Two 18th-Century Royal Palaces in Georgia and Armenia

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The Palace of the Kakhetian kings in Telavi (Georgia), known as Erekle’s palace, and the Qajar Palace (Sardār Palace) in the Yerevan citadel are two unique secular buildings from the end of 18th century which reflect the local and international artistic tendencies of the epoch. Only the palace in Telavi is still standing. We do not have any historical reference or inscriptions according to which we may date the palace, but analysis of the political situation in Georgia, comparative study of the materials and historical sources allow us to suggest an approximate date.

According to Georgian sources, Erekle’s palace was built here during the reign of Archil II when he moved the capital of the Kakheti kingdom from Gremi (1664). (Rcheulishvili, p. 62) In 1675 King Archil was removed, and the Persian officials chose a new place for the capital Karagaji. The new appointed king of Kahketi, David III (Emām-qoli Khan) moved the capital again to Telavi in 1703, and from then until 1860 it was the capital of the kingdom. Some sections of the building and ground plan of Archil’s palace remained. This building was partly reconstructed by Erekle II in the style of Iranian architecture.

Erekle II (1720-98) was an extraordinary political figure in the history of Georgia who dramatically changed the political life of Georgia from east to north. As the son of Teimuraz II (1663-1722), king of Kartli and Kakheti, he was guaranteed the throne of Kakheti kingdom, with its capital in Telavi. At this time the Georgian kingdom officially was under Persian protection and was considered an indivisible part of the Safavid empire. Georgians, however, had their own royal dynasty, and in 1745, after a long period of Muslim control, the father of Erekle, Teimuraz II, ascended the Georgian throne according to the Christian tradition at the main church Svetitskhoveli in Mstketa, the old capital of Georgia. It was a great achievement for Georgians, indicating that the Kingdom was, for the first time in three hundred years, formally fused...
At the same time, friendly relations with Persia continued. Georgian nobility, headed by Prince Erekle, participated in the military campaigns of Nāder Shah Afsāhr. The good relations with Persia continued in the time of Karim Khan Zand (1750-94), when the Kartl-Kakheti kingdom reached the peak of its independence while close cultural relations with Persians still continued, influencing all aspects of the Georgian (and Caucasian) society including visual arts. The Palace in Telavi is an example illustrating this cultural influence. It was built on a hill overlooking the wonderful view of the Kakheti Valley. The entire palace complex (there were other buildings here, e.g. churches, bathhouses) was surrounded by monumental walls, which still stand, and large circular corner towers. The palace itself is a rectangular building with a central hall with high ceilings and pointed arches. It has four ayvāns each facing a cardinal point and flanked by corridors and smaller rooms in the corners. The main entrance to the palace is from the south with three constituent parts: the central two-story tālār with columns. The ground plan of the palace is reminiscent of Safavid palaces (Kleiss, fig.4.5) and, at the same time, has similarities with two buildings of the Zand and early Qajar period (Porter and Thévenart, pp. 123-34), which confirms that Archil's building of the 1760s was partly renovated by Erekle II. Usually interiors of these palaces were richly decorated with stucco, mosaic mirror-work, and oil paintings. (Porter and Thévenart, pp. 143-46; Scarce, 1983, pp. 340-45) Unfortunately, Erekle Palace was destroyed and reconstructed many times, resulting in the destruction of all its decorations. Erekle II rebuilt the palace and surrounded it with walls and towers. Because of close similarities with Karim Khan's Arg palace in Shiraz, we can suggest that Telavi Palace was rebuilt after the Shiraz palace and according to the Persian idea of architectural decoration. At the same time we can see little differences in nuances. For instance, the tālār space in the Georgian palace is narrower, but the audience hall is wider, apparently pointing to the difference between Persian and Georgian outdoor and indoor ceremonies. The difference could also be partly due to the new tendencies in the Georgian policy toward the Russian Empire (the throne was designed in the Russian imperial style and the ceremonial portrait of Erekle II was depicted in full length, still wearing Zand Turban and Georgian dress, but with Russian imperial regalias).

We have no definite indication concerning the date that the palace was built, but we have some evidence that can throw light on its history. The palace, as it stands today, is the close copy of Shiraz palace of Karim Khan Zand; therefore, it stands to reason that it had been reconstructed in the same period, that is, between 1750 and 1794. Erekle had been the king of the Kakheti kingdom with the capital in Telavi since 1744, and as such he needed the luxurious palace in the fashion style of that time, but he couldn't reconstruct