

Dr. Lola Tsiskhvaia

Tbilisi State Academy of Arts, Georgia

The Little Upper Church of Otkhta Eklesia (named as Arseniseuli)

One of the significant monuments of early medieval Georgian architecture, one of the ancient Georgian hub of theological and educational culture, the Monastery of Otkhta Eklesia now situated on the territory of Turkey. Today Turkish name of this village is Dort Kilise which means “ four church “and it’s situated at a distance of about 5 km to the West of Tek-Kale Village, on the left bank of the river Chorokhi, in the historical Georgian province of Tao, in the Arthvini Vilayet. The monastery complex of Otkhta Eklesia is located itself in a magnificent gorge of Otkhtaeklesiistskali, on an elevated, triangular shaped hillside.

The subject of our report is an one of the exquisite little chapels in historical Tao (now the territory, you know, of Turkey) which dates back to the end of the 10th century and it’s a part of an abovementioned monastery.

First of all we should especially emphasize the location of this beautiful monument. It’s situated at a distance of about 2 km to the West of a well-known Otkhta-Eklesia great three- naved basilica, on the top of a steep rock and is proudly overlooking the gorge of Otkhtaeklesiistskali. The chapel with it ’s graceful and splendid architectural forms is erected on the heightened plateau , specially created platform (artificially corrected from three sides - West, East, North with half smoothed rocky stones). The South façade proceeds a vertical direction of the rock, so one can see the only general forms of the wall (from the southeast corner). The substructure has a function of a basement and has a simple-profiled cornice. We can freely say the chapel is two-storied – the substructure itself where the crypt is arranged /with an entrance from the East/, and the church, of course, with a fronton type roof. There is an opinion, that the chapel had a burial function like otkhta eklesia lower two storied chapel near basilica. The ground store is considered as a burial chamber /generally, the tradition of the building of two-storied chapels with crypts was established from an early period of Christianity in Caucasus/.

The facades are built with well dressed yellowish tuft blocks which brightened up the walls represented without any ornamentation. The fronts of the interior walls are undressed and covered with a thin layer of plasterer. The church was completely painted, but now the painting is partially preserved / only the poorly, insignificant details of the saints’ heads, hands

and clothes, of the vegetable motives, separate colored spots, etc/. The facades are completed with the complex moulded cornice.

The church constructively represents the cylinder-vaulted building (11.20 x 7.15m). There is a large window cutting in the middle of the apse. There are two accommodations on each side of the altar apse with a single window and the independent entrances, i.e. the altar is divided into three parts. Arrow like outline two-stepped triumphal arch terminates the apse. The interior longitudinal walls are divided into two unequalled sections with massive projecting two-stepped pilasters-pylons and two-stepped vault supporting arch based on it.

The only entrance is cut in the north-west portion of the north façade at the corner of the supporting pilaster.

There are two windows cutting in the south wall. One of them is cut out on the symmetrical axis, but the second – diagonally, where its left flank is cut into the wall pilaster body.

The significance of the west wall /in the interior/ is determined by one storied two arched open accommodation – patronycus arranged on the first floor level which was uncommon element for Georgian aisleless architecture /the characteristic element for the basilicas, the domed churches mainly arranged on the second floor of the west wall/. There are two three small windows in the west wall.

Among the church facades one can distinguish the east façade with three windows and lateral triangular high niches for its compositional decision. The upper parts of the niches ornated like a fan.

It should be noticed that in Otkhta Eklesia upper church the master attains the artistical-decorative expression of the highly plain facades with the help of the masonry carried out with an inconceivably refined, almost mathematically accuracy.

There is a nine-lined building inscription made in Asomtavruli on the north-east corner of the northern façade on the square plate where the name of builder Arseni is exactly mentioned and pointed the building date – 984 /generally speaking, there is a rare case to depict a builder personality or a building date on the facades of Georgian churches/.

Arseni was a bishop (+1082) at Ninotsminda Eparchy /southern Georgia, Samtskhe-Javakheti/, but he left his bishop rank for God, consecrated a monk in Jerusalem. At the end of the 10th century he lived as a monk in the surroundings of Otkhta Eklesia and he erected

two little chapels on the top of the mountain there /an another chapel lies in the ruins nowadays/. So our upper little church is called "Arseniseuli".

One more detail should be marked by the north façade description – one can hardly notice the track of the arcade to the east of the northern façade and the painting fragments on the walls of the arcade. We think that the chapel had the portico from the north.

Here is our modest attempt to define the meaning and place of this beautiful chapel in the extension of medieval Georgian aisleless architecture which was widespread and popular type in every part of Georgia from ancient times are cleared up.

The aisleless church type was conceived in Georgia as far back as in the ancient period, from the early Christian medieval period, from the 5th-6th centuries and exists till today. This type with particularly intensity was used from the 10th-11th centuries, when basilicas building diminished in Georgia. "Every large monastery usually had a little church in Georgia".

Highest possible constructive simplicity of the aisleless buildings and unpretentious building conditioned their popularity. There are examples of the aisleless churches where the architect thanks to his refined taste attains the significant artistic effects in the inner space and facades decisions – simplicity, whole perception of the interior, proper selection of the proportions.

The ancient aisleless churches in Georgia date back to the juncture of the 5th-6th centuries – they are the aisleless chapels of small dimensions with the only rectangular hall and an altar. There is no articulation of the interior yet with wall pilasters and supporting arches (two small churches on the Katskhi Pillar, Oltisi, Tetri Tskaro, Akvaneba). Additional accommodations along the whole longitudinal facades of aisleless churches like portico appear from the end of the 6th century.

In the chapels interior of the juncture of the 6th-7th centuries new architectural-constructive elements appear – the supporting arch rests upon the capital-horn and the wall pilaster.

In the interior of the 7th-8th centuries chapels, in the eastern part very significant novelty is given on both sides of the altar – two additional apartments with apses. We can also notice three- parted altar composition later on.

From the transitional period (8th-9th centuries) the articulation of the interior longitudinal walls and the vault into two parts with a pair of pilasters and supporting arches

rest on the pilasters evidently revealed. The number of the pilasters and supporting arches steps are changeable – they may one, two or three stepped. Articulation of the walls with pilasters and supporting arches has both constructive significance and purely artistic load.

During the centuries the proportions of the chapels plan have been changed, but the building material remains unchangeable – mainly well dressed stone aligned in regular masonry courses.

In the second half of the 10th and in the first half of the 11th centuries the walls of the majority aisleless buildings were articulated into three parts on the whole with two or three stepped pilasters. It should be said that from the 11th century the wall pilaster lost its tectonic function and the decorative moment condition spatial decision. In the same period the inner space of the chapels was apprehensively shortened.

From the 10th century the whole plastering and the partial painting of the church interior walls based as a general necessity. Aisleless churches in Tao-Klarjethi underwent the same changes.

Here is the architectural-composition and artistic decision peculiarity of the medieval Tao chapels against the background of the other countries aisleless churches of Georgia.

The meaning and the artistic value of the Upper Church of Otkhta Eklesia are conditioned by the refined masonry of the wall and its colors. The beautiful, regulated masonry of the walls is created by the symmetrically aligned blocks.

The church represented without any façade decoration is interesting and uncommon for its interior solution. The master-builder is particularly interested in inner space which is one of the characteristic features of Tao-Klarjethi architecture. First of all decision of three-parted altar-apse and pastophories with their own windows and entrances is worth mentioning.

Here is the type of the "open divided into three parts" altar where the doors of additional accommodations are open in the main space of the hall but not in the altar. This version of three-parted altar solution is an exclusion in the Georgian aisleless churches – the lower and the upper churches of Otkhta Eklesia and Chala Church (10th century).

The other interesting moment of the interior decision is one storied two arched open accommodation on the first floor level arranged at the west wall – patronycus whis is uncommon and uncharacteristic for the Georgian aisleless architecture, Analogous patronycus

but two storied is in the 10th century aisleless church of the Assumption in Saphara Monastery (historical Samtskhe). The basing of the arches of the patronycus transferred to the west wall on the horn, also the asymmetrical arrangement of the wall arches represented in the west portion of the interior and the south-western window proves that the church and the two-arched open accommodation were built in the same time.

The most interesting façade for its composition solution is the east façade with two high triangular niches. If the niches in Khakhuli chapel have the only decorative function, here the use of the niches is conditioned by the existence of pastophories /even a constructive function /.

The only entrance is cut in the north-west portion of the north façade which is a rare moment and it ever met in the Georgian architecture. The northern door was made for the aisleless churches only as an additional passage mainly connected with the liturgy (Khtsisi, Patara Oni, Agara, Spethi, Ekhvevi, Darkveti, Tserovani). But in our church the cutting of the northern door comes from the church location.

As we above mentioned there is a nine lined building inscription made in Asomtavruli on the northern façade of the church.

There is one more significant detail. One can hardly notice the track of the arcade and the painting fragment on the north façade near the door. We may think that the church had the portico from the north. Aforementioned building inscription against to the tradition depicts not on the door tympanum which the church has and which is plainly left but on the north-east part of the northern wall, on a small plate. Thus we may think that the northern portico of the church was the same period to the building.

Thus the upper church of Otkha Eklesia is a typical building of the 10th century. The subject of the master's interest was to make an impression not by ornamentation, but with the help of its location, by underlining the main architectural masses.

The aisleless church of Otkhta-Eklesia belongs to the number of rare buildings of Georgia the exact building date and the builder's name of which are pointed in the inscription. The mentioned inscription and its historical-artistic analyse show Otkhta Eklesia chapel by a number of significant elements continues the Georgian architecture line characteristic for the second half of the 10th century and, by using rare architectural-constructive elements represent very important example of architecture the end of the 10th century.

