

Dr. Thomas Kaffenberger

University of Fribourg, Switzerland

Kumurdo

The church of Kumurdo takes up a special role in the development of Georgian architecture, as much due to its unique spatial layout as to its – attested – early building date of 964, mentioned in the inscription of the main portal tympanum.

“With God's help, the bishop Iovane laid the foundation of this church by my hand - of the sinful Sakostari, in the time of King Leon - may he be glorified by God - in koronikon 184 [=964 CE] the first of May, Saturday, at the new moon, when Zvia was eristavi; this foundation was laid by him. Christ be a fellow fighter to your slave, amen.”

A second inscription, placed on the eastern façade, once more secures God's mercy for the Bishop Iovane. It must be one of the largest and most visible ones in medieval Georgia: the bishop made sure that his memory would remain present for beholders centuries to come.

Original structure of the 10th century

The church built under Iovane appeared cruciform from the outside, with short cross arms to the north and south, a slightly longer one to the east and an even longer but narrower one to the west. A dome surmounted the crossing, today missing. This seemingly simple spatial structure hides a very complex inner disposition, in a way typical for Georgian architecture from the late 10th century onwards. A hexagonal dome bay is surrounded by lateral apses and a variety of divided spaces in the West and East. The internal tripartition of the eastern parts of the church is perhaps the most common element; the elongated central bay with apse flanked by pastophoria is known since the 7th century and becomes ubiquitous under the Bagratides.

Exterior

In consequence, the eastern façade with the large inscription can be integrated quite easily into the large group of buildings with a straight façade interrupted by triangular niches, marking the space between the apses. Here, the niches are much higher than the central window, (unlike, for example, the early example of Tsromi), but there are no blind arcades decorating the surface (as in Oshki and many other places). Emphasis is put on the decorative value of the excellently carved, pink stones (everything in grey is part of the 1930s and 1970s restoration campaigns). Shallow cross reliefs and ornaments decorate the smaller windows, while the central window possesses an unusual double frame which integrates figures of the evangelist symbols on both sides. It is remarkable that the architect used a dark red stone for certain elements such as a cross in the gable, which is not made as a relief but nevertheless becomes visible through the colour effect.

The lateral facades follow the same system, but as they hide only two apses – as we will see on the inside - , there is consequently only one triangular niche in the middle of each façade, flanked by windows (with the more ancient type of hood moulds).

All that rests of the western cross arm exterior is the (later added) surrounding porch.

Interior

Unlike the exterior suggests, the interior is a centralized space, once dominated by the dome. The dome rests on six piers, which form a hexagonal crossing bay. The lateral cross arms are divided in two axis by the lateral piers of the hexagonal dome bay. Behind their straight exterior walls, two apses on each side are hidden. This combination of hexagonal dome bay and “radial” apses is usually connected with the group of centralized multi-apsidal churches such as Bochorma (10th c) or Katskhi (11th c). The only church with a vaguely similar plan (even if closer to the model of Katskhi) is the cathedral of Nikortsminda, also of the 11th century.

The western cross arm is largely destroyed today. Older drawn reconstructions suggest that it had a U-shaped tribune running along lateral and western walls. This would have found parallels in the early solution of Tsromi, with its “emperor tribune”, or the later example of Bagrati Cathedral in Kutaisi, to name just a few. At the same time, the presence of aisles and a tribune in the nave is a distinctive factor if for example compared to Oshki, built right around the same time. There the western arm is indeed also narrower than the choir, but not divided by piers or filled with a tribune.

The system of vaulting appears rather straightforward in Kumurdo. Barrel vaults surround the central dome. The six piers which carry the dome are of simple polygonal shape; only above the capital a system of stepped moulded arches and responds is developed. Similar piers appear in Oshki – there only the eastern pair of the four dome piers. The transition to the dome is made possible with small stepped squinches inserted into larger pendentives. The function of the squinches is not so much to create a transition from polygon to circle (of the dome) but rather to house sculptures [here: Queen Gurandukt, mother of Bagrat III and King Leon]. We know little about the destroyed dome. Of the drum remains the lowest layer, including odd niches with a cusped arch. Could these be additions of the attested 16th century remodeling [inscription above the precinct portal?]? This would mean that, similar to other large Georgian churches, the dome had already been destroyed a first time during the Middle Ages.

Of the barrel vaults the choir one is best preserved. It shows one remarkable element, the transversal arch resting on corbels placed high above the ground – instead of the more common stepped wall piers. This raises questions for the possible reconstruction of the nave: did the vault arches rest on protruding stepped piers there or were the piers flush with the rest of the wall - then a similar solution as in the choir would be thinkable for the vault.

The drawn reconstruction proves to be somewhat contradictory: while the lower piers indeed are not stepped, the upper, tribune ones carry the wall piers under the transversal arches – thought in 3d, this is practically impossible, as the upper piers would protrude over the lower ones. In consequence, it appears that one of the distinctive features of Kumurdo church is the use of corbels instead of wall piers, giving preference to undisturbed surfaces (for the application of paintings?) also on the inside.

Southern Porch

One of the most interesting features of Kumurdo Cathedral is the southern porch. It seems to be one of the earliest examples of a porch placed in front of the southern portal (and not alongside the western cross arm), which has the shape of an individual chapel with own eastern apse. The origins are open – perhaps it was inspired by solutions such as that of Samshwilde (before 777), where a pastophoria-like chapel was placed at the eastern end of the southern porch wing. Later, in the 11th and 12th century, these chapel-porches become widespread and often, as in Manglisi take the shape of a miniature dome-hall church with a figured umbrella vault marking the central “domed” bay. In Kumurdo, the porch only consists of a square bay, a small barrel vault and the apse to the east, as well as an even more miniature version of the same spatial concept forming a chapel in the wall strength between porch and church. It is not certain how the spare

bay way vaulted. Squinches with small angel figures remain in the east, but if they supported a rounded dome as in the main church or filled the corners of a vault similar to the ones of the Oshki porch, has to remain open.

The function of such porches is still not entirely clear, but the apse, together with the prothesis-like side chamber, speaks for a liturgical or ceremonial use of the space. A key to the interpretation of the space's function might be the many inscriptions, studied by Antony Eastmond. That of the portal tympanon has been mentioned before. In the centuries after the church was built, numerous commemorative inscriptions were added around the foundation inscription, occupying primarily the northern wall around the main portal. They mention feast days fixed in honour of probably local noblemen – according to Eastmond containing an almost legal character in announcing the consequences (before God), should the feast not be celebrated in the intended way. Again according to Eastmond, the careful graphic layout as well as ostentatious placement would make the inscriptions some kind of “textual icon”, an object “serving as representation of truth with access to the divine”. We must thus assume that the liturgical use of those porch-chapels was strongly connected to questions of personal memory and preoccupation for the afterlife – perhaps as placement for an altar, where masses for the deceased would be held.

A parallel case for this is Manglisi, where the porch-chapel contains inscriptions of similar content and sometimes almost identical formulation – yet, they are decisively less elaborately carved. Would this contradict Eastmond's interpretation? Apparently, there, some decades later, the visual quality was losing importance and the focus was laid on the content conveyed by the texts. Also, in Manglisi several inscriptions of similar content appear in entirely different locations, such as on the outer church walls or on the outside of the porch. Was this choice made in a hope for better visibility, compared to the dark interior of a porch chapel? Many questions remain open.

Western Porches – Expansion of the 11th century

In any case, the topic of porches remained an important one. In the 11th century, under Bagrat IV, the western cross arm was surrounded by a large U-shaped porch, a feature present in Georgian architecture throughout the medieval period (presumably once developed from the type of the Late Antique “Dreikirchenbasilika”). The porch was richly decorated with blind arcades resting on slender double colonettes, typical for the architecture of the Bagratide period. The two central arches of the southern porch wing were entirely open towards the outside, again a very common solution for most porches alongside the nave or western cross arm; similarly common the fact that it possessed its own apse as well.

An interesting feature is the building inscription that runs along the entire porch below the stringcourse. Large inscriptions in this area of the building are rare, but at the same time geographically widespread during the 10th to 12th centuries: for example there is one in Cufic letters at Hosios Loukas in Greece, a number of examples adorning Fatimid Mosques in modern Egypt and a late one, in Greek letters, at the Martorana church in Palermo from the mid-12th century.

Sculpture - Royal Images

Apart from the Evangelists of the Eastern window and the hard-to-interpret heads in the triangular façade niches, it is in particular the two reliefs from the dome squinches, which attract interest. The female figure is identifiable as Queen Gurandukt, mother of Bagrat III, through an inscription. It was through her that Bagrat III received Abkhazeti and was able to unify Georgia.

The man opposite does not possess an inscription. It might be that it is her brother King Leon III. According to Eastmond, the reliefs are the only example for royal imagery of the kings of Abkhaseti.

Planned Reconstruction

Even if the ruin already contains considerable parts of replaced masonry, reconstruction works are supposed to continue, much as in the case of Bagrati Cathedral. This caused controversy, as the church is contested between the Armenian and the Georgian church. Furthermore, the reconstruction of dome and western cross arm cannot rely on evidence but will be a complete invention. In the choice of forms for these parts, it is well possible to reach a falsification, making it stylistically lean more towards the 11th century Bagratid stylistic idiom than underlining the transitional status (geographically and temporally) that the church indeed has. In particular the dome is a problem: in following the proposition of Chubinashvili, the reconstruction plan shows a dome drum with a large blind arcade, much alike for example the one of Ishkhani, but also similar to the other 11th century dome drums, which we still have. However, as explained, Kumurdo has a very specific preference for unarticulated surfaces – can we nevertheless expect this kind of decoration for the dome (as is the case in Manglisi), or would the dome not rather have followed the principles of the lower façade zones?