Materiality and Cosmology: Old Georgian Churches as Sacred, Sublime, and Secular Objects

Paul Manning
Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

Abstract Discourses about Georgian churches have since the nineteenth century treated the material quality of ‘ancientness’ associated with existing churches as being among their essential defining properties. This paper first explores how different material qualisigns of churches, including oldness and qualisigns attendant on oldness, allow churches to be interpreted as secular objects, by ordering them with theatres (as expressive of ‘civilization’), the natural landscape (expressive of an aesthetics of the sublime) or other monuments, including texts (expressive of culture). One result of such discourses is that the contemporary Orthodox Church finds it difficult to have ‘new’ churches accepted as being churches at all. These nineteenth-century discourses thus provide a context for the complex and contested reception of old and new Orthodox churches, as well as other religious structures, mountain shrines, having a more ambiguous relation with Orthodoxy.

Keywords Semiotics, materiality, churches, ruins, monuments

In the past decade since the end of socialism, the Republic of Georgia has experienced what is likely the biggest church-building campaign since Georgia’s ‘Golden Age’ during the reign of the monarch Tamar in the twelfth century. At no other time in Georgian history have so many churches been built in so short a time, so much so that the Patriarchate of Georgia claims its current campaign is in itself a ‘miracle’ (Tarashvili 2005; Tskhovrebadze 2005). These new churches stand in rather obvious contrast with existing churches. Under socialism no churches were built, and many destroyed. Those built under Tsarist rule were largely Russian Orthodox, and not Georgian Orthodox, in architectural style. The primary attribute most existing Georgian Orthodox churches have is that they are extremely old.2 Old-

Ethnos, vol. 73:3, sept. 2008 (pp. XXX–XXX)
ness becomes by association almost a necessary attribute of churches, rather than a contingent one. Several other qualities attend oldness. For example, churches are in scant supply; the ones that do exist are primarily located in places that were in former times centers of a considerable population, now mostly deserted. Most significant of all, these churches are in some state of decay, sometimes actual piles of rubble.

I take as my point of departure the way that this material quality of oldness attending existing Georgian churches, allows them to figure simultaneously in multiple different fields of cosmological significance, ranging from sacred to secular, monumental to sublime, national to religious. As I show in the first part of the paper, different discourses about churches (imperial, romantic, archaeological) from the nineteenth century onwards foregrounded the material quality of oldness of Georgian churches as being central to their cosmological significance. In the second part of the paper, I explore how this discursive heritage in the interpretation of churches represents a problem for reception of new churches, indeed, for the very interpretation of ‘church’, in the contemporary period. Because oldness is such a central feature of the existing churches of Georgia, new Georgian churches can seem to fail to be ‘churches’ at all. Rather than acting as symbols of a cosmologically transcendent order or as signs of a new miraculous spiritual rebirth of the nation, new churches can instead appear to be monuments to the fallen, corrupt moral and political order of the post-socialist Georgia that produced them. By contrast, non-Christian shrine structures in the mountains of Georgia, which if not very old, are at least ruins, can be assimilated in lay religious imagination as akin to old churches. This article, then, traces how the material qualities of Georgian churches are linked to the various cosmologies in which they figure, taking cosmology rather broadly to include social imaginaries beyond the religious, such as ‘civilization’, ‘the nation’, ‘the state’, ‘nature’, ‘corruption’ and ‘the sublime’. As material objects, Georgian churches provoke many conflicting views, which accrete like interpretive mosses and lichens over the course of centuries.

I argue that the semiotic properties of Georgian churches and the many fields of cosmological significance in which they figure, are mediated in part by this contingent conflation of potentially significant sensuous qualities, Peircean ‘qualisigns’, that is, sensuous qualities (quali-) that are potentially significant (-signs) (Munn 1986; Keane 2003; Meneley 2007; Manning & Uplisashvili 2007). Since churches have a material as well as cosmological dimension, their material embodiment necessarily ‘bundles’ together both
qualisigns that are religiously significant and those that are not (the term ‘bundling’ is taken from Keane 2003:414). This co-presence of qualisigns in a single material object of the church can make contingent qualisigns, oldness, as important as the seemingly necessary qualisigns, sacredness. At the same time, this bundling of qualisigns makes the same object potentially able to function in multiple fields of significance: as a church, a monument, a ruin. As Keane notes, ‘qualisigns bundled together in any object will shift in their relative value, utility, and relevance across contexts’ (2003:414). By being ordered with or grouped with other kinds of material objects – theatres, new churches, ruins, texts, mountains – the different ‘bundled’ qualisigns of the old church will change significance, enter in different interpretative orders: like a theatre, a sign of civilization; like a new church, sacred; like a ruin or a mountain landscape, sublime; like an epic poem, a carrier of national culture. In some instances, this multiple membership of a single material object in multiple fields of classification and significance becomes a resource, a material hybrid which mediates between multiple systems of classification; at other times, it becomes a problem, a hybrid object that must be purged or purified of its bundled sensuous qualities, sometimes discursively, sometimes materially, so that it can be assigned a single order of significance.³

For this reason, Georgian churches as material objects seem to participate in and mediate various separate orders of imputed significance; spatio-temporal qualities of transcendence are commingled with qualities of spatio-temporal immanence. As churches, as houses of God, of course, they stand as meeting grounds of the invisible sacred cosmological order and the visible order of the everyday. As ancient buildings, antiquities, monuments of the works of the ancestors, they seem to mediate the immense temporal gap between imagined ancestors of the Georgian nation and the contemporary inhabitants of Georgia, by a kind of ‘presentification’ that makes present that which is absent (Vernant 1991:153). As ruins, however, such churches bear witness to the passage of aeons, ruins overgrown with moss and weeds attest to the triumph of natural orders over human orders, re-emphasizing the irreducible alterity and temporal distance between some golden age and the decadent present.

Ruins have always incited a reflective, lyrical, or melancholic response. People are perversely fascinated by the sight of crumbling temples, of abandoned cities overgrown with shrubs, of marble heads peering out through the sand, of roads grown silent. They take a macabre pleasure in observing the evidence of human decay and the final victory of nature over civilization. Individuals through the ages have taken different lessons from this drama. Some see in ruins a cautionary tale
of the futility of greatness and the inevitability of rot… Ruins serve for them as a reminder that everything human will one day perish. For others, however, ruins represent the longevity of human creation… [They] stand as testaments of art and engineering, humanity’s defiance against the sands of the desert and of the hourglass (Jusdanis 2004:37).

The general modern view of ruins has been particularly colored by the advent of a modern form of disciplinary knowledge, archaeology, that concerns itself with these objects which are hybrids of past and present tense, purifying them of the deleterious effects of the passage of time and of nature, making them exclusively the objects of discernable human intention by bringing the past into the present. Anonymous ruins overgrown with weeds become authored monuments; they move from being objects of poetry to objects of science. As objects of archeological science, monuments are a material presentification of the past, which must be restored from the ravages of time that separate that past from the present and ‘protected from the ongoing practices of the present’ (Abu El-Haj 2003:63). In the case of archaeology, purification of material hybrids operates both discursively and materially. Archaeological discourse not only emphasizes ‘monumental’ qualisigns indexing human intentionality over the qualisigns of ruin indexing the alterity of time and nature (weeds, moss, lichen), but the material disciplinary practices of archaeology remove the qualisigns of the ruin from the monument physically:

Our view is colored by archaeology, which, in its desire to save and restore the past, transforms it into something modern. Archaeology paradoxically makes ruins look ‘unancient’: skeletal remains brought to life in sound and light shows. Scrubbed, fenced off, and scaffolded, ruins have never looked as they do now (Jusdanis 2004:37).

As I demonstrate, the ‘hybrid’ quality of churches in contemporary Georgia, and the attendant conflicts over attempts to discursively and materially ‘purify’ them and assign them to a single interpretive order, is a historical product. Through the nineteenth century churches acquired multiple layers of interpretation. Different discourses seized on specific material qualisigns of existing Georgian churches, particularly their antiquity, and by ordering them with other kinds of objects, made them representative of different transcendent cosmological grounds, legitimating different kinds of transformative cultural projects. Churches were in turn aligned with theatres as part of a narrative of civilizational progress (and decay) under Russian Imperial orthodoxy; with natural landscapes and ruins as exponents of ‘the sublime’ under Geor-
gian Romanticism; and with other historical monuments, including ‘textual monuments’ such as the twelfth-century epic poem the *Vepkhist’q’aosani* (‘the Knight in Panther’s Skin’) written by Shota Rustaveli, a contemporary of Tamar, in such emerging positivistic disciplines as archaeology, ethnography and philology. Each of these epistemic orderings had in common a presupposition that ‘oldness’ was a necessary rather than contingent quality of Georgian churches.

Such a varied history of reception, then, presents problems for the contemporary Orthodox Church. On the one hand, the very newness of churches currently being built can make them seem not to be churches at all, producing a context in which the Orthodox Church’s constitutionally guaranteed rights to define what is, and what is not, a ‘church’, are placed in question. On the other hand, such discourses contest the uniquely religious meaning of the category of church. Lastly, all Orthodox churches stand in an ambiguous relation with other non- or quasi-Orthodox Georgian mountain shrines in regions such as Pshavi, where existing shrines are sometimes grouped together in lay belief and practice with Orthodox churches under a more general category of ‘salotsavis’ (‘places of worship’). If the Orthodox Church has a constitutional monopoly over the definition, building and ownership of ‘churches’ in Georgia (Corley 2002; Papuashvili 2006), lay practice here in turn again encompasses the Orthodox Church, producing a superordinate category of religious structure part of which falls out of Church control. Interestingly, the aesthetic underlying these mountain shrines seems to be uncannily similar to the romantic discourse of the sublime. Lastly, I will show how in one region of Georgia, Pankisi Gorge, virtually all of these discourses can be shown ethnographically to be layered together in lay practice of a single Pshavian, named Gabriel.

**The Order of Civilization: Churches and Theatres**

For Russian colonizers in the nineteenth century, ruins of antique Orthodox churches, especially amongst the pagan (Pshav, Khevsur, Svan) or Muslim (Chechen, Kist) mountain peoples of the Caucasus, were hybrids of different orders, at once religious symbols and patent archeological evidence of prior Orthodox Christianity, by popular legend extended across the Caucasus under the rule of Tamar (Jersild 2002:42–7, 65–71). For the Russians, such churches were relics of the true Orthodox faith now consigned to the hands of idolaters and unbelievers. Since imperial Russian ideology represented the empire as the guardian of the Orthodox faith, such Orthodox churches represented a
clear license to *restore* these fallen pagan and Muslim tribes, along with their churches, to the Orthodox faith, hence ‘the Society for the Restoration of Orthodoxy’ was the title given to the missionary society entrusted with this task (Jersild 2002:44–7). As a result, discerning mountain dwellers, Muslim or otherwise, soon learned to blow up this sort of ruin, even as they opposed the building of new churches by the Society for the Restoration of Orthodoxy. Throughout the period of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, relics of past Christianity were destroyed to resist Russian discourses of restoration (Bell 1840, ii, 58–9), at other times to indicate adherence to Islam (Baddeley 1940, 111). New churches built by the Society, too, were sometimes destroyed or simply ignored or never used (Baddeley 1940: 183, 245).

The Russian imperial discourse of restoration was not only religious, but was part of a more general ‘civilizing mission’. Russian Orientalist archeology saw in old ruined churches licenses to build new ones, to restore the population to Orthodoxy (Jersild 2002:44–7), just as they built Italian opera buildings, theaters and libraries to restore already Christian populations to civilized society (*grazhdanstvennost’*) (Jersild 1997, 2002; Jersild & Melkadze 2002). Buildings like the Tbilisi Theater or Italian Opera buildings (built in the 1850s) and their later copies in other more benighted outposts of empire (Vladikavkaz in contemporary North Ossetia, Lenkoran in Azerbaijan) were felt in themselves to embody *grazhdanstvennost’,* and to possess a self-evident appeal to the peoples of the empire (Jersild 1997:108). In principle, Orthodox churches were no different from theaters and opera buildings in this respect, even if Italian operas and theaters stood higher on the scale of progress of citizenship than churches:

There was no contradiction for Russians in the Caucasus between the claims of Orthodoxy and civility. To be Orthodox was to be civil, just as literacy and education by definition prompted one to understand the relationship between the Orthodox faith and civil life. As late as 1866, society educators still described their task as the ‘fostering of Christianity and Russian *grazhdanstvennost’* among the mountain tribes of the Caucasus’ (Jersild 1997:109).

Architectural objects of different kinds (churches, theaters) all were ordered in terms of a single hierarchy of civilization, and in turn were thought to serve to encompass the subjects of empire into this hierarchy. The social and spatial dispersion of this hierarchy of civilization (*grazhdanstvennost’*) could be read off the sorts of buildings the Russians built for whom and where: for Muslim and pagan savages in need of Christianity, Orthodox churches;
for existing Christian populations in need of civilized society, theaters and opera buildings. In the Russian empire, the state and the church were very nearly one, and Christianity itself was just one rung on a general ladder of a civilizing progress, perceived by the Russians to be the benefit of imperial Orthodox rule.

The Order of the Sublime: Churches, Ruins and Mountains

As Georgian aristocrats came to participate alongside the Russians in Russian and European intellectual movements, beginning with Romanticism, the antique, ruined state of Georgian churches became a salient qualisign, aligning them with the aestheticized order of the natural landscape, and opposing them to new structures built by the Russians. By appropriating churches as ruins, as part of the sublime or picturesque natural landscape, which elicited a gloomy, melancholy or lyrical response, Georgian aristocrats were emphasizing their own self-consciously European lyrical subjectivity by participating alongside Russians as equals in the pan-European movement of Romanticism. This aestheticization of ruins allowed this generation of Georgian aristocrats to express their own ambivalent and contradictory situation as a colonial class, a subaltern elite, within the Russian empire (Ram & Shatirishvili 2004): virtually all the romantic poets were hereditary Georgian aristocrats who had become members of the Tsarist service nobility, all of them rising to the rank of general in the Tsarist imperial service, and yet many of them had spent time in exile for plotting against Tsar.

By appropriating the lyric sensibility, Georgian romantics established their equality to Russian romantics in matters of taste and subjectivity. At the same time, their specific formulation of aesthetic categories like ‘the sublime’ differed from that of their Russian contemporaries. The ‘geopoetics’ of the Russian ‘imperial sublime’ elides the aesthetics of the sublime into imperial ideology: ‘The Russian imperial sublime…involved two axes, a vertical axis provided in the romantic period by the alpine landscape, and a horizontal axis created by the panoramic stretch of conquered territory that was viewed from a height by the enraptured lyric subject’ (Ram & Shatirishvili 2004:13). The Russian imperial sublime, then, placed the sublime (masculine) mountains of the Caucasus, associated with the conquering, masculine Russian lyric subject (the vertical axis) in opposition to the (feminine) conquered territory of lowland Georgia, a territory which is the object of contemplation, and associated with a feminine aesthetics of the beautiful (the horizontal axis).4
The Georgian appropriation of the sublime with respect to landscape and ruins enabled them to contest this elision of aesthetic oppositions into the categories of imperial ideology. For one, there is no identification of the lyric subject with the conqueror, as in the imperial sublime (Ram & Shatirishvili 2004:11–13). Further, by associating Georgia with the aesthetics of the sublime rather than the aesthetics of the beautiful, Georgian romantics opposed Russian colonial narratives that imagined Georgia as a beautiful, but effeminate and weak Asiatic country (Layton 1994). Moreover, Georgian churches came to be redefined as secular objects (in partial opposition to the Society for the Restoration of Orthodoxy), belonging to a more general category of ‘ruins’, visible signs of the triumph of the order of nature over the order of culture, of the glorious past and gloomy, melancholy reflections of the degraded present. This melancholy narrative of national cultural decline expressed in the Georgian sublime also implicitly opposed the Russian imperial discourse of civilizational progress. Lastly, the alignment of ruins with the order of nature and aeons produces a sense in which the conquered locality (identified with nature) encompasses and overcomes the transient historical agency of the imperial conqueror.

In the earliest forms of the Georgian sublime, such the poetry of romantic poet Aleksandre Chavchavadze (1786–1846), the sense of melancholy produced by such ruins is a universalizing meditation on the ruin as a testament of time and nature’s triumph over human agency, the ruin as a hybrid of nature and culture, and also a hybrid of objective materiality and subjective response. Chavchavadze’s poem Gogcha (1841) illustrates a new set of lyrical aesthetic responses to ruins as part of a romantic landscape (Lake Sevan in contemporary Armenia). The poem moves from the natural landscape of the lake to the ruins on its shores, to the feelings it engenders in the viewer. The still pure waters of wide lake of Gogcha ‘reflect the azure skies and the green mountains’

But ruins clothe its unhemmed shores,
Funereal remnants of once stately buildings,
Where once apparently flourished magnificent wide cities
And where today we see only owls and traces.5

The opposition and interpenetration of the natural and cultural features of the landscape provokes a general lyrical response of melancholy in the viewer. This lyric subject is imagined as universal class (‘the viewer’), neither identified with the writer (the lyric ‘I’), nor even more generally with Georgians,
and certainly not with the conquering romantic lyric subject of the Russian imperial sublime (Ram & Shatirishvili 2004:11–13).

Desolation, silence, nothingness
Allows the viewer to take part in their grief.
They fill the eyes and heart of a man with sadness,
Involuntarily, this feeling is expressed with a groan.

Neither the viewer nor the ruins are specifically Georgian. This is not a melancholic meditation on past glories of Georgia (the ruins in question are in any case in contemporary Armenia), rather, they are a prophecy for all mortals: ‘Lo, here we see a portrait of our own futures’. The ruins, rebuilt and repopulated in the viewer’s imagination, then revert to nature, ancient moss-covered churches becoming the haunts of wild beasts and prey. In the closing of the poem, nature moves from the gloomy aesthetics of the sublime to the happy aesthetics of the beautiful, ruins adorned by clear rippling streams with flowery banks in the moonlight.

As this poem illustrates, in the aesthetics of the Georgian sublime, ruins are ordered with natural features of the landscape, and not, as with the Russian discourse of civilization, with other objects of the human order like theaters. Such an ordering was found first and foremost in the romantic aestheticization of the Caucasus mountains that often framed these old churches as a backdrop:

Quintessentially a place of ‘terror and grandeur’, the Caucasus would furnish the Russian imagination with a topography of the sublime, much as the Swiss Alps had functioned for preromantic and romantic verse in Europe. The alpine sublime selectively dwelt on those aspects of the mountain scenery that inspired awe or fear: soaring heights and plunging depths, sudden avalanches and torrential cascade, snow-capped peaks and lush green valleys (Ram & Shatirishvili 2004:10).

In Pan-European aesthetic discourse, the qualisigns diagnostic of the sublime, emphasizing grandeur, vastness, ‘wild, barren, savage and “frowning” landscapes’ are opposed to the qualisigns of beauty emphasizing “cultivated, fertile, gentle and smiling” landscapes’ (Chard 1999:110). These aestheticized spatial qualities are in turn aligned with gendered qualities of person, ‘the sublime with the masculine and the beautiful with the feminine’ (Chard 1999:117–18). Thus, Russian romantics like Pushkin saw the masculine sublime primarily in the gloomy crags and defiles of the Caucasus Mountains (home of fierce, warlike people like the Chechens), opposed to the feminized, Orientalized aesthetics of the beautiful that typified the Georgian plains (Layton 1997):
The instantaneous transition from the awesome Caucasus to lovely Georgia is enchanting. The air of the South starts to waft over the traveler. From the height of Mount Gut the Kaishaur valley opens up with its inhabited cliffs, its orchards, and its bright Aragva, which winds like a silver ribbon — and all this in a reduced scale, at the bottom of a three-verst-high precipice along which the dangerous road goes... Georgia begins here. Bright valleys watered by the merry Aragva replaced the gloomy gorges and the awesome Terek. Instead of bare cliffs I saw green mountains and fruit trees around me. Aqueducts give evidence of the presence of civilization (Pushkin 1998:333 [1835]).

By contrast, Georgian Romantics like Chavchavadze rendered their national space as 'sublime' by erasing the distinction between the masculine sublimity of the Caucasus and feminine beauty of Georgia (Manning 2004), even as they erased the identification of the Caucasus with the (conquering, European) masculine subject, and Georgia with the (conquered, Asiatic) feminine object, of lyric contemplation (Ram & Shatirishvili 2004).

The quintessential scene embodying this new aesthetic was the ‘keepsake view’ for European, Russian and later Georgian travelers are found in the image of Mount Kazbek, where the silent majesty of the mountain (and associated ruins in the foreground and on the ruined church on the mountainside to the left) and the restless roar of the Terek river stand in turn as discrete sublime elements of grandeur and terror, respectively (Manning 2004):

![Image of Mount Kazbek](image)

*Fig. 1. The situation of the post-station [at Kazbek] has no beauty except when the great mountain is unveiled. Then the picture seen from the windows will not easily be forgotten. Again and again it has been painted and photographed: it is met with in every book of travel, even in the shop windows of St. Petersburg. It is the keepsake view – the Jungfrau from Interlaken – of the Caucasus (Freshfield 1896:87).*

Sublime mountain vistas would be incomplete without mysterious ruins lurking somewhere in the foreground. In the travel notebook of romantic poet Grigol Orbeliani (1803–1884), the intermingled sublimity and beauty of
this well-known picturesque mountain landscape is likewise complemented by reference to an old church, the Temple of Lomisi.

The night was beautiful. The sun took cover behind the mountains and its last fiery rays lit up the snowy mountains with a thousand colors. The pure air brought the fragrances of flowers. Under my feet the Aragvi writhed like a white thread in a far away chasm and its roar was heard monstrously. The awful mountains, raised up on top of one another to the sky, were silent with glory. I sat on a cliff, overhanging a chasm, and I gazed at the river, rushing down from the mountains and lost in gorges... From the East, to my left, the moon rose in brilliance; then, when the beautiful evening star cast light pleasantly on the Temple of Lomisi to the West – the hand of man is too weak to describe the beauty of glorious nature – an omnipotence of creativity is impressed on these mountains, with the sight of which the mind of man is amazed, is stirred, and is lost. I was alone, my heart filled with reverence and unbidden I bent my knees, I outstretched my hands and I turned my eyes skyward. My tongue couldn’t pronounce a single word, but never have I prayed so zealously and so fervently as at that time (G. Orbeliani 1959 (Journey from my Tbilisi to Petersburgh c. 1831–1839):158).

Descriptions such as these suggest a transference of the attitude of worship to natural objects (for example, Mount Kazbek), but also a new set of primarily secular aesthetic responses with respect to Orthodox places of worship (for example, the ruined Temple of Lomisi), which now were assimilated to, and found embedded in, this sublime natural order.

But sublime ruins are not only defined at the uncanny intersection of nature and culture, they can also be defined by the vast temporal alterity of the human agencies that produced them. The great ancientness of these churches provokes a second, more particular kind of melancholy, the opposition between the glorious past of Georgia and its fallen, dilapidated present. Most such churches are attributed in popular belief to the twelfth-century queen of Georgia, so-called ‘King Tamar’ (Orbeliani 1959:160; also e.g. Baddeley 1940:220). This popular tradition of attribution of all ruins to a single feminine regal agency, Tamar, allows Orbeliani to imbue these melancholy ruins with a national significance, nostalgic reminders of a quondam greatness when Georgia had a large empire. But the fact that ‘King Tamar’ was a woman allowed these poets to inhabit these ruins with a spectral presence of a feminine other, which, by ‘invoking an established elision between the personal and the feminine, makes the vestige of antiquity more easily transportable into a private domain of emotional intimacy’ (Chard 1999:128).
As Chard suggests, such feminine hauntings, like ‘moonlight and weeds’, are qualisigns characteristic of the romantic ruin, qualisigns which facilitate a ‘potentially dangerous and destabilizing’ subjective confrontation with alterity (Chard 1999a:134, Chard 1999: chapter 3), allowing a ruin to ‘become a medium for the exploration of subjectivity’ (Edwards 1999:16). However, not all feminine hauntings are alike. Russian romantic poets like Lermontov (1814–1841) also associated ruins in the mountains of Georgia with haunting female presences. However, Lermontov’s spectral female presences, all going under the name of Tamara, seemed to incarnate the Russian Orientalist view of Georgia as an oriental woman, embodying a peculiar Orientalist dualism that made the Tamara of one poem (The Demon) a passive beauty enslaved by a demon, in another (Tamara) a demonic sensual figure who made men her slaves (Layton 1994:200–3).

In contrast, Georgian romantics would praise a masculinized ‘King Tamar’ as a builder of churches, understood as an act of empire-building and enlightenment, in effect paralleling, preceding and encompassing the contemporary efforts of the Russians to do the same. Reflecting on an icon of Tamar in the abandoned church of Betania (Orbeliani 1877), Orbeliani assumes a position similar to one of worship before a holy icon (and Tamar’s image in this church is assuredly an icon): ‘I behold your holy image… with awe, with reverence.’ But again, as with Mount Kazbek above, here worship is secular, lyrical. The image and the church are melancholy reminders, remnants of her works, visible signs of the fallen state of the country. All that remains of past glories of Tamar’s time are ‘a ruined temple in a deserted forest, unreachable by road, where the face of a king, of Tamar the Great, appears to decorate an old wall.’

By the 1870s, Georgian romantics had made ancient churches into secular objects that were already becoming hybrids of the romantic discourse of ruins (eliciting a subjective lyric response) and a newer archaeological discourse that treats churches as historical monuments (eliciting a historical, memorial response). As monuments, these old Georgian churches stood in opposition to the new Russian ones as icons of differences in monumental time, in which the temporality of Georgian orthodoxy and Georgian empire encompasses that of Russian Orthodoxy and Russian empire by an order of aeons. Vakhtang Orbeliani’s (1812-1890) poem ‘Two Buildings’ from the same period (1881) contrasts a contemporary (Russian) freshly painted building to an old Georgian one from the period of Tamar, which is encrusted with weeds. The first building has weak walls which are easily destroyed, and even its ruins
will quickly disappear into the earth: ‘it has no past, nor will it have a future’. The second one, including a ‘holy church’, while abandoned and overgrown with weeds, has no fear of the flow of time, ‘it stands heroically, built by the hands of heroes’, and ‘if someday its walls are destroyed, its remnants (shtenni) will remain forever’, ‘because a great past has a great future.’

The Order of Monuments: Churches and Texts

In late romantic poems we already see signs that old churches are moving from the aesthetic order of ruins to the epistemic order of monuments, from the subjective lyricism of romantic poetry to the dispassionate disciplinary empiricism of Georgian archaeology, from the period of ‘romanticism’ to the period of ‘realism’ (Lotman 1984:142; Manning 2004). Romantic ruins are mysterious, illegible: archaeological positivism would replace this mystery with historical knowledge as surely as it would remove the moss from the façade to read the inscriptions beneath (Edwards 1999:16). The new archaeological understanding assimilated old churches to the category of monuments (dzegli), which included verbal texts as well as other secular buildings like fortresses, all of which were felt to be traces (k’vali) or remnants (nashti) of a once great Georgian civilization, to be monuments and witnesses of the culture of a Georgian nation (e.g. Zemokartleli 1875:1). Each
kind of monument (architectural, textual, customary, oral) would become the object of a corresponding emergent academic discipline (archaeology, philology, ethnography and folklore), both within Imperial academies and at the amateur level in the Georgian popular press. Each emerging discipline (archaeology, ethnography, folklore, philology) constituted itself with respect to a specific sort of empirical object, but were understood to be homologous in methodology and aim (compare Van der Veer 2001: chapter 5). The work of archaeology in piecing together the scattered ruins of the nation (associated with rulers like Tamar) were likened to the philological work of reconstructing from various existing manuscripts a singular, authoritative Ur-text of the national epic poem (associated with a contemporary of Tamar, the poet Shota Rustaveli). All these new disciplines were also united in having a single transcendent object, they were all disciplines of ‘the nation’. Accordingly, each disciplinary object, each ‘monument’, could be assigned, once and for all, on the basis of original authorship, to exactly one such transcendent historical national unity.

These changes in the epistemic order occurred around the same time of a major historical event, the Russian conquest of territories of Ottoman Georgia in 1877–78. These territories had formed the centre of Tamar’s empire in the twelfth century, but had been under Ottoman rule for over two centuries. Ottoman Georgia became the site of a major current of irredentist fantasy of the cultural and political reunification of these ‘long separated brothers’, Ottoman and Russian Georgia. In the period leading up to the war, and in the immediate aftermath, Russian Imperial spies and archaeologists (all of them Georgians), and Georgian newspaper correspondents, respectively, scoured the countryside of Ottoman Georgia, finding little that was Georgian there other than ruins of churches. Even if the people often no longer resembled Georgians in language and especially religion, the ruined churches that dotted the landscape were signs that the land itself, if not the people, belonged to Georgians.

With the ‘archaeologization’ of churches, the interpretive custody of old churches passed by slow degrees from Orthodoxy to the Nation, from religious sites of worship of God to secular monuments of the nation. Georgian travelers in Ottoman Georgia continually drew attention to the nature and quality of ruins, particularly of churches, always searching for tell-tale inscriptions that would permit identifying them as ‘Georgian’, but rarely tarrying as their forebears might have done to emit a lyric groan or melancholy sigh. Since local Georgians were usually Muslims, these churches had ceased to
be Georgian religious objects, and were now freely appropriable as secular objects belonging to the Georgian nation. Georgian travelers worried that the local Muslim population would destroy these ruins to use the old stones for building purposes. They were even more scandalized that some such churches were being appropriated by the local Christian populace as Armenian Apostolic churches, often accusing the local Armenian population of intentionally hiding or defacing Georgian inscriptions (e.g. Bakradze 1987[1878]:41). Every church was scoured for signs of Georgian inscriptions that would establish once and for all that a given church was part of the Georgian, and not Armenian, religious, and therefore national, patrimony.

In this discourse, the appropriation of ruins of churches was strongly textualized, ruins were seldom illustrated as parts of sublime landscapes, but were more often transcribed as textual objects. Bakaradze’s seminal Archaeological Journey to Guria and Adjara (published in Russian in 1978, describing a journey to Ottoman Georgia that took place in 1873), shows a strongly textualizing approach to monuments. The only illustrations of churches in his book are a paltry few drawn by Giorgi Qazbegi (1839–1921) during an earlier espionage mission in Ottoman lands (published in 1875), while his own illustrations, numbering over a hundred, are all transcriptions or illustrations of inscriptions found on these churches. This ‘textualizing’ shift is registered even in late romantic poetry from the period. Vakhtang Orbeliani’s poem ‘There is a place’ (Aris Adgili…) (Orbeliani 1879) about Gelati Monastery, the burial place of Tamar, begins with a description that otherwise shows all the typical affect-laden qualisigns of the romantic ruin, the sublime and deserted surrounding landscape, the moonlight, and especially ‘the moss of a thousand years’ that decorates it. However, the ruin is first of all a monumental text: ‘Its walls… are a notebook’ (amis k’edeli… aris raveuli), that tell the tales of thousands of years, of its glorious builders, specifically, of Tamar.

Just as the architectural landscape is read as monumental text, textual monuments are read into the landscape. Travelers to Ottoman Georgia make the strange Ottoman Georgian landscape familiar by seeing in it illustrations of passages from the epic poem by Rustaveli: one traveler thinks to see in the Ottoman Georgian city of Batumi a fabled city from Rustaveli’s poem (N___dze 1879:3); another, daydreaming on a boat floating down the Ch’orokhi river in Ottoman Georgia, thinks himself to be ‘in the land described by Rustaveli’ (Bavreli 1879:62). The two kinds of monuments, ruins and texts move from metaphoric to metonymic parallelism: Ottoman Georgian churches are themselves searched for signs of texts, inscriptions, and old books
in Georgian. At the same time, parts of the Ottoman Georgian landscape are searched for landscapes that Rustaveli had in mind when writing his epic poem. The ruins authored by King Tamar and the epic poem authored by Rustaveli become two series of monuments, architectural and literary, that, taken in tandem, allow the imagining of Georgia, an ancient Georgia whose center was Ottoman Georgia.

To further reinforce this metonymic alignment of the archaeological and philological orders of monuments, the first deluxe illustrated print edition of Rustaveli’s epic poem (Kartvelishvili 1888) made this connection explicit by having the decorative borders and capitals of this textual monument be drawn from the decorative reliefs found in old churches. As the introduction to the edition itself notes: ‘Almost every monastery and fortress – Mtskheta, Uplistsikhe, Betania, Kutaisi, Gelati, Sapara, Kabeni, Akhtali, Pitareti, Samtavisi, Ateni – has its part, has imprinted its mark (k’vali), in this book’ (Kartvelishvili 1888:325). On this simple, decorative level, this text stands as a kind of print microcosm of the national macrocosm. Here the monumental text contains within it parts (ts’ili) and marks or traces (k’vali) of the order of architectural monuments which mark the historical territory of Georgia, thus linking together the order of circulatory textual monuments (the first print edition of the poem) with the immovable order of archeological monuments as an intertextual series.

The assimilation of churches to the quasi-textual order of the ‘monument’ was also a decisive move to transform them into objects of a secular intelligentsia discourse. On the eve of conquest, the intelligentsia project for Ottoman Georgia was an explicitly secular one, which emphasized only putative commonalities (a common culture and language) between Russian Georgians and Ottoman Georgians, ignoring or downplaying the religious divide between them as Christians and Muslims. This approach was in explicit opposition to state-sponsored programs of proselytism as represented by the Society for the Restoration of Orthodoxy (see above). The assimilation of churches to the authorship of the monarch Tamar alongside the secular epic poem by her contemporary Rustaveli represented, in effect, a claim by the secular Georgian intelligentsia for authority over these monuments and their interpretation. As time goes on, such intelligentsia discourses about churches as monuments of culture become ever more explicitly critical of the Russian Orthodox Church. Lastly, the fact that these old churches were ruined temples in distant lands deserted by Georgians made visits to them into pilgrimages as well as expeditions. Starting with the travelers of the 1870s, ‘archaeological
excursions’ and ‘archaeological descriptions’ become a distinct genre within the broader category of travel letters, and by the 1890s churches had become exemplary subjects for the nascent social practice of amateur photography.\textsuperscript{7} One Georgian travel writer and amateur photographer summarized his own motives for traveling to Ottoman Georgia that,

\begin{quote}
The reason for our travel was to inspect and photograph, along with inscriptions, old remains (\textit{nashtebi}), signs (\textit{nishnebi}) of a strong and lively life of Georgia that once existed here. Lo, he who wishes to feel the strength of the Georgians in the past must travel to these places (Alanishvili 1893).
\end{quote}

Such photographs of old churches today adorn billboards throughout Tbilisi, accompanied by the ubiquitous legend ‘our past is our treasury’, defining churches as the archaeological patrimony of the nation. Churches allow a real, existential, indexical encounter with the national past, whether mediated through such indirect indexical modalities as the photographic image, or direct ones, face to face encounters: Scientific expeditions to these ruins become national pilgrimages. These pilgrimages, at once sacred and secular, Orthodox and National, beginning with the discovery of Ottoman Georgia, continue today as a social practice in Georgia (compare Shanks 2007 [1992] on the ‘visit’ as a modality of archaeological experience). After all, wherever you might want to go on a school field trip, excursion or scientific expedition in Georgia, an old ruined church will be somewhere nearby.

**New Churches: Purification and Corruption**

Such are the discourses (civilizational, aesthetic, archeological) received from the Tsarist period, whose only unifying feature, perhaps, is that they defined churches as having the essential feature of being \textit{old}. But everywhere one looks in contemporary Georgia, \textit{new} Orthodox churches are springing up all over the place. More churches have been built in Georgia in the last fifteen years than any time in history. Of course, these are almost all Georgian Orthodox churches, because as a result of a concordat of 2002 between the Georgian church and the Georgian state, no one else is allowed to build churches or even name anything a ‘church’. The Orthodox Church has proclaimed this church building campaign as a miracle, the will of God, and yet at the same time their rhetoric assimilates tones of national unity alongside the spiritual aims of praising God: ‘The time of building has come. Our people again return to their roots, but at this time we must build a temple in praise of God, which will unite the Georgian people’ (Asatiani 2005).
This temple that will ‘unite the Georgian people’ is the Trinity (Sameba) Cathedral in Tbilisi, dominating the landscape, is the largest Georgian Orthodox church ever built. Everything about the material form of this church is intended to underpin its centrality as an Orthodox sacred site, even in spite of its novelty. This structure has a traditional design. It differs from existing churches primarily in its immense proportions. Orthodoxy, of course, is a branch of Christianity that suppresses all signs of novelty, and the design of the church explicitly reflects this, using old orthodox architectural techniques:

Often the question is heard: Why do they build temples with old, and not new, contemporary architecture? This is not correct, because Orthodoxy (Martmadi-debloba) is an Orthodox (Ortodaksaluri) religion and it in itself carries its original, traditional form [sc. unchanged] … It is much easier to think up something absolutely new and create it, than build a new church on the model of the old and traditional. How is it possible to convey a hymn with pop music, it could never be a sign carrier of [the register of] hymns. So says the architect Archil Mindiashvili (Asatiani 2005).

Moreover, invisible to the naked eye, the church incorporates sacra, rocks and earth, from the Holy Land as well as from all places associated with the narrative of the Georgian conversion to Christianity, and from various monasteries and graves. It even incorporates a fragment of the ancient throne of Georgia and an acheiropoeton, a sacred object not made by human hands, a natural stone formation in the form of a cross discovered in the mountains of Georgia (Asatiani 2005). The material structure of the Church of the Trinity incarnates itself as a center of Orthodoxy and as center of the Nation, by incorporating sacred fragments and relics from holy sites of the Nation which are ennobled by their proximity to relics from the Holy Land.

The official Orthodox narrative has much to say about the place of the Church of the Trinity as the crown jewel in the church-building campaign of Georgia. But even if the Church can guarantee the funds to build new churches, it cannot determine with finality the significance that this and other new churches will have. Many Georgians see these new churches as not reflecting a miraculous spiritual renewal, but rather a materialistic degradation of Georgia. Regardless of the opinions of the populace about the Orthodox Church in general, each individual new church can provoke a new crisis of the relation of spiritual and material, reflecting not the purification and deification of the material world, theosis, but rather the degradation and corruption of the spiritual world.
Materiality and Cosmology

First of all, simply because the new churches are not old, they seem very unlike ‘real’ churches, lacking all the attributes of the sublime that Georgians have learned to associate with ‘the countless old, original and grandiose churches and monasteries’ in Georgia. But the most obvious contradiction between the transcendent value of the Orthodox church and its gross materiality as a building is, how, in a country that is so very poor, can so many and such large churches be erected in such a short time? And not just how, but why? Is this any time to be wasting money on religion, when people are starving? So far from being a sign of the purification of Georgia, fortresses erected against the devil, for some these churches become a sign of corruption. How else could so many churches be erected in such a poor country, if not with stolen money, bribes, and why are all these churches erected where rich people live? Here it is not so much the actual newness of the church building, as the complex moral teleology of material exchange in which it is embedded: churches built with the wrong means, stolen money, the money of corruption, and built for the wrong ends, honoring dead people rather than charity for living people or honoring God, cannot in themselves be buildings of religious significance. One informant outlined the contradiction as follows:

Today Georgia finds itself in the direst situation. Never have I seen so many beggars, so many people with their hands outstretched in Georgia. Georgia has such fertile soil, that it is not possible for beggars to exist here. Go around in the streets, in the streets of the capital and there are so many people with hands outstretched, I’m not even talking about gypsies anymore. There are more Georgian beggars than Gypsies, aren’t there? … Today’s religious (sasuliero) and secular (saero) authorities only want to build these pointless, big churches … For example, let’s take the church of the Trinity, which is being built in Avlabar. The sum of so many millions was thrown into its building, but the people are in need and reduced to the state of beggars. The church has such power and significance, that it could lead the people out of this complex situation, that is, from the difficulties. But it does nothing principled. [The prestigious neighborhood of] Vake is being built up with churches, isn’t it? These churches have multiplied like mushrooms, especially in Vake. The people who are building these churches are all those whose brother, or wife, or sister and so on have died, the multitude of churches that have appeared in Vake, when I look at them, I am ashamed. Today a church no longer has a religious significance.

And yet, even if, as many say, the new churches are built with the money of corruption, even if they represent a misdirection of material resources of an impoverished country, or are built to honor people, and not God, and even if they lack the qualisigns associated with ‘old’ churches, they have largely
become accepted as objects of pieties associated with churches. Many Orthodox Georgians now cross themselves not only when entering, but also when passing, any church. Drivers take both hands off the wheels of their cars to engage in this now pervasive public expression of piety. Not just actual churches, but sometimes even when passing a photographic image of a church (such as those that adorn billboards discussed above). The new churches are associated by these pieties with the old. These are buildings where the work of purification, separating the order of ruins and monuments from the order of churches, is already done.

**Shrines and Churches: The Pshavian Sublime**

There is one part of Georgia where the existing monumental order of Georgianness cannot easily be subsumed under Orthodoxy: this is in the mountains of Georgia, the very birthplace of the Caucasian sublime. By the 1880s ethnography and folklore had replaced archaeology as the privileged disciplines of the nation, accordingly, attention shifted northwards from the mute archaeological monuments of Ottoman Georgia to the ‘living museum’ of Georgianness represented by the mountains of Georgia and mountain-dwelling groups like the Khevsurs and the Pshavians. These groups quickly were established as the quintessential sublime object of Georgian folkloric and ethnographic discourses. In a very short time they moved from being considered peripheral savages to being the authentic bearers of Georgian national traditions. In these mountain regions, isolated and poor in archeological remnant, the monuments of interest were primarily verbal ones, poetry, traditions (Manning 2004, 2006, 2007; Manning & Uplisashvili 2007).

These mountain regions of Pshav-Khevsureti are not rich in ancient monuments; most of the monuments there were built by the Pshav-Khevsurs themselves (Tuite 2002). The Pshav-Khevsur religious cult is strongly connected to cultic sites called *khatebi* (literally ‘icons’) and assorted cult buildings in general called *salotsavebi* (‘places for prayer’, in Pshavian reckoning Christian churches and Pshavian cultic sites alike are reckoned as belonging to this general class of structures) and *nishebi*. Each settlement has its own cultic site, often at some distance from the settlement in the woods, usually at a higher elevation. These sites are each connected with a specific patron, a ‘child of god’ (*khutisshvili*), associated with strong notions of ritual purity attainable only by men, and the Pshav-Khevsurs, though never having had any feudal overlords in fact, in general imagine themselves to be ‘serfs’ (*qmebi*) of these otherworldly ‘lords’ (Tuite 2002).
On one level, these Pshavian shrines stand opposed to Orthodox churches. Shrine practices are overseen by a local shrine officiant (*khevisberi*), while churches are in general overseen by Orthodox priests. Since the nineteenth century shrine practices have been seen as at best a debased form of Orthodoxy, and at worst actual idolatry. Inasmuch as the religion of the mountains is traditionally aniconic, no cult of images, much less idols, attends structures which are themselves called ‘icons’ and ‘crosses’. Sometimes this charge of idolatry (*k’erp’tavq’aniscema*) was amended to what could be called ‘ruin-olatry’ or ‘cairn-olatry’ (*q’ore-tavq’aniscema*, ‘worship of piles of rocks’) (Manning 2006). On the other hand, a countervailing tendency in more contemporary popular discourse, especially amongst Pshavians I have interviewed, uses a broader term, *salotsavi*, ‘place for prayer’, to cover both Orthodox churches and mountain shrines, which are treated as complementary forms, locations for a single practice, *lotsva* ‘prayer’. In many ways, such a definition accords well with the kind of definition of a ‘place for prayer’ I have heard among plains Georgians, one of whom defined a *salotsavi* as a place ‘where stone has been placed on stone, where a candle has been lit’.

For Russo-Georgian discourses of the Society of Restoration of Orthodoxy, the two orders of building were clearly opposed as orthodoxy to idolatry, even if individual priests seemed to have realized the need for an accommodation of local beliefs and practices. For Georgian intelligentsia, two options remain available: one to foreground their shared *Georgianness*, a secularizing solution that locates the unity in national tradition, ignoring the obvious fact that many shrine practices are shared with other non-Georgian and non-Christian populations throughout this portion of the Caucasus, the other to emphasize similarities between them on the religious plane of lay religious practice.

In material terms, a traditional mountaineer shrine in regions like Pshavi and Khevsureti is, at first glance, quite unlike an Orthodox church of the plains. In these regions, in contrast to most of Georgia, there are few old churches to attribute to Tamar, the whole region ‘appears as a vast blank on the Georgian architectural map’ (Tuite 2002:28). That is not to say that there are not ruins. While some ruins are considered to be sacred (see below), other kinds of ruins are attributed to agency of the *devi*, pre-human demonic others whose destruction at the hands of shrine divinities, *xvtisshvilebi*, is celebrated in mythic cycles (Baddeley 1940:180). In Pshavi and Khevsureti, those old ruins are attributed to the *devi* which are characterized by stones of cyclopean (‘coffin-sized’) size and the superior craftsmanship involved,
fittingly for a prehuman race who are imagined as being the source of many forms of craftsmanship (especially iron-working). By contrast, sacred shrines are composed of much smaller stones and a much lower level of craftsmanship (Ochiauri 1967:23–5).

The appropriation of spaces for humans from the devi (whose former inhabitance is marked by the cyclopean ruins) by these shrine divinities is marked by the shrine itself. Throughout the North Caucasus, those shrines that are not located in older churches often are ruins themselves, ‘not much more than a heap of stones’ (Baddeley 1940:176). Accordingly, some Georgian writers often took the apparent ruin of the Pshavian shrine as being evidence of a prior ruined church. The Pshavian poet Vazha Pshavela, seeking to diminish the distance between Pshavian religion and Orthodoxy by citing parallelisms in lay practice between what some at the time saw as Pshavian idolatry and Georgian Orthodoxy, notes that ‘the khatis of Pshav-Khevsureti only take the form of old ruins, and it is difficult to know, what these are ruins of. We must consider them the remnants of churches’ (Vazha-Pshavela 1961[1914]:311).

Physically, the format of a mountaineer shrine begins with the central point of the shrine, the holy of holies, usually a stone tower, indexically marking the point where the Khvtisshvili came to earth, the k’vrivi (Kiknadze 1996:12–19, Tuite 2002:29). The physical qualities of the k’vrivi stand metaphorically for its moral ones. The word k’vrivi is related to standard Georgian mk’vrivi ‘dense, solid, firm, hard.’ It also conveys a sense of lacking interior spaces, hollows and cavities (Kiknadze 1996:13). In contrast to a church, entrance to the k’vrivi is forbidden, partly because of its exceptional sacrality, partly for the physical reason that it is often a building with no interior. ‘Its physical impenetrability is a metaphor for its moral prohibitedness’ (Kiknadze 1996:13). But simple material inaccessibility is not required, any forbidden, taboo, space is a k’vrivi in this sense, whether there is a structure or not (Kiknadze 1996:13). Ruins that have been abandoned by human hands, overgrown with weeds, announce themselves as k’vrivi spaces: ‘a house or a fortress abandoned by people becomes a ruin, but it does not return to nature, it does not return to chaos with respect to human culture, rather, its being is raised to a higher level’ (Kiknadze 1996:19). Such ruins attest not to a melancholy retreat of culture before nature, but rather to the strength of the hand of the divinity that preserves them in the absence of human hands, that is powerful enough to appropriate spaces from humans and demons (devis) alike, that makes them strong (k’vrivi) (Kiknadze 1996:19).
This structure surrounded by a sacred space marked by a small wall within which exceptional taboos relation to ritual purity prevail (Tuite 2002; Tuite & Bukhrashvili 1999), some so sacred that the blood of sacrifice can only be communicated to the shrine by means of blood-soaked snowballs! (Kiknadze 1996:13).

The rest of the buildings that compose the shrine complex, radiating out from the k’vrivi in a complex spectrum of degrees of ritual impurity, are themselves separated by another low wall from the increasingly impure spaces without. The physical and moral relations, internally between shrine spaces and externally between shrine spaces and other more profane spaces, produce a radial cosmological diagram of ontology, spatially classifying entities based on their indexical degree of purity or participation in divinity (natsiliani ‘having a part of’ divinity) or impurity (‘mixedness’ mireuli, narevi), and therefore their relative access to shrine spaces with similar properties, ranging from divinities (khvtisshvilis), pure men, impure men, women, impure (e.g. menstruating) women, demons (devis) (for details see Tuite 2002; Tuite & Bukhrashvili 1999).
The Pshav-Khevsur shrine, while certainly a ruin, is very difficult to ‘see’ as being anything like a church, and yet, it can also be seen as being an Orthodox church that has been extroverted, literally turned inside out. On the one hand, the *k’vrivi* is the opposite of church in being a building with no interior, it is so sacred that it is difficult to approach and impossible to enter. On the other, the whole complex is in effect the contents of an Orthodox church spilled out onto the ground, albeit with all iconic representations removed, yet with complex distinctions of ritual access that parallel those marked by exterior and interior walls within and outside an Orthodox church. However, the church necessarily stands as an integral object apart from and in opposition to its surroundings, natural or otherwise, while the shrine incorporates these surroundings, often being located in a grove which is, in effect, part of the shrine (Kiknadze 2007:101). The contrast, both religious and aesthetic, between the two forms of *salotsavi* was noted early by an ethnographer of the Pshavians. The nineteenth-century ethnographer Khizanishvili strongly contrasts the way an Orthodox *salotsavi* opposes the building as an integral object to a relatively irrelevant context, while in the Pshavian *salotsavi* the natural context takes precedence over the building:

In general mountain people and especially Pshavians have built their *salotsavis* in pretty, eye-catching, pleasant places. We Kartlians of the flatland pay the most attention to the beauty and attractiveness of the building of the *salotsavi* and the place it is situated in we often treat as irrelevant, it doesn’t matter, where the temple (*tadzari*) is, as long as the building is good and pretty … The Pshavian thinks and behaves completely differently. He is for the time being an unsullied child of nature and finds beauty also in nature and not in the artifice of the hand of man; for that reason too the spatial situation of the *salotsavis* of the Pshavs attracts the eyes of a man with its own beauty and prettiness without our knowing it … The [shrine] building itself doesn’t attract our eyes in any way and reminds us of an ordinary Pshavian house (Khizanashvili 1940:97).

Even more so, in the case of many Pshavian shrines the building itself is little more than a ruin, developing a contrast between an indifferently built shrine that either is a ruin in itself, or was never built to be much more than a ruin, the accent being more on the place than the building:

A *Khati* is a place of worship (*salotsavi*) and this *salotsavi* consists of a sacred place, where you see a simply built stone wall [or cairn, Georgian *q’ore*], which in no respect resembles a temple (*saq’dari*) of our sort. In the *salotsavi* you will
never see a real icon (*khati*). Often you won’t even encounter a purposely built wall – the ruins of a wall represent the building of the *khati*… Only in its spatial disposition does the *khati* attract the attention of the onlooker: most *khatis* are built in a pretty place high in the mountains and surrounded by high trees (Khidzhanashvili 1940:20–21).

These three features, then, perhaps, go together to form a view of the Pshavian religious structures as embodying a quasi-sublime aesthetic, the primitive sublime of the ‘unsullied child of nature’ who is at the very same time the keeper of the sublime traditions of Georgian *culture*, that could be seen as *uncannily* like the sublime of the Georgian romantics: (1) the integration or synthesis of nature and culture, everywhere a shrine involving both orders, (2) the aestheticization of natural context (specifically groves) as being an integral component of the shrine complex, and (3) the almost deliberate indifference to the physical structures, which resembled ‘real’ ruins, not as spaces which have returned to nature, but rather having remained standing while apart from culture, so that they announce themselves as being *k’vrivi* spaces. Even if Pshavian *salotsavis* seemed to be the exact opposite of the Georgian Orthodox Church in material and aesthetic terms, the Pshavian appropriation of their *salotsavis* seemed uncannily close to what Georgian romantics liked best about churches in general. Pshavians, initially an object of the Georgian sublime, like the ruins and mountain scenery that attend them, become, as ‘unsullied children of nature’, the lyric subject of an indigenous form of the Georgian sublime.

**Conclusion: The Ruins of Pankisi**

I have so far laid out these discourses about churches in Georgia end to end like beads on a string, giving perhaps the false impression that each one supplants the other. I would like to conclude this exploration in historical and semiotic anthropology with a contemporary ethnographic moment, showing how these differing discourses coexist in life in one small region of Georgia: Pankisi Gorge.

Pankisi Gorge is unlike many adjacent Georgian mountain valleys, like Pshavi and Khevsureti, in that it is rich in old monuments. At some point in the Middle Ages, Pankisi was densely inhabited. Then, a series of invasions, and the valley was left without a single village. These old monuments are not in the level plains of the Gorge, by the Alazani river. Rather, they cluster the slopes of the surrounding mountains, now to be found only with difficulty in
steep areas covered with dense forest. The various peoples who repopulated Pankisi in the last two centuries, starting with the Pshavians from the nearby mountain region of Pshavi, followed by other North Caucasian groups, the Kisti (Georgian Chechens), and finally in the last century the Ossetians, came to Pankisi finding an empty place full of material signs of preceding populations.

As these Pshavians and other north Caucasian groups came into Pankisi, they seemingly ‘recognized’ these old ruined buildings as being cultic places similar to those they had built themselves to mark sacred (k’vrivi) places associated with the ‘khatebi’ or ‘khvtisshvilebi’. They used this subjective folk aesthetics, the Pshavian sublime, to appropriate these ruins as being abandoned salotsavis, and dotted the region with shrines, recognizing in these abandoned ruins in the woods shrine structures of the type they had left behind in Pshavi. That is, these ancient ruins, whatever their original function – an old wall, an old church, an old grape press, an old fort – were all sacred places. Even now, in the Kisti village of Omalo, whose population has largely accepted a more austere version of Islam (Wahhabism), there is a wood in the middle of the village, surrounded by a tall fence. Within the wood, in the darkness of the trees, there is an ancient wall. Next to it is an altar and the material traces of burnt wax candles. No one attempts to cut down this wood, even though few now apparently frequent it for worshipping purposes. Elsewhere, throughout the woods, one can find many old ruins, churches or not, some of which have makeshift altars in front of them. Why some have been elected as being cult sites over others is unclear. There is no question that there are more than enough old ruins in this forest to serve this function, an excess of signs of the ancestors.

All this talk of ruins would be incomplete without talking about Gabriel, my guide to the shrine complexes of Pankisi during fieldwork there in 2005. Gabriel regards himself not only as a Pshavian, true to his ancestors’ memory, but also as Orthodox: he sees no conflict between the two positions. A couple of days after our first interview, Gabriel took me and my Georgian colleague on an excursion to see all the cultic sites in the near mountains. Gabriel loves nature as much as he loves old stones: ‘these stones, they are signs of the ancestors, I cannot help but love them’, he said as we sat resting by a little fountain, surrounded by a wooden fence like all mountain fountains, to protect it from being polluted by the trompings of animals and the like.

Our tour is tortuous, the ancestors seemingly having preferred to build their habitations in safe mountain fastnesses at some remove from the plains.
Gabriel claims that the path we are on is an ancient road that led into the highland villages. Gabriel knows his archeological periodizations well. He talks of having found Bronze Age and Iron Age weapons and tools hereabouts; he has a small archeological collection: ‘I love these old things’. There is no conflict between his belief that these are sacred sites of the khatis and the khvtissshvilis, and his amateur archeological analysis that these are also remnants of the ancestors who lived here at specific historical periods, and he can name these, if you care to ask. Unlike the shrines in Pshavi which are all felt to be legendary monuments erected in mythic times, these shrines based on ruins are clearly felt to belong to the field of history, the sacred ‘shrininess’ of a ruin is not in conflict with the sure historical knowledge that in its time there was nothing sacred as such about the place. It may have been a winery, for example. So I begin to wonder what it is that is about a place or a ruin that announces that it has some specific significance beyond the fact that it is old. For Gabriel, for one, they are all sacred in the sense that they are remnants, signs, of the distant ancestors, real historical persons who can be known and given respect through attending to their architectural remains. Some of these structures, clearly Orthodox churches, were sacred in their own day as well. But still, I am looking for what it is that turns this or that old pile of stones into something sacred, something that announces something more than that it is simply a pile of stones.

Finally we come by a creek, and thankfully Gabriel announces that the spring itself is near at hand. We are passing up a path now that Gabriel asserts runs through the middle of an ancient village, now lost in the trees. Gabriel occasionally picks up a piece of old ceramic, illustrating his claim. We come across a level place, shady, pleasantly surrounded by trees with pleasing prospects; it is the shrine site of the adgilis deda, ‘the mother of place’, a kind of genius loci spirit shrine. This shrine is nothing more than a small concrete box with an opening in front, with a small wooden fence, two feet in height and 4 feet on a side. Not a ruin in sight. I begin to wonder if I was wrong about my initial theory that only past ruins made for present-day shrines. The shrine box has coins in it, the shrine treasury. The mountaineers have always made metal sacrifices of silver objects, now the silver cups are replaced by silver coins. A plastic bottle of Qazbegi brand beer, cut in half, having some unknown ritual function, is lodged into a crook in the tree that shares the sacred fenced-off space with the shrine. Gabriel complains that the shrine is a mess and, although no shrine officiant (khevisberi) himself, he sets about cleaning it out, setting it in proper order, as he always does when he passes this way.
Fig. 5. Gabriel inspecting a commemoration box (nishi) of his own making in an ancient graveyard. Photo by the author.
Passing other, similar modest shrines in similar locations, we find the fountain at last. Gabriel points out many good picturesque landscapes for camera shots (he is as much a child of romanticism as the rest of us); we drink the cold water and smoke. Gabriel seems quite happy with the surroundings and we pause there for a while. Then we move on to an old graveyard. Stones of the old graves have been drawn down the hill by erosion, and Gabriel assiduously picks through the tailings on the slope up to the graveyard, picking up old bits of bone, teeth, skull, that have been brought to light by erosion. There is a shrine box here, too, one which Gabriel built himself, and Gabriel again cleans it out. Each grave is a rectangle of large stones. In one that had been broken, parts of a skeleton peek up from under the ground; I can see the top of a skull and some other bones. Gabriel takes the remains of the ancestors he has picked up along the way and places them in the middle of one of the better preserved graves. He comes up here often and lights candles in the little shrine box for the ancestors buried here.

Nearby, we find a lovely little spot, with scattered stones, perhaps from another old graveyard that might once have been part of the first; hundreds of years of erosion created a small gorge that now divides the two. Gabriel pauses, looking around with real pleasure, and we look around too at the small clearing in the middle of the trees with old lichen-covered stones scattered in piles here and there: ‘There should be a shrine here’, Gabriel finally announces. I wonder what he means, and ask him. ‘Places such as these are places that should have shrines, shrines should always be in beautiful little spots in the woods like this, or near old ruins, or both.’ There seems to be some subtle aesthetic that I had missed all along, something about places that produce some epiphany in mountain religion that causes people who have moved to an abandoned valley to ‘discover’ the location of shrines. Sometimes these signs are given by nature, sometimes they are given by the remains of the ancestors, but always there is something about the place that seems to announce itself as the proper place, a meadow in the middle of a wooded grove seems to be just as necessary to a shrine as an old ruin, and usually, these two features are found in tandem in Pankisi.

The religious landscape and discourses that comprise the contemporary ‘Pshavian sublime’ do not generally figure in the contested definitions of ‘church’ that are currently in play in the plains of Georgia. Though the Orthodox church makes no claims that Pshavian salotsavis are churches in themselves or belong to the church, the Pshavians certainly now treat their shrines as being coeval and complementary translational equivalents.
of Georgian churches united by a single function with different officiants. Just as a person elects to be a priest, but a khevisberi is elected by the shrine divinity, so too the Orthodox Church elects a place to erect a church, but a Pshavian shrine announces itself as a sacred place. How a Pshavian shrine announces itself as a sacred place is precisely how the Pshavian aesthetic of appropriation, evidenced in Pankisi, makes it an uncanny reminder of the sublime aesthetics of Georgian romanticism. The aesthetic embodied in a Pshavian shrine, containing moments both of nature (a clearing in the woods) and culture (a ruin or a pile of stones), makes it resemble the sublimity of romantic landscapes that contain moments of nature (mountains) and culture (ruins, which are themselves hybrids of nature and culture). Hence, the purification of definitions that oppose the order of churches to the order of ruins, the sacred to the sublime, are once again united in the local hybrid aesthetic of the ‘Pshavian sublime’ in a way that seems to encompass both.

Acknowledgments
The research leading to this paper was funded in part by grants or fellowships from the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (nceeer), the neh, and sshrc. I would like to thank Khvtiso Mamisimedishvili, Nugzar Papuashvili, Harsha Ram, Zaza Shatirishvili, and Kevin Tuite for contributing in various ways to helping me build the argument here. I would like to thank the volume editor Anne Meneley for both arranging the panel that led to this paper and for patient and productive editorial engagement throughout. All errors are my own.

Notes
1. Georgians habitually refer to Queen Tamar as ‘King Tamar’ (Tamar Mepe), perhaps to emphasize that she wielded the power of a king in spite of her feminine gender. I refer to these churches as ‘Georgian churches’ and this period as ‘Georgia’s Golden Age’ as a kind of shorthand but immediately caution that this is a tendentious and essentializing formulation, assuming that the multi-ethnic Transcaucasian empire ruled by Tamar is to be identified in essence with the modern nation state of Georgia. Tamar ruled a multiethnic and multiconfessional empire, and the churches built in her time and other times almost necessarily have multiple claimants in the contemporary period. Battles between Georgian and Armenian nationalists over national styles of church architecture and churches as national patrimony, or between Georgian Orthodox philetists (religious nationalists) and Georgian Catholics over church ownership and restoration (Papuashvili 2006), which dominate the existing literature on churches, is something I will touch on only lightly here. Contextualizing these churches as products of Georgia’s Golden Age or the early history of Christianity in Georgia (as one reviewer has suggested) can imply that a nationalist, and in particular a philetist (religious nationalist) interpretation is ultimately the historical master narrative for understanding them. Such a viewpoint might also mistakenly suggest that a positivistic disciplinary narrative based in archaeology is the master narrative of naturalized ‘empirical fact’ forming a presupposed ‘back-
ground’ to which all these other discourses considered here play the second fiddle of culturally or historically inflected ‘ideology’ (for other critical perspectives on archaeological epistemes see Abu-Lughod 2001, Jusdanis 2004, Shanks 2007[1992]).

2. The Georgian Orthodox church was subsumed under the Russian church under the Russian empire as part of an explicitly ‘imperial philetist’ ideology that linked the Russian empire to religious Orthodoxy. As a result, Georgian priests of the Society for the Restoration of Orthodoxy were by definition agents of the Russian state, often opposed by Georgian nationalist intelligentsia. Ironically, Georgian secular nationalist claims for autocephaly of the Georgian church (in the late Tsarist period up to the socialism period and in the post-socialist period) became themselves a form of philetism (religious nationalism), strongly influenced by the Russian model of a direct linking of church to nation-state (Papuashvili 2006:27–8). Philetism is considered to be a heresy by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, but as a state and popular model of the relationship of religion to nation-state it is quite common in Russian and Georgian Orthodoxy, and is officially recognized in the Concordat between the Orthodox Church and the Georgian state of 2002 (Papuashvili 2006:32–4).

3. This discussion of churches as semiotic ‘hybrids’ is influenced by Latour (1993:10–11).

4. Actually this is a simplification, in the basic formulation both axes are ‘sublime’, the vertical axis representing the conquering lyric subject and horizontal axis representing the vast extent of conquered empire that requires such elevation from which to view it (Ram 2003).

5. Nat'amali; sign, trace, shadow of someone.

6. For example, the editor of Droeba, Sergi Meskhi, issued editorials against such Church-sponsored conversion activities amongst the Ottoman Georgians, noting that the Ottoman Georgians were already feeling Russian rule for fear of such forcible conversions, and that, in any case, religion was a matter of ‘conscience’, and that economic, administrative and cultural work was preferable to religious conversion in these regions (Meskhi 1880:1).

7. The Tiflis Amateur Photographers’ society was founded in 1893, associated with the professional photographers Alexander and Vasil Roinashvili, both of whom were noted photographers of Georgian ruins and antiquities (www.photomuseum.org.ge/a_roinashvili/index_en.htm).

8. Kevin Tuite (personal communication) notes the existence of such structures that have interiors, indicating that the forbidden quality exists whether or not it is a built-in material feature of the architecture.

References


Khizanashvili, N. 1940. Etnografiuli Nats’erebi. Tbilisi: SakSSr Metsnierebata Akademia.


Lotman, Juri. 1984. The Theater and Theatricality as Components of early Nineteenth-

Makalatia, Sergi. 1934. Pshavi. Tbilisi: No Publisher Listed.


