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Oshki Sculptures

The history of the Oshki church of St. John the Baptist, built between 963 and 973 in Tao, is closely linked with the 1000-year-old dynasty of Georgian kings – the Bagratians. The “Kingdom of the Georgians”, in academic literature also known as the Tao-Klarjeti region, became a refuge for the Bagratians, who were forced to leave Kartli at the end of 8th century, after the creation of the Tbilisi Caliphate by the Arabs. The Bagratians turned Tao-Klarjeti into the cultural and ecclesiastical center of Georgia with a new capital – Artanuji. At the same time, the Georgian kings formed a political alliance with the neighboring Byzantine Empire against common Arabian enemies. The close political and cultural relations with Byzantium were also conditioned by the single orthodox faith. Although within the sphere of Byzantine influence, the Georgian rulers also wished to emphasize their own dynastic power. Therefore, in a region remote from Mtskheta (the spiritual capital of Kartli), a new royal ideology was formed based both on Byzantine culture and the old traditions of the Kingdom of Kartli. Tao-Klarjeti, situated at the intersection of important trade routes, also actively participated in cultural dialogue between the Orient and the Occident. Each of these historical circumstances is perfectly reflected in the Oshki high-reliefs, which are good examples of the dynamics of cultural interaction.

The sculptures of Oshki can be divided into several thematic groups. Special emphasis is made on royal representations, reviving close connections with Byzantine art and court culture. Religious scenes and a large number of zoomorphic figures mostly reflect eastern Christian and local Georgian traditions.

The “portraits” of donators, David *Magistros* (in future David *Curapalates*) and Bagrat *Eristavt-Eristavi*, are repeated three times here. One of the donor compositions, carved on the south façade, shows Bagratians in the “*Deesis*” scene. Bagratians are shown wearing ornate Byzantine clothing. As evidenced by *Constantine* Porphyrogenetos in his “*De administrando imperio*” (10th c.), the allies of Byzantine Empire received richly decorated garments and regalia as gifts, together with bestowed titles. The Oshki kings are attired in *chlamys*, a ceremonial cloak appropriate to their rank and no another imperial regalia – *loros*. For example, in a high-relief from Tbeti, Ashot Kukh, who had no byzantine title, is shown clothed in a traditional Caucasian royal costume, embellished with the figures of lions. The garments of kings in Oshki are adorned with palmettes and eagles inscribed in a circle, which were perfectly known in Byzantine culture as well as in Iranian and Caucasian art. According to the evidence of *Constantine* Porphyrogenetos, the gifts of Byzantine emperors included garments embroidered with red eagles. A similar *chlamys*, decorated with eagles, is worn by Armenian King Gagik Arwruniin an image on the west façade of the Holy Cross Church in Aghtamar (915-921). The *chlamys*, *fibula* and *crown*, in Oshki presented together, were important coronation paraphernalia. So, in the Oshki scene, the fact of the legacy of Bagratians’ kingship was clearly emphasized. Bagratians are depicted in bejeweled low crowns, but the diadem of Bagrat *Eristavt-Eristavi* is additionally decorated with pendants, exclusively imperial insignia. As is seen in “*De Administrando Imperio*”, Byzantine emperors did not usually interfere in the inner affairs of the Kingdom and did not violate its sovereignty. Accordingly, Georgian kings allowed themselves to use well recognizable emblems of imperial authority for the strengthening of their own ideology and power. The *vita of Grigol Khandzeli*, written by Giorgi Merchuli (10th c.), as well as other historical works, like “*De administrand oimperio*” and *Georgian Chronicles* (or “*Life of Kartli*” by Leonti Mroveli, 11th c.), mentioned that the Bagratians considered themselves descendants of the biblical King-Prophet David and thereby relatives of the Mother of God. In this regard, the

remarkable fact of the kings' images being included in the "sacral" space of the "Deesis" was an unusual iconographical detail, which especially emphasizes their divine ancestry. The iconography of the Oshki scene seems to have been inspired by the Byzantine compositions of Christ blessing the Emperor, and also by the entrance mosaic of Hagia Sophia. Accordingly, the Bagratians quite consciously used the forms of Byzantine imperial imagery to highlight their own royal ideology. But the closest example of such rare iconographical design is the donor scene from the Cappadocian murals of the 11th c. Here, the donors depicted at the feet of Christ express high humility. In Oshki both divine and secular figures are of equal scale and shown almost life-size. N. Aladashvili explained this particularity by the artistic tendencies inherent for Georgian and Armenian sculptures. The images of donor and deity equal to each other are found on reliefs from Opiza (9th c.) and Javakhetis Akhasheni (10th – 11th cc) in Georgia and on the relief of King Gagik in Armenian art. One could only suppose that the general principles of iconography of Caucasian rulers, as well as the oldest idea of divine ancestry of kings, might have come from neighboring Iran, with which Georgia and Armenia had a centuries-old cultural interaction. Monumental figures of rulers executed in the Iranian Hellenized style, were already represented on reliefs of Jvari in Mtskheta in the 7th c. In this respect, interesting examples are offered by Sasanian monumental high-reliefs, representing the investiture of the Iranian Kings of Kings. Thus, all the royal images discussed above reveal the synthesis of Iranian monumentality and Hellenistic elaborated forms.

On the bases of the donors' inscription and the iconography of composition, the theme of salvation is stressed here too. The square halos of donors attract a special attention as a sign of a living person. One could assume that the square halos in the donor scene are some kind of markers, separating the earthly and heavenly spheres.

Another example of monumental sculpture in Oshki is the eagle above the south window. The oldest sign of royal power and a Christian symbol of Christ, it is accompanied by Archangels here. In Byzantine art, there are numerous examples of sculptural eagles mentioned by Tao-Klarjeti researchers. An eagle attacking a hare also is found in the Khakhul Church in Tao (10th c.) and is perceived as a recognizable image of the Kingdom.

Another couple of royal "portraits" are presented in the interior of the church on both sides of central niche of the southwest pillar. The kings are robed in a different kind of Byzantine embroidered array, also bearing low crowns and scepters. According to V. Jobadze's suggestion, the Bagratians stood in this niche during liturgy. Additionally, in the depths of the niche are the remains of a painted figure, probably Christ, while beside the royal representations there are *areasomtavruli* inscriptions naming the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist. Thus, the text and images together provide an original variation of the Deesis theme. In this context, the so-called "sacred charisma" of the emperors might be stressed, whereas the supreme rulers were a part of the liturgy.

The royal images of Bagratians are also represented on the two steles, embedded in the wall in the south-east part of the Oshki church interior. These portraits have a more intimate character and appear like icons for prayer. According to one of inscriptions, Bagrat *Eristavt-Eristavi* had already died and brothers are depicted here with the gestures of Orants. They are attired in richly gemmed garments (as K. Machabeli argued, it should be *loros*) and high soft hats. The themes of prayer and salvation are stressed by the images of the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist in the upper parts of the steles. Therefore, the royal images of Oshki represent the original adaptation of the formulae of supreme rulers' might, intrinsic to Iranian and Byzantine royal ideology and linking here to the ideas of salvation and the legitimacy of the Bagratians' reign.

The iconography of Oshki's sculptural decoration also shows links with the Conversion of Kartli. In the history of Georgia, David *Curapletes* is primarily known as a king actively fighting for the unification of the country. Moreover, he enthroned his foster-son, Bagrat III, first king of united Georgia, at the end of 10th c.

The special interest of the Bagratians in the past of their culture is also reflected in literary sources. An excellent example of this is the manuscript rewritten in Shatberdi monastery in Klarjeti before 970. The Shatberdi compilation includes a version of the "Conversion of Kartli", which has a postscript written by the scribe Ioane Bera. Ioane Bera writes that the lost text of the "Conversion of Kartli" "has been found". This source is quite important for understanding the iconographical program of the Oshki sculptures. According to A. Oqropiridze, the decorated octagonal pier in the southern gallery is a reference to the pillar of *Svetitskhoveli* or the Life-giving pillar, the greatest relic of the Georgians. This supposition is also confirmed by the stone image of St. Nino accompanied by an *asomtavruli* inscription. St. Nino is depicted in the gesture of prayer, which also echoes the text of the "Georgian Chronicles", according to which the Life-giving pillar prepared for the construction of Svetitskhoveli was magically erected by an angel only after her prayer. A notable detail is the crowned head which, according to scholars, might be Emperor Constantine the Great, or biblical King David or King Mirian, the first Christian king of Georgia.

The image of St. Simeon Stylites carved on the upper part of the pillar is another symbol of Georgian identity in the sculptures of Oshki. The monumental figure of the saint is also repeated above the window of the west façade. The cult of St. Simeon was fairly popular in Georgia. In old Georgian translations of the life of St. Simeon (the manuscript of Jerusalem, before 8th c.; and the one from Mount Sinai, 10th c.) and in the work of Byzantine canonist of the 11th c., Nikon of the Black Mountain, it is mentioned that Georgians enjoined the Saint's especial patronage; in Georgian hagiographical literature, St. Simeon is considered the spiritual father of "The Thirteen Assyrian Fathers", who arrived in Georgia in the 6th c. to strengthen Christianity and to found the monasteries (among them Zedazeni, Shio Mgvime and David Gareja). Images of St. Simeon Stylites in Georgia are found on the chancel barriers of Zedazeni and Shio Mgvime (11th c.), in the Parkhali basilica (10th c.), on the chancel barrier of Chrdili (10th - 11th c.) and in Katskhi Church (11th c.). This indicates the close ties of Georgian monasticism with Eastern Christendom and further emphasizes the origin of Georgian monastic tradition.

The reliefs of the pier in the southern gallery of Oshki are perceived separately from the whole sculptural decoration of the church, although they echo iconographical ideas of the main program. For example, the *Deesis* is repeated here. The reliefs of the pillar are directly connected with the history of Georgia, reflected also in a more expressive style inherent to Georgian medieval art. Another allusion to the Conversion of Kartli is also shown in the composition on the south façade of the church. According to I. Mamasakhlisi, it represents the composite image of the sacral hunting of St. Eustace and that of King Mirian; accordingly, the plant in the center of scene seems to be a symbolic image of the Tree of Life and the Cross of the Survivor. But one detail might be added here: the universal symbol of the Tree of Life is also found in the "Chronicles of Georgia" and is described in the Shatberdi manuscript. From this tree were created three wooden crosses erected in Mtskheta and Ujarma by St. Nino and King Mirian. Thus, the hunting scene in Oshki refers to the sacred space of Mtskheta and its relics.

Another group of reliefs represent zoomorphic figures, mostly decorating the architectural details. Such a large number of animals could be explained as inspiration from the work attributed to Basil of Caesarea, included in the Shatberdi manuscript and describing animals and fantastic creatures. The images of rabbits, eagles, lions and fighting animals, typical for Iranian and east Christian medieval art, were quite popular in Caucasian reliefs and were depicted in

Georgia for centuries. Accordingly, the Oshki reliefs, besides showing Byzantine art tendencies, offered traditional artistic interaction with Oriental art that primarily reflected the historical reality.

Thus, the sculptural decoration of Oshki emphasizes several themes, reflecting the common political course of the Bagratians in the 10th c. On the one hand, the idea of royalty is represented in well recognizable forms of imperial iconography; on the other, a number of the reliefs underline the hereditary relation between the Bagratians and the center of Georgia, expressing hope for the future unification of the country.