the late thirteenth century he noted that 'they are losing their Christianity for lack of preachers'. Their final defeat came in the 1540s at the hands of the Ottoman Turks, although Georgia remained a Christian principality until the seventeenth century. Russia and Turkey continued to fight for regional supremacy during the nineteenth century until today's border (which incorporates the old Georgian province of Tao and Klarjeti within Turkey) was decided at the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in 1921.

Only a handful of the 80-old Tao-Klarjeti churches have survived. There were three principal types. One of the earliest Tao churches, a large seventh-century church at Bana, destroyed except for one apse during the nineteenth-century Ture-Russian war, was based on a quatrefoil plan within a circular wall. An early form, this centralised plan was later dropped in favour of a basilica or, more usually, a cruciform combining the two simpler forms. Dorki, now used for husbandry, is a picturesque example of the former; Jaban, Qak Vank and Hisato are fine edifices of the more complex cruciform type combining a basilica and centralised dome, with a choir, nave and transept.

It is in this last cross-axial form which perhaps best illustrates the contrast found in all Georgian architecture between an apparently simple exterior and a complex interior. At Qak Vank, for instance, the outside of the church gives the impression of a straightforward cruciform church with transepts and a central dome. Yet within, each transept is composed of a triple nave with a central apse flanked by two subsidiary recesses. Externally the divisions between the apses are indicated by two triangular niches bordered by blind arches. The principal facades and the distinct drums of the Tao-Klarjeti churches are commonly faced in a delicately hued yellow stone, much of which is in remarkably good condition. The villagers at Hisato say that the colour was obtained by soaking the stone in milk. Other characteristics include blind arches, scalloped niches, finely chiselled window surrounds and...