

Vardzia - the Church of the Dormition

The Vardzia complex stretches across five hundred meters of the cliff face comprising nineteen tiers of caves. Vardzia is the largest rock-cut monastery in Georgia among the survived ones. The Catholicon of the monastery is the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin distinguished by its huge size and location. It presents a simple hall space with the barrel vault and the broad apse at the east end. There are additional chambers to the north, west and south, all of which have entrances to the church. The church is completely covered by wall painting. The frescoes of the Vardzia church presents the earliest example of the decoration of so called the “epoch of Queen Tamar”; Consequently, it presents the earliest surviving portrait of the Queen Tamar. Since the Queen is presented here crowned but unmarried, the wall painting of the Vardzia can be dated by the 80 s of 12th century (Tamar was crowned as coruler with Giorgi III in 1178 and she was married in 1186 her first husband Iuri Bogolubski). The portrait of the Donors is presented on the Northern wall of the Church, following the well-established tradition of the location of the Donor’s portraits in Georgia. The composition shows the King Giorgi III in prayer before the enthroned Virgin and Child. The King is followed by Tamar, who holds the model of the church in her hands. The Georgian sources tells that Vardzia monastery was begun by king Giorgi III and then was completed by his daughter. Both Donators wear imperial dress surmounted by loroi. Both are crowned by similar crowns. What attracts a special attention is the portrait of the local peodal Rati Surameli presented on the western part of the northern wall, the latter is presented in Georgian costume and he is lacking the nimbus. According to E.Eastmond ,this choice reflects the superiority of the Royal family and reinforce the privileged status of the royal family setting them apart from the rest of the society. At the same time the design of the Royal portrait stresses Tamar’s blood right to the throne and legitimacy of her authority. She is named as ” King of the Kings of all East, daughter of Giorgi”, while the portrait of

Giorgi bears an inscription: “King of Kings of all East , Giorgi, son of Demetre , King of the Kings”. The angel passing a symbol of power and divine approval from the Virgin to the king further reinforces the legitimacy of the rulership of this royal dynasty. This special accent can be linked to the historical reality concerning the reigning of the king Giorgi III and the crowning of the Queen Tamar (E.Eastmond focuses here on two counts: the legacy of reigning of Giorgi III himself and the hindrance caused by attitudes to the gender of Queen Tamar).

The figure of the Saint included in the Royal portrait attracts a special attention. According to the recent studies of Nino Chikladze, the Saint is identified as St. Evrenius of Trabzon, the patron saint of the Trabzon Empire. Though the appearance and inclusion of this less popular Saint by that time is surprising. St.Evgenius became especially popular only after the establishing of the Trabzon Empire. And his special cult emerges namely in that context - as the major patron Saint of newly established Empire. Thus, Nino Chikladze explains his appearance as the reflection of the political will and participation of the Georgian Kingdom in the history of the founding the Trabzon Empire. The design of the Royal portrait obviously shows the political target and plans of our Kingdom.

The huge number of the individual Saints attracts a special attention in Vardzia programme. The holy Warriors and female Saints prevail here. The leading role of the military Saints echoes the military function of this foundation. The Holy warriors are presenting as the individual Saints (for Example Rati Surameli’s portrait) as well as a part of the scenes of Coronation of the Saints by Christ. What is unusual here, is the location of these scenes - they are represented on the jambs of the windows of the Southern Wall. The summit of the jambs presents the image of Christ placing the crowns on the Holy warriors. The placing of the images on the window walls is the iconographic tradition widely spread in Georgia and even is characterized as the “local” tradition of the Georgian Church decoration. The church of the Dormition is comparatively poorly illuminated – hence the scene of the Saints Receiving Crowns from the Saviour, represented in the illuminated splays of the windows,

in *contre-jour*, creating a special accent in the whole decoration. It must be noted, that these figures are much bigger compared to those of narrative compositions, creating a tectonic accent in the overall system of decoration. Apart from its scale, significance of the compositions is increased by the shape of the jambs – wide, diagonally directed surfaces. The half-figure of the Saviour with outstretched hands presented on the soffits of the window, as if ‘entering’ from ‘outside’, puts the crowns on the Saints represented on the ‘sloped’ surfaces – these representative scenes adjusted to the window splays give a palpable impression of the animating of the scene. Thus, the composition of Coronation of the Saints creates, so to speak, the impression of “breakthrough” to the integrity of the inner space of the church – displaying a kind of “pathways” demonstrating the unity of the internal and external spaces.

In Vardzia St Nino’s earliest identified fresco portrait can be found - St. Nino is presented on the South pilaster and she faces the portrait of queen Tamar. Splendid image of St Catherine attracts a special attention.

The Apse of the church represents a monumental image of the Virgin and child flanked by the figures of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel. The traditional images of the Apse in Georgian church decoration (Deesis or Maesta Domini) is substituted by the huge image of the Virgin characteristic for the epoch of the queen Tamar. The lower register of the apse represents twelve figures of the church fathers holding the scrolls represented as co-participants of the divine liturgy. The scenes of Christological cycle are presented clockwise. The cycle opens by the scene of the Annunciation located on the Southern slope of the arch. Here appears Nativity, Presentation to the Temple, Baptism, Transfiguration, raising of Lazarus, Entry into Jerusalem, Last supper, Washing of the feet, Crucifixion, Anastasis Pentecost and Dormition. The scenes are enriched by iconographic details inspired by hymnography enriching the symbolic context of the scenes (for example the representation of the ladder in the scene of the Annunciation, visualizing one of the most frequently spread metaphor of Virgin as One who unites the Heaven and Earth and etc.)

The image of Mandylion catches a special attention thanks to its scale and location. The Holy Face is appears on the tympanum here and presents one of the most important

images of the whole programme of the Vardzia decoration. The placement of the Mandylion above the doorways certainly reflects the Eddesian practise of placing the Mandylion above the city gate. Grabar emphasizes the salvific meaning of such location. In Vardzia this message is emphasized by the episode of the Salvation placed alongside the Holy Face- i.e the Resurrection and the scene of the chaining of Satan, which implies the idea of triumph as well. It is noteworthy that the Communion of St.Mary of Egyptian is presented above the Holy Face. (in the intrados of the arch of the tympanum arch); both St. Mary and St. Zosimus are presented in frontal, “iconic” pose. The location of the Holy Face next to the scene of the Communion of St.Mery gives an additional meaning to the incarnation icon. In this context the Mandylion is strongly associated to the Eucharist. It is perceived as an offering, the communion bread itself. If we recall the theological disputes which took place around the issue of sacrifice in 12th century Byzantium, this interpretation of the Holy image proves to be absolutely obvious. Moreover, it echoes the local disputes among the Georgian and Armenian churches -the counter to Armenian Monophysitism, the major rival confession to Greek Orthodoxy in Georgia. This centuries-old theological opposition between neighbors grew especially fervent during the 12th century, when most Caucasian lands were brought under Georgia’s control. The impact of this dispute upon Georgian culture can be traced throughout the centuries, but it was especially strong during the period under consideration. One of the most actual question of disputes was the different liturgical practice of communion rooted in the difference of Christological dogma. Thus, the Icon of Incarnation alongside the scene of the Communion presents an argumentative image against the teaching of “*mia phys* - the Mandylion, a historical portrait of Christ – or so to say image –argument itself, visualizing the dogma of the Incarnation and the sacrifice.

The Souther Nartex of the Vardzia church is dominated by the theme of the Last Judgment, thus fulfilling the lack of this theme in the main space of the church. The apse of the narthex presents the traditional scene of the Sanctuary programs in Georgia – the Deesis, while the vault of the church presents the huge image of Glorification of the cross, scene that has a long history and tradition in Georgian visual art. Vardzian image presents one of the most beautiful and refined images of this theme in Georgian wall painting reflecting its proximity to the traditions of so called artistic school of “ Tao –Klarjeti”. Obviously the wall paintings of the Vardzia is

executed later than the murals of the main space. These murals are dated back to turn of the 12 – 13th cc in special literature. The huge image of the Last Judgment is enriched here by the scenes of the life of St. Stephen the Proto –Martyr and the huge image of the Martyrdom of forty Sebastians representing in a very prominent place.

