

The Khakhuli Dome Decoration: Eschatological and Historical Context

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Khakhuli monastery is located in the historical Kingdom of Tao in modern-day Turkey in one of the gorges of the Tortrum river. Cathalicon of the monastery was one of the series of large-scale churches and monasteries founded by David III of Tao (ill.1) in the second half of the tenth century. The present paper is dedicated to the dome decoration at Khakhuli and it aims to demonstrate the contextual complexity of its iconographic programme.

The summit of the dome features a monumental image of the Glorification of the Cross, a theme that has a long history in medieval Georgian art (ill.2). The image represents the widespread version of this subject referred to in scholarship as the “Vision of Constantine”: a huge cross is depicted against the starry sky and enriched with the theophanic elements such as a mandorla and radiating rays behind the arms of the cross. As noted by Tinatin Virsaladze and other art historians, the Khakhuli painting follows the dome decoration of the neighboring Iskhani church (ill.3) as well as Manglisi church (ill.4) which similarly feature the elevation of the cross by four Angels in their domes.

The significance of the theme of the “Glorification of the Cross” in medieval Georgia is unmatched elsewhere in the Byzantine world. Even though the theme frequently appears in the art of Cappadocia, Cappadocian material cannot come near to Georgian examples in terms of the consistency of appearance, iconographic diversity and richness. That is why this theme has come to be regarded to be a traditional iconographic choice for the Georgian dome programmes. Its popularity is explained mainly by its eschatological context – the image of the triumphal cross relating to the theme of the Second Coming of the Lord and the Last Judgment. However, in secondary literature the popularity of the subject in Georgian art is also linked to the historical events described in *Kartlis Tskhovreba* or *The Life of Kartli*, the principal historical source and chronicle of medieval Georgian history. Giorgi Chubinashvili linked this pictorial theme to the actual events described in the Georgian sources. In this light of particular note is the section that describes the elevation of the crosses in the capital of Iberia - Mtskheta by newly converted Georgian king Mirian and the apparition of the cross over the city. Events symbolically related to

the vision of the cross to Constantine the Great (312) and the famous miracle of the apparition of the cross over Jerusalem in 351, thus, emphasizing the belonging of the Church of Georgia to the Ecumenical Church having national history of its own. The “Glorification of the Cross” of Georgian dome decorations seems to follow iconographically the texts describing the miracles which took place in Mtsketa; the event that is regarded as a symbol of Christianization of Iberian Kingdom in Georgian history.

In Georgian monuments the theme of the “Apparition of the Cross” is often accompanied by the image of the “Deesis”. The Old Testament themes also often appear in the dome— the row of prophets holding appropriate texts, or representations of more narrative scenes which feature prophets, for example Zechariah in a chariot as seen in Ishkhani murals (ill.5), or even the cycle reflecting the biblical story featured in the thirteenth-century katholion of the Kirants monastery (ill.6). In the murals commissioned by the famous Mkhargdzelis family, the band of the bottom of the dome is occupied by scenes from the life of different prophets. The Khakuli case can be regarded as a variation of these choices, since it is the scene of the Ascension of prophet Elijah which appears there (ill.7). The latter is presented beneath the huge cross on the southern section of the dome. In the scene of the Ascension of Elijah, the prophet is generally represented as ascending to the heaven in a quadriga mostly driven by four horses; that is regarded in patrology as a symbol of four main virtues of man. In most cases he is presented together with Elisha receiving *his mantle*.¹ *The Khakhuli image represents traditional version of this scene combining two episodes of the story. What is unusual here, is that behind Elijah appears the figure of Angel identified by Asomtavruli inscription as “Raphael”.*² Archangel Raphael is considered to be a protector in the prophet’s journey, and it seems that the inclusion of this specific angel in the composition can be explained by this aspect of his service – he accompanies the Prophet Elijah in his sacred journey to heaven.

Let us now consider the iconography of the Ascension of Elijah in the broader context of dome programmes of Georgian churches, since several comparable examples can be cited here. We have

¹ For iconography of this scene see: M.Kadiroglu, N. Peker, B.Isler, *The Iconography of the Scene of Ascension of Elijah in Capadocian and Tao –Klardjetian Wall Painting*, p. 100- 101

² At a first glance, an inclusion of Archangel Michael would have been more understandable here, thanks to the liturgical texts of the Ascension feast telling the meeting of Archangel Michael with Prophet Elia, focusing on the theme of the Ascension of the prophet to the heaven and the second coming of the Lord.

already mentioned the dome of the Kirants Church (ill.8) where among the Old Testament scenes the Ascension of the prophet occupies a prominent place. This episode from the Old Testament is also attested in the Nikortsminda Church decoration (ill.9). These murals are dated to the 17th c, although according to Virsaladze they follow the scheme of the original, 11th c. layer of the painting. The scene of the Ascension of Elijah also appears in the early twelfth century on the ceiling of the Natlismtsemeli monastery in the David Gareji desert, demonstrating the transition of this theme from the dome program to the domeless decoration.

Virsaladze traditionally explains the dominance of this theme in the dome programmes of Georgian churches by its eschatological context. It is well known that Prophet Elijah is one of the most important protagonists of the Old Testament story. He occupies a special place in Judaic as well as Christian Eschatology. According to Judaic tradition, he is a “messenger” of the Messiah and restorer of God’s people, whereas in the Christian tradition he is considered to be the “witness” and forerunner of the Second Coming of the Lord. Thus, the inclusion of the prophet entering the heaven by means of a chariot of fire? on the “heaven” of the dome, alongside with the Vision of the Cross is considered to be a reference to the biblical story of his Ascension and the final events of the history. I would argue that the representation of the Ascension of the Prophet alongside the Glorification of the Cross illustrating the “end of the world” could also contain historical references; and can be related to one of the most precious relics kept in Georgia – the mantle of Prophet Elijah which was left to Elisha as a witness of his corporal Ascension and promised return into the world. According to medieval Georgian chronicles *Conversion of Kartli* the mantle of Elijah was allegedly brought by Jews driven out of Jerusalem during the siege of Nabuchodanazzar. According to the ecclesiastic tradition it was buried with the Chiton of Christ that was brought to Mtsketa by the Jewish priest Elioz in the main church of Mtsketa - the Svetitskoveli – rereferred to in the Georgian sources as the “Holy of the Holies” or the “Mother of all churches” (ill.10) . The transition of these relics and the foundation of the most sacred site became the basis of “Jerusalimisation” of Mtskheta. Thus, the popularity of this theme in the dome programmes can be related to the relic of the Svetitskoveli cathedral and, the Georgians refer to this biblical story not solely for its eschatological interpretation, but as a *memoria* of one of the major shrines of the Georgian Kingdom. This association in medieval thinking should have been more vivid. If we take into account the importance of this relic as reflected in Georgian historical sources, as well as in a large number of deeds, this symbolical link appears highly plausible. What

makes it especially significant is that in Georgian sources the mantle of the prophet is always cited in conjunction with the shroud of Christ. Indeed, in the *Conversion of Kartli* these two relics seem to be inseparable in its significance. It is obvious that in Georgian spiritual history the mantle is perceived to be a “forerunner” of the major relic and palladium of Georgia – the shroud of Christ. Their unity and presence in one and the same sacred space - the Svetitskhoveli cathedral, stands for the fulfilment of the Old and the New Testaments in “new Jerusalem” of the city of Mtsketa. It is obvious that the importance of the relic of the mantle stimulated the special cult of the prophet in Georgia as attested by the folk feasts dedicated to St. Elijah, numerous churches dedicated to him, or many toponyms inspired by his name. Even the prominence of the sheep’s cloth of Elijah attested in the Georgian folk feasts is regarded to be an influence of the importance of the mantle relic in Georgia, by ethnographers.

It is noteworthy that according to all existed versions of the texts of the conversion of Kartli the first Christian king of Georgia was converted into Christianity on the 20th of June; on the very day when the church commemorates the feast of the “Ascension of St. Elijah to Heaven”. If we take into account a very special role of the prophet Elijah in patrology, this ‘coincidence’ would show a deep symbolic roots: The Prophet Elijah defended the worship of the Hebrew God, returning the Hebrew people to the right faith, because of that, by significance he is sometimes compared to the lawgiver Moses. He is considered to be a protector of the royal dynasties and we find an epithet of “protector of the Kings” in reference to Elijah in the Akathist text. The royal aspect of his cult seems to be especially pronounced in Georgian history, since the first Christian king of Iberia was converted on the feast day of the Great Prophet. Thus, St. Eliajah and his mantle believed to have been buried in Georgia became a natural protector and palladium of the Georgian state. Therefore, the representation of this biblical episode at Khakhuli may be interpreted as a distant remainder of “national” relic of the country. The local importance of this theme may have encouraged the designer of the Khakhuli murals to give it such prominence in the overall programme. It is noteworthy that the painter distinguished it even by a manner of execution: the curves of the flowing drapery are comparatively thick and differ from the rest of the painting by expressiveness remotely reminding the partitions of the enamel work (ill.12), thus differentiating this image from the others stylistically. It cannot be accidental either that the whole composition differs from the rest of the painting by the choice of colours.

The key to understanding the context of the Khakhuli image can be found in the murals of the chamber of the David Gareji monastery from the Udabno desert. Here the scene of the Ascension of the prophet Elijah appears alongside images from the life of St. Nino, apostolic saint of Georgia. The principal wall-paintings represent the history of conversion of Kartli, among which the miracle of the Svetitskoveli – the life-giving pillar attracts a special attention. According to Zaza Skhirtlaze the inclusion of the scene of the Ascension of the prophet in the programme representing the history of conversion of Kartli can be variously interpreted – in general mantle stands for the symbol of divine grace left by prophet on the Earth. It can also be interpreted as a symbol of the unity of the Old and new Testaments in the Svetitskoveli Cathedral. I would argue that the symbolic link to the Svetitskoveli church in the murals of the chamber is further stressed by the images of the Trinity and that of the Ladder of Jacob. Both of them appear as important symbols of the life-giving pillar of the Svetitskoveli in the famous twelfth-century *Sermon on the Living Pillar, The Lord's Tunic and the Catholic Church* written by catholicos Nikoloz Gulaberidze. The ladder of Jacob is presented in the text of conversion of Kartli as a prefiguration of the burial place of Christ's Tunic and that of the mantle of the prophet Elijah. Therefore, the murals of the Gareji reveal the “national” overtones of the overall programme giving a palpable allusion to “second Jerusalem” or new Jerusalem of Georgia with the reference to its main Locus Sanctus.

The symbolic link to the sacred city of Mtsketa is supported by other ecclesiastical buildings commissioned by the tenth-century king David Curopalates. One has an impression that Svetitskoveli symbolically ‘re-appears’ in all churches commissioned by this influential ruler of Tao –Klarjeti region. For instance, note the prominence of the image of Zion included in the sanctuary programme of the Otkhta murals (ill.14) . Zaza Skirtladze interprets this image as a symbolic allusion to the Mater Ecclesia of Georgia, the Svetitskoveli Cathedral, which in some Georgian sources is referred to as the ‘Church of Zion’. Even the choice of the basilican plan for a group of splendid churches commissioned by David of Tao in historical Tao is considered to have been inspired by the old Svetitskoveli church. The sculptural decoration of the Oshki church is worth evoking in this regard (ill.15) - the image of St Nino carved into one of the pillars in the south gallery obviously promotes the remembrance of this major church of Georgia, illustrating the miracle of the erection of the life giving pillar of the Svetitskoveli. These allusions seem to be natural??. Along with the special significance of Mtskheta as the ecclesiastic capital and spiritual center of Georgia, the political situation of the country should be taken in account. Unifications of

kingdoms generally took place through the hegemony exercised by central regions. In Georgia, we have a very atypical case, whereby the unification started from what was traditionally considered to be the periphery of the country, since traditional centers of the kingdom, such as Kartli, were occupied by Arabs. In fact, the kings and aristocrats of Kartli were exiled by Arab emirs to the southern part of Georgia and the former worked towards unification from this very part of the country. Thus, the symbolic reference to the “heart” of Georgian kingdom, the Svetitskoveli, so to say, *Axis Mundi* of Georgian church and state – evidenced in ecclesiastic building campaign carried out by David III of Tao may well contain political undertones. It demonstrated the spiritual unity of Georgia and the idea of its political unification which was about to be begin.

This attitude is fully ‘illustrated’ by the inscription preserved at Samtavro, one of the main churches of Mtskheta (ill.16). Unusual inscription on the triumphal arch tells the story of coronation of the Bagrationi king from the Tao region in Mtskheta. The latter is identified to be the king Adarnase II who was the first to receive the title of the Georgian King” after the abolition of the kingdom of Kartli by Sasanians in the sixth century. This eleventh-century inscription reflects the restoration of Kartvelian monarchy in Mtskheta, and it was considered to be so important by the later restorers of the church that it was repeated and saved as late as the 17th century. Thus, Mtskheta the site of coronations of Georgian kings and of consecration of catholicos, maintained the significance of spiritual center even in the period under Arabian rule and the inscription cited here gave a special emphasis to this circumstance. It is instructive that during the centuries everywhere?? Mtsketa the formal capital of Kartli is called the “capital” - metropolis of Georgia, the word that stands for the meaning of the Heavenly Jerusalem in patrology.

I would also argue that the reference to one of the “national” relics in the Khakuli church might give also evoke concrete associations relevant to Byzantium, where the cult of the Prophet Elijah was strongly promoted. It is well known that the prophet Elijah was proclaimed to be a patron saint of the Emperor Basil I and in course of time the prophet became one of the most important patrons of the Macedonian dynasty, contemporary to David III’s rule. Nea Eklesia built by Basil I was the most ambitious church building erected in Constantinople since the sixth century³. One of the most important relics of the church was the sheepskin of the prophet Elijah.⁴ The feast of the prophet on

³ Observations on the Nea Ekklesia of Basil I, p. 52-53.

⁴ 58.

the 20th of June was especially important to this site. According to the typikon of the great church in the Nea “a more splendid festival is celebrated, with the Emperor and senate and patriarch assembling there”.⁵ It is inconceivable that king David Curopalatos was not aware of this Byzantine practice. Support for this historical parallelism can be found in a special personality of David III per se. David III “kurapalatos of whole East” was the dominant ruler of Caucasus; the most distinguished representative of the Bagrationi family in Tao. His rulership is regarded as a turning point in the history of unification of the Georgian lands. After his successful campaign against the rebellion of Barda Skleros in 979, he conducted a more active policy of independence from Byzantium, breaking away from the shadow of powerful Christian neighbors to the west.

Thus, the claim of possessing this precious relic, strongly promoted in ancient Georgian historical sources and Georgian visual art, gave a special authority to Georgian sovereign, possibly reflecting the challenge to Byzantium pretending to possess the actual relic. Moreover, it is well known that Emperor Basil I promoted his symbolic connection with the biblical kings David and Solomon. The sermons of Nea Ecclesia openly attested to this attitude and aspirations of the Emperor. The Biblical provenance of the Bagrationi royal house was a well-known topos by the tenth century. The special importance of this theme was reflected even in the writings of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, according to which Iberians claimed to be the descendants of the Biblical King Davit and consequently the progenies of the Virgin. Notably, none of the dynasties in the history of Byzantine Empire succeeded in establishing the idea of their Biblical origins, the fact that gave a special privilege to Georgian sovereigns. The representation of the Ascension of Alexander the Great (ill.17), the widely-recognized archetype of the powerful ruler, on the southern facade of the Khakhuli church demonstrates the scale of ambition of Georgian rulers who overtly challenged the might of Byzantium.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that the text of conversion of Kartli elaborates the statement that the relics buried in Georgia – the mantle of Elijah and the Chiton of Christ had implications not only for the past and the present but also in eschatological terms, and their time would in fact come when they “appear in glory over the world”. This future-centric context is strongly emphasized in a number of Georgian royal documents. Thus, in medieval Georgia both of these relics carried eschatological connotations, and their conceptualization was linked to their active protection of

⁵ Basil I p. 195.

the Georgian kingdom, but also to a special mission which Georgian kingdom was to embark on in “future time”.