

YANA TCHEKHANOVETS:

The Caucasian Archaeology of the Holy Land: Armenian, Georgian and Albanian Communities between the Fourth and Eleventh Centuries CE. (Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section One: The Near and Middle East, Volume 123.) xxiv, 307 pp. Leiden: Brill, 2018. €150. ISBN 978 90 04 36224 6.

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This is a timely and useful addition to the growing body of literature studying relationships between the early Christian cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus. Scholars are increasingly recognizing that the former Rome-centred approach to this period has offered a skewed picture of the material culture of the region and, by concentrating on interactions between centres of power, has not properly explored what was happening in societies perceived to be on the periphery of influential empires. Tchekhanovets has essentially taken the first step in the process for scholars of material culture wishing to understand the links between the three Christian Caucasian societies of late antiquity and the Holy Land by offering a summary of what was already known from the literary sources and attempting to map that data on to the extant archaeological data for the region. This is an exercise rendered more challenging by the linguistic expertise necessary to undertake such a study – not only should the scholar have a knowledge of Byzantine Greek, Armenian and Georgian, but as is demonstrated in this work, fluent English and Russian are also imperative if the archives of the relevant nineteenth- and twentieth-century excavations are to be fully re-evaluated. The volume demonstrates how revisiting these archives can yield dividends, even if the gaps in historic excavation records can often leave us with infuriating lacunae.

As a gazetteer of sites linked to the Caucasian communities across the Holy Land and Sinai this book will become an invaluable aid to those researching the relationship between the Holy Land and the different ethnic groups who settled the region in the early Christian period. This is also helpful information for those who, like the reviewer, are interested in tracing the influence of Syria and Palestine in the archaeological record of the Caucasus. It must be noted at this stage that, as Tchekhanovets herself observes, her findings – particularly relating to dating issues – often dispute the accepted narrative of Caucasian scholars and, as such, this book is liable to be controversial in some circles as contesting “official” narratives. The reviewer is largely convinced by the arguments put forward in this volume and by the fact that all data is carefully placed in a wider context rather than cherry-picked to fit a particular political or national agenda. Having spent some time discussing the relationship between Georgia and the Holy Land with the late Tamila Mgaloblishvili, leader of the Center for Exploration of Georgian Antiquities, who was involved in 12 expeditions to the Holy Land between 1997 and 2008, I am aware of how the Georgian narrative (the society I am more familiar with – I am not so conversant with the Armenian material) places the inscriptions from Bir el-Qutt and Umm Leisun as being significantly earlier than the dates proposed by Tchekhanovets. However, I am also aware that Mgaloblishvili’s team dated the epigraphical data purely on palaeographical grounds and therefore believe that Tchekhanovets’ arguments need to be seriously considered by scholars given that she has taken pains to place the inscriptions within a wider context that links them, as far as possible, to stratified finds and buildings analysis of the complexes.

As this is a fast-evolving field of study, there are several observations relating to the Georgian material that have emerged since this volume went to press. First, on p. 234 there is a section discussing burial customs using data from crypts and

necropoleis in the Holy Land with proven links to Armenian and Georgian communities. Tchekhanovets asserts that:

Although the number of excavated early monastic sites in Armenia and Georgia is extremely small, it can be argued that this type of burials [sic] remained foreign to the Caucasian region (p. 235).

In fact the kind of multiple burials she is referring to have been discovered in Georgia. At Nekresi in Kakheti (eastern Georgia) a team led by Nodar Bakhtadze discovered that the mortuary chapel at the monastery had been used for both individual and communal graves. The individuals were of both sexes and had personal items buried with them – suggesting that they were wealthy laypeople – but the communal grave lacked grave goods, was for males, and had evidence of holy oil being gathered as a *eulogia*, leading excavators to conclude that this was a grave of “martyrs” or of particularly venerated monks (Bakhtadze et al., *An Archaeological Study of the Ancient Churches in the Former City of Nekresi*, Georgian Ministry of Culture, in press).

Second, there is a surprising dearth of objects from the Holy Land in Georgia given the close links between the two societies in late antiquity. The reviewer contests the attribution of a Syro-Palestinian origin for the bronze censers in Georgia and Armenia (see Loosley Leeming, *Architecture and Asceticism: Cultural Interaction Between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity*, Brill, Leiden, 2018, for further discussion of this issue) but notes that Tchekhanovets’ supposition that Svaneti’s historical role as a guardian of Georgian Christian treasures is absolutely correct (pp. 252–3). Thus far the only securely provenanced object of early Christian Palestinian origin is a chalice in Ushguli, upper Svaneti, that bears an early Arabic inscription denoting it originated in the region of Ramallah. Stylistically and epigraphically we can tentatively date the chalice to the eighth or ninth centuries.

Finally, it should be noted that this volume has been let down by poor copy-editing. There are an unacceptable number of grammatical and spelling errors. Additionally, in some passages the syntax is so convoluted that the reader must re-read to try and gauge the meaning of the sentence. These issues should have been picked up in production and it is a shame that this issue detracts from what is otherwise a useful book that is likely to become the standard work in its field.

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VAZHA PSHAVELA:

Unveiling Vazha Pshavela: A Dozen Poems by Vazha, with Stories and Artworks Inspired by Him.

Translated by Donald Rayfield, with illustrations by Manana Antelidze, Ana Kordzaia-Samadashvili, Andro Semeiko, and Leonid Semeiko. 173 pp. London: Garnett Press, 2018. ISBN 978 0 9564683 4 5.

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It is a rare occasion when a reviewer has the opportunity to comment on an outstanding work of Georgian literature in English translation. Indeed, the number of such