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Phoka, St Ninos Church
1033-1048

In the province of Javakheti (municipality of Ninotsminda), on the south bank of the Paravani lake, in the village of Phoka stands a single naved church. Abandoned for a long time, the church lost its roof and some upper parts of eastern and south walls but was restored in the last ten years, and a convent was established even before. The convent of Phoka is very strong and famous with its hard-working nuns, which is understandable if we take into account the hard weather conditions they have to cope with.

On our arrival in mid-September, when the weather was sunny and warm in Tbilisi, Phoka met us with its usual harsh climate, cold, windy and foggy. Built-in a massive sandstones of a dark yellowish colour, church looked gloomy and shiny at the same time.

The size of the church is 14.8X13.1 m, 16,7m tall.

The church is a single naved, elongated to the west-east axis, it has a large apse on the east, with one central window and two large niches on the sides. The space of hall is rendered with four pairs of pilasters, that project from the walls in double steps to hold lower arches over the longitudinal walls and the upper ones for the vault. It has two windows on the south and no windows on the west or north. The only entrance is also from the south, which is typical for the Georgian churches. The interior has never been plastered and the quality masonry creates its powerful and monumental look.

Facades are left plain, gable roof creates the shape of the rectangular structure. No porches or annexes ever existed. Decoration is concentrated at the door and window openings. The huge stone of south door tympanum (3.87X1.27m) has a rather unusual distribution of ornamentation. It is divided into seven vertical sections, where the centre is curved with the massive cross, set into the ornamental background, the most lateral sections are largest and are left plain, another pair of sections (more narrow) are cut in floral ornamentations that come with the geometric periodicity, and the sections on the sides of the central cross are used for the inscriptions (discussed later).

The two windows on the south facade have been also decorated with the combination of the floral and geometric ornamentations, on contrary to the tympanum, that has no frame and does not come out the wall surface, the window moldings are projecting from the wall surface. This is done in a more elaborated manner on the eastern facade, where the single window molding with its curved top has a large stone rectangular frame.

Architecture of Phoka church belongs to the type of hall churches, that were popular during the centuries in Georgia. Its proportions, rendering of the inner space and the decoration is typical to the regions of Javajketi and Trialeti. But the quality of architecture and its decoration distinguishes Phoka from the similar monuments, and the reason stands in its history that can be learned from the inscriptions and not only.

From the Georgian Chronicles, we know that St Nino, to whom is addressed the conversion of Kartli into Christianity, on the way to Mtskheta, made a break in the village of Phoka. Therefore the affiliation/consecration of the church to St. Nino is logical.

Inscriptions, on the facades, are of great importance. In three inscriptions curved in asomtavruli we read:

1. „Jesus Christ, the son and the voice of the divine glorify Ioane Okropiri, bishop of Kartli in both of his lives, amen“;
2. „Jesus glorify Bagrat Curopalates“;

3. *„In the name of God, I Bavriel was worthy to built this church and I worked as mason of Ioane Okropiri, the bishop of Kartli“.*

Phoka inscriptions are important as they give the date of its construction. It mentions the King Bagrat IV Curopalates (1027-1072); it also indicates, that the church was built by the initiative of the Bishop Ioane V (1033-1049). We learn also the name of the builder, Bavriel, which presumably indicates the place of his origin, the village of Bavra, is relatively close to Phoka. Also, the fact, that Phoka is related to St Nino, makes it as much important place, that church is built with the initiative of the bishop himself.

These are the reasons, that with its artistic and building qualities, Phoka church stands as an outstanding example of medieval Georgian architecture.