

World Heritage Watch Report 2023



From Community Engagement Towards Management Change at the Gelati Monastery, Georgia

Mzia Janjalia, George Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation



At the last WHW Forum of 2022, a brief review on the developments at the Gelati Monastery following the decisions of the 44th extended session of the World Heritage Committee (44 COM 7B. 47)¹, has been presented. The paper stated serious problems regarding the implementation of the WHC 44th session's decisions, including management issues, conservation programme, temporary roofing, etc. Special concern was stated regarding the developments on the Gelati wall paintings: namely the poorly documented works oriented on invasive means and remedial conservation having poor links with the original techniques, environmental peculiarities and construction/roofing issues. The poor management, and the minor role of professionals in the decision-making process, as well as the poor availability of information were listed as serious challenges for the Gelati WHS.²



Fig. 1: Roof cover of the Church of the Virgin, seen from the north, October 2022.
Photo: ICOMOS Georgia

In terms of the implementation of the WHC's decisions about management issues, as well as the actual state of preservation of the Gelati WHS, the situation has not changed much since the last WHW Forum: a new temporary roofing, which is a bit better than the old one but still inappropriate, has been arranged only over the Western arm of the Church of the Vir-



Fig. 2: New temporary roof cover on the Western arm under construction, September 2022.
Photo: Europe Our House

gin (see Fig. 1 and 2), and the deterioration of wall paintings continues. Despite the fact that the roofing and environmental problems have not been solved, several campaigns of restorers working under the Giovanni Secco Suardo Association and their collaborating Georgian team have been conducted aiming at the full conservation and even restoration/color integration of the part of paintings, there is active deterioration in the areas of interventions; ongoing deterioration can be seen also in other painted spaces of the Church of the Virgin (Fig. 3–6) and St. George Church – signs of deterioration of the sanctuary apse mosaic of the Virgin Church should be underlined (Fig. 7 and 8).



Fig. 3: Painting condition after full conservation, Western arm, January 2023.
Photo: Chubinashvili Centre

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

² Mzia Janjalia, Recent Development and Threats to the Gelati Monastery, Georgia, WHW Report 2022, pp. 232-234, <https://world-heritage-watch.org/content/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-Report-WHW-final.pdf>, WHW Report 2022, pp. 232-234



Fig. 4: Painting condition, Northern arm, January 2023. Photo: Chubinashvili Centre



Fig. 5: Painting condition after full conservation and restoration/color integration works, Western arm, January 2023. Photo: Chubinashvili Centre



Fig. 6: Painting condition after full conservation and restoration /color integration works, detail, Western arm, January 2023. Photo: Chubinashvili Centre



Fig. 7-8: Sanctuary apse mosaic, 2020 (left) and January 2023 (right).

Photo: Chubinashvili Centre

The period was marked by a wide involvement of stakeholders in the Gelati issues: the Georgian Patriarchate, being the owner of the site, Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation, ICOMOS Georgia, as well as new community groups like the SEC Workers Union, etc. It has been a marker of a new stage in the Gelati WHS preservation process where community involvement had been mainly limited to the activities of a local NGO (Europe Our House), the media (several private TV Broadcasting Companies and News Agencies), and a small number of Georgian professionals for quite a long period. Participation of international colleagues on the request of Georgian professionals also should be mentioned: comments by Rickerby & Shekede sent to the Ministry, and an online discussion held with the Max Planck Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and the Opificio delle Pietre Dure.

Since the last WHW Forum of 2022, three important documents have been prepared upon the initiative of the Patriarchate of Georgia, owner of the site:

1. **Report on the Safeguarding and Conservation of Gelati Monastery**, prepared by: Austin Nevin, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK; Sarah Staniforth, President Emeritus IIC; Lorinda Wong, Getty Conservation Institute, USA; and Francesca Piqué, University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), Switzerland – based on a review of the documents provided and site-visit from 1-2 May 2022³
2. **ICOMOS Georgia Report on Gelati Monastery State of Conservation**, based on review of the documents provided and site visit on 31 October 2022⁴

³ <https://monitori.ge/uckhoeli-eqspertebis-daskvna-gelatze/?fbclid=IwAR0Z2QqUA-tYkxBwbvLSGZDyPCUzujvgTZLau2ArFPW5BAjwrpUwJK-9PN90>

⁴ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oetSM10Ee8c1GvTXffCqRT2XH4kOVuYw/view?fbclid=IwAR17HUWwLYSCz9goXtqF3UswP7G0ya32gNri2d4TGvK-tlpA9MzWLSwzkwSs>

3. **Condition Assessment and Recommendations on the State of Conservation of Gelati Painted Churches**, prepared by the Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation, based on a review of the documents provided and site visit from 20 January 2023⁵.

All three documents coincide in serious concerns on the methodology and results of the works undertaken by the team of painting restorers. The latter were under the Association Giovanni Secco Suardo, in collaboration with a Georgian team, all selected by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth of Georgia without any clear criteria. The Chubinashvili Centre has also covered problems seen in a strategic vision and management of the project, including decision-making and assessment practices used; briefs on 14 contracts from the period of 2021-2022 are attached to the document as illustration of unsystematic works implemented on the site.

Problems with information availability and dissemination is also an issue in the Chubinashvili Centre's report, as well as a delay of implementing WHC Committee decisions; and delay of full temporary roofing construction for the painted churches. Improper planning and implementation of painting conservation works, and improper quality of documentation for the works implemented on the wall paintings are highlighted. Of special concern are: the condition of painted areas after the implementation of full-scale conservation, and the issue of implementation of restoration works despite a lack of stabilized environmental conditions and dehydration of the structure. The works implemented by the restorers invited by the State Party were focused mainly on the Western arm of the Church of the Virgin, therefore issues of other painted areas of the Gelati painted churches and signs of deterioration of the mosaic in the main apse of the Virgin Church were also stated in the report.

An important event of the period has been the **WHC-ICROM-ICOMOS Advisory Mission to the Gelati Monastery** which took place from November 28 – December 2, 2022 (A Report of the Mission has been published by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth of Georgia on February 9, 2023⁶). Not going into details, the fact should be underlined that the statements of the Mission Report are in full accordance with above-mentioned documents.

The mission recommendations could be a marker of the end of the disagreements between the State Party and the professional circles regarding Gelati WHS. But further concerns were raised by the feedback of the State Party presented at the brief-



Fig. 9: Declaration of the management change, 24 February 2023.

Photo: Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth of Georgia

ing of the Minister of Culture⁷, brushing away the majority of criticism contained in the Report and accentuating positive elements, highlighting the role of UNESCO in the selection of the team of restorers, which had been used to be named in all previous public statements by the Ministry as experts of UNESCO⁸.

The briefing was followed by special statements of the Chubinashvili Centre,⁹ the Patriarchate of Georgia,¹⁰ and several professionals. The process was concluded with a special meeting and a declared agreement between the Ministry and the owner of the site, the Patriarchate of Georgia, on the transfer of the leading and management role of the process from the Ministry to the Patriarchate.¹¹ The signed agreement has not been published yet, and professional circles hope very much that mistakes of previous management bodies will be understood thoroughly, and essential updates will be done. Wide involvement of Georgian and international professionals, as well as the development of clear management scheme with full transparency is expected to be provided by the new leader of the process.

Therefore, the State of Conservation Report presented to the WHC by the State Party¹² is definitely out of date. Though the Report presented by the State Party should have been updated even despite latter developments of 2022 and 2023, as even

5 <http://www.gch-centre.ge/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/...გ.ჩუბინაშვილის-ცენტრი-გელათი-ანგარიში.pdf>

6 Report of the Joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS/ICROM Advisory mission to the World Heritage property "Gelati Monastery" (Georgia) 28 November – 2 December 2022, pp. 4-5 https://drive.google.com/file/d/10-MaX6J9ZJVHQFQlCMe66qWST-MXkSZ1y/view?fbclid=IwAR3KQXaO8BZM-NO2qSb_IjshvHPFzgCmJnX7gUwSMqcz-24IoJvRglEtCVM

7 <https://www.facebook.com/MinistryofCultureSportandYouth/posts/pfbid0E-1QuDsT9WvsrBnXVznA4rtkRiVaa46gq1w6227XZ6svwsuxDBy94wkRiGZvC-TuGI>; <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/408>

8 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=196305265880412&set=pcb.196306979213574>; <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=250143207301709&set=a.230957325886964>; <https://www.facebook.com/MinistryofCultureSportandYouth/photo/s/a.116002933910646/21911888359905/>; <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=356330953349600&set=pcb.35633333349362>, etc.

9 https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=5299487891250616&set=a.416334257153182&locale=ka_GE; https://drive.google.com/file/d/1k-djTvhh5vwhlplS5zPPjA03FAbp4mKIV/view?fbclid=IwAR3E56X1CreOe5dC-satzH4sBxn_GMeBG-wle2bljvBcqlt9pXk4Bz2_HB2Q

10 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=230297636006920&set=a.200166392353378>

11 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=232397885796895&set=a.200166385686712>

12 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/documents/192486>

for the time of presentation it was not accurately representing the actual state of conservation of the Gelati WHS. The Report refers to the WHC recommendations for the selection of the team working in Gelati and ICOMOS technical reviews from February 2022 as proof that the solutions of managing body were correct.¹³ At the same time, it is lacking information on serious concerns of Georgian and international professionals regarding the decision-making process and methodologies applied especially to the wall paintings, that had been absolutely clearly expressed by that time.



Fig. 10: Results of the paintings conservation in the Western arm, version of the State of Conservation Report. Photos: State of Conservation Report 2022

Without going into details, some inconveniences still should be mentioned. As a marker of improper approach can be seen the way of presentation of the effectiveness of conservation works implemented: raking light is used for imaging before consolidation and ordinary one for the state of conservation after the works implemented. Actually, the process of quick deterioration is clearly visible through visual observation at the areas where the conservation intervention was implemented. Of special concern are schematic and chromatic restoration interventions widely used in the Western arm of the Church of the Virgin by the restorers of Giovanni Secco Suardo Association and their collaborating Georgian team without any justification and professional reviews.¹⁴

Despite the statements of the Report, the work on the Conservation Programme actually has not started. In addition, the purpose of the campaigns of painting restorers working under Giovanni Secco Suardo Association and a Georgian team collaborating with them, were mainly focused on physical works.¹⁵

No information is available on the results of the work of the new environmental monitoring system for microclimate referred to in the State of Conservation Report.

The information presented by the Report of the World Heritage Council and its activities, definitely does not reflect the Council's actual role and activities for the Gelati case. Despite some formal changes, the role of the Council is as formal as it has been in the previous period. In its present state the Council is comprised mainly of representatives of official structures, and with a dramatic minority of professionals in its composition, has absolutely no ability of real decision-making and independence.

Conclusion

Even this brief overview shows the problems related to the Gelati WHS case that could be used for further development and improvement of WHC standards, as well as means for their implementation. Several issues should be considered in risk assessment for the future, namely: use of the WHC and UNESCO brand by local officials in advocacy of their own decisions, and use of management practices far from modern standards for preservation of cultural heritage.¹⁶ And lastly, despite the role and responsibilities of the State Party, as defined by the World Heritage Convention in 1972,¹⁷ also regarding the State of Conservation Report, it would be important to discuss and consider the possibility of requesting the State Party provide independent professional discussions and reviews of the Report on the local level, before its presentation to the WHC.

¹³ For some comments on the issue, see WHW Report 2022, pp. 233-234 (note 2)

¹⁴ For actual state of conservation of the areas where the intervention was implemented see ICOMOS of Georgia and Chubinashvili Centre reports (notes 4 and 5).

¹⁵ See list of contracts, in the report by the Chubinashvili Centre (note 5), pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ Bernard M. Feilden and Jukka Jokilehto, Management Guidelines for World Cultural Heritage Sites, Rome 1998, https://www.iccom.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/1998_feilden_management_guidelines_eng_70071_light_0.pdf; Managing Cultural World Heritage, Paris 2013, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/managing-cultural-world-heritage/>

¹⁷ <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-en.pdf>