

Ecclesiological programs in the monumental art of Tao-Klarjeti and their development in the Transcaucasian monuments from the XI to the beginning of the XIII century.

Picturesque ensembles of the medieval kingdom of Tao-Klarjeti are an important part of the development not only of the Georgian Art but also of the Transcaucasia Art on the whole. Close to Byzantium traditions, having experienced strong influences of neighboring Syria and Cappadocia, they represent an independent artistic phenomenon.

Frescoes of Otkhta Ecclesia Basilica (Tao-Klarjeti), dated around 960, are considered to be the cradle of many Transcaucasian altar programs. The ecclesiological theme in these frescoes is opened with plenitude unsurpassed for that time, anticipating further solutions in ensembles of the XI-XII centuries. In the conchas of the apse we can find an image of Christ in Glory, almost completely lost today, below him there is Etimasia, on both sides of which are located figures of angels. In the next register we can see the Virgin Mary Orant and St. John the Precursor. Prophets and Church Fathers are represented in one row below. In the later development of the monumental art programs Prophets and Church Fathers will occupy different areas in a cathedral.

There is a big window in the middle of the register, at the top of which we can find a personification of the Church with a small Basilica in its hand and the inscription “SO” (Sion/Zion). Most likely it embodies the Cenacle, where the Pentecost took place and where the apostles’ teaching originated. There are two compositions represented in the window slopes both sides from Ecclesia: Melchisedek with a vessel in his hands on the left and Moses receiving the Tables of the Law on the right. The apse program finishes with evangelical scenes.

We can watch similar programs but in a condensed version in the wall-paintings of Khakhuli (Tao – Klarjeti, XI cent.), in the cave church of Natlismtzemeli (Georgia, beginning of XI cent.), and also in the Church of the Saviour in Chvabiani (Svaneti, 978-1001).

The painting program of Betania altar (the beginning of the XII cent.) develops the theme of Okhta Ecclesia deeper but in a revised version. There is the Theophany in the concha, the rows of Prophets, Apostles and Saints top-down sequentially (it is important to mention in this context the lost paintings of Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Tatev monastery (930), where the divine hierarchy is allocated in the same way as in Betania). Images of deacons can be found in the window slopes. The central place in the row of the prophets is taken by David. His position is distinguished hierarchically and defined by royal dignity which is strengthened by a connection to the genealogy of Georgian Bagratids. The single image of Melchizedek with a wine vessel (inscription: King, Priest, Prophet) represented in Betania is a unique for monumental art. The

image comes across as multifold as it brings together prophetic, royal and Eucharistic serving. It refers to Christ as a high priest according to Melchizedek's rank in liturgical sense.

Moreover the ecclesiological part of the prophetic row program is outlined in clear eschatological direction which is gradually revealed in the other prophets' texts. They talk about the presence of God starting from the arrival of the Messiah up to triumph of the Heavenly Jerusalem. There is a row of apostles with closed codex or tied scrolls below.

These type of iconography ascends to a composition "Traditio legis" and is typical for the Georgian Monuments of the X- XII centuries (Khakhuli, the beginning of the XI cent., Oshki, 1036, Chvabiabi, Ateni, Matskhvarishi, 1140, Natlismtsimeli, the first quarter of the XI cent., Sio Mgvime, beginning of the XII cent. etc). Only by the beginning of the XIII century it starts to be changed by "Communion of the Apostles" (Kintsvisi), the composition which was widespread in Byzantium world since XI century. In the Transcaucasian area this scene can be found in such region as Lori (Akhtala, Kobair, Kirants) and Ani (Tigran Onents Church) from beginning of the XIII century. Zechariah, John the Precursor's father and the High Priest of the Temple of Jerusalem (according to the Gospel of James) closes the procession, wearing respective clothes and holding a censer and a shrine. In accordance with the altar conception his image is called to emphasize the theme of continuity of the Old and New Testament Priesthood started by Melchizedek.

The row of apostles in Betania clearly indicates the idea of continuity of the Georgian Church : tradition claims that five of the represented apostles are connected to the evangelism in Georgia as well as in Cappadocia and Pontus. In the lower register of the apse we can find frontal figures of Church Fathers with closed books in their hands.

Thus the wall-painting program of the altar apse in Betania represents a fair illustration of rethinking and actualization of the ecclesiological theme, which is typical for early monumental art in Georgia. We can find a completed image of the Christian Church with its Eucharistic basis. The Priesthood theme takes priority of the program. Owing to the special selection and a positional relationship of these figures with their attributes and the image of Christ in concha we can clearly understand the idea of the continuity of the Old and New Testament Priesthood. We can also see the beginning of "Transcaucasian" theme connected with the understanding of the place of the Georgian Church in the Catholic (Oecumenical) Christian Church. The program placed in Otkhta stays actual in monuments dated to the beginning of the XIII century. Its basis is understood in an actual rich version in Timotesubani.