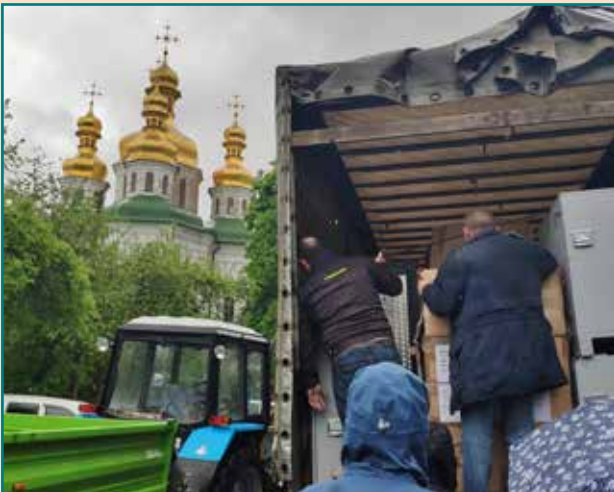


World Heritage Watch Report 2022



Recent Developments and Threats to the Gelati Monastery, Georgia

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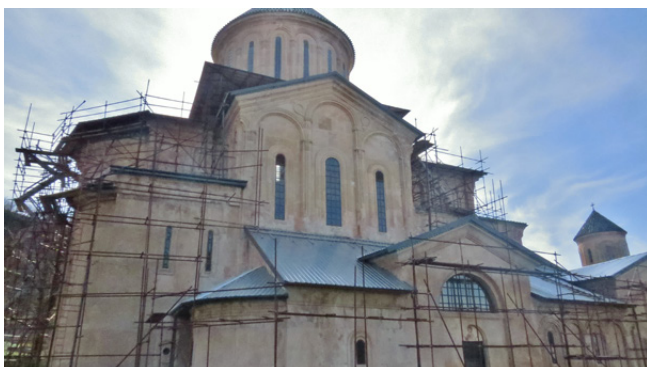


Fig. 1a and b: Roof cover of the Church of the Virgin, seen from the north, in June 2021 (Photo: Restruere 2021) and and February 2022 (Photo: Europe Our House)



Fig. 2a and b: Roof cover of the St. George's Church, seen from the northwest, in June 2021 (Photo: Restruere 2021) and February 2022 (Photo: Europe Our House)

The paper is a brief review on the developments after the decisions on Gelati Monastery (Georgia) (C 710bis) adopted at the 44th extended session of the World Heritage Committee (44 COM 7B.47)¹. None of the urgent issues requested to the State Party to implement and report for examination by the World Heritage Committee at its 45th session have been implemented.

WHC 44 COM 7B.47 "4 a. Provide a more workable solution to covering over both the Church of the Virgin and St George's Church": The coverings remain unchanged.

WHC 44 COM 7B.47 "4 b. Develop a costed conservation programme for the property": A conservation programme has not been developed. The Ministry has made a number of public statements that it is going to start working on a conservation programme.

¹ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/7764/>

WHC 44 COM 7B.47 “5 c. Provide a report on the activities of the World Heritage Protection Council of Georgia”: The World Heritage Protection Council of Georgia is not active, therefore it is not involved in Gelati developments. The professional boards are not active, and in general, they do not have a decision-making role². Several professional meetings were held with advisory function for the Minister, though the legislation gives exclusive decision-making power to the Minister. There is no mechanism for checks and balances.

WHC 44 COM 7B.47 “6. Further requests the State Party to review and update the *Management Plan* for the property and submit this to the World Heritage Centre for review by the *Advisory Bodies*, and establish a *Management Committee* for its implementation”:

The Gelati Management Plan has not been reviewed and updated. It has never been an acting document. A Management Committee for Gelati does not exist. All decisions are made by the Ministry. Information is hardly available - accessibility is a problem for professionals: the documents are not freely accessible.

WHC 44 COM 7B.47 “7. Calls for an increased mobilization of the international community to provide more financial and technical support to the State Party”: Several activities were held by the State Party under contracts with international and Georgian companies. They received positive technical reviews by ICOMOS. However, serious methodological problems in regard of the activities raise concerns among Georgian professionals and our international colleagues in the field.

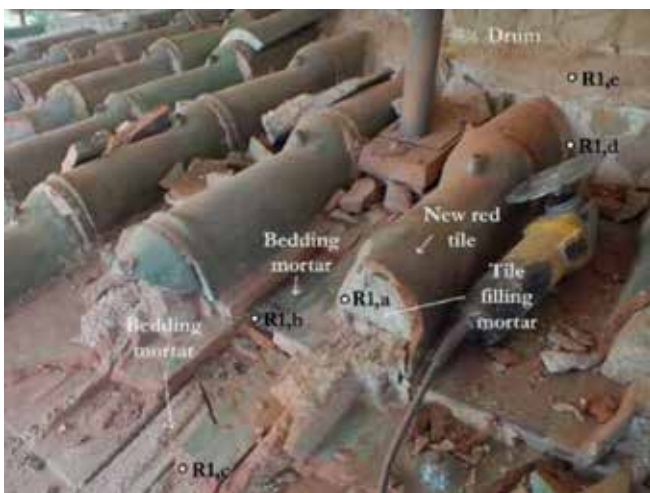


Fig. 3: Sondage R1. “As a result of the sondage, it was easy to understand that the tiles in this position are directly placed over a lime layer without any insulation device (Fig. 16, 17)”.

Photo: Restruere 2021, p. 15

1. The ICOMOS review of the “Report on the mission, the preliminary suggestion on the reasons for water infiltration and the initial recommendations for protection from water infiltration” (Restruere 2021) does not take into view the fact that there are no developments on the issue of temporary covering, which was an issue in the report of the mission, as well as on the WHC session. The sondages have revealed moisture, and transpiration and lack of ventilation are stated as decisive risk factors for wall paintings in the report. For the analysis of samples taken during the June 2021, a contract was concluded in January 2022.



Fig. 4: Sondage R3. “From this sondage, it was possible to understand that the thickness of the mortar between the insulating layer and the tiles does not seem to be sufficient to ensure that the nails fixing the tiles do not pierce the insulating layer making the insulating layer ineffective.”

Photo: Restruere 2021, p. 19

2. The ICOMOS review on the “Mission report on the state of conservation of the mural paintings of Gelati Monastery”: Along with the fact that the review is too general, it is obvious that ICOMOS does not have full information on the activities implemented. The review is based on the background statement: “Between 22 and 29 June 2021, two international expert missions were carried out to Gelati Monastery.... Mission aimed to carry out an assessment of the condition of Gelati Monastery’s mural paintings, develop mitigation measures to prevent further deterioration, and provide methodological recommendations to ensure the stability and safety of the wall paintings”. In fact, there were several activities implemented concerning wall paintings:

- **9 June - 13 July:** Elaboration of mitigation measures to prevent further deterioration and provision of the methodological recommendations to ensure stability and safety of wall paintings.

² This was the situation in February 2022, At the moment WHPC of Georgia is activated, as well as some of the professional boards. The role of the WHPC and its boards remain formal, however, having somewhat of a ‘notarization’ function.

- **2 July–21 July:** Analysis of samples of stone plaster painting layer salts biological patina.
- **14 September–22 October:** Elaboration of mitigation measures to prevent further deterioration; test consolidation of endangered areas to ensure stability and safety of wall paintings.
- **1 November–30 November:** Research of wall paintings and mosaics, salt extraction, consolidation of mosaics and paintings.

Our serious concerns are based on the facts that

- the works implemented on the Gelati wall paintings are poorly documented;
- they are oriented on invasive means and remedial conservation;
- they are based on general statements regarding methodology and materials;
- they have poor links of sample analysis results with the works implemented;
- they lack arguments for the compatibility of methods and materials with the current case; they lack links with original techniques of paintings and environmental peculiarities;
- they contain proposals for aggressive interventions;
- they lack links with construction/roofing issues; and
- they lack links with the aims of the contract.

Conclusion

The WH Centre was not informed by the State Party regarding serious concerns of Georgian professionals on the proposals of the wall painting restorers, and on critical reviews of a number of international colleagues in discussions held upon request of the Georgian professionals (Comments by Rickerby & Shekede were sent to the Ministry, and an online discussion held with the Kunsthistorisches Institut (Institute of Art History) and the Opificio delle pietre dure (Workshop on Hard Stone) in Florence).

The poor management, and the minor role of professionals in the decision-making process, as well as the poor availability of information are principal features of the Gelati case. Of special concern is the improper use of the ICOMOS Technical Review on the Gelati wall paintings issue. Its “plain reading” has become a basis for the final decision by the State Party to ignore considerations of the professionals regarding the high risks for the paintings contained in the proposed approach and activities.

We have serious concerns that the ICOMOS Technical Review can become a trigger for years of drawback of the wall painting conservation standards in Georgia, along with causing damage to the Gelati paintings.

In general, we believe that the Gelati Monastery should serve as a case study for the risk assessment and the development of UNESCO principles and quality standards. Based on the importance of the case for Georgia we urge the WH Committee to revisit the wall paintings component³, as well as to be focused more intensively towards the whole case of the Gelati Monastery⁴. The process is far from modern standards of conservation and contains lots of risks, which is more crucial in case of a WH site, since a WH site should serve as a role model in the field.

References

Restruere Srl: Safeguarding and conservation of Gelati Monastery World Heritage Property, Georgia. Report on the mission and preliminary suggestion on the reasons for the water infiltration and the initial recommendations for the protection from water infiltration. Florence, 30 July 2021

3 ICOMOS principles for the Preservation and Conservation-Restoration of Wall Paintings, 2003, Articles: 4, 5, 6, 7, 10

4 ICOMOS EUROPEAN QUALITY PRINCIPLES for EU-funded Interventions with potential impact upon Cultural Heritage - Revised edition November 2020. Manual; Granada Convention, 1985, Articles: 13, 14, 15, 17, 18; The Venice Charter, 1964; Article: 16