

The murals of the Otkhta Ekklesia

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Complex multi register bema programs, among which is that of the Otkhta Ekklesia, represent a significant peculiarity of the monumental painting in Tao-Klarjeti between tenth and twelfth centuries. They offer minor analogies with some of the programmatic arrangements which can be found in other easternmost regions of the Christian art like Cappadocia. Yet, four or five bands into which the iconographic programs divided and confined to the walls and the conch of the apse appear to be a product of the architectural and functional prerequisites as well as the spatial perceptions of the sacred in Medieval Georgia.

The murals of the Otkhta Ekklesia are commonly attributed to the second half or the last quarter of the tenth century. The apse is decorated with a program in five registers. An enthroned Christ of the apocalyptic type is in the conch. The first register is depicted with prepared throne, the Hetoimasia, glorified by the choirs of angels. Virgin Orans standing on a low pedestal in front of a throne with an archangel on either side occupies the third register. Both heavenly guards are holding a scroll, on which according to N. and M. Thierry, the words of the disciples at the Ascension and the Second Coming (Acts 1:10-11) must have been written. St John the Baptist is flanking the angel to the right. The fourth register below is interrupted at the center by a large opening, on either side of which are groups of prophets and Church Fathers (four of each on the two walls) led by David and Salomon on either side. The intrados of the window is decorated with a female personification of Zion. She is in imperial attire with an elaborate headdress in the form of the city walls or a crown. The side jambs are respectively depicted with the images of Moses receiving the Laws to the south and that of the Melchisedek holding the paten. A developed Christological narrative occupies the fifth and lowermost register where a number of chronological scenes follow: Annunciation, Visitation, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, Baptism, Transfiguration, Crucifixion, Raising of Lazarus?, Anastasis, Holy Women at the Tomb of Christ, and Christ Appearing to the Holy Women.

We can find *comparanda* for this condensed program in late tenth and early eleventh century Georgian monumental decorations in Oshki, Khakuli, Ateni, Chvabiani (the church of Christ Savior) and Natlismtsimeli. Superposed bands organization limited to the apse seem to have been maintained during the twelfth century in Georgian monumental art. In Betania,

Matskhvarishi and Sio Mgvime more condensed variants with reduced number of superimposed registers differentiate the painted programs of this period.

From the thirteenth century onwards, the abbreviated program is limited to three registers as in Ksintsvisi or in other examples of Transcaucasia like in Kobair, Kirants, Akhtala and Tigran Onents. Bishops are below, Communion of the Apostles above and a *Majestas Domini* with the Virgin and Prodrome to left and right is in the conch. In the remote provinces of Byzantium, the three register programs combining the Communion of the Apostles, the group of apostles and prophets, and the Apocalyptic Vision sometimes 'contaminated' with intercessory figures of Virgin and John the Baptist are widespread from eleventh century onwards. Thus, this earlier 'visionary' type of Christ in Majesty, which may be possibly seen as the 'predecessor' of the Pantocrator, persists in Cappadocia and Georgia. However, sometimes, the standard Deisis which acquires a regular 'intercessory sense', especially in funeral contexts, was also preferred in these regions where Constantinopolitan influence is not entirely absent.