

The Residences of Catholic Missionaries in Georgia According to Textual and Visual Narratives by Cristoforo De Castelli

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze and compare the narrative forms of textual and visual works by Cristoforo De Castelli (1600-1659), the Sicilian missionary in Georgia, who left behind rich materials on the 17th century period of that country. The works of Castelli include letters, reports and drawings, created throughout his twenty-five-year stay in Georgia. Sent to Rome as independent compositions the works were collected and organized into seven thematically and chronologically ordered albums by Castelli upon his return to his hometown of Palermo (1656-1658), where the manuscripts are kept today. Other works (letters and reports) are scattered in different archives and libraries in Italy (Rome, Florence and Naples). Yet, as a single narrative it combines Castelli's life throughout his mission in Georgia with his reflections on the realities of the country.

Taking the above-mentioned materials as a foundation for this writings, the article will focus on the set of drawings of Catholic residences in different regions of Georgia (the Kingdom of Kartli, the Principalities of Guria and Odishi), which could be considered the most telling examples of the changes in Castelli's visual narrative forms from 1631 (when he first arrived in Georgia) to 1656 (his departure to Palermo). The article will try to reveal how each residence and its setting had captured the missionary's attention and will follow Castelli's textual and visual evolution through this process of documenting this dynamic relationship between Catholic missionaries and local peoples.

Key words: *Cristoforo De Castelli, Catholic Missionaries, Word and Image Narrative*

The Narrative Forms of Castelli's Works

The works that Cristoforo De Castelli created in Georgia - letters, reports and drawings – initially were designated for documentary recording purpose, which determined the structure and content of his drawings and writings.¹ The mission task he received from Propaganda Fide, before his long journey to Georgia (1630), was to describe in word and image the reality he saw in the Orient. The responsibility Castelli assumes becomes a *key focus* of each word he writes and of each sketch he draws. In his final report – *Missioni per Molti Paesi d'Infedeli* - Castelli starts his narrative with the following words:

Havendo Io scritto il mio Viaggio di 25 anni incirca che fui indegnamente Missionario nell'oriente, e delineata

¹ Georgian public learnt about Castelli's drawings from the edition *Don Cristoforo De Castelli. Reports and Albums about Georgia*. Edited and translated by Bejan Giorgadze, Tbilisi, 1970 [1].

ogni Cosa con diligenza in Carta conforme l'ordine havuto dalla Sacra Congregatione de Propaganda Fide [...] con li ritratti delle Persone più degne de Principi, e Rè di quelle Parti, a quail havea servito per medico, et in altre Professioni, insieme con li nomi, e Cognomi Loro, e [...] Luogho, Tempo, e Testimonij, che per esser assai differenti di nostri era istoria Curiosissima a sentirla, ma con la Perdita di queste Fatiche nel Naufragio delle nostre robbe da Roma a Palermo perdei insieme l'animo di poterle rifare un'altra volta essendo vecchio infermo, tutto lacerato, e guasto, e più morto, che vivo, con quelle poche forze che mi sono rimaste anderò ricuperando qualche Cosa di quello che mi ricordo, [...] et al meglio che potrò per obedire a chi devo, e col tempo se piacerà al Signore darmi Vita, daremo qualche ordine a quelle, se cossì sarrà gloria del Signore. [8, pp. 59-60]

As Castelli admits in the text quoted above, he most likely wrote before drawing, and that is what this article aims to prove. Also, considering his words we should suppose, that the image-drawings and word-texts were produced as a complementary one another.

If analyzing independently Castelli's works, we find out that among them the only dated materials we have are the letters, written during the years 1631-1656 and addressed to his family and religious superiors in Rome. The letters initially are full of detailed descriptive information and confirm Castelli's first approach to the new world – the *Orient*.

The next text is the surviving report – *Missioni per Molti Paesi d'infedeli*, written upon Castelli's return to Palermo during 1656-1658, and enables to compare it with his early writings. The report is written in the past tense, as kind of *memoir* as Castelli begins writing it away from Georgia and summarizes the narrator's life during the 25 years in the Orient lands. The text is divided into Chapters by theme rather than chronologically, and where the story has more importance than the description of single things, meanwhile the letters sent from Georgia are mostly written

in present tense, where the details gain more importance rather than content.

As regards the visual materials, there are approximately a thousand drawings and sketches assembled by Castelli in seven albums. The albums contain portraits of Georgian kings and nobles, or domestic portraits of male and female faces, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures etc. From them among roughly 500 sketches and drawings represent the narrative scenes, where several activities of missionaries are depicted, such as healing, baptizing, preaching, etc. These scenes document the Catholic missionaries' duties and lives in Georgia, at the same time describing the daily lives of the locals, all set against the backdrop of Georgian architecture and landscape. Castelli made around 20 sketches on each theme. He later included these scenes to portray common activities in and around the Catholic residences in different regions of Georgia.

Between Castelli's drawings one of the most well-elaborated and accurate compositions are the set of Catholic Residences in Georgia according to his movements between Georgian regions: the Kingdom of Kartli, the Principality of Guria, the Principality of Abkhazia, the Kingdom of Imereti and the Odishi Principality. The compositions assembled almost all activities practised by missionaries in Georgia and each residence drawing contains and depicts mostly scenes characteristic of the individual region. As regards the plot and information found in the drawings, they add to the narrative on the topics documented in the earlier letters and the report, albeit using different forms.

The set of Residences could be considered as the clearest example of the demonstration of Georgia and European Catholic's relationships. In addition they offer a broad picture of Castelli's drawing skills in terms of composition, figures, perspective and narrative scene creations. This different methods of textual and visual narration, such as letters, reports and drawings, could be arose initially out of the situation and surrounding

environment, rather than carefully planned structures. However, from the letters we learn that Castelli was educated in the *Collegio Massimo dei Gesuiti* in Palermo [7], where he learnt the subjects of *Artes Liberales*, which included rhetoric and different arts, such as drawing, fortification, etc.

Arrival in Gori and the Future Strategy

The first city Castelli arrived accompanied by two missionaries was Gori (1632). The drawing of Gori Fortress and its surrounding could be considered as one of the first of his visual reports amongst his drawings of Catholic residences and the start of Castelli's visual narrative about the Catholic residences in Georgia.

The drawing of Fortress of Gori and its surrounding [Image 1] is performed in brown ink and framed by the pencil with several explanatory notes in Italian. Below of the Fortress composition, on the left side, later was glued the paper with Latin text, which covers half part below of the composition. The most of scenes and figures represented on the composition are elaborated in details and accompanied with the handwritten phrases in Italian and Latin. The Fortress itself is drawn in perspective and covers backdrop horizontally; the flags, towers and the group of horseback figures on the foreground should express the military situation in the country. In the center, below the fortress, on the slopes of hill are scattered the houses and residences of different missions with own churches: the Dominicans', St. Augustinians', the Theatins' and Armenians. Few solitary human figures are scattered into the composition: among them two missionaries from St. Augustinian order and two of the Theatin missionaries with traveling bags on their shoulders [Image 2]. This scene we can consider as the visual narrative story of Castelli's arrival in Gori, when they were welcomed by the brethren, while the wording continues into the Castelli's letter written from Gori and addressed to his uncle:

La mattina seguente ci venne ad incontrare il Padre Don Giacomo di Stefano, [...] insieme con quelli di

Sant'Agostino, e ci condussero alla desiata Città di Gori nella nostra povera capanna posta sotto terra all'uso del paese, tanto piccolo che à pena ci possiamo stare [7, p. 6].

It is obvious that the first two years spent in Gori (eastern Georgia), before moving to the region of Guria (western Georgia), are the years of study and adaptation to the Georgian reality, and also the proof of his faith in Catholicism, his perseverance despite the misery of being a missionary in the Orient. The letters written to his uncle from Gori are full of detailed descriptive texts of social and local attitudes, but even though, the only one drawing of the Gori residence depicts mostly its architecture, with the residences and the churches of different religious orders represented in surrounding of the Fortress of Gori. It could be due to Castelli's insufficient linguistic competence or due to the on-going war with the Persians at the time that the drawing includes fighters on horseback and flags on the Castle. As we learn from Castelli's reports, the drawing of the Fortress of Gori was ordered by the Persian General Rostom Khan, who by that time was occupied with the restoration works of the city of Gori, damaged due to the war¹:

"[...] non so chi facesse intendere al Generale dell'esercito che faceva disegni delle fortezze che fabricava in quelle parti, come fra di noi v'era Pastore eccellente in quest'arte [...].

Gran generale ci disse [...], et esso m'andò spiegando il suo pensiero. [...] pensava distruggere il suo paese et fabricare varie Fortezze e lassarli presidij a nome del suo Re, e vorrebbe mandarli ogni cosa delineata et colorita [8, p. 172].

As the above-quoted passage proves, Castelli's talent of painter acquires useful function since his arrival in Georgia, which becomes later the medium to have close

¹ Rostom Khan (1565-1658) was a Georgian prince converted to Muslim and grew up at the Persian court. In 1633 he was appointed as a Wali of Kartli and sent to Georgia, in Gori, with a large Persian arm. Soon he took control of Kartli and reigned until his death.

relations with Georgian royal families and foreign invaders, in order to better understand the internal and foreign situation of Georgia, while obtaining information for Rome.

It is difficult to affirm which drawings from Castelli's seven albums belong to the Gori period and what kind of drawings or sketches he made during his stay in Gori, a part of Castles and architectural descriptions, probably few, because we should consider that Castelli does not know the Georgian social life yet. He draws what he sees and writes what he feels. The descriptions in the letters to his uncle are mostly related to the Georgian religiosity and the liturgy:

Per quello che tocca all'anima non credono al Sommo Pontefice, negano la processione dello Spirito Santo dal Figlio. [...]

Tengono in Christo Signore nostro una sola natura, e simili altri errori che per hora tralascio. [...] Tengono le Chiese poco più in ordine che le stalle di costì, li Sacerdoti, e Vescovi si tiene per dotto chi sà leggere, e scrivere, e dalla loro ingoranza precedono tanti mali.

Pochi giorni sono si scoperse un di questi Vescovi non essersi stato battezzato, con tutto ciò l'anno lasciato seguitare tutte le funzioni piscopali, come se fusse stato legittimamente eletto, e senza di nuovo conferirli l'ordini li quali tutti furono nulli, mentre li mancava il fondamento.

[...] Si confessano alcuni in 30, in 30 anni altri mai, e quando lo fanno per quanto habbiamo potuto intendere, lo fanno sommariamente, sì che subito si spediscono.

Se nell'hora della morte portano a dalcuno il Santissimo Sacramento lo portano senza lumi, e senza nessun decoro, ò riverenza, sì bene non v'è più Sacramento per la raggione sopradetta [7, pp. 8-9].

As the above mentioned quotations shows, Castelli criticizes the Georgian Orthodox liturgy, but analysing his works, we have to bear in mind his Catholic thinking. The letters demonstrate Castelli's effort to understand the local people in order to elaborate the strategy of his mission.

Residence in Guria and Word Sculptured into Image

If we follow Castelli's movement through the Georgian regions, the drawing of the Catholic Residence in Guria could be considered his second visual report. Castelli arrived there in 1934 and stayed for seven years, till the death of Catholicos Malakia II Gurieli (1616-1639), who was on good terms with the missionaries [2, 7, 8]. It could be due to the freedom given by the Catholicos that Castelli appears to become more familiar with Georgia as reflected in his texts and drawings, in the scenes that depict the social life of the local people and their interactions with the missionaries which Castelli describes.

The Residence in Guria [Image 3], conversely to the Gori Fortress, brings together different narrative scenes. The composition is divided into three levels, where the most space is dedicated to the scenes of preaching, baptizing, healing, child burial etc., and where the missionary's figure emerges in the centre of local people. Each scene is placed and sized on the drawing according to its importance and represented in *zigzag* line: preaching and child burial on the front-view, while in the second level is placed the healing and baptizing scenes. The narrative scenes occupy mostly the left part of composition while the architectural constructions are placed on the right. In the middle of the backdrop is represented the church and residential houses, which creates the triangular shape and concludes the whole narrative.

The first scene which captures attention is the dimensional preaching scene in multi-figures, where the missionary with raised hand is attended by surrounding local people. Represented horizontally it covers whole front-view and should express the freedom of catholic missionaries in the region of Guria. Castelli made more than 20 sketches around the preaching topic with similar composition, and included it in almost each Catholic residence, as one of the main missionaries' activities.

The next scene, represented on the left, narrates the child burial cases in Guria: the missionary, with raised

hands and alarming posture, catching the couple during their own child burial [Image 4]. The explanatory text in Latin, next the scene, announces that the local peasants bury their newborn child due to the poor life and slavery, for which they are designated. In fact, in the letter addressed to his uncle, Castelli describes the Guria as the *sterile* and people who have nothing to wear. There are two compositions about child burial in Castelli's albums: one is an independent composition [Image 5], and second scene included in the Residence of Guria. On the independent composition the scene is attended by animals and birds. In Castelli's report there is passage which should refer and explain the mentioned visual scene:

Le donne poverelle, parturito che hanno i putti, il padre istesso per liberare la madre de' travagli prende il putto li torcie il collo e lo va a sepolire nell'orto, overo l'involta in straccio e raccomanda ad un'acqua corrente... Li cani et uccelli di rapina sono avessi a vedere tali spettacoli e subito conoscono quando alcuna va a sepolire putti... e alle volte combatono gl'uccelli con li cani per levarsi la preda [8, p. 69].

Similar facts are described by other Castelli's contemporary missionaries', and the representation of child burial scene on the front-view by Castelli, should underline the missionaries' involvement in such cases.

The following composition, on the left of the centre, represents another main missionaries' activity - the healing. The man lies stretched on the ground and held by other men in order to allow the missionary to heal the sufferer. Castelli divides the healing scenes into two categories: the healing of peasants, which happens always outside, on the landscape background [Image 6]; and the healing of nobles, which takes place into interior. Castelli interprets the healing process as the spiritual one, as well. Due to the mentioned reason, the healing is frequent in Castelli's sketches and texts, without specification of medical remedy, instruments or medicines. As the fact, the most of the missionaries were chosen for the missions thanks to their ability of physicians, and Castelli was one of

them – [...] *Mossi da Dio domandono al Papa un Medico e Pitore insieme, e mandarmi a si alta impresa di predicare il Sancto Vangelo nell'oriente a gl'eretici et infedeli* [8, p. 60].

The same healing process importance gains the baptizing scene into Castelli's drawings and texts. In Guria residence composition of baptizing scene takes place outside of catholic's residence yard: the missionary holding a book in the right hand and the left hand on the child's head. The man and hors, accompanying the child, could present their arrival from the long distance.

Castelli made more than 20 sketches on the baptism process, which are similar to each other in terms of composition and take place outside, on the background of landscape, near the river, while only few scenes taking place into interior express the baptism of the nobles [Image 7]. In fact, in his letters and reports Castelli mentions the freedom granted by The Catholicos Malakia Gurieli - of baptizing local people without any oppress:

Ne stiamo senza rossore appresso di lui tanto più che ci tiene per persone bone et habbiamo bisogno della persona sua più che mai, perché mentre stavammo appresso di se con bone cose e Chiesa ben visti da queste genti e con libertà di battizare in publico e solennemente personi grandi e piccoli, e simil altri progressi [8, p. 21].

To summarize the visual report of Guria, which was later sent to Rome, is the composition where each visual scene seems to be elaborated first in words. The documentation of his observations and first impressions that we can observe in the first letters sent from Gori, develop to become the part of his daily life in Guria. We can say that the Guria residence represent one of the first most interesting according his narrative style and multi scenes, where the alongside the architectural buildings the social life acquires more importance. And the textual richness which we could read into Castelli's letters, now become and take their forms into images.

Residence in Samegrelo and Routine

After the death of Malakia Gurieli, Castelli was forced to move to Samegrelo (western Georgia) to continue his missionary duty and life, and where he stayed until his departure back to Palermo. Nonetheless of freedom given by Levan Dadiani (1611-1657) and the respect, Castelli in his letters and reports often complains of the bad climate of Samegrelo and of the duties he continually receive from Levan Dadiani, to whom he refers as *Anibal de nostri tempi* [6].

The days in Samegrelo turn into a kind of routine and a lamentation of health problems. In his letters and texts, Castelli often complains about his worsening health and asks Rome to be returned back home in order to spend his last years in tranquillity and to prepare for death and final judgement. All the mentioned depicts on his texts and drawings, where Castelli refuses to describe the details, repeats the things written already, which turns to be routine. In his request to return he seems to feel the failure in the battle of spreading Catholicism in the Orient.

All his disappointments are obvious in visual report of Catholic Missionaries' Residence in Samegrelo [Image 8], very similar to the Residence in Guria in terms of composition. The narrative scenes are distributed into four divided space, which are assigned between each other with the fence. On the front-view are represented: the sale of slaves, on the left the preaching and on the right the baptizing scenes, all developing outside the fence of residence. The background depicts architectural buildings and new topics such the construction of peasant houses, while on the left flank is represented the Orthodox Church, the religious and their parish. Most of scenes are accompanied by explanatory texts in Latin and Italian.

The scene on the front-view, which unifies the sale of slaves – *Asrguunt vendentes et ementes pueros et hominos* –, and preaching, is represented into two groups, with catholic missionaries in the middle [Image 9]. The difference between the similar preaching scenes in Guria Residence is the missionary with raised hand, that express

denounce towards slave sales. The slave sales practice was frequent in Castelli's contemporary Georgia, mostly by the Georgian nobles in cooperation with Turkish and Armenian merchants:

La ricchezza del loro Principe è venderli Schiavi, à Turchi e Armeni, e con questi venduti s'ha fatto un bon thesoro. E dona per un Cavallo Turchesco quattro o cinque Figlioli e così per un veste o instrumento di guerre e per un cane mediocre diede una famiglia intera e per un altro più bello due, e questi schiavi seguono poi la fede del loro Padrone [8, p. 19].

The passage quoted above refers to the Prince of Guria and describes the goods that nobles received in exchange of selling their own peasants. However we can assume that this way of bargaining was used by the Georgian nobles in general; at the same time the figure of the Turkish merchant with the scales on the table aggravates such activity. Apparently the scene is created to highlight the slavery sales fact. It is also possible, that same advantages and deals had the nobles from Samegrelo alongside with nobles from Guria.

Taking into account the above Castelli's drawing and narratives related not only to specific noble, but can be generally considered as description of slaves' sale process. For instance on the Samegrelo Residence composition the Orthodox and Catholic churches are represented next to each other [Image 10], separated between them with fence. The separation is so natural and not distinct, that it should express the cohabitation of Orthodox and Catholics. The passages related to coexistence of mentioned two faiths, is mentioned in the letters and reports written from Guria. Catholicos Malakia II Gurieli, gave to the missionaries the church and house near his residence. Castelli, to attract the local people, painted the church with Catholic saints alongside the Orthodox saints:

[...] Vicino al Palazzo del Prencipe un piccolo sito di mano nell'istesso suo giardino con la sua prottettione, una casa à modo di convento adornata di figure sante e di così di edificatione, che non vi restò persona in questa

Provincia che non volesse vederla, e la Chiesa guarnita di picture alla greca cavate all'antichità di queste Chiese che sono nell'Oriente non poca fatica, il che dava grande conformità con essi loro e l'inducevano ad orare in Chiesa nostra com'in la propria [7, p. 20].

The visual scene which would express the above mentioned passage is not present in the Residence of Guria, but instead we see it in Samegrelo Residence, that makes us believe that Castelli sometime replace his visual and textual narratives.

* * *

Throughout this comparative study of textual and visual narratives on an identical topic, we can assume, that Castelli was elaborating the subject and then, the structure of his drawings, because as he admits in the introduction to his report, he most likely wrote up the narratives before extracting drawings out of them: *And I wrote my journey of around 25 years when I was an unworthy Missionary in the East, and outlined diligently every single thing.*

In order to confirm Castelli's words, we can see that in the case of the drawing of the first Residence in Georgia, the Residence of Gori, the composition depicts mostly the architecture (Castle, churches of different religious orders and so on), rather than narrative scenes with the locals and missionary figures involved in it. In contrast, the later residence drawings of subsequent Georgian regions are mostly dominated by narrative scenes (scenes of healing, preaching, locals at work). Here, all scenes are represented in the foreground of composition, dominating in this way, the architecture, which is mostly drawn in the middle or in the background and in perspective. In fact, these late drawings of the residences reveal more familiarity with the local customs and more intensity of contact and action in the relations between missionaries and locals.

In his texts, Castelli comments that he drew the residence of Gori because of a task received from the Persians who were interested in the description of the surroundings of Gori, although this seems to be a

justification on Castelli's part, as Castelli had just arrived in Georgia and did not yet speak the language. Thus, he might not have been able to get in touch with the locals and consequently avoided their description in drawing. Notwithstanding, the letters and reports sent simultaneously from Gori are full of descriptive texts of the new world and socio-local attitudes and can hardly hide the author's emotions and involvement, which wane in intensity in later years. The texts demonstrate Castelli's effort to understand the local people in order to elaborate the strategy of his mission and this is probably true of the drawings as well. But in later drawings, the interaction between texts and images changes noticeably: the drawings of the following residences start to become more interesting, while the texts grow less descriptive, until we reach a routine style in both text and image (Residence and texts from Samegrelo). And this is the time when Castelli's health (especially his vision) becomes worse and he asks the Congregation of Propaganda Fide to grant him the permission to return to Palermo in order to spend his last years at home, in peace.

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Illustrations:

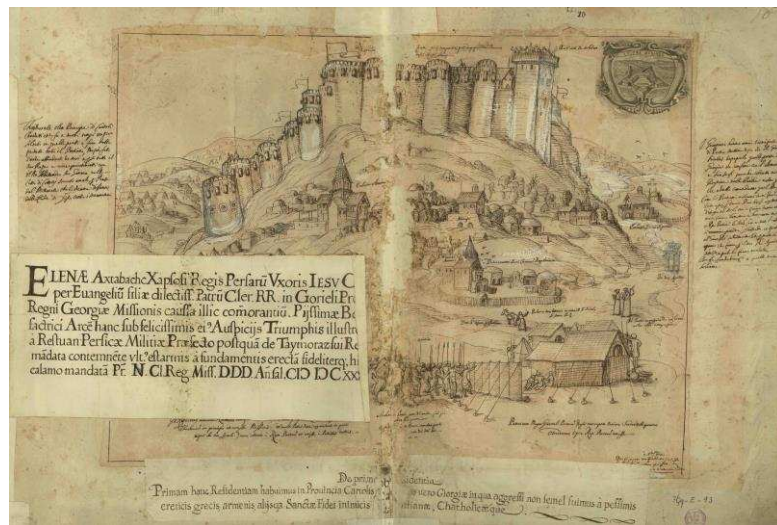
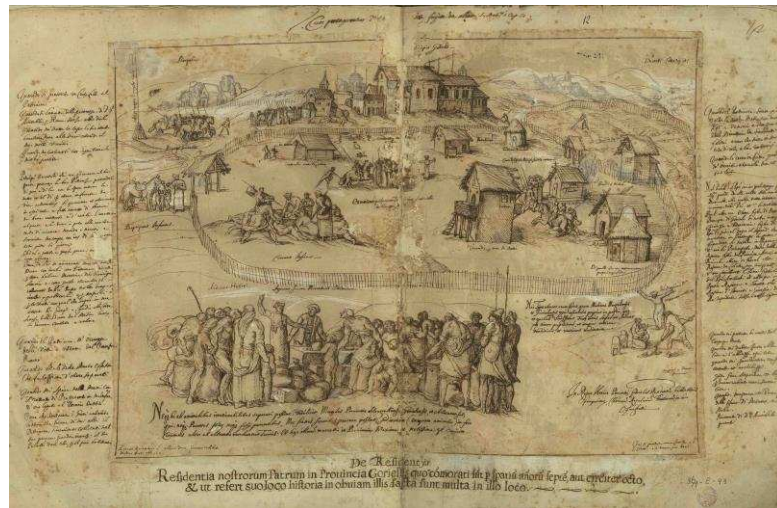


Image 1. Cristoforo De Castelli, Album II, Gori Fortress



Image 2. Cristoforo De Castelli, Album II, Theatine Missionaries [detail]



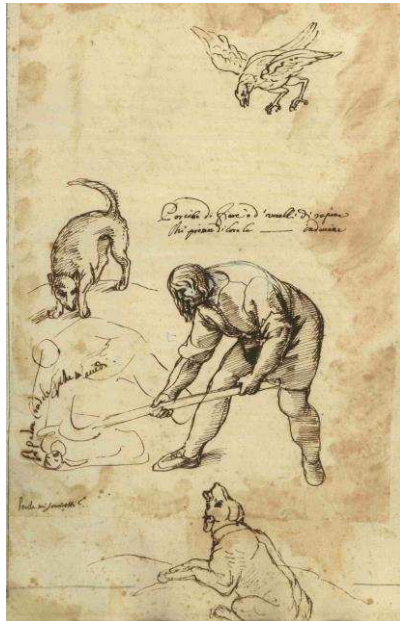


Image 5. Cristoforo De Castelli, Album III, Child Burial



Image 6. Cristoforo De Castelli, Album II, Healing [detail]

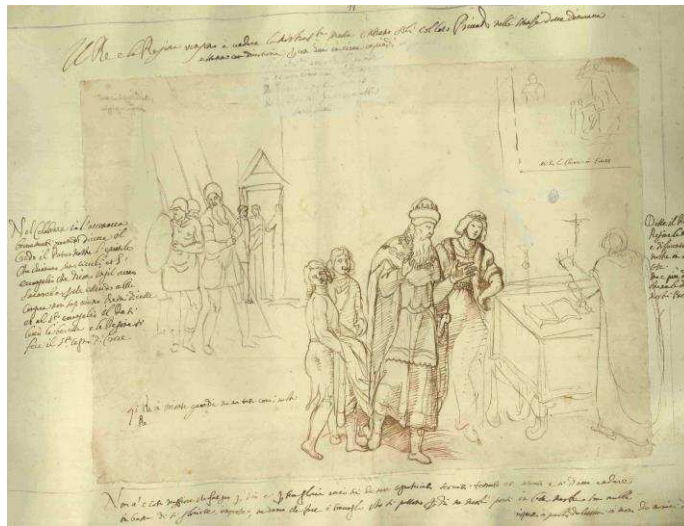


Image 7. Cristoforo De Castelli, Album I, Baptizing Georgian Prince



Image 8. Cristoforo De Castelli, Album II, Residence of Catholic Missionaries in Samegrelo



Image 9. Cristoforo De Castelli, Album II, Slave sailing [detail]

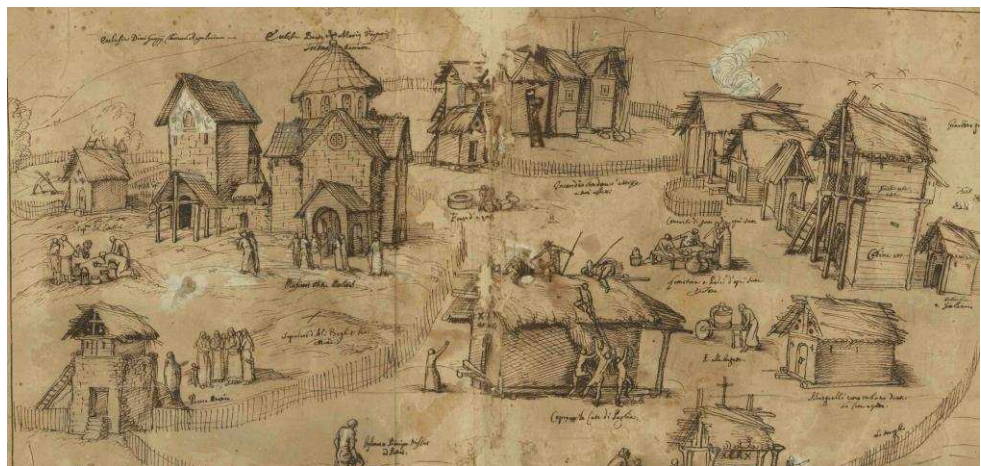


Image 10. Cristoforo De Castelli, Album II
Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Samegrelo [detail]