

Opiza Monastery

Opiza monastery is one of the oldest monastery in Klarjeti region. Around 370-s due to the political situation in Kartli kingdom, namely when Kartli was conquered by the Persians Klarjeti region was separated from the kingdom and subordinated to the west Roman empire. This region was taken back only in the middle of the 5th c. by the King Vakhtang Gorgasali, who appointed Artavaz, his foster-brother, as a ruler of Klarjeti region, with whom he built several churches (Akhiza, Daba Meri, Shindobi) and castles (Tukharisi) in this region, including Opiza monastery and Artanuji castle. After the invasion of the Arabs, in the first quarter of the 8th c., the monastery was demolished and abandoned and sooner, in 750-760 the life in the monastery was revived. When in 780-s Grigol Khandzteli came in Klarjeti Opiza monastery was the only active monastery in this region. The monastery at that time had a small brethren and a tiny church of St John the Baptist (according to the tradition the monastery kept the throat of John the Baptist).

Although, we don't have anything tangible here prior to the 9th c., as the archaeological excavations have never been conducted in this site. What we see here is dated to the 9th c. and on. At present, the church and other buildings are virtually ruined. The monastery was abandoned after the region was conquered by the Ottomans in the 16th c. The church was destroyed as a result of an explosion in 1965, in order to construct a road. But fortunately the main church and other buildings were photographed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The monastery is located on a slope of a steeply rising mountain, so in order to build different buildings masons in advance created artificial substructures, on which they erected all these buildings. The complex consisted the Church of St John the Baptist, the refectory, storage rooms and other unidentified, auxiliary buildings.

In the middle of the 9th c. Guaram Mampali, son of Ashot I kurapalati¹ (786-826), erected new church, which fragments we see now and according to the Vita of St Gregory after his death in 882 Guaram Mampali was buried here.

¹ Ashot Kurapalat was the ruler of Kartli region, but because of the Arabs he was urged to leave Kartli and to move to Klarjeti around 813-s, where he had great support of Byzantium and was given the title of Kurapalar. He started war against Arabs from there and for the 820 he had most part of Kartli under his administration. He rebuilt Artanuji castle and built a city beneath this castle; in this castle he built his palace and church of St Peter and Paul, where he prepared his burial place. During his reign

The cross-shape **plan** (so called croix semilibre) of the church with the unusually elongated west arm and two additional chambers on the both sides of the sanctuary date back to the ninth century, while the dome with the roofing in the form of a half-opened umbrella (a form obviously borrowed from Khandzta) should have been restored in the mid-tenth century by King Ashot IV. Beneath the church there is an ossuary/crypt, with an entrance-hall and 4 chambers.

From the architectural point of view, one of the most interesting detail in this church is the way how the transition from the central square bay to the circular base of the dome was implemented. *“For this builders of Opiza and a little bit later builders of Dolisqana used a hybrid structural form, a squinch inserted into a pendentive. Unlike the earlier squinch that had a conical shape, this squinch was flattened in order to follow the curve of the pendentive. Few years later, this form was adopted in Tao and applied in a much more decorative way. This hybrid structural form, which was developed in the architecture of Tao-Klarjeti, underwent significant development during the 10th c., becoming more elaborated, like in Khakhuli, Oshki, and Ishkhani”* (D. Khoshtaria).

From the description of N. Marr, we know that the interior of the church was painted; He noticed some fragments of foliate and geometric decorations, as well as figures of angels and saints. Besides, according to him, on the drum, within the blind arches figures of prophets were placed and in the south arm the figures of local rules were painted, one of which had an explanatory inscription, based on which the figure was identified as Ashot IV.

The donor relief, representing Christ with Ashot and David, which is now kept in the National Museum in Tbilisi was placed somewhere on the south facade of the main church, but we don't know the exact location.

On the south-west of the main church there is a **refectory**. It was a large rectangular building built with huge stones. Interior of the refectory was divided into three naves by for pairs of piers and was covered with vaults. Apart from its high-quality building technique, the refectory is interesting for the fact that it was supplied with water. In the early 20th century, a little vaulted pond still existed in the north-west corner of the building, which delivered spring water to the refectory, confirming that the monastery had a good irrigational system. The refectory also was built by Ashot IV. When N. Marr visited the refectory, he noticed on one of

with commission of local duke Gabriel Daphanchuli new church in Khandzta monastery was built and also nunnery of Gunatle was established.

the arches, an inscription inside the refectory, which can be translated as follows: “*this was built by me, Ashot, in 4 years.*”

On the east side of the church there was a **rectangular building**, „abbot’s dwelling“ as A. Pavlinov named it, which was divided into three chambers, the length of the building was 18 m. and the south façade had 5 arches rested on the rectangular piers. One of the rooms (east one) was covered with dome.

On the south-west of the church we have **bell-tower** built either in the second half of the 13th c., or in the first half of the 14th c.

And lastly, the Monastery was one of the most important cultural and religious centres. A lot of manuscripts were written here. Also, we know that one of the most prominent Georgian medieval philosopher Ioane Petritsi lived here, later he moved to Georgian Monastery named Petritsoni (aka Bachkovo monastery) in Bulgaria and continued his activities there. Moreover, it is well known that in Opiza monastery there was a goldsmith’s workshop.

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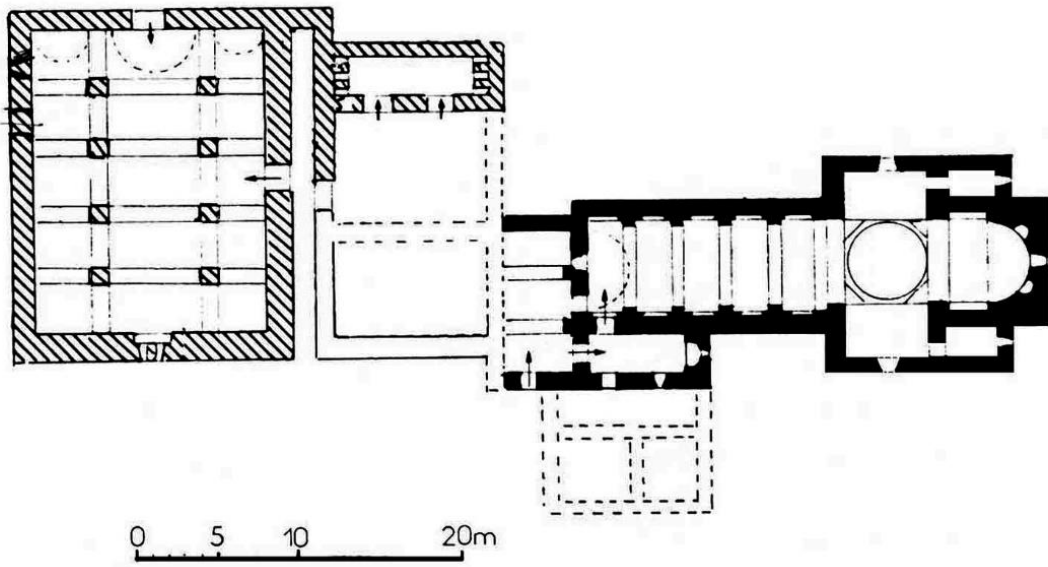
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Внутренность Рипизъ, Сибирск. Муз. в. 1903

Внутренность развалинъ монастыря въ Рипизъ.



Фотомонета Шореръ, Ватиканъ и Мъ въ Римѣ.

ВНУТРЕННОСТЬ РАЗВАЛИНЪ ЦЕРКВИ ВЪ РУЖИЦѢ.



