ornate sculptures of animals and saints. A striking eagle clutching a doe in its talons is a recurring feature which has led to the speculation that it could have been a sort of heraldic emblem of the Bagratids. According to a mythical story related by Marco Polo 'all the kings of this province were born with the sign of an eagle on their right shoulder'.

Similar sculptural themes adorn the walls of Öşk Vank and Haho including archers and a lion attacking a stag. In the churches badly decayed frescoes, as well as the external sculptures, frequently portray a saint carrying a model of a Georgian church as an offering to Christ. At Öşk Vank two such saints, whose heads have been hacked off, wear richly decorated robes like those which would have been worn in the court of the Byzantine emperors. This enhancement of Georgian architecture with relief carving, often grouped around the southern entrance, is believed to be an early stage in the elaborate decoration of main portals which featured in the development of Romanesque and Gothic architecture in Europe.

In addition to the surviving sculptures, some of the extant churches contain traces of mural paintings which have only recently been studied. Relatively sophisticated in form, they follow the medieval tradi-

tions of eastern Christendom but use a strictly limited palette. Typically, biblical scenes including Christ and the Apostles, the Virgin Mary, the Incarnation and the Redemption, are composed within horizontal registers. They have stylistic traits in common with the better-known and richer paintings found in the rock-hewn churches of Cappadocia in central Turkey, frescoes which are slowly benefiting from a major conservation effort launched by UNESCO and the Turkish government.

The poor condition of the frescoes reflects radical political changes. In the centuries following the inclusion of Tiao and Klarjeti within the expanding Ottoman empire, the churches were gradually abandoned as the area became dechristianised. Many fell into ruin or were plundered for their stone; others were damaged by earthquakes, by treasure hunters or continuing regional conflict. Yet, in more recent decades, the survivors have suffered further harm. The dome of Opiza, one of the oldest monasteries in Klarjeti, was pulled down in the 1960s. More seriously, the fine centralised church at Ekek, near Tortum, was dynamited so that the stone could be used to build a new mosque in memory of a local shopkeeper. In others, windows and doors have been filled with cement and rubble, walls have been blackened by fire.

In several cases the conversion of churches to use as mosques has helped to conserve the building's basic structure, but once converted, the faded frescoes have invariably been covered with whitewash. The roof of the Parhal basilica has been covered with a thick layer of concrete in an unsuccessful attempt to keep the rain out. Water that seeps into the basilica is kept off the kilims by corrugated iron sheets attached to makeshift scaffolding.

One of the best preserved churches is at Haho, now Bağlar Başı, and also faces an uncertain future. Honouring a 70 year old agreement, the villagers have maintained the building in reasonable condition although the basilica roof tiles have been replaced with corrugated iron. Unsightly as it is, the sheeting was all the villagers could afford to keep the building open as a mosque. A new mosque is currently under construction and, once abandoned, Haho could go the way of its neighbouring churches and fall into disrepair.

The only hope for the Georgian churches is for them to be recognised as a tourist asset in a beautiful region of deep gorges and spectacular mountain scenery. Following recent political rapprochement between Turkey and the former Soviet Union, the Sarp border gate on the Black Sea, for decades a closed frontier, has been opened allowing Georgians and other ex-Soviets to visit the region. Improved roads, though often unmetalled, have eased accessibility and a few specialist tour operators have started organising trips to the area. Combined walking and church study holidays could be promoted to include those churches, such as Dortkilese, which are several hours from the nearest road. To date, the few studies published about the churches have been of an academic nature. A condition survey is urgently required and priorities for conservation need to be assessed before time runs out for Turkey's forgotten Georgian churches.