

## Khakhuli

## Monastery

Location: historical Tao, modern-day Haho/Bağbaşı

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The Khakhuli monastery was founded by David III of Tao (r. 966-c.1001) in the 960s before he was bestowed the title of *kuropalatesin* 978 for his participation in crushing the revolt against Basil II. Described by Giorgi Merchule in his mid-tenth century vita of St Gregory of Khandzta as “a builder of holy churches and a collector of religious writings”, David III co-founded Oshki with his brother Bagrat II (961-966) and founded the monasteries of Parkhali and Otkhtawhich represent extraordinary revivals of basilical architecture. These buildings are large and strikingly original structures. Little of this scale has survived from the Byzantine world from this period.

Located up a western bank of the Tortum River in modern-day Bağbaşı village, Khakhuli was once a sizable and populated monastic complex and is the only one of David’s foundations which is mentioned in medieval historiography. The chronicles describe it as “God’s throne – the holy church of Khakhuli”. The main site is enclosed by 3m high walls and comprises of the *katholikon*, a small church, three chapels and oratories as well as remains of other structures which may have served as a refectory and a scriptorium. Southeast of the complex there are remains of another hall church and 1km west of it, on top of a cliff, there lies another chapel with a panoramic view of the Khakhuli valley.

### Interior

In the very heart of the walled enclosure of the complex lies the *katholikon* dedicated to the Theotokos. This cruciform domed building is traditionally dated to the 960s and reflects the early cross-dome plans. Construction techniques and materials used are essentially the same as for other churches of Tao-Klarjeti of this period. Eastern arm is tripartite, with 4 by 3m apsed *pastophoria* on either side of the apse. The *pastophoria* do not have access to the sanctuary but rather open into the transepts as at Tbeti and Dolisyana. Similarly to the Otkhta Church built in the 970s, there are rectangular niches with gabled tops on either side of the sanctuary for the accommodation of icons.

One of the most striking features of the interior are eight niches built into the semi-circular wall of the apse which rise from floor level to a height of about 5m. Such niches gained popularity in the tenth- and eleventh-century Georgian and Armenian architecture. Wachtang Djobadze believes that the origin of this architectural motif must be sought in the early Syrian churches of Tur Abdin, citing the example of the church of el ‘Adhra. Another noteworthy architectural element of the interior is the 3m high niche found in the north-west pier of the dome. It is most closely comparable to niches from David’s other foundations, Parkhali and Oshki. When Djobadze visited the site, several fragments of painting were still visible in the upper parts of the niche and he argued that the image would have represented the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. According to recent scholarship, niches like this were allocated to important members of the ecclesiastical community, local lords or rulers of the region who would have stood there during services. Indeed, the niche at Khakhuli contains still contains remnants of a one-line inscription in *asomtavruli* which mentions a local ecclesiastical figure.

## Wall paintings

The fragments of high-quality wall paintings that survive in the dome (Glorification of the Cross and Ascension of Elijah), sanctuary (a row of apostles), south arm (Entry into Jerusalem), north arm and west wall (which features an intriguing image of a *ktitor*) have been variously dated to the late tenth and early eleventh centuries.

## Stonedecoration

The figural carving of the church is mostly concentrated around its south door where we find an unusual cycle of images executed in low relief and conveying ideas of the triumph of the Christian religion, of the Resurrection, of the ultimate Ascension to Heaven. The tympanum over the door is decorated with the scene of the Exaltation of the Cross featuring four angels with abnormally large faces. Representations of the subject appear frequently in both Georgian and Armenian churches from the sixth century onwards, when there is a sixth-century example at Jvari in Mtskheta, and a tenth century example at Aghtamar Cathedral in Lake Van. An arch of the south gallery, which was added in the fourteenth-century, cuts across a part of the tympanum and partially covers the three reliefs to the left of the door. These include a griffin, a lion fighting a bull and an image of Alexander the Great's Ascent to Heaven in the upper register, one of the earliest representations of this subject in the South Caucasus. Previously it was erroneously identified as an Old Testament scene of Daniel in the Lion's Den which was a widely popular choice for stone decoration of facades of tenth-century churches of Kartli. At Khakhuli, Alexander is depicted as a young, beardless man with a halo rather than a traditional crown or diadem which he wears in the Byzantine examples of this iconography. The halo coupled with his general resemblance to images of the young and curly-haired St. George underscore Alexander's divine origin and perceived equality to Christian saints rather than his associations with divinely endorsed kingship which David III may have sought to stress in his royal foundation. On the right side of the south door we find images of St. Peter holding the key of Heaven, an Old Testament scene of Jonas emerging from the whale's mouth and further down a cock and a lion.

## Khakhuli triptych

The Khakhuli triptych, one of the most venerated icons in Georgia, derives its name from the Khakhuli monastery where its central part was kept throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the 1120s, the central image of the supplicating Theotokos was transferred to the Gelati monastery (Western Georgia) at the request of David IV (r.1073-1125) and his son Demetre I (r.1093-1156). It was soon after the transfer that the enamelled icon was incorporated into a triptych, and in this manner reconfigured and reconceptualised to look decidedly Georgian. Its history before the transfer to Gelati is poorly documented and its first mention as the icon Khakhuli in historical sources is found in David IV's will and testament of 1125.

The central part comprises three surviving enamels of remarkable size corresponding to the Theotokos's face and hands. The repoussé background is now lost. The face measures 11.5 by 7cm whilst the hands are 9 by 5cm, making these fragments the largest pieces of enamel to survive from the Christian East.

In *Greeks Bearing Gifts* (published in *Medieval South Caucasus*, 2006) Antony Eastmond dates the central icon to the late tenth century and argues that it was a Byzantine gift from Basil II to David III after the defeat of Bardas Skleros. This is in opposition to most Georgian literature which argues that these three enamels are Georgian in manufacture.