

DOLISKANA

I) LOCATION

The church is located in the historic province of Klarjeti, near the city of Artvin (presently in Turkey). The name of the village we are currently in is called Hamamlı Köy. It is located high above the right bank of the Imerkhevi river.

II) MEANING OF DOLISKANA

Doli means “wheat”, while Khana is a field of crops.

As such, the name of Doliskana means “field of wheat”.

III) HISTORY OF THE MONUMENT

On the historical point of view, we know almost nothing about the earlier period of the church. But we are sure that it falls within the context of the spiritual movement initiated by Gregory of Khantzta. The earliest document mentioning Doliskana is the *Life* of Gregory of Khantzta, written by Giorgi Merchule in the 10th century.

Bagrat Curopalates had received the right to be chamberlain instead of his father Ashot, and he received a visit from Gregory of Khantzta. Gregory went before Bagrat and congratulated and praised him on becoming a chamberlain. To save the king's soul, they used a fertile land which was offered by Ashot to Khantzta, and they built Shatberdi.

Later, Gregory invited all the contemporary rulers to come and see the constructed monasteries in the desert of Klarjeti. They first visited Shatberdi, where Zakaria, bishop of Ancha, joined them. Then they went to Jmerki, Berta, Daba and finally to Doliskana.

Doliskana belongs to the twelve monasteries which were under the governance of Gregory of Khanzta, who had become archimandrite of the Klarjeti monasteries.

IV) HISTORIOGRAPHY

Since the 19th century, a number of travelers have given written accounts of the church of Doliskana.

The first account was from a French professor, Mari Brosset. He was a scholar of the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg and he was respected for his work on Georgian antiquities. He received an inscription from the church from a geologist, Otto Wilhelm Hermann von Abich.

The second account of the church was from the Georgian historian Dimitri Bakratze, who organized an ethnographic expedition to the area of Shavsheti, Klarjeti, Lazeti and Adjara.

In 1888, the Russian professor Pavlinov published a report of his journey to Tao-Klarjeti. In his report, he included photos and measurements of monuments such as Mamatsminda, Sveti, Khanzta, Opiza, Doliskana and Yeni Rabat.

David Winfield published an important article about “Some Early Medieval Figure Sculpture from North-East Turkey”, which includes many photos and drawings of the carvings of the churches of Tao and Shavsheti.

And last but not least, Wakhtang Beridze and Wakhtang Djobadze contributed significantly to the knowledge and understanding of these monuments through their studies.

V) ARCHITECTURE

Doliskana is a relatively small church, compared to the other monuments of Tao-Klarjeti. It is made of roughly squared sandstone blocks, for the main part (bricks are also used as a building material).

The original appearance of the church has undergone many changes. During the 90s, the church was converted into a mosque, and it was completely abandoned. More recently, some holes were somewhat controversially drilled in the walls. This situation contributed to the bad conditions of preservation of the church, which is of historical value. The church has also suffered from negligence. In the end, the Embassy of Georgia in Turkey managed to cease further alterations.

The church is a cross-in-square.

Architecturally speaking, the closest parallel is the monastery church of Khanzta, which belongs to the same architectural type and possesses similar dimensions.

The east arm consists of a deep semicircular apse with one window on the east end. The apse is flanked by two pastophories which, as in the case of Khanzta, are not connected to the apse but are open to the cross-arms. The southwestern portion of the church is almost completely gone. It is possible that, as in Khakhuli and Oshki, there was an open gallery. Such galleries are attested in early Georgian architecture (Bolnisi Sioni, Tsromi), Armenian (Odzun, Ereruk), as well as Syrian and northern Mesopotamian. We don't know the exact purpose of the northwestern side of the church. In its forms and proportions, it resembles a similar room in the northwestern part of the Khakhuli church. This room, as in Doliskana, is accessible from the southwestern part of the western crossarm and was, according to Ekvtime Takaishvili, used as a pantry and wine cellar – very important in Georgia. Archaeological evidence has shown that the longitudinal northwestern room in Doliskana might have been used not only for the storage but perhaps also for the preparation of the Eucharistic bread.

For the construction of the drum of the dome, smoothly finished stones were used in the same manner as in Opiza (now lost) and Khanzta. Its exterior dodecagonal surface is divided by twelve blind arches resting on paired colonnettes surmounted by twin capitals which are decorated with split palmette leaves. We distinguish two groups of capitals, according to their shape: first, carefully carved palmette leaves with rounded tips and second, summarily carved foliage with pointed tips and a vertical stem in the middle. Wakhtang Djobadze observed their appearance in neighboring Armenia (Zvartnots) and in several Tur Abdin churches as well.

On the molding of upper cornice, we find, at irregular intervals, a very rare motive, which recalls the Lesbian cymatium, and which is apparently unique in the architecture of Tao-Klarjeti. This motive was infrequently used in other provinces of Georgia. The earliest and closest example for comparison is in Vale, where it can also be observed on the cornice of the church.

There were exceptionally close similarities between the drum of the dome of Doliskana and its counterpart in Opiza, which no longer exists. They were very similar in shape: dodecagonal, with their exterior surfaces divided by the same number of blind arches supported by twin colonnettes with stylized capitals.

The main difference between these two monuments lied in the roofing, which in Opiza had the shape of a half-opened umbrella, whereas in Doliskana, it has the form of a cone. There were other slight differences, but this was the main one.

To the same group belongs the dome of Khanzta which, in comparison with those of Opiza and Doliskana, is structurally more rigid and less adorned.

Despite their differences, all three drums were similar in size and shared a common ratio between their height and diameter.

The walls of the church have kept two very important *Asomtavruli* inscriptions which mention King Sumbat I, the son of Adarnase II. Sumbat was “King of the Kartvels”, the only ruler of

Klarjeti who held the title of King, and he was endowed with the Byzantine title of Kuropalates in 954. He ruled until his death in 958.

One of those inscriptions can be found on the drum of the dome, under a high relief representing the king himself holding in his hands the model of a cupola church. It reads: “Christ exalt our King Sumbat”. The second one, which consists of two concentric lines, can be observed above the south window, and it bears these words: “Christ exalt our King Sumbat lasting as the sun” (here the word “*mzegrzelobit*” or “lasting as the sun” enhances the glorification of the power of the living king).

VI) ARCHITECTURAL SCULPTURE

The most striking sample of architectural sculpture is the donor’s figure.

It is not an easy task to give a written account of the donor. The only way to focus on its stylistic details is to use binoculars. This obliges us to rely on the most relevant bibliography. David Winfield wrote that the head was severely damaged by target practice. Indeed, its upper part is completely destroyed. The face was carved frontally, showing a beard indicated by simple radiating lines. The body is also carved in a frontal position, in contrast to the feet which indicate that he is walking forward and should be seen from a sideways position. According to Wakhtang Djjobadze, the origin for the combined frontal and sideways pose of the figure is to be found in Sassanian and, more distantly, in Assyrian sculpted figures. Did the lamassu serve as a possible but indirect model? It seems that it was just a convention adopted here.

The act of offering the church was awkwardly handled. Sumbat’s left hand, holding the church, is not related in any natural manner to his body, and it is clear that the sculptor was concerned simply to emphasize the connection between the king and the church by putting the model of this church in both hands; Sumbat’s left hand under the church is detached from the drum. The relief is small and placed high up on the drum, where it is hardly visible. Moreover, the inscription

which proclaims Sumbat as king, can barely be read from such distance. For those reasons, Antony Eastmond concludes that the image was not intended to receive scrutiny from terrestrial viewers. And he thinks that, due to the crudeness of this relief, Sumbat had no access to the funds employed at Opiza, an argument which is strengthened by the modest dimensions of the church itself. Obviously, the aim of the relief was not to impress the Georgian people with the ruler's power. It is clear, especially if we compare it to the sculpture of Ashot II Kukhi from Tbeti. Rather, it was aimed at showing a visual proof of the generosity and faith of the donor, as was the case in Opiza, with the relief of Ashot IV and Davit II (Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi). Of the representation of the church itself, only a door is still visible, but the model seems to have approximated more to the shape of the actual church than does the king to a human figure. Another point of iconographic interest is that Sumbat is standing alone. There is no intercessor or representation of a figure, such as Christ, to whom he might be presenting the church, and no sign in the masonry of the drum which could prove that further figures ever existed.

Moving on to the south window, we can see on each side small figures of archangels in low relief, symmetrically placed, with accompanying inscriptions. There is also an inscription saying that it was "made by the hand of the deacon Gabriel". The figures and the main inscription form a decorative archivolt for the window. Both archangels hold imperial insignia, but their imperial costume is missing. We must point out the punch-holes technique which has been used here to indicate a jeweled hem on their garments. The orbs which are carried by the archangels are represented as flat discs and one can notice the same punch-hole technique on them. One of the main byzantine examples for comparison is the famous Berlin ivory, perhaps representing the crowning of Leo VI in 886.

We should observe the placing of the Doliskana figures in relation to each other. The curious isolation of the donor in the drum has already been noted, but it becomes less odd if Sumbat is considered in relation to the sculptures around this window. Such a connection is established by the similar inscriptions "Christ exalt our King Sumbat", as a result of which we can assume that

the two archangels beneath the window inscription perform the function of heavenly guardians for the King. In this matter, David Winfield even proposed to identify the Biblical King-Prophet David in the circular frame (sunburst), because it is known that King David was the one from whom the Bagratids claimed their descent. And beneath is a Star of David! So, one might be inclined to interpret it in a way to serve directly this legitimization. Yet, it is highly questionable whether masons (more generally artists) of that time were aware of its meaning. It is difficult – and somewhat risky – to firmly say that they intentionally used the Star of David to establish a direct connection with the Bagratid family, and so to serve a political purpose. It is a controversial issue. Indeed, based on the latest research, Prof. Michele Bacci suggested that in that period it was just a cabalistic and merely decorative motive.

Unfortunately, below the circular frame or *imago clipeata*, the inscription makes very likely that the figure depicted is the deacon Gabriel. Some scholars have suggested that this Gabriel, protected by the archangel Gabriel, his guardian, who has the preeminence over Michael thanks to a little circle-shaped detail carved on his costume, is the mason responsible for the sculptures of Doliskana.

But there is one problem because the sculptures, as well as the inscriptions, can be divided into two stylistically divergent groups.

Indeed, Wakhtang Djobadze makes a distinction between two groups of sculptures. According to him, one mason must have executed the two-line inscription on the keystone of the window of the south crossarm. This inscription displays the same accuracy and precision in rendering the *Asomtavruli* letters as in the architectural decorations. On the other hand, there are other inscriptions, executed by the deacon Gabriel, which share flaws that are characteristic of the first group of carvings. And so, Djobadze thinks that the architectural sculpture was executed by two masons.

In Doliskana, the deacon Gabriel is mentioned in two inscriptions, once below his portrait and again on the eastern part of the southern porch as deacon and teacher. So, this means that despite

his artistic shortcomings, he enjoyed prominence as a teacher and deacon. It is interesting because it has been suggested by scholars that this Gabriel may have been not only a sculptor but even an architect who built the church.

In this region, Serapion of Zarzma, who lived in the same period, was not only renowned as a church father but was considered “very knowledgeable and trained in architectural skills”. He participated actively in rebuilding the monastery of Opiza. A similar situation existed in Syria – Georgia and Syria being interconnected in ecclesiastical matters and Georgian monks having the habit to stay in Syrian monasteries.

Our deacon Gabriel could have been the builder of Doliskana, but this is not certain. This is a very complex topic, and I will not enter into the details. According to Wakhtang Djobadze, the construction technique and some architectural considerations speak against that.

Now, we can wonder: who was the builder of the church? The original church of Doliskana must have been built, according to Djobadze, by an anonymous master mason shortly before 945. And one may also wonder: why before this date and not during the rule of Sumbat I? In the *Life* of Gregory of Khanzta, Georgi Merchule, enumerating the monasteries established by Gregory in the 8th and 9th centuries, states that “Doliskana became a monastery later”, namely after the death of Gregory in 861. Since Merchule completed his biographic work of Gregory of Khanzta in 951, Doliskana could not have been built during the rule of King Sumbat I in 954-958 but a few decades earlier. It means it can have existed only before 951. From an inscription located on the church’s south porch, one could suppose that it was built during the rule of Adarnase’s son, Bagrat, who died in 945. On the other hand, the presence of the relief depicting King Sumbat in the dome, who was the second son of Adarnase and Bagrat’s brother, leads to the conclusion that Sumbat only finished the construction of the church. Soon thereafter, the better economic conditions in Tao-Klarjeti stimulated renewed building activities. This must have led Sumbat Kuropalates (954-958) to embellish the southern facade and the drum, where he incorporated his image with the model of the church in his hands. For that he needed two masons: Gabriel and an anonymous one.

This conclusion, according to which the church was built under the rule of two kings, and not only one king is corroborated by an inscription in the niche of the southwest porch, which says: “Jesus Christ (help) our kings (Sumbat and Bagrat) builders of this holy church during the Last Judgement. Jesus help!”

Notice the way Gabriel is depicted in the solar clipeus. Analogies are possible with Armenian examples of bust-length figures within circular frames dating from the 6th and 7th centuries at Ptghni monastery (Ptghnavank), and several 10th century examples on the walls at Aghtamar. Such figures in medallions are relatively common in Byzantium. They are then spread in Russia, on facades of the cathedrals of St. Dimitri at Vladimir and of St. George at Yuriev Polsky, 12th century.

Finally, over the window of the south crossarm, is an omega-shaped brow. Its face is curved with a continuous strip of palmettes, which can be interpreted as an indicator of different artistic practices. Indeed, the motive appeared in the 10th century in some manuscripts produced in neighboring monasteries, but also in some textiles woven in Byzantine workshops and in Georgia or neighboring Armenia. We must bear in mind that a textile trade route went through the territory of Tao-Klarjeti. And it seems that such textiles have been available not only as a fabric but also as ready-made garments, some of which being sent by Byzantine emperors to Georgian noblemen (see sculptures of Duke Bagrat and David Magistros in Oshki).

On the south façade of the church, there was an interesting sundial, where twelve equidistant radiating segments were carved with fourteen letters. When N. Marr visited Doliskana in August 1904, the sundial was used to regulate the irrigation of the orchards. A similar sundial was on the south facade of the 10th century (now destroyed) church of Ekeki. Another one existed also on the south facade of Phoka church.

Doliskana is the earliest known church in Tao-Klarjeti that shows that polychromy and sculpture on the facades had become typical practices. Such embellishment occurs on the

keystone of the apse window of the eastern facade, and on the semicircular space between the keystone and the window brow of the south facade, where one can see blocks painted in yellow and red. It seems that the practice of accenting windows with polychromatic radiating blocks appeared for the first time in Doliskana. By the second half of the 10th century, it became mandatory for all churches of this region to articulate in this way the upper parts of windows (e.g. Khakhuli, Oshki, Parkhali and Otkhta Ekklesia).

VII) INSIDE THE CHURCH

Two stories are discernable. The upper story was used as the mosque. The lower one was used as a storage room.

The dome is supported by four stepped arches. The transition from the square to the circular base of the drum is achieved by stepped pendentives, flanked by two teardrop-shaped segments which have a decorative rather than structural function. A similar architectural motive appears about a decade later in the church of Kumurdo (964).

It is interesting to notice that the architectural principles of the facades of the drum are reflected inside, below the cupola (other examples of that kind are Goghiouba, Zegani, Yeni-Rabat and Ishkhani).

We also witness a process towards simplification of the architectural structure, most visible on the walls and at the junction between the walls and the vaults. Doliskana shows a new step in the evolution of architecture of Tao-Klarjeti (see for example Kumurdo and Khanzta for better comparison).

Originally, the interior of the church was decorated with frescoes, but Pavlinov had found in 1888 only fragments in the apse, where he saw two rows of saints. Nicholas Marr translated

Georgian inscriptions with names and he also discovered in the conch fragments of an image of Christ on Throne.

In the apse, the paint has vanished, which has left the masonry bare in the lower part. But on the southern part, one can still discern four bishops, two of whom are painted with a subtle pastel green color. Above them are the remnants of two saints (only their feet are preserved). The two rows are separated by a decorative frieze.

It seems that the dome was decorated with wall paintings too. Perhaps, this part was occupied by a glorious representation of the Ascension.

In the western part of the south crossarm is a partially preserved ottoman inscription, which is religious in content (passages from the Koran). Next to it is (or was?) another large inscription: Ali Rajab Ali. Doliskana is the only church with such inscriptions among the churches of Tao-Klarjeti.

A far lot more can be said about this monument. And the last up-to-date interpretation of the architectural sculpture of the church is in the wonderful book *Medieval Georgian Sculpture*.

Presentation made *in situ* on the 12th of September 2019, within the framework of the Seasonal school “Tao-Klarjeti: History and Heritage of Movable and Immovable Monuments” (08 - 16.09.2019).

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