

*Erik Thunø*

**Title:** Svetitskhoveli Cathedral

**Date:** 1010-33

**Geography:** Kartli (Georgia)

**Culture:** South Caucasus

**Medium:** Architecture



Fig. 1. Mtskheta. Aerial view with Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (1010-33), seen from the south. © Erik Thunø

alt="The Cathedral surrounded by a large courtyard in the center of town and near the Mtkvari River"

**Keywords:** Mtskheta, cathedral, life-giving pillar, Christianization, Saint Nino

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The current Cathedral of Svetitskhoveli was erected by Patriarch-Catholicos Melkisedek (r. 1010-33). Located at the confluence of the Mtkvari and Aragvi rivers in the ancient capital of Mtskheta some twenty kilometers north of modern-day Tbilisi, Georgia, the building and its history are closely interwoven with the fourth-century Christianization of Georgia. Medieval

Georgia's largest cathedral and the final resting place of Georgian monarchs and catholicos-patriarchs, Svetitskhoveli remains the most important church in Georgian Christianity.



Fig. 2. Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (1010-33), Mtskheta, seen from the north-west with main entrance. © Erik Thunø

alt="The restored early eleventh-century Cathedral surrounded by visitors in its courtyard"

Melkisedek's cathedral owes its name (Svetitskhoveli=life-giving pillar) to a pillar miraculously erected during the church's construction. The incident is first mentioned in Rufinus' *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 400 CE) the earliest source for the Christianization of Georgia. This watershed moment marked the beginning of a reorientation from Zoroastrian and Sasanian influence toward a newly Christianized Romano-Byzantine world. The story has two protagonists: The first was a "woman captive" (named Nino in later Georgian sources) who evangelized Kartli—present-day eastern Georgia—in the second quarter of the fourth century. The second was king Mirian III (r. 284-361 CE), the ruler of Kartli and a vassal of the Sasanians. A contemporary of Constantine the Great, the Zoroastrian ruler was baptized no later than 337 CE, making him – along with his Armenian counterpart Trdat—one of the world's first monarchs to embrace the new religion officially. According to Rufinus, Mirian was on a hunting expedition when the woods through which he was passing was unexpectedly engulfed in utter darkness. Lost and alone, he was saved by the sudden appearance of the light of the Savior and swore his allegiance to Christ. Advice from the "woman captive" then prompted him to build a church in Mtskheta, soon to become the epicenter of Georgian Christianity. The new church's outer walls were raised without difficulty, but, as its pillars were being installed, one of them



refused to stand upright despite every human effort. The “woman captive” then spent the night alone in prayer inside the church. The following morning, the pillar suddenly appeared floating upright above its intended spot, and “while everyone was still in the grip of wonder and astonishment, before their very eyes, the pillar, with no-one touching it, gradually and with perfect balance settled down upon its base.” Rufinus recounts how the church was then completed in magnificent style and priests dispatched from Constantinople by Emperor Constantine to help the new belief system settle in this remote foreign country.



Fig. 3. Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (1010-33), Mtskheta, eastern façade. © Erik Thunø

alt=“The restored early eleventh-century Cathedral with its sunlit eastern façade which depicts the life-giving pillar and holds an inscription that identifies Melkisedek as the cathedral’s donor and a certain “Arsukisdze” as its master builder.”

No traces remain of the pillar and King Mirian’s original fourth-century church, which collapsed in the 420s. Marian’s church, apparently a wooden structure with a walled precinct, was replaced c. 500 CE by a large, three-nave stone basilica with a polygonal apse. Its builder, King Vakhtang Gorgasali (r. 457-502 CE), also made Svetitskhoveli the see of the Catholicos of Georgia. Scattered architectural remains from Vakhtang’s church survive within the current cathedral. Based on an elongated three-nave floor plan with a dome on four piers and a deep apse, the cathedral was destroyed in 1400 by Tamerlane’s army. The dome collapsed in 1656 during an earthquake and was later restored. Numerous refurbishments also characterize Svetitskhoveli’s outer walls and many of its decorative reliefs are no longer *in situ*. The eastern façade still retains an original depiction of the life-giving pillar surrounded by a semi-circular

fan-like composition that identifies Melkisedek as the cathedral's donor and a certain "Arsukisdze" as its master builder. Today, the miraculous pillar is commemorated by a seventeenth-century walled tower in the south side of the cathedral's nave, believed to be the place where the pillar originally rose within Mirian's church. Subsequent Georgian narratives on the conversion of Kartli record that a Jewish woman named Sidonia lies buried underneath the pillar, where she embraces Christ's mantle, allegedly brought to Mtskheta by Kartli's first-century Jews.

Svetitskhoveli, also called the "mother of all churches" and "holy of holies" in ancient Georgian sources, adheres to a tradition of site-bound sanctity established during the second quarter of the fourth century, a tradition prominently evident in the Constantinian churches of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and Saint Peter's in Rome. Whereas the Constantinian sites claimed their holiness from historic bodies, whether absent from (Holy Sepulcher) or still resting within (S. Peter) their original tombs, Svetitskhoveli, by contrast, only became a *locus sanctus* after the pillar miraculously lowered itself onto its base. While contributing to a new sacred topography after the Edict of Milan (313 CE), Svetitskhoveli embodied a sacred site that in both its origins and its materiality was remarkably different than its contemporaneous counterparts.

### Biography

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