

## **Khandzta Monastery**

In the late eighth century St. Gregory initiated a large monastic movement in Klarjeti region. After he spend two years in Opiza monastery, St Gregory in around 782 established his first monastery here (Khandzta, Shatberdi, Nunneries – Gunatle, Mere; Ubisi – in west Georgia). During the centuries this monastery was the most important centre in Klarjeti, it was some kind of principal base of monastic colonies in this region. As V. Djobadze characterizes the monastery, “*it was destined to revive once again the national identity of Georgia by mobilizing its spiritual forces against the Arab overlords*”.

The complex consists of several buildings, from which some are in ruins: the main church dedicated to St George, Bell-tower, ruins of a refectory, a tiny chapels and three rectangular cells in three stories. On the west there are a spring and a small barrel-vaulted chapel above it, which according to V. Djobadze should have been built in 820s. On the outside of the monastic enclosure, on the southwest (some three hundred meters) of the monastery on top of a hill there are three small barrel-vaulted chapels. When in 1904 Niko Marr visited the monastery, he described several buildings which now no longer exist: he identified the seminary or library, storage rooms and other subsidiary buildings on three layered terraces, as well as winepress on the southwestern side.

The first church, constructed by St Gregory, as well as cells for monks and refectory were built with wood. In the 820-s the wooden church was replaced by the masonry church with the material support of a local nobleman Gabriel Daphanchuli. Since then this monastery became a resting place for Daphanchuli family, but only for male descendants of Gabriel Daphanchuli; as for women, they were buried in Gunatle nunnery (Shavsheti). The Vita of St Gregory keeps numerous interesting information including the description of rules for the everyday, monastic and liturgical life in the monastery. According to the Vita, while working on monastic rules, Gregory of Khandzta asked a friend who was on his way to Jerusalem to write down the Sabaite rule/Typikon and bring it back to Georgia. In about 826 Gregory’s friend handed him „*The Rule of Mar Saba*“, according to which Gregory compiled his own. This story described in the Vita once again shows how closely Georgia was connected to the Holy Land and especially to the monasteries established by Sabas. In the Vita this description occupies important part of the text, part of the text below vividly illustrates everyday life of monks: „*During the first days of our Blessed Father Gregory, the typicon for his disciples was very strict. There was a small bed within their cells, a few meager items, and a vessel for water, whereas there was nothing else to give comfort to the flesh, neither food nor drink. They only*

*received sustenance when they ate together at trapeza, this was how they lived. Many of them did not drink wine at all and those who did, only partook of a little bit. They did not have a fireplace in their cells, because fires were not lit, neither did they light a candle at night. Instead the night was spent in Psalmody and the day was spent reading books”.*

From the early tenth century, a new wave of construction activity started in the region caused by the increased number of monks on the one hand, and by the growing power of their donors on the other. In 910s and 920s the monastery of Khandzta underwent significant renewal, commissioned by the member of the royal family Ashot III Kukhi, when in 918 Ashot died, the main church still was not finished and it was completed by Gurgen Duke of Dukes, a nephew of Ashot. Another quotation from the Vita of Gregory regarding the construction of the church: *„Through Arseni’s (Arseni was an abbot of the monastery) initiative, the new and beautiful church was started upon a bare, uncompromising cliff. After much time they cleared a place through extensive labor with rock and mortar, made all the preparations for construction, until it was completely built. May Christ bless Amona, the wise builder and all those who helped, through whom the church was victoriously built. Men brought rock and mortar on their backs from a great distance upon a difficult path. “*

The church built by the architect named Amona is one of the outstanding monuments in terms of artistic and technical quality. The church is an inscribed-cross structure with a dome supported by apse projections on the east and two free-standing piers on the west. The facades of the main volume remain plain, while the dome is more elaborated. Geometrically crystallized octagonal shape of the drum is vivified not only by the decorative arches on double colonnettes, but also by the broken line of cornice and the roofing in the form of a half-opened umbrella. When V. Djobadze studied the church he noticed the well-preserved purple pigments on the double colonnettes, based on which he suggested that these collonettes were painted in purple.

*“Amona obviously was aware of and respected the architecture of the previous times, for this church he applied graded scheme of the squinch system with three rows of squinches, which never appears after the 7<sup>th</sup> c in Georgia and its neighboring countries. A tall octagonal drum is erected above four big squinches. In the upper corners of the drum we have eight smaller squinches and above them 16 diminutive ones are made. This reminiscence witnesses for Amona’s knowledge and appreciation of classical forms rather than for his conservatism”* (D. Khoshtaria). The church was painted at some point, from which only few fragments has survived.

So the Khandzta monastery, namely the main church of St George “*turned out to be hotbeds of new architectural ideas. Amona, as the “builder with great wisdom” constructed the church which heralds new developments in the architecture of the region. It shows that the previous humble churches built of roughly cut stone corresponded no more to the aspirations of the time. With a lots of novelties, such as the blind arches on the drum and the broken line of cornice, wide omega shaped adornments above the windows, the church is considered as a predecessor not only of Opiza and Doliskana churches, but the churches built by David Kurapalate in Tao*” (D. Khoshtaria).

On the south of the main church there is remains of the **refectory**, presumably also built by Amona. This was a rectangular structure divided into two equal parts by four pairs of cruciform piers bearing five pairs of arches. The only entrance to the refectory was from the north side directly facing the southern door of the main church. Underneath the refectory there is a basement storey, perhaps a room used as a kitchen. Between the church and the refectory a tiny church and cells are erected, dated back to the 10<sup>th</sup> c. Such planning of the two most important buildings (church and refectory) of the monastery should have been determined by the regulation/typicon of the monastery. Typically refectories are situated to the west, south and north of the main church and doors of the church and refectory are facing each other. 13<sup>th</sup> c. Typicon from Shiomgvime monastery, as well as some other typicons of different monasteries in Byzantine, describe the procession which took place after the conducting the divine liturgy. According to the typicons after conducting a service the monks were gathered near the door of the church and headed to the refectory, chanting the Psalm (Psalm 144, 1-7). The monks took seats in accordance with a hierarchy and the meal was served. Then the reader would begin to read texts from the Gospel or from the lives of saints and the brethren would start having meal. After the meal, the reader was obliged to clean up plates and dishes, and the cook had to put leftovers in a basket. Then some prayers were read and afterwards the monks left the dining hall.

Apparently, the above-described regulations that required the monks to collect near the door of the church after holding a service and follow together to the refectory, determined the location of a church and a refectory in the monastery. This procession meant that the church and the refectory should be situated close to each other, in a way that the monks could walk freely from one building to the other.

On the west we have two-story **bell tower**, which must have been built in the fourth decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. On the walls of the bell-tower there are two inscriptions, which mention the builders of it: hieromonk Markoz, Anton and stone masons Abesalma Kldeli, Kamiri,

Kazani and Msakhura. Markoz, mentioned in the inscription is the same person who is also mentioned in the Sinai Georgian Synodikon, that is the Sinai commemorative Chronicle, as „builder of the Bell-tower in Khandzta“. According to Synodikon, Markoz from Klarjeti, in about 1545 moved from Khandzta to Sinai (in the monastery of St Ekaterine).

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