*Teresa Shawcross*

**Title:** The Exterior Wall-Paintings of the Church of the Archangel (Taringzel) at Lashtkhveri, Mestia
**Date:** Late 14th century to early 15th century
**Geography:** Mestia, Upper Svaneti
**Culture:** Georgian
**Medium:** Fresco

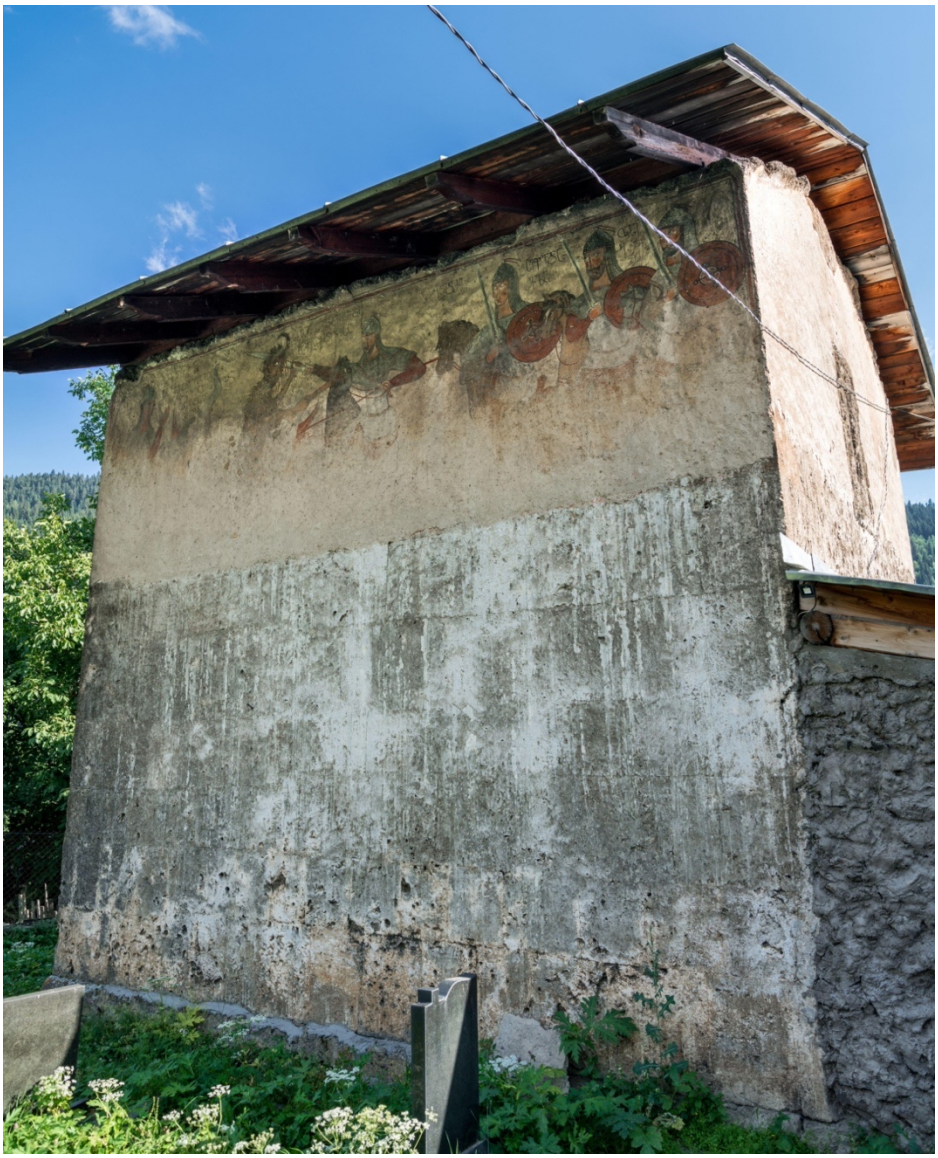

Fig. 1. Mestia, Lashtkhveri, Church of the Archangel (Taringzel), northern façade. © Alexei Fateev / Alamy Stock Photo

"alt=Image of a tall, rectangular building with a pitched roof. Under the roof's overhang are the remains of a vividly colored fresco depicting a row of armed combatants and onlookers"

**Keywords:** Svaneti, Mestia, Lashtkhveri Church, *Amiran-Darejaniani*, Moses of Khoni, folk tales, Georgian, Persian

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The Church of the Archangel (also known as Taringzel) stands at the edge of the village of Lashktkhveri in the Lenjeri district of Mestia, Upper Svaneti. A hall-church of modest dimensions with walls of limestone blocks and a peaked timber roof (fig. 1), it blends in with the other buildings that surround it, looking of a piece with the houses, barns, and towers that form the family compounds that together make up the sprawling settlement. The church's exterior was once decorated with frescoes, as was the case for many churches in the region. Traces of these exterior frescoes can still be made out – the best preserved being located directly under the roof's overhang. These frescos have been dated to the late 14th or early 15th centuries, with some overpainting and additions especially on the eastern façade. Although individual elements resemble those found at other churches, the iconographic program at Lashtkhveri is unique among surviving examples of external frescoes from the 10th to 15th centuries. Moreover, the initial impression of disparateness of its subjects is belied by the underlying coherence of its message.

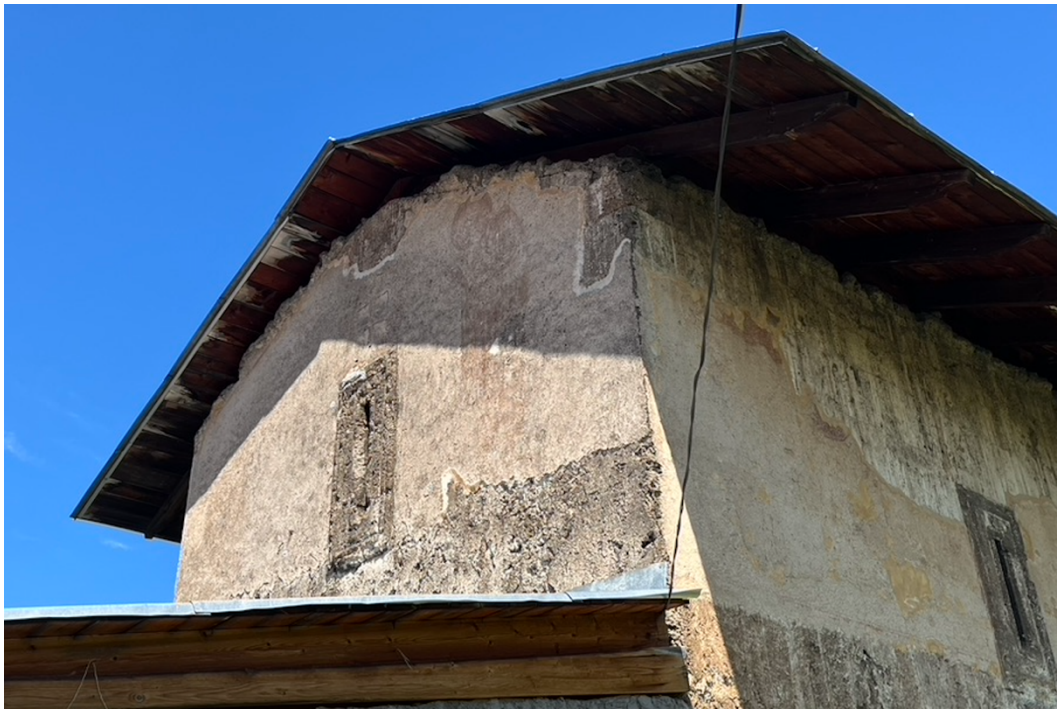


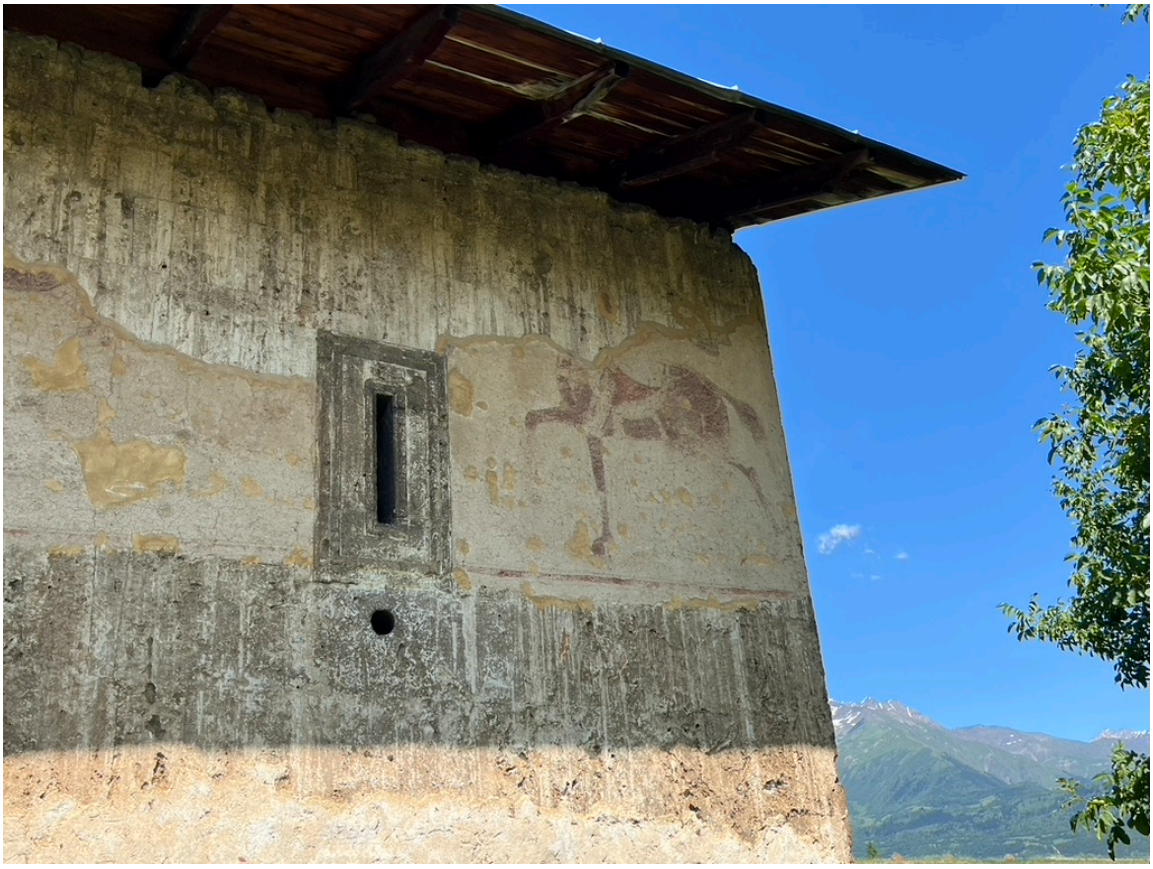
Fig. 2. Mestia, Lashtkhveri, Church of the Archangel (Taringzel), western façade, remnants of a fresco of the Deesis. © Reproduced under fair use license. Photograph: Teresa Shawcross

"alt=Image of a detail of a badly damaged fresco. One can dimly make out the contour of a standing figure, presumably John the Baptist, whose head is surrounded by a nimbus and who inclines towards another figure north of it"

At the churches in the Svaneti of the Archangels at Iprari, of St George at Adishi and Svipi (Pari), and of the Savior at Laghami, frescoes depict subjects such as the Fall of Adam and Eve, the Hospitality of Abraham, and especially Christ in Majesty flanked by the Virgin

Mary and John the Baptist, and sometimes also by Archangels and Apostles and Saints.[1] The latter scene, which is attested in the Byzantine world at least since the 10th century and is known to scholars as the Deesis ("entreaty"), appears often to have been combined on the exterior with depictions of the Vision of St Eustace. For example, at Iprari, the south façade of the church is painted below with a Deesis and above with the Vision of St Eustace. Depictions of St Eustace are also frequently found on the interior side of the west wall (Zenobani in Imereti, Khosita Mairam in Ossetia, Sapara in Samtskhe-Javakheti), or opposite, namely on the east façade (Laghami in Mestia), as well as on the vault (Nuzal in Ossetia) – all locations that place in dialogue the veneration of Christ in Heaven and his descent to and appearance on earth to redeem mankind. Boasting a cult already firmly established in Georgia from the 6th century, St Eustace was according to tradition a Roman soldier and general originally called Placidius who, when out hunting a goat-antelope (*tur*) or a stag, beheld a vision of the Cross or of Christ Himself between the animal's horns or antlers, accompanied by a divine voice declaring that God desired his salvation, chastising him for fighting against Christianity and ordering him to be baptized. The saint was said to have been deprived of his wealth and position because of his conversion and driven into exile – eventually returning only to receive martyrdom.[2]

At Lashtkhveri, the Deesis was represented on the west façade, above the entrance to the building (fig. 2), while the Vision of Saint Eustace was represented on the east or sanctuary façade.



[1] Marine Kenia, *Upper Svaneti Medieval Mural Painting* (Tbilisi: G. Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation, 2010), 10-11.
[2] Tania Velmans, "L'Église de Zenobani et le thème de la Vision de Saint Eustache en Géorgie," *Cahiers archéologiques* 33 (1985): 30-31, 44.

Fig. 3. Mestia, Lashtkhveri, Church of the Archangel (Taringzel), southern façade, remnants of a fresco with mounted warriors. © Reproduced under fair use license. Photograph: Teresa Shawcross

"alt=Image of a detail of a badly damaged fresco. One can make out a prancing horse with an elaborate double-girthed saddle – and, more dimly, part of the figure of a rider riding with his legs straight in the stirrups"

The fresco on the southern façade of Lashtkhveri continued the theme of pagan soldiers who converted to Christianity and were martyred for their faith, since it depicted a row of warrior saints. Marked as a heavenly army by the nimbuses around their heads, these saints, dressed in armor, were mounted on prancing horses with high, double-girthed saddles and long stirrups. They were represented as if preparing themselves to take formation and charge as the front-line shock troops in an imminent battle (fig. 3). There are many extant medieval representations of equestrian saints in Georgia, such as in the reliefs at Nikortsminda in Racha, and the frescoes at Svipi in Mestia and Dirbi in Shida Kartli. While precursors can be found already in the 9th and 10th centuries (e.g. Martvili in the Svaneti), the specific iconographic type at Lashtkhveri appears to have begun to emerge from the 11th century onwards. The type may be argued to have developed in the context of the influx into the eastern Mediterranean of north-western European knights – especially Normans – as mercenaries and crusaders.[3] Certainly, equestrian saints are often found both in churches and on fortifications in Greece that were associated with rule by crusading dynasties (e.g. the Akronauplia Gatehouse at Nauplion, Panagia Gorgoepoikoos at Athens). On the façade of the narthex of Old Church of Vrantomas in the Peloponnese, for instance, dating to the 13th century, a frieze consists of six equestrian saints divided into two groups facing each other in mock tournament.[4] Contingents of these knights served not only under the Byzantine emperors but also under Georgian kings.

[3] Mamuka Tsurtsumia, "Couched Lance and Mounted Shock Combat in the East Georgian Experience," *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (2014): 85-88, 99-100.

[4] S. Gerstel, "Art and Identity in the Medieval Morea," *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World*, ed. Angelike E. Laiou and Roy Parviz Mottahedeh (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2001), 265, 275; Julio Gailhabaud, *Monumentos antiguos y modernos : colección que constituye la historia de la arquitectura de los diferentes pueblos en todas sus épocas* (Madrid: I. Boix, 1845), n. p.

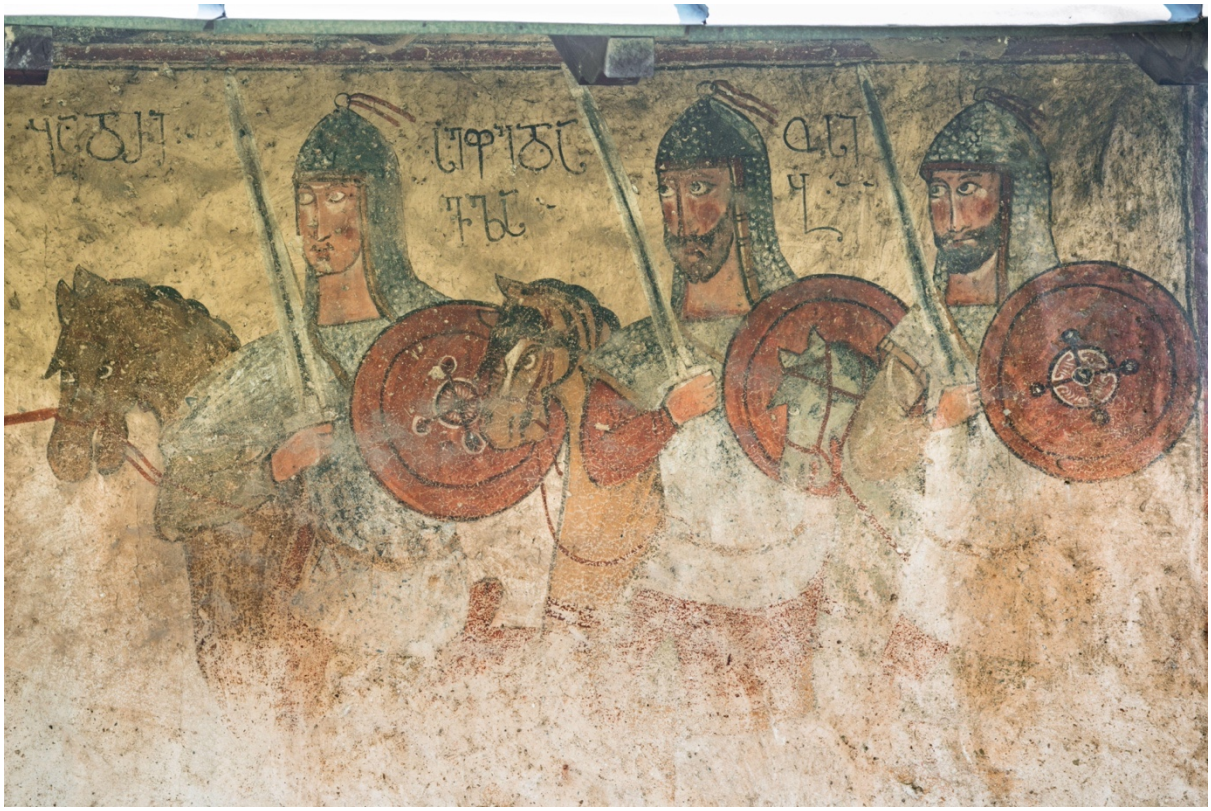


Fig. 4. Mestia, Lashtkhveri, Church of the Archangel (Taringzel), northern façade, fresco detail with three warriors, labelled from left to right as Badri, Sepedavla and Usib, standing in a row in front of their mounts. © AJF / Alamy Stock Photo

“alt=Image of a detail of a damaged fresco with three figures of men standing in front of their grey horses. The men are dressed in mail and lamellar armor, and have open helmets and round shields”

If a cursory glance at the northern façade suggests that, like the southern façade, it also depicts warrior saints, a closer examination reveals a new dimension that adds another layer of meaning to our interpretation of the entire program of frescoes. Since none of the figures have nimbuses around the heads, they cannot represent saints; but neither are they explicitly identified as portraits celebrating the contemporary ruling dynasty, its military commanders, or its soldiers such as one finds on other monuments. In the western portion, three warriors – wearing open helmets, chain and lamellar armor and bearing spears and round shields – stand dismounted in front of their horses (fig. 4) and attentively watch the combat scene that occupies a central position in the composition. That scene (fig. 5) depicts several actions synoptically by a fourth warrior mounted upon a black warhorse: an initial charge with a lance or spear that hits its mark and then a further, fatal blow delivered at close quarters with a sword. The enemy, which manages to get in a counter-blow but ultimately is unable to resist the onslaught, has a dual aspect: first, of a wild, demonic-looking creature of gigantic proportions with some humanoid features, but sporting horns on its head and bristles on its back; and, second, of a red serpent-like dragon that may be a material part of the other creature rather than merely its steed. Finally, in the eastern portion (fig. 6) is the same warrior, who has been swallowed by but managed to escape from inside a black dragon,

whom he is slaying with a scimitar.[5] The only other surviving fresco with comparable images is found at the Church of the Saviour at Chazhashi in Mestia, but that is a considerably later work dating from the 17th century.

Fig. 5. Mestia, Lashtkhveri, Church of the Archangel (Taringzel), northern façade, fresco detail of the warrior Amiran, armed with a sword in his right hand and a spear in his left, slaying a wild-looking demon, the Baqbaq-Devi, as well as a red, serpentlike dragon that may be either the demon's steed, a monstrous birth from the demon's dying body, or a transmogrification of the demon itself © AJF / Alamy Stock Photo

"alt=Image of a warrior mounted on a grey horse in the act of striking a sword blow on the head of a creature with humanoid features, horns and bristles – while at the same piercing with his spear a red serpent or dragon emerging from the creature. The creature unsuccessfully attempts to fight his assailant off"

[5] The fresco is now extremely damaged, but the memory that the warrior slaying the black dragon was depicted as having escaped from within it has remained in the memory of the local residents in the 19th century, who may have claimed that the scene depicted Jonah (Jonah 2:10) – although the possibility that they referred instead to Job cannot be excluded (Job 40:15-20). See Clive Phillips-Wolley, *Savage Svanetia*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1883), II: 115-17.

Fig. 6. Mestia, Lashtkhveri, Church of the Archangel (Taringzel), northern façade, fresco detail of the warrior Amiran fighting his way out of the belly of a black sea-dragon or whale which he slays with his scimitar © AJF / Alamy Stock Photo

"alt=Image of a warrior carrying a scimitar emerging from a fire-breathing dragon with hands upraised and preparing himself to strike the mortal blow"

In the case of Lashtkhveri, the explanatory inscriptions in Georgian *asomtavruli* script describe the central scene as "The Battle of Amiran and Baqbaq-Devi" ("Ჭომი ამირანისი და / ბაყბაყ დევისა") and comment with regard to the flanking image to the left that "When the whale swallowed Amiran, he killed the whale and emerged" ("ოდეს: ამირან: ვეშაპმა/ნ: ჩანთქა: ვეშაპი: მ/ოკლა: და გამოვიდ(ა)"). The inscriptions furthermore identify the three observing warriors in the flanking image to the right as "Badri" ("ბადრი"), "Sepedavla" ("სეფედავლა") and "Usib" ("უსიბ").[6]

The deeds of Amiran and his companions formed the subject of stories in prose and verse that circulated both orally and in written form. Several encomiastic texts honoring Queen Tamar compare her future or current husbands with "Amiran" and "Badri" – revealing that these figures were already known at the royal court by the early 13th century.[7] Although the earliest extensive written version in Georgian, *The Tale of Amiran, Son of Darejan*

[6] Ekvtime Takaishvili, *არქეოლოგიური ექსპედიცია ლეჩხუმ-სვანეთში: Expédition Archéologique en Letchkhoum et en Svanethie* (Paris: n.p., 1937), 338-349 at 330. With thanks to Alexander Sherborne for his assistance in translating the inscriptions.
[7] *Amiran-Darejaniani: A Cycle of Medieval Georgian Tales Traditionally Ascribed to Mose Khoneli*, tr. R. H. Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), xxiii-xxiv.

(*ამირანდარეჯანიანი*), is attributed to one otherwise unattested Moses of Khoni on the authority of the epilogue of no less than Shota Rustaveli's *The Knight in the Panther's Skin* (*ვეფხისტყაოსანი*), the reference may be a later interpolation.[8] Nonetheless, since the *Tale of Amiran* engages with literary models that post-date the early 11th century, but shows no awareness of texts produced during the Golden Age of the second half of the 12th century, it is likely that the statement contains a kernel of truth, and that the work was written by the mid-12th century at the latest – probably by an author writing under court patronage.[9] Support for this context is provided by the author's extensive exposition of the merits of a military tactic – involving heavy cavalry formations used in offensive maneuvers – that was new to the region, having been first copied from the western knights by the Byzantines (after 1071), and then introduced to the Georgians by David IV (r. 1089-1125).[10] He dismisses the use of the bow as cowardly, and instead extols warriors who charge at their enemy on horseback with a couched lance and then, after that initial attack, draw their sword to engage in hand-to-hand combat. As Rustaveli would do after him, he identifies this style of fighting as exemplary of the chivalrous code of a military aristocracy.[11]

Curiously, the heroes of the *Tale of Amiran* are presented as fluent speakers of the Persian language. They are referred to as liege-men of the Caliph of Baghdad and, while they wage war against the Khazars, Chinese, Turks and others, never fight Persians. Moreover, while they and their interlocutors frequently invoke God, their Monotheism has none of the characteristics of Christianity, but is compatible with Islam. Given this, and given also that the work refers to itself in its prologue as a "Persian tale," it is tempting to argue that the text is a translation from an original in Persian that was itself produced after the Islamic conquests of Iran. Certainly, translations from Persian into Georgian were produced from the 11th century onwards (e.g. *Layla and Majnun*; *Vis and Ramin*; *Shahnameh*). However, claims by 12th-century Georgian authors to have discovered and translated a forgotten Persian book appear increasingly to have functioned not as factual statements but as literary tropes intended to evoke the exotic. Moreover, although not conclusive, the archaizing language and heavy indebtedness of the *Amiran* to the compositional techniques of oral poetry – a debt that extends beyond the presence of formulae of a banal type to more substantive descriptive elements and structural devices – as well as the preservation of the memory of the realia of a former age suggest that the text's author was inspired by the contemporary vogue for orientalism to draw on a pre-existing oral tradition that had already begun circulating in the southern Caucasus two or three hundred years earlier, during the 8th or 9th centuries.[12] Whatever the precise nature and identity of the source or sources that inspired the *Amiran*, the written text appears to have had a long-term impact on Georgian popular culture. It reshaped old stories and inspired new ones. In addition, quotations from it circulated widely as maxims embodying wisdom and magical powers.[13]

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[8] *Amiran-Darejaniani*, tr. Stevenson, xxiv-xxv.
[9] *Amiran-Darejaniani*, tr. Stevenson, xxv; David Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 69-72
[10] Tsurtsumia, "Couched Lance," 87-88.
[11] Tsurtsumia, "Couched Lance," 89-90.
[12] Note that the world described in *Amiran* is one where when the Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad was at its zenith, the commerce of Basra had not been disrupted by the Zanj revolt, and the Khazars were a threat to the Islamic sphere of influence that the Arabs needed to be reckoned with.
[13] Rayfield, *Literature*, 70. This resembles the fate of Vicenzos Kornaros' early modern *Erotokritos* on the island of Crete, where lines of the narrative poem became circulated as or became incorporated into popular couplets (*mantinades*).

While the fresco on the northern façade at Lashtkhveri shares some characteristics with the written text, it has more in common with the folk songs relating to Amiran, Badri, Usib and their peers that have been recorded by ethnographers working from the 19th century onwards in regions such as the eastern district of Pshavi.[14] While the text refers to the hunt of a miraculous stag, as well as to the killing of several demons and of dragons, it does not connect these episodes together. By contrast, an oral ballad tells of the hunt by the heroes of a goat-antelope with golden horns that leads them to a tower where they receive instructions to find and kill a monstrous demon lord, the Devi. Moreover, it relates that the severed body of the demon lord metamorphosed during its death throws into multiple dragons, one of which swallowed Amiran, forcing him to fight his way out of its belly before he could slay it. This description of the testing of the warrior's valor approximately matches the content and order of the scenes depicted on the church. The specific style of combat portrayed should not be taken as proof of knowledge of the written narrative, since by the turn of the 15th century, the shock inflicted by a charge with couched lance was no longer a tactical novelty for Georgians, but the time-honored method preferred by native cavalry units – who continued to employ it even against enemies such as Tamerlane (Timur Lenk).[15]

All this suggests that, by the time the exterior frescoes at Lashtkhveri were painted, the enduring appetite for stories relating to heroes such as Amiran were no longer considered to represent the ambitions of a specifically royal or even princely elite, but rather epitomized a martial ethos that was more widely disseminated. The integration of these heroes into an otherwise deeply religious iconographic program in which three motifs – those of the hunter, the warrior, and the martyr – are reinforced through repetition suggests that their Muslim origins had been forgotten and they had been fully Christianized in collective memory. It also points to the identification in lay circles of some wars as divinely sanctioned enterprises. Holy War appears understood as providing an opportunity to incorporate into humanity's collective struggle to achieve salvation, the striving of each individual soul.[16] Such war provided the means by which soldiers could protect themselves from the exercise of gratuitous violence and join the ranks of blessed while doing what they were trained to do and could do best.

Interpreted in this way, the frescoes on the exterior of the Church of the Archangels at Lashtkhveri may be argued to have served to commemorate the role of the rugged highlanders of the Upper Svaneti as the guards and defenders of a northern borderland region defending with their bodies the integrity of an ethno-religious community to their south. Such soldiering appears, moreover, to have been considered to enroll these men on the side of good against evil in a cosmic struggle that was expected to continue until the unleashing of the forces of the Anti-Christ and the Last Battle that would mark the end of human time. It is surely no coincidence that the Devi was painted with the physical features attributed in eschatological narratives to the hairy and unclean peoples of Gog and Magog. Indeed, the Devi's huge, round eye –with prominent white showing – directs its desperate, dying glance not at its victorious opponent, but outwards and upwards towards the land in which those

[14] Ana Ivanashavili, "Amirani: The Hero of the Georgian Folk Epic," *Georgian Folklore Magazine* 25/06/24, https://geofolk.ge/en/article/amirani--qartuli-khalkhuri-eposis-gmiri/148 [last accessed 19th April 2025].
[15] Tsurtsumia, "Couched Lance," 91.
[16] Michele Bacci, "On the Spatialization of the Sacred in Caucasian Cultures," in *Approaches to Sacred Space(s) in Medieval Subcaucasian Cultures*, ed. Michele Bacci et al. (Brno: Masaryk University, 2023), 35.

peoples were kept imprisoned behind the Iron Gates.[17] Nor that, when the worshipper enters the church, his or her gaze naturally follows a shaft of sunlight from another "eye", this time an *oculus* in the southern wall, that travels across the interior of the church to the northern wall, striking the interior of the northern wall. There, another image forms a contrast to and cancels out the monster outside. As the ray illumines this new image, it heightens the shimmering effect of the abundant white pigment used for the horse, clothing and background, bathing its subject – the patron saint of hunting and warfare as well as the recipient of the highlanders' particular devotion – in an almost otherworldly luminescence (fig. 7). If the Svans were proud of having been entrusted with a sacred vigil meant to be kept until the destruction of the created world, they did not think of themselves as assuming this burden alone. Rather, they claimed that St George, seconded by St Theodore, St Demetrios and their fellow warrior-saints, formed a supernatural host that rode with them.

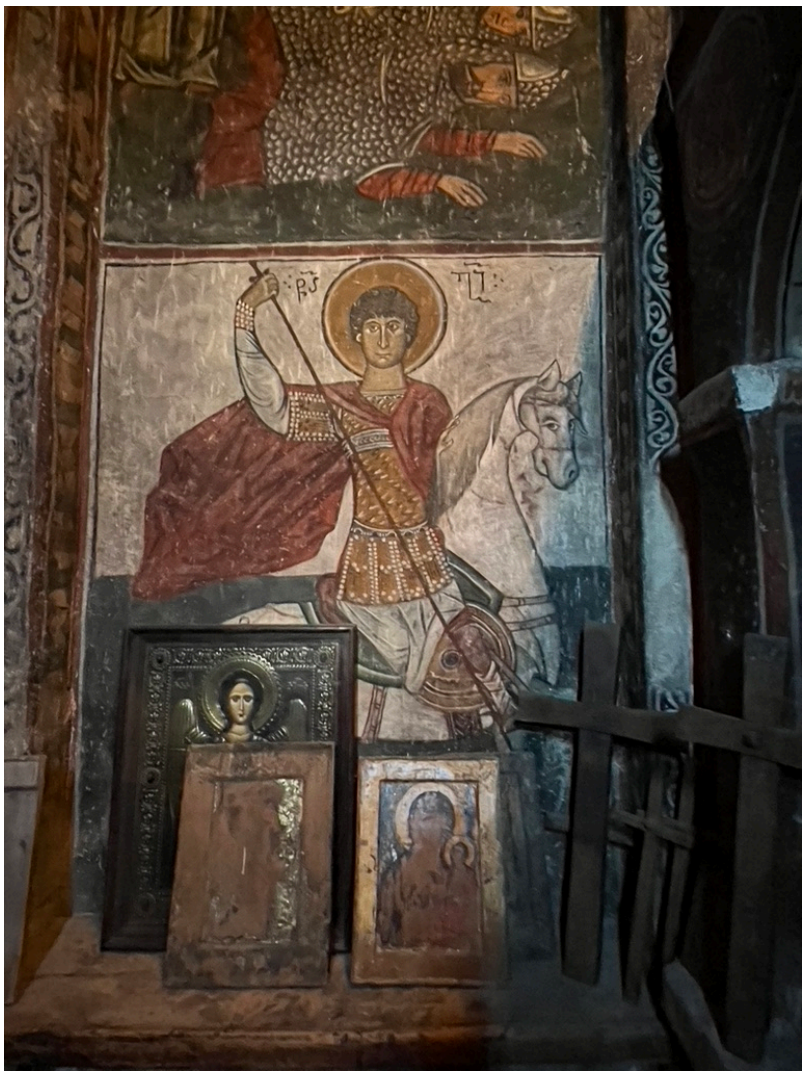

Fig. 7. Mestia, Lashtkhveri, Church of the Archangel (Taringzel), fresco of St George on the interior of the northern wall. © Reproduced under fair use license. Photograph: Teresa Shawcross.

[17] For this eschatological tradition, see Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

"alt=Image of a warrior-saint in military garb, mounted on a white horse and with right hand upraised as he strikes with his spear. The bottom part of the fresco is obscured by panel icons and cross that rest against it"

**Biography**

*Teresa Shawcross is Associate Professor in History and Hellenic Studies at Princeton University and a Senior Member of Robinson College, Cambridge University. She is the director of the Medieval Black Sea Project.*

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