

## Ishkani

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Ishkani is located in the high mountainous village of the same name Işhan, overlooking once a beautiful valley of Chorokhi river. The village belongs today to the vilayet of Artvin, once being part of the historic Tao region of Medieval Georgian Kingdom. Ishkani functioned as an important ecclesiastical center until the Ottoman occupation of the region in 16-17th cc.

On the site of Ishkani the remains of a grand domed church and a small hall chapel are survived; in recent years, during the excavations of the site remains of several other churches and structures were revealed. Studies of the Ishkani started with E. Takaishvili, who visited the monument during his field survey of 1917. Ishkani was largely discussed by W. Djobadze. Ishkani became a turning point in started the studies of Georgian monuments in Turkey. Dr. Mine Kadiroglu has dedicated her Ph.D. and later a monograph to Ishkani. Ishkani became a gateway through which the Turkish scholarship later was built. Ishkani is the first Georgian site in Turkey, where the restoration works started. The restitution project was made by Anfora Mimarlik Restorasyon, and the restoration works were conducted by the firm Osman Gulsum (2012-2016), the conservation works of the frescos and the floor was made by ArkIstanbul. Since the rehabilitation of the site, it has been closed and is inaccessible for the visitors.

History of Ishkhani goes back to the VII century. According to The Life of Saint Grigol Khantsteli, written by Giorgi Merchule, Grigol together with his disciples visited the site and found the church abandoned and widowed. His nephew Sabah fall in love with the place, and came back, restored it and became the first bishop of Ishkani.

*„And when they reached the vicinities of Ishkhani, God revealed to the blessed Grigol and Saba the original greatness of Ishkhani and the holy churches of the site, and he announced to them that it would be restored again to its former state by the hand of Saba. And the trail to get there was shown to them, for at that time this place was inaccessible to man. And when they arrived in Ishkhani they were very happy to find this glorious place, because it had everything to provide both material and spiritual consolation“ (ch. 15).*

According to Giorgi Merchule, the first church in Iskhani was built by the Nerses Catholicos (640-661), who had come from Iskhani and later became the patriarch of Armenia (D. Lang, 1956:135-153). *„ By the will of God, Saba became the bishop of Ishkhani – of the main church built by the blessed catholicos Nerse [my emphasizing] – and of his throne which for many years had been widowed. Now again the spiritual wedding took place, and the church was built a second time [my emphasizing] by this blessed [Saba] with the material support of those God-imbued kings“ (ch. 26).*

The passage has commonly been interpreted in that way that the Armenian catholicos Nerses III Shinogh (641-661), who, according to Sebeos, was a native from Ishkhan, had built a church in his native town, either in the 630s, that is before he became the catholicos of Armenia, or in the 650s, during the years of his exile in his village of Ishkan. There is no single word in Armenian texts on Nerses connections with Ishkan and his construction activities here. This silence has meaning. It's obvious that for Armenians Ishkani remains as an estranged

monument- as it serves to the religious needs and values the Georgian-Armeno community of the miaphysite faith.

The main building of the site is a large cross domed church (36.60 m in length, width 19 m at the crossing; western arm 15 m. long and 9 m wide; height is about 35 m; the dome height is 11.40 m; diameter 7.86 m). Built of a yellowish sandstone of a moderate size, facades are clad with the smoothly cut stones in even rows. The tall conical roof of the dome is covered with the tiles glazed in dark red and green. Four arms were originally covered with stone slabs, but after the restoration were covered with the tiles too.

Church has a unusual planning that is the result of several reconstructions. The eastern side of the church comprises of an elevated apse surrounded with the open exedrae. The semicircular wall of the apse is covered with the conch. The apse is elevated and it comprises an open exedra. A horseshoe-shaped arcade whose arches rest on eight monolithic columns with decorated cubic capitals opens on to a rectangular ambulatory. It is a narrow corridor, that also connected to the side chambers. The rooms flanking the apse have upper stories and are open into the interior with the double arched openings.

The dome rests on four free-standing massive pillars that mark the junction of the cross. The dome is tall and covered with the blind arcade (16 niches). The western arm of a single nave is longer (16 m) than the northern and southern arms and divided in 5 equal bays with blind arcade. On the north side of the western arm is a long and darkroom, on the opposite, on the south, there are remains of several chambers, that does not exist anymore.

From the outside, the church has a cross-domed shape, typical to the architectural monuments of the Caucasus. Its facades are clad with the smoothly cut yellow sandstone, but in several parts, the existence of non-cladding (south wall of western arm) indicates, that originally the church was built in more modest quality. Ishkani is not rich with the figural reliefs, but its geometric and floral ornamentation, together with the blind arcade, that marks all facades and the drum of the dome, makes the church of an elaborate design.

The original floor (reviled and conserved 2012-16) it is made of red black and white lime was covering the whole interior with the floral and geometric ornamentation.

Church was covered with frescos, but it has survived mostly in the dome and badly on the walls of the church. The dome is covered in Lapis lazurite and comprises the Ascension of the Cross. Four massive figures of angels are floating the cross in the sky. Below this scene, repeated four times at each axis, is a two-wheeled chariot, drawn by four winged horses and driven by a standing figure. Above each chariot, there is a Georgian inscription mentioning the colors of the horses. This repetitive scene is generally accepted as depicting the "Vision of Zachariah" (6:1-6) from the Old Testament. Within the blind arcade of the drum, eight standing figures alternate with eight windows; On the arches of the window jams, there are the busts of other holy figures.

Ishkani is particularly rich with the inscriptions, that were scattered on its stone facades and also written on the plaster. The oldest inscription is over the entrance that connects the north-western chamber to the western arm. „*In chronicon RLZ (= 137) in the month of September Z (= 7) with the help of Christ and the blessing of the holy Catholic church by the*

*orders of Adarnase, King of the Georgians, our blessed Father Basil was appointed as bishop, and he served this holy church (of Ishkhani) 17 (= 19) years with outstanding dedication and in complete faith, and he entrusted his soul to God in the month of December 15 (= 26) on Friday. May Christ rest his soul, amen. After him by the orders of our glorious (and) worthy kings – may they be exalted by God – David, King of the Georgians, Ašot Kuropalates, Bagrat Magistros (and Sumbat Antipatrik) dispatched to Greece-Trebizond our honorable, worthy Father Stephane, and he was consecrated as archbishop (of Ishkhani) by the hand of the honorable and God-imbued Greek Patriarch Basil in the month of March 1 (= 1) Sunday. May God endow him benevolently with success, amen. [...]*” (translation by Djobadze, based on Takaishvili’s reading).

The second inscription which is of interest in order to clarify the building history of the cathedral of Ishkhani was located in the west arm of the cathedral. It was read by Taqaishvili in 1917. Below the portraits of three princes, who were depicted together with the military saints St George and St Theodore, were the painted inscriptions which identified them as “Adarnase Kuropalates, son of Bagrat Magistros,” “Bagrat Magistros, king of the Georgians [ქართველთა მეფე],” and “Bagrat, eristavt eristavi, son of Adarnase Kuropalates.” The group portrait thus rendered the representatives of three generations: the first mentioned Adarnase (d. 961) was the father of Bagrat, eristavt eristavi (r. 961-966), and David Kuropalates (r. 966-1000), the two princely brothers, who later founded the church at Oshki (963-973). Bagrat Magistros (d. 945), on the other hand, was the father of Adarnase Kuropalates and thus the grandfather of Bagrat, eristavt eristavi.

The third and most visible inscription is located over the porch on the south facade. The inscription is cut in beautiful letters, following the semicircular shape of the tympanum stone. The inscription was covered in red and blue paint. It reads: *„In the name of God, I, miserable Antoni, bishop of Ishkhani renovated this porch of the holy Catholic church for the glorification of kings: King Giorgi and his children, for (the) prayer for the soul of Bagrat Kuropalates, (and) for forgiveness of our sins. Holy Catholic church aid and protect us before God and be our abode during the awful day of retribution before the universal judge (so that) we can be worthy of forgiveness for our sins and of (the) benevolence of God. I beseech all entering (through) this gate to commemorate me in (your) prayers“.*

The king mentioned in the first line of the inscription and in its main corpus is the anti-Byzantine Georgian king Giorgi I (r. 1014-1027), the son of Bagrat Kuropalates, first king of the united kingdoms of Georgia (1008-1014). Giorgi’s enduring political conflict with the Byzantine emperors Basil II (r. 976-1025) and Constantine VIII (r. 1025-1028) explains why he is mentioned without any of the customary Byzantine honorary titles.

Another important inscription is made on the upper part of the same facade, around the large window and its decoration. In analogy to the inscription of the south portal, the first line is carved onto the profiled brow above the window opening, while the rest of the inscription is carved onto the stone facing to the right of the window. Altogether, the inscription reads:

*„In the name of God, I, Antoni, archbishop of Ishkhani, renovated and completed this temple of God, the Catholic church for (the) glorification for Bagrat Kuropalates, for prayer and for the commemoration of my soul and for the forgiveness of my sins. Chronicon was SNB (= 252). And I built (this church) with the hand of Iovane Morčaisdze“.*

The inscriptions discussed above together with the architectural remains give us a general idea of the different stages in the construction of the cathedral of Ishkhani that stretched over a long time. They enable us to establish the following relative chronology.

Taqaishvili who visited the monument in a more complete state in 1917 believed that the eastern exedra was a remnant of an early tetraconch building. This conclusion was based on several factors. According to *The Life of Saint Grigol Khantsteli*, written by Giorgi Merchule, the first church in Iskhan was built by the Nerses Catholicos (640-661), who had come from Işhan and later became the patriarch of Armenia (D. Lang, 1956:135-153). The second factor Işhani has an open exedra on its eastern side, the motif of which characterizes Zuart’noc Cathedral, a famous memorial building in Armenia built by Nerses; The established fact dating the eastern exedra of Işhani to the 7th c was correctly rejected by Dr. M. Kadiroğlu in her monograph dedicated to Işhani (M. Kadiroğlu,1991:55). Dr. Kadiroglu argues that the Işhani exedra comes from the second building period of late 9th and early 10th cc., though the pillars may have been reused from the 7th c church. Nicole Thierry, who has analyzed the remaining wall paintings of Ishkhani, including those of its dome, arrived at the conclusion that the entire interior of the cathedral must have been embellished with wall paintings during the second half of the tenth century. If this is correct, this would mean that the construction works that were carried out in the 950s and early 960s concerned not only the west arm of the church but the entire structure of the cathedral as we know it now. Consequently, its interior must have been completed before 966, the year when Bagrat, eristavt eristavi, died. Since it in several important points resembles the contemporary church at Oshki (963-973), founded by Bagrat, eristavt eristavi, and his brother David Kuropalates, a construction date around 960 for the cathedral at Ishkhani seems not at all unlikely.

If the main shape and the scale of the church were created during David’s times, the embellishment of it took place when Anton became a bishop. He was responsible for the coverage of all facades with the beautiful cladding, adding the porch and richly decorated moldings, he must be behind the floor that according to the parallel material is dated as of the 11th c.

Opposite of the main church, on the south, stands a small chapel, with a plain facades and with the richly decorated porch, that mentions the Georgian King Gurgen and the year of construction, 1003. The date is given in Armenian letters. The small chapel has a fresco painting, that shows a scene of communion in the apse wall and Christ Pantocrator in the conch.

During the rehabilitation works a large number of churches were revealed. There was a small basilica, two hall churches and a number of monastic structures.

Number of burials were discovered, mostly from the medieval period, also from the times of Russian-Turkish war, when the church was used for worship by thy Russian troops.

Later, within the Turkish rule, the mosque was open in its western arm. Today, the church is closed and not accessible for visitors. The reason is a floor: the problem of how to make the interior accessible and save the original floor remains unsolved.

Ishkhani with its unique architecture, decoration, amazing mural paintings and inscriptions was always been considered as an outstanding monument of Georgian history and culture, a monument that deserves acknowledgment as an important piece of the world's heritage.

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