

Lecture Notes by Prof. Dr. Cornelia Horn on the Cathedral and Monastery of Tbeti

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The Cathedral of Tbeti, a site at times also referred to as Tbeti Monastery (ტბეთისმონასტერი), or in Turkish as TibetiManastırı or C(h)evizliManastır, is situated in the village of C(h)evizliköy, on the right bank of the river Imherkhevi, about 15 km from the town Shavshati, in the province of Artvin, in modern-day Turkey. The village is located at an altitude of 1200 meters above sea-level, in an area rather densely covered by forests. The wider region is interspersed with numerous lakes. It is quite likely that the area derived its name Tbeti from the presence of these lakes, given that the Georgian expression ტბა-ეთი, *tba-eti*, means precisely that, lake district.

Today, the former cathedral building has been severely damaged. Preserved are merely ruins of the once magnificent church building, which served as the central liturgical site of the life of a culturally and intellectually highly productive monastic community.

Tbeti Monastery was a medieval Georgian monastery in Historical Southern Georgia. The southern Georgian kingdom of Tao-Klarjeti flourished from 888 to 1034 CE. Thereafter it was united with Abkhazia and Kartli. Together they formed the Kingdom of Georgia, with Tbilisi as its capital.

At the time of the foundation of the cathedral, the region was under the rule of the Bagratid prince of Artanuji, Ashot II of Tao-Klarjeti, also named AshotKukhi, meaning Ashot the Immature or the Unripe. He was the great-nephew of Ashot I and a son of Gurgen I. As hereditary ruler of Tao, AshotKukhi carried the title *eristavt-eristavi*, or duke of dukes, or Grand Duke, a title that expressed that he was holding the position of a senior provincial governor. Politically more famous than AshotKukhi was his nephew, Gurgen II. Nevertheless, AshotKukhi is credited with having founded Tbeti Cathedral sometime between 891 and 918. This ascription of the church's foundation to AshotKukhi is based on two references in *Kartlistskhovreba*, the medieval Georgian chronicles, one in *Matianekartlisai* and one in *SumbatDavitisdze*.

An important relief statue of Grand Duke AshotKukhi is preserved in the State Art Museum in Tbilisi, to where it was brought following World War I. This relief statue constitutes an important witness to the development of sculpture in the 10th century. RusudanMep'isashvili and WachtangZinzadse (*Die Kunst des altenGeorgien*; Leipzig, 1977) have discussed that at the beginning of the 10th century, the process of sculptural appropriation of form entered its decisive stage of development. In the process, a transition took place from the linear to the plastic representation of forms in stone. These two scholars saw this process as being already very well revealed in relief with the depiction of Grand Duke AshotKukhi, which dates from the period between 891 and 918. The relief statue is a figure of 113 cm height. It is executed in high relief, being kept nevertheless as a clear block of stone, without the figure's individual parts being executed and worked out in detail. This stone relief sculpture once was part of the decorative program of the north-western pillar of Tbeti Cathedral, but today it is kept in the State Art Museum in Tbilisi. On this relief sculpture, Ashot's headgear, clothing and the drawing of the fabric are reproduced in a realistic fashion. The rich drawing of the fabric is especially revelatory of the decorative side of the representation.

The Cathedral of Tbeti, which AshotKukhi sponsored, may have been dedicated either to Saint George or to the Mother of God. For the former, a series of wall paintings on the vault of the western arm is taken as evidence. Nicolai Marr described several scenes of the Passion of St. George, which he still saw as paintings with captions on the vault of the western arm. The scenes he could identify comprised the scene of St. George distributing his wealth to a group of assistants; the scene of the saint having been attached to a wheel, which two executioners were turning on pikes; and a scene that showed St. George being bound and whipped by two executioners. Based on this decorative program that focused on St. George, some assume that Tbeti Cathedral was dedicated to that saint.

Tbeti Monastery was an important cultural hub of medieval Georgia. It is possible that prior to the foundation of Tbeti Cathedral in 918, a monastic settlement may already have existed at the site, dating back to the ninth century. The *Life of Grigol of Khandztaby* Grigol Mrechuli reports of a miracle that Bishop Zachariah of Ancha worked at a monastery of Tba at the time of Saint Grigol.

Over the course of time, Tbeti Monastery developed into a significant center of cultural production. A noteworthy number of hagiographical writings were created by the monks living at the monastery. Tbeti Monastery became one of the most important centers of calligraphy and manuscript illumination. In 995, Ioane Mtbevari, who is known as composer of religious songs and as translator of several Greek works into Georgian, created the Gospel of Tbeti, which Bishop Samuel of Tbeti commissioned to be decorated with miniatures in the tradition of Byzantine manuscript illumination. During the 10th century, moreover, Davit Tbeli worked at Tbeti Monastery. He is known as an important translator from Greek into Georgian. In the year 1002, the copyist AkvilaMtbevari wrote the famous manuscript known as *Life of the Saints*, which is now kept on Mount Athos. Later centuries knew further famous writers and copyists, among whom one might mention, with Bruno Baumgartner, the names of Pavel Mtbevari, Ioane Mtbevari-Sapareli, Giorgi Mtbevari, KvirikeMtbevari, and AbuseridzeTbeli. Documentation is preserved which allows one to trace the cultural activities at Tbeti Monastery into the 13th century.

Of the monastic complex at the site, only the ruins of the main church remain today. The lack of excavations and sufficient archaeological surveys result in a lack of findings of any further buildings, that is, of remains and traces of the presumed larger number of monastic settlements at the site.

In more recent years, the deterioration of the architectural remains of Tbeti Monastery and Cathedral increased significantly. In the year 1961, all of the western arm of the cathedral as well as a part of the northern arm, the cupola, and the roofs of Tbeti Cathedral fell in. They may have fallen in on their own. While Nicole and Michel Thierry refer to earthquakes as causes of destruction, WachtangDjobadze also commented on the fact that spolia from the cathedral walls had been removed by the local farmers and other members of the population and used in the construction of houses and other buildings.

Into the second half of the seventeenth century, the Cathedral of Tbeti still functioned as a Christian church. Thereafter, the local population opened a Muslim shrine or mosque inside the church building. This Muslim shrine was functioning until the end of the nineteenth century. At present, no religious services are being held in the ruins of the former cathedral, neither Christian, nor Muslim ones.

Tbeti Cathedral and its monastic complex attracted some attention of scholars, primarily of art historians. Among the scholars, who have worked at the site, mention should be made of G. Kazbek, D. Bakradze, A. Paulinov, Nikolai Marr, Nicole and Michel Thierry, V. Beridze, Bruno Baumgartner, and W. Djobadze.

The art historians Michel and Nicole Thierry have studied extensively the original structures and foundations of Tbeti Cathedral. At present, the basic structure of the building is recognized as a croix-libre structure. Yet that is a secondary, reworked floorplan. Scholarship assumes that the original church was set up and built as a central octagonal building, rather than a round church with an apse. The basic floorplan consisted of a central circle, above which was placed a central dome. Four main arms of a cross extended into the four cardinal directions. The apse then was an extension of the eastern cross arm. In between each two of these four main arms, there was an additional area of about the same length and proportion. Each of the eight arms would have ended in a window, cutting through the outer wall. From the outside, the round building wall would have shown niches that were placed one each between the windows marking the eight arms.

According to the research work of Nicole and Michel Thierry, Tbeti Cathedral was once painted completely. Nikolai Marr described paintings in the apse and the western arm. Wachtang Djobadze seemed to have thought that only the western and the eastern arm were painted, given that the other arms were constructed later, after the paintings had been completed already. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Thierrys still observed upper registers of the apsidal scenery, but the destruction was advancing rapidly and the pigmented layers were increasingly being washed out. The apse, moreover, was also threatened structurally. The Thierrys produced a photo documentation of the pictures of the apse of Tbeti Cathedral as these were still visible between 1967 and 1972. According to the Thierrys, an acceptable dating for these paintings ought to fall between the end of the 12th century and the beginning of the 13th century.

Various scholars have described or commented on different parts of the painting program of Tbeti Cathedral. Marr's descriptions of scenes from the martyrdom of Saint George have already been discussed above. The description of the paintings of the apse offered by the Thierrys remains valuable still. Already at the time of their visit, the colors of the paintings had faded considerably. The background of the set of paintings of the registers they observed was colored in green ash, likely originally turquoise, resulting from the use of malachite as a pigment.

The Thierrys described a program of paintings consisting of three registers: a first, top register with Christ, seated on a richly decorated throne and being surrounded by angels; a second, middle register, showing the Virgin, John the Baptist, and a row of apostles; and a third, lower register with figures of Church Fathers. Of these Church Fathers, Marr was only able to identify

Athanasius of Alexandria by way of still being able to read the relevant caption. While the upper register of paintings is to be regarded as complex and original, the middle zone followed a tradition that had been established in Asia Minor for centuries.

In the apsidal conch, a rather large figure of Christ was depicted seated on a throne. He carried a book in hand. The book was shown open, allowing the viewer to read the text of John 8:12 'I am the light of the world, those who follow me will not walk in darkness.' The figure of Christ was painted with his right hand raised for blessing, the fingers being held in the typical gesture of the sign of blessing. Christ was dressed in a pink tunic, embroidered in yellow at the wrists. Over this tunic was draped a turquoise coat. Christ's feet were bare and shod with thin-laced soles. A mandorla in pink served as background to the figure.

On an older photo, taken by A. Paulinov, one can still see Christ's elongated face, scanty hair, and a loop sliding down his right shoulder. Christ's face was surrounded by a cruciform nimbus, the crossarms of which were marked by small rhombi with pointed angles.

Some information is preserved concerning the ecclesiastical structures as well as the figures leading the Christian faithful at Tbeti Cathedral. Some documents are preserved of synodal records from Tbeti, which have been made accessibly by Tina Enukidze. Information is available concerning the episcopal leadership at the cathedral as well. We know of StepaneMtbevari, who was born in Georgia in the middle of the ninth century and who died in Georgia in the tenth century. StepaneMtbevari was the first tenth-century bishop of Tbeti. He had been trained in multiple languages and came to be a famed writer and hagiographer. He is regarded as a leading figure in the Tao-Klarjeti literary school. Support was accorded him through the efforts of AshotKukhi, who not only commissioned the building of Tbeti Cathedral. According to the Georgian chronicles and significant monastic hagiography, like the *Life of GrigorKhandzteli*, Ashotstrongly supported and may have regarded as intrinsically united the life of monasticism and the furtherance of cultural life. Thus, Ashot commissioned StepaneMtbevari, whom he had installed as the first bishop of Tbeti Cathedral, to compose the somewhat novelistic or hagiographic *Martyrdom of Mikel Gobron*. This hagiography was an early witness to Christian-Muslim conflict and struggle in Georgia. Ashot's commission of Stepane to write this text witnesses quite clearly to the early importance, already in the 10th century, of reflecting on the relations of these two faith communities to one another. The history of the preservation and active usage of the site as a religious shrine, of its partial destruction through neglect or active disregard in the twentieth century, and to some extent also the history of more recent efforts on the part of interested Georgians and of the local, Muslim community to preserve at least parts of Tbeti Cathedral and make the site known again regionally and globally, also but not only for reasons of tourism development, is a sustained and ongoing witness to the continuing relevance of Tbeti Monastery and Cathedral. In particular, it is an important witness to the relevance of reflecting on and being concerned about precisely this relationship between Christians and Muslims, of Turkish, Georgian, and other backgrounds, for reasons of peaceful social and religious life and coexistence, for reasons of political stability, and for reasons of joined efforts in the preservation of a common and shared cultural heritage in this important region in the southern Caucasus and its western border areas.