



Summary :

The church of St. Sophia in Trebizond was built in the years of Manuel I Grand Komnenos (1238-1263) and was ornamented with a variety of sculptural reliefs. Apart from the four capitals supporting the dome, the church includes a frieze depicting the fall of Adam and Eve (southern portico) as well as lots of decorative plaques on the southern, northern and western portico. The sculpted decoration on the church's exterior reflects the influences from Armenian and Georgian art, while the numerous sculptures are ornamented in a distinctively Seljukian style.

Date

during the reign of Manuel I Grand Komnenos

Geographical Location

Trebizond

1. The church

The [church of Hagia Sophia](#) in [Trebizond](#)¹ was built in the 13th century by donation of [Emperor Manuel I Grand Komnenos](#) (1238-1263) in the complex, [cross-in-square](#), style with three peripheral porticos on the southern, western and northern side.

The building is lavishly decorated with sculptural reliefs,² which may be divided into three categories: the capitals, the sculpted frieze on the exterior side of the southern portico and some decorative plaques incorporated in the exterior side of the southern, northern and western portico.³ Most of the church's sculptures date back to the 13th century and probably they were intended for this building. The dome and portico capitals as well as a marble slab incorporated in the interior of the central apse had previously been used in another building.

The sculpted decoration of the church is strongly influenced by the Seljukian style. The central motif of the star, from which bandlike, entwined, geometrical shapes start, the zigzag and the repeated geometrical motifs, the cordate flowers, the lotus flowers as well as the cellular decoration are the main motifs of the sculpted decoration, influenced by the Seljukian art. The dominant influence of this style has led to the supposition that mainly Muslim sculptors worked in the church, particularly in a period when their relations with Christians were really friendly in view of the common Mongolian threat, that is, between 1242 and 1262.⁴ Nevertheless, the extensive external sculpted decorations could be a possible influence from the centuries-old tradition of the architectural sculpture of Armenia and Georgia, with which Trebizond maintained good relations at times.

2. Capitals

The capitals of Hagia Sophia, four inside the church for supporting the dome and two for supporting the entrance arches in each of the three porticos, offer typological variety. The four dome capitals are identical and rest on similar marble columns and pedestals. Their decoration includes triangular shapes in three rows, depicting the motif of votrys (grape), quite stylized, though. These capitals, whose decoration is strongly influenced by Islam, were originally intended for another, unknown building and were later used in Hagia Sophia, as inferred by their style, which dates back to the 8th century.⁵

The two southern portico capitals are in complex Theodosian style dating from the late 4th or the early 5th century. They are of unknown origin.

As regards the northern portico capitals: the first portrays a cross in low relief on the one side and medals on the other sides, while in the second capital, constructed in the same style, the cross has been replaced by a monogram. Capitals with similar decoration are quite common from around the mid-6th century onward.⁶ They probably come from the same, still unknown, building.



On the western portico the first capital is in complex Theodosian style of the 5th century, while on each side of the second one there are two back-to-back birds, whose tails cross at the centre of each view. Each corner has a stylized motif of a plant, ending in a pine cone. Although this motif was already known in the 6th century, its complicated representation dates back to the late 9th century.⁷ Nothing is known about the different buildings the capitals came from.

3. Relief Sculpture of the Southern Portico Frieze

A stone frieze consisting of twelve plaques of different size, which depict the fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise, is above the arcade of the southern portico. Two graven **liturgical inscriptions** explaining the scenes are above the frieze.⁸ The inscriptions and the frieze are divided into two parts, on either side of the central arch of the portico. A small chiselled niche is formed here. The seven scenes are arranged from right to left but are quite faded today. They include: the creation of Eve, the temptation of Eve, Eve offering Adam the forbidden fruit (on two plaques), the closed gate of Paradise guarded by an angel, the exit of Adam and Eve from Paradise (on three plaques), the lamentation of Adam and Eve and the murder of Abel.⁹ The figures on the right part of the frieze, depicting the scenes prior to the Fall, are dressed and portrayed among luxuriant vegetation. On the other hand, the figures on the left part are depicted naked. The inscription following the scenes from Paradise reads:

'Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed' (Genesis 2:8).

The excerpt to the left of the frieze reads:

'He (Adam) sat naked and weeping before the gates of Paradise' (Triodion).

Although certain features of the frieze, which is of a particularly eclectic character, are considered eastern influences (the depiction of figures from left to right and the dressed figures inside the Paradise), when it comes to interpreting this piece, it seems to belong to the wider Byzantine art and liturgy, taking into account the content of the liturgical inscriptions. Researchers consider that this piece of work was modeled mainly on the artistic traditions of Armenia and Georgia.¹⁰

4. Other Sculptures of the Southern Portico

The external frame of the arch encompassing the portico has an exergo (high relief) decorative vine-twig motif, appearing to spring from stone masks showing lion heads.¹¹ The keystone of the arch is adorned with a single-headed eagle, the emblem of Trebizond emperors. As regards construction, the piece belongs to the initial stage of the church's construction. A **Simurg**, or griffon, named 'Saint Mark', on the eastern part of the portico over the inscription, wrongly represents the symbol of Evangelist Mark (the lion). Relief plaques depicting a centaur with a bow and a winged griffon are incorporated in the triangular spaces between the lateral arches and the central arch of the arcade respectively.¹² Over the portico's window there is a plaque decorated with inlaid white marble showing two back-to-back doves, whose tails cross at the centre of the composition. Each bird is turned towards a spiral motif, which encloses pomegranates. To the east there is a plaque adorned with a cross. A plaque with bas-relief, interlaced circles and a second plaque showing a half moon and a star are incorporated to the west and east of the window respectively.¹³ Finally, on the external side of the central encompassing arch and on either side there are two plaques enclosing medals with vegetation motif extending round a spoked piece of jewellery. They are decorations in low relief, typical of the Seljukian style.¹⁴

5. Northern Portico sculptural reliefs

A graven cross with three horizontal antennas is beneath the *keystone* of the encompassing arch.¹⁵ Beneath this motif there is a broken plaque with faded decoration, which may have shown an eagle, by analogy to the southern portico. Two more plaques with crosses, of a more decorative character, are incorporated over the junction of the central arch with the eastern arch of the triple arcade and on the eastern portico wall respectively.¹⁶ The decoration is topped off with a number of bas-reliefs in a lively Seljukian style:¹⁷ On top of the middle arch of the arcade there is a medal adorned with a complex, thlasto (dog-legged) geometrical shape. On



either side of the central arch there are two similar plaques with a more simplified design. Above the junction of the central with the western apse there is a rectangular plaque adorned with zigzags, while beneath there is another plaque decorated with crossing squares. At the respective eastern point there is a plaque with interlaced geometrical motifs on either side of two crosses. The two lesser portico arches rest on stones with stalactite decoration on their inside. On the western side of the northern portico there are stone plaques with a lotus flower motif. Above these plaques there is a panel, sections of which are adorned with palm leaves and a spiral piece of jewellery. The panel includes a small, enclosed cross. A medal adorned with the repeated motif of decorative triangles is incorporated in the eastern side of the portico.

6. Western Portico sculptural reliefs

The most typical sculptures of the portico are the **dossieret** of its two capitals, adorned with a three-band cellular motif.¹⁸ Similarly decorated, in a distinctively Seljukian style, are the horizontal edges of the frames of the two lateral arches. The central arch encompassing the portico is adorned with a plain motif of interlocking circles and semicircles in low relief, ending in the tops of its two **pilasters**. A four-sided plaque with rhomboid, bandlike decoration is incorporated in the northern side of the round skylight, which penetrates the centre of the portico. Internal niches with sculpted decoration in the Seljukian style are formed on the northern and southern side of the portico.

7. Other sculptural reliefs

On top of the central apse there is an externally walled sculpture depicting a single-headed eagle, similar to that of the southern portico. In the internal side of the central apse and on the southern wall there is a built-in marble slab with braided, bandlike decoration, probably made before the 13th century and first used in another building. Finally, a fragment of a stone slab, decorated with an eight-pointed star in the Seljukian style, was found on the southern side of the church.

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1. About the church see Brounov, N., "La Sainte-Sophie de Trebizonde", *Byzantion* IV (1927-28), pp. 393-405· Talbot Rice, D., *The Church of Hagia Sophia at Trebizond* (Edinburg 1968).
 2. About the church's sculptures see generally: Strzygowski, J., "Les chapiteaux de Sainte Sophie a Trebizond", *BCH* 19 (1895), pp. 517-522· Alpatov, M., "Les Reliefs de la Sainte-Sophie de Trebizonde", *Byzantion* IV (1927-28), pp. 407-418· Talbot Rice, D., *The Church of Hagia Sophia at Trebizond* (Edinburg 1968), pp. 45-82· Safran, L., "The Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia at Trebizond", *BSCAbs* 20 (1994), p. 29· Eastmond, A., "Narratives of the Fall: Structure and Meaning in the Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia, Trebizond", *DOP* 53 (1999), pp. 219-236.
 3. Every portico is surrounded by wide arch and lower it was perforated with a triple arched opening.
 4. For example Talbot Rice, T., "Analysis of the Decorations in the Seljukid Style", *The Church of Hagia Sophia at Trebizond* (Edinburg 1968), pp. 78-82.
 5. Kautzsch, R., *Kapitellstudien* (Berlin 1936), p. 199, no. 667· Talbot Rice, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46. A similar capital of the same workshop is kept today at the Archaeological Museum of Constantinople: Mendel, G., *Catalogue des Sculptures, Musees Imperiaux Ottomans* III (Constantinople 1914), p. 463, no. 1239.
 6. Strzygowski, J., "Les chapiteaux de Sainte Sophie a Trebizond", *BCH* 19 (1895), p. 519· Talbot Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
 7. For the various proposals for dating the capital see Talbot Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
 8. Alpatov, M., "Les Reliefs de la Sainte-Sophie de Trebizonde", *Byzantion* IV (1927-28), σελ. 407-418· Talbot Rice, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-49· Safran, L., "The Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia at Trebizond", *BSCAbs* 20 (1994), p. 29· Eastmond, A., "Narratives of the Fall: Structure and Meaning in the Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia, Trebizond", *DOP* 53 (1999), pp. 219-236.



9. A representation in drawing of the frieze see in Eastmond, A., "Narratives of the Fall: Structure and Meaning in the Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia, Trebizond", *DOP* 53 (1999), fig. 5-6.
10. Alpatov, M., "Les Reliefs de la Sainte-Sophie de Trebizonde", *Byzantion* IV (1927-28), pp. 417-418· Talbot Rice, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49. A more analytic interpretation of the iconography and the liturgical function of the frieze see in Eastmond, A., "Narratives of the Fall: Structure and Meaning in the Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia, Trebizond", *DOP* 53 (1999), pp. 223-236.
11. The origin of the motifs should be sought in the Mosouli area, where similar themes decorated monuments of the 12th and 13th century and they were probably created due to the influence of the sculpted decoration of the Church of the Cross in Achthamar (915-921), Talbot Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
12. Plates with similar mythical monsters were very popular during this period in Caucasus and Russia, *op. cit.*, p. 50 and table 20B-C.
13. The crescent with the star, a shape already known from the Sassanid Persia, was very popular in Islamic art through the centuries, while later it became the emblem of the Ottoman Empire, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
14. *op. cit.*, p. 51 and table 23B.
15. *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.
16. Crosses of this type were very popular in Armenia, Georgia, as well as in the Mosouli area, *op. cit.*, p. 52 and note 42, 43.
17. About the Seljukian style of the decorations see Talbot Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 55-82.
18. *op. cit.*, p. 53.

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	Brounov N. , "La Sainte-Sophie de Trebizonde", <i>Byzantion</i> , 4, 1927-1928, 393-405
	Eastmond A. , "Narratives of the Fall: Structure and Meaning in the Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia, Trebizond", <i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i> , 53 , 1999, 219-236
	Redford S. , "Byzantium and the Islamic World, 1261-1557", Evans, H.C, <i>Byzantium, Faith and Power (1261-1557)</i> , The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 2004, 391-392
	Safran L. , "The Genesis Frieze at Hagia Sophia at Trebizond", <i>Byzantine Studies Conference: Abstracts of Papers</i> , 20, 1994, 29
	Strzygowski J. , "Les chapiteaux de Sainte Sophie a Trebizond", <i>Bulletin de Correspondance Hellenique</i> , 19, 1895, 517-522
	Eastmond A. , <i>Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium. Hagia Sophia and the Empire of Trebizond</i> , London 2004



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	http://www.doaks.org/DOP53/DP53ch12.pdf
	Trabzon, Hagia Sophia
	http://www.karalahana.com/yeni/trabzon/hagiasophia.htm

Glossary :

	cross-in-square church
	Type of church in which four barrel-vaulted bays form a greek cross; the central square of their intersection is domed. The cross is inscribed into the square ground plan by means of four corner bays.
	dosseret
	Architectural member of marble with the form of inverted truncated pyramid, that was placed between the capital and arc.
	liturgical inscriptions
	Inscriptions including excerpts from liturgical books, such as Pentekostarion, the Euhologion (Prayer book) etc.
	pillar
	Pier of square or rectangular cross-section.
	simurg
	Mythological animal with head of dog, legs of lion, with feathers and big tail that symbolizes in the Sassanidian art a beneficial for the seeding form.

Auxiliary Catalogues

All the sculptural reliefs were incorporated in the temple during its construction between 1238 and 1263. However, some of them were placed later. These were:

Capitals of the dome: 8th century

Capitals of the southern portico: end of the 4th - beginning of the 5th century

Capitals of the northern portico: middle of the 6th century

Capitals of the western portico: 5th and 9th century

Sculpture of the interior central arch: earlier than the 13th century