the region and to communicate with the Georgian king, a mission that faced its challenges due to religious suspicions.⁹⁰ This episode, vividly captured by Jenkinson, underscores the geopolitical complexities and the interplay of diplomacy, trade, and religion in the region during King Levan's reign.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed the royal ideology of King Levan, his title of King of Kings and the change of that title in the latter part of his reign. I suggest, that the title King of Kings may also be related to the title “Sword of the Messiah”, which was used by other Bagration kings of the united Georgia along with title King of Kings. King Levan’s policy to protect and save Christianity and the Christian monuments may be related to the fact that he, like his ancestors, is trying to be the sword of the Messiah. Which means that they are the executors of the Messiah's plans on earth, and the protection and strengthening of Christianity is their main function and duty.

Based on the chronology I outlined in Chapter 1, the Church of John the Baptist in Alvani was painted in the thirties of sixteen century, and its ktetor portrait was produced during a period when King Levan still referred to himself as the "King of Kings." This self-reference, as analyzed, could imply his aspiration to rule a united Georgia, much like King David the Builder, the "King of Kings of the whole East," who was a ruler of a great Christian kingdom. The inclusion of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena alongside King Levan in these portraits is highly symbolic.

⁹⁰ Antony Jenkinson, in *Hakluyt's Voyages* selected and edited by Irvin R. Blacker (NY: Viking Press, 1965), pp. 107-108.

Constantine and Helena are revered as defenders of Christianity, mirroring how King Levan viewed and presented himself.

These portraits not only celebrate King Levan's role as a benefactor and protector but also strategically position him within the lineage of great Christian rulers, aligning him with figures like Emperor Constantine and St. Helena. The deliberate iconography and placement of these portraits across various churches articulate a clear royal ideology. King Levan aimed to project himself as both a devout Christian leader and a sovereign defending his kingdom amidst the pressures of neighboring Islamic empires, thereby underscoring his dual role through visual and symbolic means. This portrayal reinforces King Levan's image as a defender of Christianity, anchoring his authority and legitimacy both spiritually and politically. to understand king Levans ideology and self-fashioning better, in the following chapter I will discuss the image of Constantine and Helena, how they became symbol of defenders of Christianity together and what is role of their image in broader Georgian context.

Chapter 3 Constantine and Helena next to the Ktitors

As discussed in the previous chapters, King Levan of Kakheti refers to himself as the King of kings in the beginning of his reign. He strives to portray himself as a defender of Christianity, a builder of churches, and a caretaker of his Christian country. In this way, he shares similarities with the kings of the united Georgia. These kings called themselves the King of Kings and the Sword of the Messiah, presenting themselves as ideal Christian rulers (see Chapter 2). In this context, Emperor Constantine is considered to be one of the clearest paradigms of an ideal Christian ruler.⁹¹ In order to understand the role of the figures of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena depicted next to the ktitor portrait of King Levan, I will review the formation of the common iconography of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena and the possible symbolic meaning of their image. Next, I will analyze examples of their depiction in a Georgian context and their role in Georgian culture. I will review their images in Georgia and beyond, exploring the question of why artists would use their image next to King Levan.

3.1 The Byzantine Cult of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena

Emperor Constantine and St. Helena are particularly revered figures in the history of Christianity. Emperor Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, is known for his defense and promotion of Christianity, while his mother, St. Helena is celebrated as the discoverer of the True Cross. Emperor Constantine positioned himself as a chosen servant of the Almighty God, who

⁹¹ John F. Haldon, "Constantine or Justinian? Crisis and Identity in imperial propaganda in the seventh century" In *New Constantines*, 102.

assigned him a certain role to fulfill.⁹² He created his own legend which was, as first Christian emperor, who received the blessing directly from God and later generations shaped his symbolic image further, which made him a paradigm of the ideal Christian leader.⁹³ He underwent a significant transformation from his initial upbringing as a tolerant pagan polytheist. He propagated several Olympian divinities during the early years of his reign. However, during his military campaign to gain control of the Italian and North African provinces, he turned to Christianity and its sacred symbols for aid. Constantine believed he had been chosen by the Almighty God of Christianity and entrusted with a mission to protect the Christian Church in the empire and propagate the Christian faith throughout the world. Eusebius presents Constantine as a leader blessed directly from God, it is well reflected in a vision of a cross in the heavens with the message 'Conquer by this'.⁹⁴ These experiences led him to develop the role of the Christian imperial theocrat, a concept conveyed in contemporary art and codified in writings by Lactantius in the west and Eusebius in the east. His pioneering role served as a model for Byzantine emperors in eastern Europe and medieval kings in Western Europe over the next millennium. Constantine's reign marked the initiation of Christian imperial theocracy, setting a precedent for future rulers.⁹⁵ Constantine's mother, St. Helen, went to Jerusalem to find the Holy Cross, destroyed the pagan temple and found the true Cross.⁹⁶

Together, Constantine and Helena became considered as paradigms of ideal Christian leadership, which, as Natalia Tetriatnikov suggests, could be associated with the belief that they

⁹² Charles M. Odahl, "Constantine the Great and Christian Imperial Theocracy." *Connections: European Studies Annual Review* 3 (2007): 89-11.

⁹³ Ibid, 104

⁹⁴ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.28.

⁹⁵ Charles M. Odahl, "Constantine the Great and Christian Imperial Theocracy." *Connections: European Studies Annual Review* 3 (2007): 89-11.

⁹⁶ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 3, 26. Stephan Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found*. Stockholm, 1991, p. 71

share the same tomb.⁹⁷ Early Christian sources indicate that Emperor Constantine was buried in the Basilica of the Holy Apostles and St. Helena was buried in Mausoleum of Helena in Rome.⁹⁸ It could be their initial burial place and later, their remains could be transferred from one place to another. There are different traditions about the final resting place of St. Helena; ancient and modern sources provide different information. In his *Life of Constantine*, Eusebius says: “her corpse was escorted by a vest train of guards to the imperial city and placed in royal tomb.”⁹⁹ In his *Ecclesiastical History*, Socrates later tells us that she is buried in the imperial city of Constantinople, New Rome, in the royal tomb at the Apostelion.¹⁰⁰ several later Byzantine versions agree, that Helena was initially buried in Rome, but that her remains were eventually moved to Constantinople and buried with his son, Emperor Constantine.¹⁰¹ Middle Byzantine sources confirm that during their time, Constantine and Helena were indeed interred in the same tomb.¹⁰² There are conflicting information about their final resting place. Some sources suggest that the remains of both were transported to Venice following the fall of Constantinople in 1204.¹⁰³ Later the Russian traveler Antonii of Novgorod says they were actually buried in the same grave. He does not indicate where is the grave, but since we know only about his pilgrimage

⁹⁷ Natalia Tetiatnikov, *the True Cross Flanked by Constantine and Helena. A Study in the Light of the PostIconoclastic Re-evaluation of the Cross*, 1993

⁹⁸ Philip Grierson, *The Tombs and Obits of the Byzantine Emperors (337-1042)*; with an additional note by Cyril Mango and Ihor Sevcenko, DOP 16 (1962), p. 13. 21-23. and especially p. 39-40; J. Ebers o It, *Sarcophages impériaux de Rome et de Constantinople*, BZ 30(1929-30), p. 582-587. John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Decline and Fall*, London, Penguin, 1995, pp. 107–108

⁹⁹ Eusebius, *Vita Constantini [Life of Constantine]* 3, 47

¹⁰⁰ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1, 17; in addition to what Eusebius writes, Helena was interred at Rome. According to Ado, the Liber century used a mausoleum for his mother or an earlier or even original church dedicated to the martyrs Mar "Ad duas lauros" on the Via Labicana. Jeanne Guyon, *Le cimetiere aux deux lauriers [The Cemetery of the Two Laurels]*, Rome, 1987, 207ff.

¹⁰¹ Philip Grierson, *The Tombs and Obits of the Byzantine Emperors (337-1042)* in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16, 1962, 39-40

¹⁰² Simon Ebersolt, *Sarcophages impériaux de Rome et de Constantinople [Imperial Sarcophagi of Rome and Constantinople]*, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 30 (1929-30): 582-587.

¹⁰³ Enrico Dandulus, *Chronicon Venetum* 10, 4, 20 (a. 1211); Bertrand de la Broquière, *Travels* (trs. T. Jones, Haford, 1807, p.228) was shown the tomb which the Venetians had emptied

in Constantinople, we can assume, that he means they are buried there.¹⁰⁴ A cross-shaped reliquary from Hildesheim, dating back to the twelfth century, is labeled as containing fragments from the tomb of Emperor Constantine and Queen Helena (Fig.18). This label suggests that these relics originate from the same grave, which could indicate that Constantine and Helena were indeed buried together.¹⁰⁵

In Eastern Christianity, including in Georgia, it is commonly believed that Constantine and Helena are interred in the same grave and they are buried in Constantinople. Natalia Tetriatnikov posits that even though they were already quite popular, the dissemination of information about their shared burial site from the 8th to the 9th century further bolstered their collective cult and enhanced their popularity.¹⁰⁶ This period is associated with numerous small icons depicting Constantine and Helena.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, in the middle of the ninth century, Patriarch Methodius wrote chants for the liturgy of Constantine and Helena for the first time.¹⁰⁸ Alexander Kazhdan notes that the re-activation of recording of legends about Constantine began in the eighth and ninth centuries.¹⁰⁹ These new accounts appear after Constantine's elevation to sainthood, even though we do not have the date of his elevation, we can assume that it happened in seven to nine century, while he is elevated as saint in Eastern Christianity with his mother

¹⁰⁴ Antonii of Novgorod, Антоний, Архиепископ Новгородский. *Книга паломник [The Pilgrim's Book]*. Сказание мест Святых во Зареграде в 1200 году [*Tale of the Holy Places in Zaregrad in the year 1200*], ред. Ч. М. Лопарев, Православный Палестинский Сборник 51 1899 p. 24.

¹⁰⁵ Herbert Ludat, "*Das Jerusalemer Kreuz [The Jerusalem Cross]*." Cologne, 1956, p.3

¹⁰⁶ Natalia Tetriatnikov, *the True Cross Flanked by Constantine and Helena. A Study in the Light of the PostIconoclastic Re-evaluation of the Cross*, 1993 170-177

¹⁰⁷ Winkelmann, "*Die älteste erhaltene griechische hagiographische Vita Konstantinus und Helenas (BHG Nr. 356z, 366, 366a) [The oldest preserved Greek hagiographic Vita of Constantine and Helena (BHG No. 356z, 366, 366a)]*." In *Texte und Textkritik. Eine Aufsatzsammlung [Texts and Text Criticism. A Collection of Essays]*, edited by Jürgen Dummer, 623-638. Berlin, 1987 (TU 133). The oldest manuscript: Palimps. Cambridge Univ. Add. 4489.

¹⁰⁸ *Anthologia graeca carminum christianorum* (ed. W. Christ. M. Paranikas), Leipzig 1871, p. 99

¹⁰⁹ Tetriatnikov., *the True Cross Flanked by Constantine and Helena. A Study in the Light of the PostIconoclastic Re-evaluation of the Cross*, 1993. Antony Kazhdan, "Constantin imaginaire": Byzantine Legends of the Ninth Century about Constantine the Great, *Byzantion* LVII (1987). p. 243. 7.

Helena, and their image together appears at this period of time.¹¹⁰ As Tetriatnikov elucidates, a fresh perspective towards Constantine and Helena together emerges in Greek liturgical sources from this era. They needed a concept of Ideal Christian Ruler, the one, who does the mission from the God in this earth, and they chose first Christian emperor and his mother, who found a true Cross, and it made the concept of a New Constantine and New Helena rise.¹¹¹ For instance, a poem from the seventh century refers to Justinian II and his wife Sophia as the new Constantine and Helena;¹¹² Pope Hadrian at the Council of 787 referred to the iconolude rulers Irene and Michael as the new Constantine and the new Helena.¹¹³

After the revival of their cult, the depiction of Constantine and Helena became even more widespread. According to Tetriatnikov, the visual representations of Constantine and Helena from the post-iconoclastic period can be divided into two types: Constantine and Helena holding hands on the cross,¹¹⁴ and Constantine and Helena standing on both side of the cross, without touching it, with angels depicted above the figures.¹¹⁵ There are instances where these two types overlap.¹¹⁶ Images of Emperor Constantine and Helena are especially abundant in the paintings associated with the Byzantine and post Byzantine art. In this way, we can consider the influence on the

¹¹⁰ Paul Magdalino, "Introduction," in *New Constantines*, p. 6. Sandro Nikolaishvili notes in his dissertation that the elevation to sainthood outweighs his sinful life, which means killing his wife and his son. Nikolaishvili, 2019. "Byzantium and the Georgian World c. 900-1210: Ideology of Kingship and Rhetoric in the Byzantine Periphery." PhD diss., Central European University, p.147

¹¹¹ Tetriatnikov., *the True Cross Flanked by Constantine and Helena. A Study in the Light of the PostIconoclastic Re-evaluation of the Cross*, 1993, 170

¹¹² Dilia Angelova., *Sacred Founders*, 3.

¹¹³ Leslie Brubaker, *Politics. Patronage, and Art: Paris, gr. 510*, (1985), pp. 10, 11.

¹¹⁴ The examples of this type are a tenth-century ivory triptych from State Museum Berlin and the eleventh-century church Yilanli Kilise in Cappadocia, the eleventh century Bochorma church in Georgia, etc.

¹¹⁵ In the twelfth century in Esztergom, Hungary, on a twelfth-century silver relic in the monastery of Fonte Avellana in Tesoro dell'Abbazia, Italy, and on thirteenth-century relics in the Louvre and Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, etc.

¹¹⁶ Reliquary of Tesoro dell Abbazia, Nonantola, Italy etc.

entirety of Eastern Christianity, particularly those countries that bordered the Byzantine Empire and maintained close connections with it.

Regarding the depiction of Emperor Constantine and Helena, when they are included in scenes of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Christian church, they are usually represented near the Crucifixion scene because the cross they hold is the same cross on which Christ was crucified. This is the case, for example, in the 13th-century Žiža bell tower in Serbia (Fig.19). In some cases, the pair of Constantine and Helena are included in the scene of last Judgment, for example, in the Panagia in Mavriotissa, Kastoria, Greece (Fig.20) and elsewhere. The reason behind their depiction in the scene of the last Judgment could be because Emperor Constantine and St. Helena are the custodians of the True Cross, which symbolizes the First Resurrection, and since the Last Judgment is associated with the resurrection of the righteous.

3.2 Constantine and Helena in Georgia: images and text

Images of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena are found in many Georgian wall paintings, manuscripts, and engravings. The most common type in Georgia depicts Emperor Constantine and St. Helena standing on both side of the cross, holding hands across it. The abundance of these images could be explained by the fact that both saints played a special role in the Christianization of Georgia. St. Helena holds special importance for Georgians due to her contributions to the Christianization of Georgia, which occurred during the reign of Emperor Constantine. George Hamartolos, in nine century texts, briefly recounts this story in his chronicles about the Christianization of the Armenians and Georgians.¹¹⁷ After Emperor

¹¹⁷ *Georgika (Reports of Byzantine writers about Georgia)* book 4, Tiflis, 1952 p. 311, 317

Constantine converted to Christianity, Queen Helena went to Jerusalem to look for the Holy Cross. The Manuscript of Sinai recounts the meeting between St. Nino and Queen Helena, it does not indicate where and why did they meet, but we know that they did.¹¹⁸ The queen developed a fondness for the captive woman, who was none other than St. Nino, we do not know from this account the backstory of St. Nino, but it mentions her as captive woman.¹¹⁹ Helena sent her to Georgia to propagate Christianity. St. Nino dutifully accomplished this mission.¹²⁰ After persuading King Mirian and Queen Nana to embrace Christianity, she constructed churches and wrote letters to Queen Helena and Emperor Constantine, requesting them to dispatch priests.¹²¹ Priests were sent to Georgia, and Queen Helena brought out two letters to them, where she called Queen Nana the Blessed one and St. Nino a queen and equal to the apostles.¹²²

Like St. Helena, Emperor Constantine is an outstanding figure for the Georgian context. According to accounts from the church council at Ruis-Urbnisi in 1103, King David IV, due to his ecclesiastical merits, was unanimously compared to Constantine the Great, being described as "the personification of Christianity, like Constantine the Great."¹²³ David IV was recognized for his significant contributions to the Christian faith in Georgia, similar to Constantine's role in the broader Christian world.¹²⁴ The same sentiment can be heard from the mouth of David's anonymous historian: "...every village that was conquered by the devil was reclaimed for God,

¹¹⁸ Akaki Bakradze, *სინური მრავალთავი [Manuscript of Sinai]*, 864, თბილისი [Tbilisi], 1959.

¹¹⁹ Ivane Javakhishvili, *ძველი ქართული საისტორიო მწერლობა, [Old Georgian historical annals,]* p. 109

¹²⁰ Akaki Bakradze, *სინური მრავალთავი [Manuscript of Sinai]*, 864, თბილისი [Tbilisi], 1959

¹²¹ Ibid. There is a version that King Mirian himself was an author of those letters and not St. Nino
ძველი ქართული აგიოგრაფიული ძეგლები [Monuments of Old Georgian Hagiographical Literature], I. 5th - 10th. ed I. Abuladze (Tbilisi: Mecniereba, 1963), 85-6

¹²² *ძველი ქართული აგიოგრაფიული ძეგლები [Old Georgian Hagiography]*, ტომი 1 [Book 1], p. 83-85

¹²³ The acts of Ruis-Urbnisi council, 194. In the epitaph written by the monk Arsen, dedicated to David IV, it states: "The establishment of integrity for Christianity, like Constantine among self-conquerors, the strength of good service, like Theodosius among scepter-conquerors." (Monk Arsen to king David IV - *ქართული მწერლობა [Georgian literature]*, ტომი II, [Book 1], Tiflis, 1987, p. 233).

¹²⁴ *ძველი ქართული აგიოგრაფიული ძეგლები [Old Georgian Hagiography]*. 81–163.

through which he received the grace of apostleship, like Paul and like the great Constantine." ¹²⁵

Comparison of David IV with Constantine is a new propaganda narrative that enters the Georgian consciousness during his time, so that David, like Emperor Constantine, becomes in a way the executor of God's will, who even stands above church officials. David IV carries out a church reform, for which he translates the Byzantine canon laws into Georgian and puts himself as the leader blessed by God as the main judge, in order to get rid of the uncontrollable growth of power of the church, which has become very strong at this time and which he sees as a threat to his own royal power. ¹²⁶ He considered himself the heir of the Byzantine legacy in the east. ¹²⁷ It is probably the canon laws translated from Byzantine that brought the concept of Constantine into the Georgian cultural consciousness; otherwise, it was not popular and known locally during this period. ¹²⁸ After David IV, Georgian kings were also compared to Emperor Constantine, for example, David's granddaughter, King Tamar. ¹²⁹ Although King Tamar was a woman and female leaders were more commonly compared to Helena, the comparison of King Tamar to Emperor Constantine may further emphasize that, in this case, during time of King Tamar, for Georgians, Emperor Constantine is a symbolic concept of an ideal Christian ruler and not only an actual historical figure.

Since the time of David, the Builder, we often see images of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena in the Georgian context. Despite the abundance of images, the depiction of Emperor

¹²⁵ Monk Arsen. *ცხოვრება მეფეთ-მეფე დავითისა* [*The Life of David the King of Kings*] p. 171, Robert W. Thomson, *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles: The Original Georgian Texts and the Armenian Adaptation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 319

¹²⁶ Sandro Nikolaishvili, 2019. "Byzantium and the Georgian World c. 900-1210: Ideology of Kingship and Rhetoric in the Byzantine Periphery." PhD diss., Central European University, p.147

¹²⁷ The icon from Sinai where king David the builder is represented has an inscription "Basileus of the entire east"

¹²⁸ Sandro Nikolaishvili, 2019. "Byzantium and the Georgian World c. 900-1210: Ideology of Kingship and Rhetoric in the Byzantine Periphery." PhD diss., Central European University, p.145

¹²⁹ *A life of Kartli*, 289

Constantine and St. Helena next to the ktetor within the context of the church remains relatively rare in Georgia. The earliest example of such an image date back to the early twelfth century. Art historian Asmat Okropiridze identifies the damaged figure of the founder in the painting at the Bochorma Church, which is presented next to Emperor Constantine and St. Helena, as David the Builder (Fig. 21). Although little remains to definitively identify the figure, Okropiridze believes that the traditional dress and particularly the arm decorated with gold leaf suggest it was at least the highest feudal lord of his time.¹³⁰ Based on the shroud and the date of the church, and since David's anonymous historian refers to him as the emperor Constantine, Okropiridze believes that we are likely dealing with a ktetor portrait of David IV the Builder.¹³¹ There are few other examples of depictions of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena next to ktetors in Georgian wall painting. One similar example, also David IV the Builder, is represented in the Gelati Monastery dating from the twelfth century. However, since the Georgian king and the Christian monarchs are not depicted close to one another, we cannot completely categorize them under the type where ktetors are presented next to Constantine and Helena. As we have seen before, the portrait of King Levan of Kakheti and the unknown king next to him in the Church of John the Baptist in Alvani, is an example of the type where the ktetor is represented next to Emperor Constantine and Queen Helena.

Rulers who are compared to Emperor Constantine and St. Helena are often depicted next to them. For example, Stephen III, (Stephen the Great of Moldovia) offering his foundation to Christ through the mediation of the Prophet Elijah; St. Peter, Constantine, and Helena (flanking the True Cross); King David, and the "Royal Deësis," mural painting, after 1488, St. Elijah (Sfântul

¹³⁰ Asmat Okropiridze, *The Image of the donor in the Church of St George of Bochorma* [Literature and Art I (1990): pp. 235-251

¹³¹ Ibid.

Ilie) Church, near Suceava, Romania (Fig.22).¹³² Stephen the Great is easily associated with the concept of New Constantine, while he is fighting for strengthen the borders of his Christian kingdom.¹³³ A thematically similar image can also be found in the painting of Hagia Sophia in Kiev, which was built at the beginning of the eleventh century, where Constantine and Helena are represented twice in the church's decoration.¹³⁴ In the Chapel of Joachim and Anne within the Hagia Sophia in Kiev, small depictions of Prince Yaroslav and his wife, Princess Irene, are positioned close to the figure of St. Constantine. Additionally, in the Chapel of the Archangel Michael, who is the patron saint of Prince Yaroslav, St. Helena is depicted alongside St. Anne, who is the patron saint of the Kiev (Fig.23).¹³⁵

The painting in the Alvani Church bears a close thematic connection to the depiction found in the church of St. George in Staro Nagoričino (North Macedonia), constructed between 1316 and 1318. In Staro Nagoričino, Emperor Constantine and Helena are prominently featured on the northern wall of the narthex, depicted alongside the royal couple (Fig.24). This emphasizes their significant role as iconographic emblems of apostolic patronage of the imperial throne, underlining their spiritual and authoritative support for imperial and Christian leadership. Further enhancing

¹³² Andrei Dumitrescu, "The Bowing Prince: Post-Byzantine Representations of Christian Rulership in Moldavian Wall Painting." In *The Routledge Handbook of Byzantine Visual Culture in the Danube Regions*, edited by Maria Alessia Rossi and Alice Isabella Sullivan, 223. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024

¹³³ Jonathan Eagles, *Stephen the Great and Balkan Nationalism: Moldova and Eastern European History*, I.B. Tauris, 2014, p.215

¹³⁴ Nadezhda Nikolaevna Nikitenko, "К иконографической программе однофигурных фресок Софийского собора [On the Iconographic Program of Single-Figure Frescoes of Saint Sophia Cathedral]," *Византийский Временник [Byzantine Journal]* 48 (1987): 101-107; там же, "Программа однофигурных фресок Софийского собора в Киеве и ее идеиные истоки [The Program of Single-Figure Frescoes of the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev and Its Ideological Origins]," *Византийский Временник [Byzantine Journal]* 49 (1988): pp.173-178.

¹³⁵ The marriage of Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev to Anna Porphyrogenita, a Byzantine princess, in 988 symbolized a strong alliance between Kievan Rus' and the Byzantine Empire. This union was not only strategic but also led to Vladimir's conversion to Orthodox Christianity. The adoption of Byzantine Christianity by Vladimir and the subsequent Christianization of Kievan Rus' aligned the principality culturally and religiously with Constantinople, the heart of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Their successors were the successors of Byzantine imperial blood it means that their representation next to Constantine and Helena could also emphasize the fact that they are related.

John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History*, 811-1057. Cambridge University Press. 2010. p. 319

this theme, the Church of St. Nicholas in Psača (North Macedonia) (Fig. 25), dating from 1365-1371. The paintings of Psača also mirrors these elements of Alvani church of the John the Baptist, but in reverse.¹³⁶ It starts with the images of Emperor Constantine and Queen Helena and ends with the images of Tzar Uroš and King Vukašin.¹³⁷ King Vukašin was also well known of his financial contributions to the monasteries of Mount Athos, similarly as King Levan. Kings of Serbia King Vukašin and his brother and Co-ruler Tzar Uroš, share another similarity with King Levan, they fight against Ottomans to save their Christian Kingdom, but it happened almost two centuries earlier.

Conclusion

Emperor Constantine and St. Helena are highly revered figures in Christianity, including in Georgia. Their contributions to the conversion of Kartli and their status as Christian leaders have made them enduring symbols of ideal Christian leadership. This concept evolved over the centuries, with the emergence of the idea of a New Constantine and a New Helena. In the 12th century, against the backdrop of the strengthening of the Georgian kingdom, King David the Builder was referred to as a new Constantine. He saw himself as a continuation of Byzantine imperial power in the Christian East. His association with Constantine and Helena is evident in the wall paintings of his era, where his portrait is found alongside theirs. After the disintegration of Georgia, there are no examples comparing any ruler to Emperor Constantine until the first half of

¹³⁶ Except the figure of St. Nino, because she is out of the concept in the case of Psača.

¹³⁷ Their identification is in question, and it is likely that King Vukašin was later overthrown and replaced by Tzar Uroš's wife, Jelena. This suggests even more commonalities between the ktetors and their flanking figures. MiSa Rakocija, ed. 2006. *The Days of St. Emperor Constantine and Helena: NiS and Byzantium*, Fifth Symposium, June 3-5, 2006. The Collection of Scientific Works V. Niš: NKC. P. 377

the 16th century. During this period, King Levan of Kakheti was depicted next to Constantine and Helena, much like David the Builder, in John the Baptist church of Alvani. Despite the weakness of Levan's kingdom and the fall of Byzantium, Levan's reign was marked by the construction, restoration, and painting of many churches.

This enduring association of Georgian kings with Constantine and Helena, despite changing historical circumstances, underscores the lasting influence of these figures as standards of ideal Christian leadership. The enduring association of Georgian kings with Constantine and Helena, despite changing historical circumstances, underscores the lasting influence of these figures as standards of ideal Christian leadership. It also highlights the role of art and iconography in shaping and reflecting this political ideology.

Conclusions

The portraits of King Levan are exceptional in the history of Georgian art because of their quantity and their difference from earlier Georgian examples, evidenced by their placement in various parts of the church, unlike the traditional north wall of entrances. Despite its prominence and abundance, there are not many studies on the portraits of King Levan, and they focus more on the identification of the portraits than on the examination of King Levan's royal ideology through the portraits. This study allows us to look deeply into the royal ideology and worldview of King Levan, and to fill in at least a small part of the gap that we have after the researches up to the thirteenth century.

Portraits of King Levan also revive the depictions of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena next to the ktetors in Georgian wall paintings. This new arrangement and revival of Constantine and Helena might be due to King Levan inviting artists from abroad, as suggested by the inscriptions in the Gremi church, which mention Protosyngellos from Thessaloniki, who, according to Tinatin Kaukhchishvili, painted the Archangel Church of Gremi. In addition to the location and quantity of the portraits of King Levan, they are distinguished by the decorations of his garments and the figures with whom the artist presents his image. The ktetor portraits of King Levan are similar to each other; the content, the number of figures, and the treatment of form, color, and line are consistent across the portraits. This similarity includes not only to the images of King Levan but also to the general iconographic program and style of the churches painted during his era.

King Levan's ktetor images form a single narrative, which functions as a medium for storytelling. Depending on how, in what form, and with whom King Levan is depicted, we gain

insights into his life stages and self-fashioning. From the analysis of historical sources, we find that he is particularly interested in creating an image of himself as a faithful defender of Christianity, like his great ancestor David the Builder. His aspirations are proved by the image of Holy warriors and the Holy Virgin, which symbolize protection and reinforce King Levan's image as a defender of Christianity protected by Holy Warriors and blessed by the Holy Virgin. The greatest paradigms of defenders of Christianity are Emperor Constantine and St. Helena; using their image, next to the portrait of King Levan, reinforces his associations with them.

The kings of Kakheti, formed after the disintegration of Georgia, had a special claim to the crown of the united Georgia, because the last king of the united Georgia, Giorgi VIII, became the first king of the kingdom of Kakheti, Giorgi I. The use of the title "King of kings" by Kakhetian kings Aleksandre I and his son, Giorgi II (the father of King Levan), can be explained by this historical association with the united Georgian kingdom. Since King Levan also carries the same title, at the beginning of his reign, we can assume that he also had the ambition to unite Georgia under his crown. Also, when King Levan refers to himself as the King of Kings at the beginning of his reign, it evokes associations with the great Georgian kings, especially David the Builder, who was named King of Kings and Sword of the Messiah. King Levan is likewise a builder and does everything what could be the mission of the Sword of the Messiah, including the financial involvement in the restoration activities in Jerusalem and Mount Athos. His self-fashioning and emphasis on being a new defender of Christianity and a God-blessed king show his desire to connect with distant Christian kingdoms and to find a way out of the new geopolitical situation in which his kingdom found itself after the appearance of the Ottoman Empire.

The sixteenth-century Kingdom of Kakheti was in great danger: it had the Ottoman Empire on one side, and Safavid Iran on the other. King Levan was searching for a solution. He started

with strengthening his kingdom, built a new fortified capital, and reconstructed and repainted churches in his region. He became a highly respected and important figure locally, not only as the rightful heir to the throne of Kakheti, but also as a Christian king who would build new churches and repair old ones for the glory of the Christian faith. The second step was to establish a connection with Christian powers to strengthen his image as great Christian ruler, a New Constantine in the region, who was worth to be saved from Islamic powers. King Levan uses the symbolic images of Emperor Constantine and St. Helena, figures familiar to Georgians, especially in wall paintings, we find their portraits in almost all the churches, commissioned by king Levan, also we have two portraits of king David IV next to Emperor Constantine and St. Helena in Gelati and Bochorma churches, etc. By painting his portraits next to these figures, he ensures that his portrait is associated with them.

Future research could further explore how King Levan's approaches to royal portraiture and church patronage influenced later generations, possibly shaping contemporary perceptions of leadership and cultural identity in Georgia. As we go deep into history, the reign of King Levan offers an important example of how art and architecture can effectively talk about the royal ideology and the self-fashioning of King to future generations and probably shape a nation's heritage and ambitions.

Illustrations

Figure1.

King Levan of Kakheti, Kashmi trinity church (photo by Salome Gviniashvili)

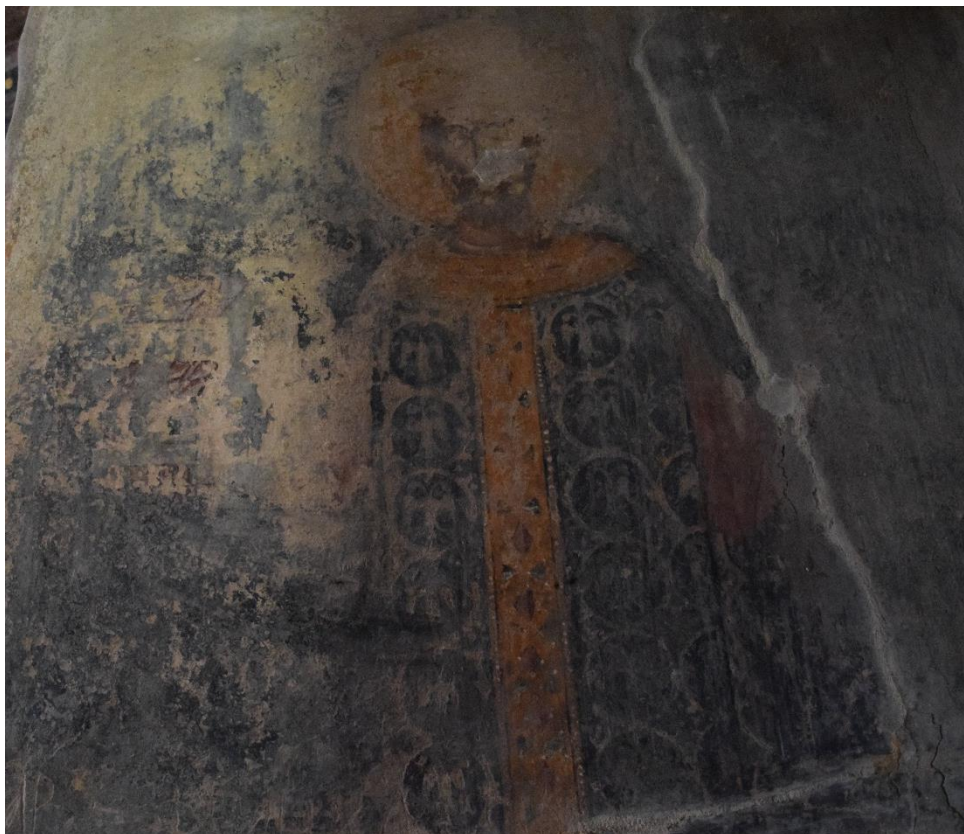


Figure2. Holly Warriors, Kashmi trinity church (photo by Salome Gviniashvili)

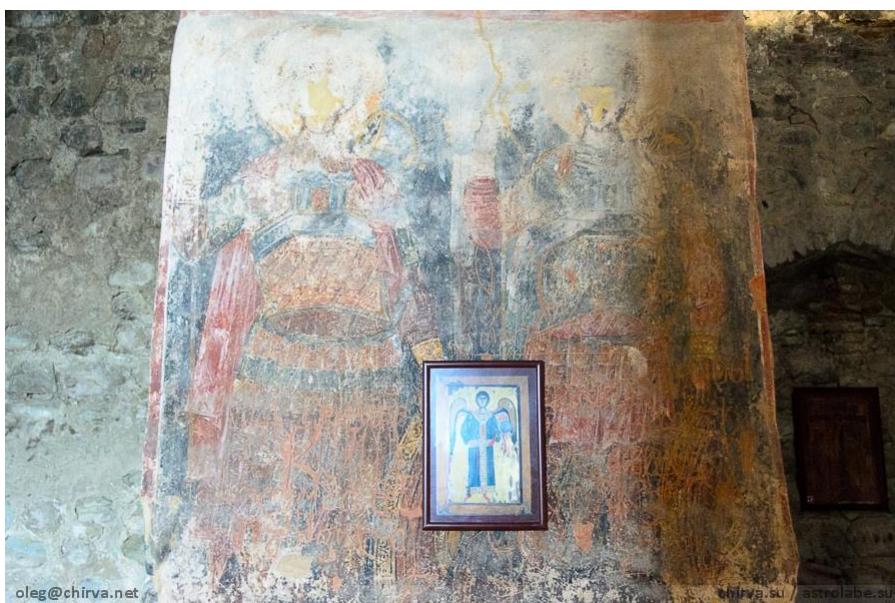


Figure3. Holy Warriors in staro Nagoricane (source the webpage: <https://www.panacomp.net/saint-george-monastery-staro-nagoricane-village/>)

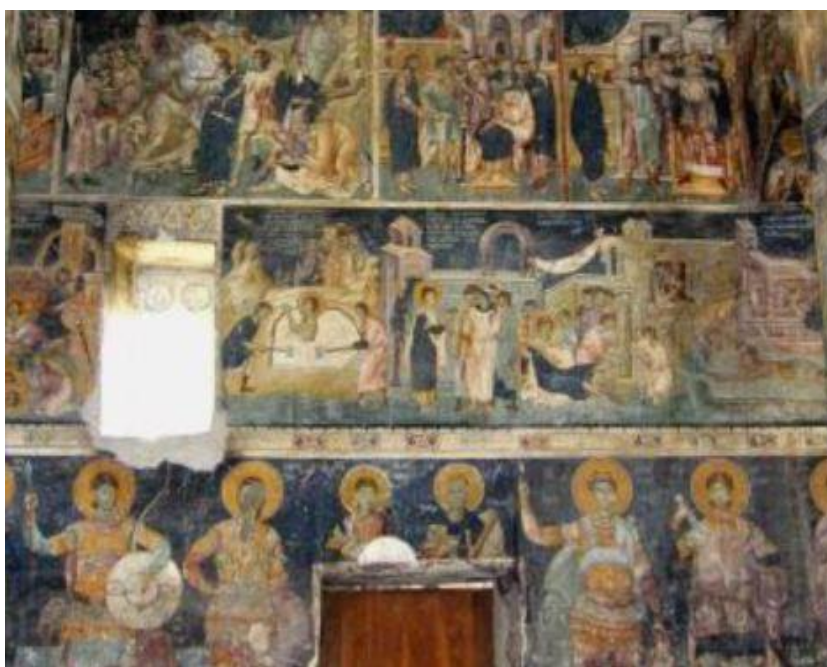


Figure4. Inscription of Western tympanum in Kashmi trinity church schematic drawing by T. Kaukhchishvili

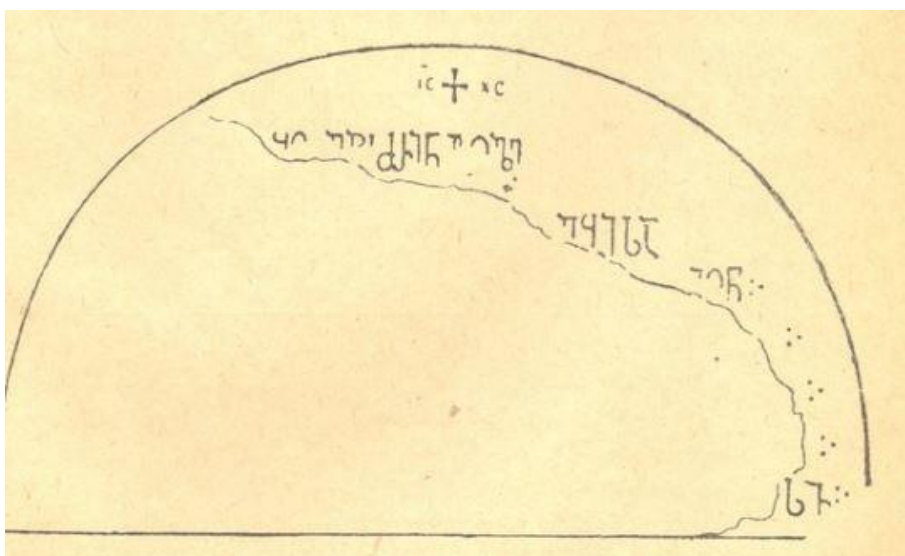


Figure5. Western wall of Kashmi trinity church (photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



Figure6. Western wall of Alvani John the Baptist church (photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



Figure7. Portrait of Ktetors in Alvani John the Baptists church, King Levan and unknown king
(photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



Figure 8. Damaged portrait of unknown king in Alvani, with scratches marking his beard (photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



Figure 9. Ktetur portrait of Nekresi church, King Levan, Queen Tinatin and Prince Aleksandre
(photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



Figure10. Ktetur portrait of Akhali Shuamta, Queen Tinatin, King Levan and Prince Aleksandre
(photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



Figure11. Ktitor portrait of Alaverdi, King Levan, Prince Aleksandre and possibly king Giorgi II
(photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



Figure12. Ktitor portrait of King Levan in Gremi (photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



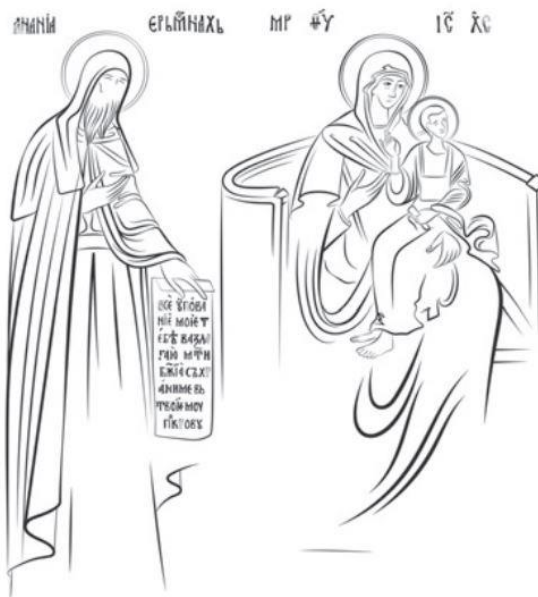
Figure13. Greek inscription of Gremi(photo by Salome Gviniashvili)



Figure14.Ktetor portait in Piva (photo by: Dragan Vojvodić)



Figure15.Ktetor portait in Pljevlja Holy Trinity church, (schematic drawing by Natalia Zivotic)



Drw. 7. Hieromonk Ananija, nartex of the Holy Trinity church near Pljevlja, 1592
(author: Nataša Životić)

Figure16. Ktitor portrait of King Levan and Prince Aleksandre in Mount Athos (source: Marina Vachnadze)



Figure17. Coins of Demetre I and David IV (Georgian National Museum)





Figure18. Cross from Hildesheim, with true cross flanked by Constantine and St. Helena (photo by Natalia Tetriatnikov)



Figure19. Emperor Constantine and St. Helena in belltower of Žiča monastery (schematic drawing by B.Zivkovic)

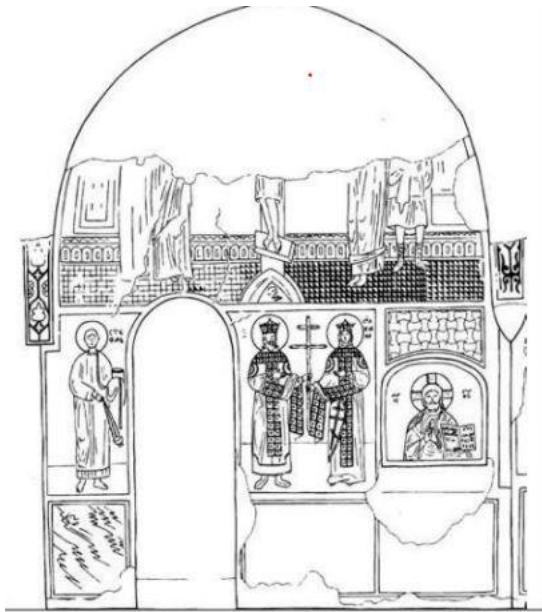


Figure 20. Frescoes of the Mavriotissa Monastery near Kastoria (Source: Tetriatnikov)



Figure21. Ktetor of Bochorma church, (Scheme by Asmat Okropiridze)



Figure22. The Imperial Deësis Mural at the Church of St. Elijah, Suceava, by Andrei Dumitrescu



Figure23. Hagia Sophia Kiev. Emperor Constantine with ktetors, and St. Helena near ktetors-
(Photo by Nadiia Nikitenko)



Figure24. Saints Constantine and Helena, Queen Simonis, King Milutin, and Saint George, 1315–
17, monumental painting. Church of Saint George at Staro Nagoričane, Republic of North Macedonia
(source: Maria Alessia Rossi).



Figure25. King Vukašin and Tsar Uroš with emperor Constantine and St. Helena in Psača monastery (Photo by Zvonko Nikolov)



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