

Murals at Oshki Church

In 1917, during the expedition organized under the direction of Ekvtime Taq'aishvili in historical Tao-Klarjeti, already special attention was given to the church of Oshki. Taq'aishvili gave a brief description of the frescoes surviving in the church and deciphered also the fragmentary donor inscription running along the painted band that divided the two registers of figures below the conch of the main apse.

Foundation and Date

The church in the small village of Camliyamac, is dedicated to St. John the Baptiste and had been built under the patronage of the rulers of the Tao-Klarjeti Kingdom, **Bagrat the Magistros** (d. 966) and **David III Curopalates** (who ruled from 958 to 1001) in 963-976. David was greatly respected at the court of Constantinople as an important ally of the Byzantine Empire against Arab domination, first as a military supporter of Nicephoros Phocas and later of Basil II, against the rebellious Barda Skelleros. David was widely regarded as the mastermind behind the unification of Georgia, a process finalised 1022 under king David IV.

Given the scale and magnificence of Oshki Church, and its refined sculptural decoration, we must regard this monument as conveying the key artistic aims of the period. It is the crucial projects of the ambitious rulers of Tao-Klarjeti. More than twenty inscriptions survive from Oshki. Of these, the principal foundation inscription is to be found painted over the main entrance to the church in the south transept. This extensive text states that the church was built by Bagrat, eldest of the aristav, and his brother Davit III Magistratos, the two sons of Adarnase II. It goes on to detail the costs and construction methods of the building. Bagrat and Davit are mentioned together or individually in at least six other inscriptions and a further two commemorate the Byzantine emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII. These date from the 1020s, when Oshki was in the Byzantine-controlled theme of Iberia. All the inscriptions indicate the importance of Oshki to the rulers of this region.

Inscriptions

The exact dates of the building can be established from two other inscriptions. The first of these, on a stone reused in a later building states that the church was begun on the Feast of the Annunciation, 963, and the second, on the east façade of the church, claims that it was completed within ten years. The first inscription also gives the date of Bagrat's death as October 2, 966, indicating that much of the work must have been carried out by Davit alone. The church was still unfinished. The two Georgian rulers appear together twice at Oshki, once on the exterior and once inside the church in relief. This makes Oshki one of the few securely dated medieval churches in Tao-Klarjeti.

According to another inscription the frescoes in the apse were executed with the donation of **Jojik the Patrikos**, in *koronikon snv*, i. e. in 1036.¹ This painted inscription is among the image of church fathers in the main apse.

"... I have restored to grandeur and have painted the church of the blessed Forerunner, at the expense of Jojik, patrikos, of charitable soul. My God bless and protect him. Kornik'on was 256 (= 1036) of the Greeks..."

¹ Only small fragments of the inscription have survived. For the English translation: Eastmond 1998, 232.

The paintings of 1036 adorned the entire interior of the church. However, over the past century most of these frescoes, which already survived only at separate fragments, have been lost.

Oshki appears to have been not only a sizable monastery but also an administrative centre of the rulers of Tao-Klarjeti as well. But almost nothing of the secular structures has survived. Aside from the main church, a few monastic buildings have been preserved. Some 50 m northeast of the church are the ruins of the refectory, with adjacent seminary and scriptorium. And on the hill about 30 m north of the church may have been the residence of the bishop. A church of such dimensions must have had quarters for the clergy and visitors, a bath, warehouse, and administrative building, all of which may have perished.

Architecture

The church as a three-stepped platform – traditional for Georgian architecture – and is built with squared and smoothly finished yellowish limestone blocks. The dimensions of the churches increased in the second half of the 10th century. The church in Oshki is a complex, richly decorated, and spacious structure whose interior length without its west annexe is 41, 60 m. Its width equals 27 m, and its height reaches 34 m. Also, a new architectural type evolved. Typologically, it is a triconch, cruciform plan in which the dome is supported by four freestanding piers. The dome is circular and the 24-sided drum has 12 windows openings. The transition from the square bay to the circular base of the drum is accomplished by means of pendentives, which are almost completely covered by huge squinches. These are not functional here and serve merely to adorn the pendentives. Together with the high decorated bases of the piers, they play a significant role in the interior decoration. The columns creating an extra bay in front of each arm. Behind each column and between the corners there are four spaces having a square form on the plan. From these spaces' doors are leading to the side chambers. The east-, north-, and southarms of the church are terminated by semi-circular apses, while the westarm consists of a long barrel-vaulted, latin-cross nave. The Western arm is flanked with long naves from both sides, on the south there is an open gallery, when on the north there is a dark room. The apse and transepts terminate in conches with side chapels in two storeys (the galleries are now almost destroyed). In Oskhi there are six chambers on the ground floor and six chambers above them. The upper storey rooms are much traditional in Georgian architecture. But there is no single church in the Georgian architecture to have such amount of the rooms. The side-chambers and upper-storey rooms did not exist for structural and aesthetic reasons alone. The majority of them had apses and niches showing that they were intended for liturgical use. Some of them could indeed have been private oratories, while others might have been chapels dedicated to the commemoration of a saint whose relics were kept in them. There is no indication of what kind of relics were kept in Oskhi. The interior of the church can be accessed through three entrances made in the western, northern and southern arms. The latter that serves as the main entrance has a square domed porch. The architecture of Oshki shows that in the 10th century the organization of interior masses becomes more complex. In the domed church, the centre of the crossing moved closer to the apse by the elongation of the westarm, the remnant of a basilica plan, which effects an important change in perception of interior space, by evoking a greater sense of monumentality. It is a kind of combination of triconch with inscribed cross type building. Such combination of different architectural structures enabled the architect to enlarge the space of the building.

The remaining blocks in the east apse suggest that originally here, in the middle of the wall, may have been the bishop's throne. There are no traces of any church furnishings left in the apse or in any other part of the church.

This architectural type became a model for the following cathedrals of Medieval Georgia. So, Kutaisi as the closest parallel.

A tripartite, underground, barrel-vaulted chamber, which extends from the south wall of the west crossarm to the south, is now filled with refuse. Taq'aishvili found in it the remains of human bones indicating that it was a crypt in which members of the ruling Bagrationi family may have been buried.

The oldest Murals

The second half of the tenth century is characterized as a time of building large cathedrals throughout Georgia. Their scale suggests that none of them was originally entirely painted. It is proposed that originally only separate parts (presumably the dome, apse and some parts of the walls) may have been painted. So the adoption and adaptation of the Byzantine complete system of church painting was not considered an urgent task in Georgia at that time, as it was well shown by Zaza Skhirladze.

The interior decoration of Oshki in the decades from the 970s has remained unclear. On the drum of the dome are painted crosses. They display a great range of formal variations. Some of the crosses resemble contemporary processional crosses.

The south pastophorium of the church shows the traditional composition of the glorification of the Lord that was widespread throughout the early-medieval Christian East. Christ on a throne set with gems, surrounded by a mandorla, is flanked on both sides by archangels clad in patrician robes set with precious stones, and by tetramorphs standing on fiery wheels. The lower register separated from the conch by a band of simple geometric ornament, comprises a row of medallions and the frontal figures. In the centre, above the window, are the three medallions: the central one bears the image of the cross embellished with precious stones, while the other two feature half-figures of saints. On the walls of the apse a row of standing apostles was represented on both sides of medallions: seven to the north, and five to the south. The gestures of the apostles vary: the first has his right hand raised in benediction in front of the chest: only the upper part of the halo has survived from the second and third figures; the fourth holds a closed book in his hand; the fifth holds an open book with a nine-line, partially damaged text. The sixth probably also held an open book. Of the figures represented on the south half, only the heads and insignificant fragments of the haloes of the first three figures survive. The last image of this row has survived the best: the upper half of the figure of a beardless young apostle, with his right hand extended forward.

The geometric ornaments preserved on the triumphal arch of the apse, and the fragments of the two scenes, on the south slope of the vault, as well as the traces of painting elsewhere in the space indicate that the interior of the chamber was completely painted.

The scene on the south wall, presented against a classical-type architectural background, probably with Christ to the left, might be a scene of a miracle of healing. A fragment of a composition immediately above it resembles the Annunciation by its scheme, with an angel depicted in the left part.

The style of painting is different from the painting that survives elsewhere in the interior, and bears the artistic features seen in paintings created at monastic artistic centres of the ninth-

tenth centuries. This dating is supported by the palaeography of the inscriptions in Georgian *asomtavruli* script, which is close to the calligraphy of tenth-century manuscripts.²

All this suggests that originally only separate parts may have been painted. The practice of fully adorning the church interior with fresco images in Georgia must have become finally established from the first decades of the 11th century.

The Stelae

Two funeral stelae came to light in the passage of the pastophorium from the south apse 2003. There is an inscription on the eastern wall of the south-east chapel that refers to its connection to Bagrat the Magistros. It was ascertained that the stelae bore portraits of the Tao rulers – King David and his brother Bagrat, together with the Virgin and St. John the Baptist. 16 Georgian *asomtavruli* inscriptions were recorded on both stelae, based on which they were dated to the 966-973. Thus, precisely this section must have been the burial place of the donor-builders of the church. This supposition is supported by the fact that the principal donor image was placed on the south façade of the chapel – a large-scale relief image of the Deesis flanked by the figures of Bagrat the Magistros and David the Curopalates in imperial robes.

The Paintings of 1036

Jojik was a Georgian nobleman of high standing, honoured with the dignity of Patrikios, who served as strategos in Dorystolon. Of Jojik's decoration little survives. Some church fathers stand in the apse, and some fragmentary scenes exist in the south conch. The painting of the huge, vast apse incorporated the image of Christ enthroned between two archangels in the conch, below it the orant Virgin and St. John the Baptist between two rows of the Apostles, and finally the figures of Church Fathers and deacons.

For a long time, the south apse of the church had been converted into a mosque by local residents. The fragmentary painting, still visible while the mosque stood, was fully revealed at the structure's demolition in the early 1980s. The main composition occupies the middle register of the central section of the apse, between the two windows and over the main door. The heads and shoulders of three figures are now lost, but their identities can be established from the surviving fragments, as well as Taquaisvilis photographs of 1917. It is certainly not an ordinary Deesis, as the photo shows the torso and face of the right-hand figure, in which it is clearly a man in secular dress. John the Baptist stood in the centre, holding a scroll inscribed in Georgian (John 1:29), with an unidentifiable bishop wearing an omophorion to his right with and a secular figure to his left, who wears a mantle clasped at the breast and a tall turban. This could represent the donor, Jojik patrikios.

To the left, the entire length of the eastern wall of the apse must have displayed a large, multi-figure scene of the Crucifixion, of which only fragments at present. Of the depiction only the lower right part, showing the mourning apostle John, the centurion (holding a shaft rather than a lance), the one with the sponge, and the group of men who are shown in the moment of terror whilst they recognise the Son of God (Matt 27, 54) survives. The figures are rendered with an astonishing degree of empathy and expressivity.

The composition represented to the right of the central scene, on the western wall, is also fragmentary, it shows two groups of secular figures approaching the cathedral of Bana in Tao, which is identified in an inscription. Behind Bana is Davit *kuropalates'* foundation of Ottxa Eklesia (now Dört kilise in Turkey), which is also named in an inscription. Although nothing survives to link this scene with the Bagrationis, a royal scene remains the most likely subject for such a contemporary secular depiction. The cathedral of Bana was one of the principal

² Skhirtladze 2010, 108.

royal churches of Tao. It was used for the coronation of Bagrat IV in 1027 and his marriage to Helena, a niece of the Byzantine emperor Romanos III Agyros in 1032. To underscore the importance of this marriage, the Byzantine princess was set off on her journey to the South Caucasus in company with an important icon and a nail from the true Cross. It is not known, where the relic, to which the Georgians developed a great attachment, was kept, but the depiction of the ceremony in front of the cathedral at Bana in the south apse of Oshki commemorated its arrival to Tao.

Since the wall paintings were added to Oshki in 1036, it is reasonable to assume that the scene commemorates one of these important royal events.

As Eastmond has well shown, to place such a royal scene level with a Christological scene suggests that it was designed to carry great weight in the overall scheme, extolling the grandeur of the Bagrationis and their alliance with the Byzantine throne. Its location by the main entrance to the church only adds to its prominence.

Narrative depictions of a royal event are very unusual in Byzantine ecclesiastical monumental art. Given the state of the wall painting, it is impossible to come to any firm conclusion about its content. However, the location and size and the scene show that in the 1030s the promotion of the Bagrationis could dominate the decorative scheme of a church. Since Oshki had been under Byzantine control from the 1020s until 1034, as two surviving inscriptions in the church show, this image could have played an important role in the reassertion of Bagrationi rule in the region and in the propagation of its links with the Byzantine imperial family.

The windows jambs between the three scenes contain the remains of images of two women saints, Marina and Thekla.

The niche in the eastern face of the north-west pillar appears also to have had paintings and reliefs, but these images have been purposefully damaged.

The niche in the south-west pillar supporting the dome of the church – the special place of the *erismtavaris* – is also painted. The large-scale figure of Christ in the niche is flanked on both sides with half-figures of the founders, each accompanied by long painted inscriptions written in old Georgian uncial script inscriptions mention the Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist. The style of the painting points to its execution in the 1030s.

Conclusion

The designers of Oshki had two interrelated aims: to build a church of great scale and high artistic quality, adorning it with highly refined reliefs, ornaments, painted graphic images, and extended inscriptions; and to apply frescoes only to those individual sections with liturgical, memorial or some other function. The complete painting of the south-east chapel must be linked to its funerary role. As a result, its creator never set themselves the task of decorating the entire interior with frescoes.

The later, nonroyal patronage of the paintings and the prominence of the image of Jojik Patrikios demonstrate the importance of members of the aristocracy in the promotion of the royal family at this time.

Oshki had a particularly rich monastic life, producing a large amount of manuscripts. Oshki monastery is a manifestation of the cultural, political and spiritual strength of medieval Georgia.

The following literature served as a basis for this overview of the monastery

Bibliographie

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