## DAVID KHOSHTARIA

## Past and Present of the Georgian Sinai:

A Survey of Architectural History and Current State of Monasteries in Klarjeti

The historic province of Klarjeti (within the present-day Artvin Ili of Turkey) to which Medieval authors enthusiastically refer as the "Georgian Sinai" is dotted with churches and monasteries built during the ninth and tenth centuries. They are connected with the large-scale monastic movement initiated by St Gregory of Khandzta that was one of the pivotal events of the Medieval Georgian history. The main narrative source for the study of this movement is the *Life of St Gregory of Khandzta*, written by monk George Merchule in 951.

The arrival of St Gregory to Klarjeti in about 780 gave rise to the spiritual revival, which resulted in a very significant architectural activity energetically supported by the Bagrations, the house of local rulers at that time and the Georgian Royal family later. Soon in Klarjeti a great number of monasteries was founded or renewed.

Archaeological interest in the churches and monasteries of Klarjeti started in the nineteenth century (K. Koch<sup>1</sup>, D. Bakradze<sup>2</sup>, G. Qazbegi<sup>3</sup>, Pr. Uvarova<sup>4</sup>). From the architectural point of view, they were first examined by A. Pavlinov, who organized his expedition to Klarjeti in 1888. His report<sup>5</sup> includes brief descriptions of the monasteries, to which plans, cross sections, façade drawings, and photos are attached. These drawings though far from being accurate, served as the only graphic documentation of the architectural monuments of Klarjeti until 1990s. The contribution of N. Marr was also notably valuable. He rediscovered and subsequently published the *Life of St Gregory of Khandzta*. With the purpose of preparing the publication, he went for a trip to Klarjeti in 1906 and visited many churches and monasteries. His "Itinerary" attached to the *Life* contains immense information about the region including detailed descriptions of monuments, and is still very helpful to the explorers of the "Georgian Sinai".

After the First World War, the study of the monasteries of Klarjeti was interrupted for a long time and was resumed only in the late 1950s. The book and the articles by W. Djobadze<sup>7</sup> should be mentioned especially, as well as the works of N. and J.-M. Thierry<sup>8</sup>, D. Winfield<sup>9</sup>, and B. Baumgartner<sup>10</sup>. From 1980s, Tur-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> K. Koch, Wanderungen im Oriente während der Jahre 1843 und 1844, Reise im pontische Gebirge und türkischen Armenien (Weimar, 1846), 190–194.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> D. BAKRADZE, "Ob arkheologicheskoy poezdke sovershennoy v 1879 godu po porucheniyu Akademii Nauk v Chorokhskiy bassein, Batum, Artvin i Artanudj", Zapiski Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk [Proceedings of the Imperial Academy of Sciences] 37, 1 (1880); id., "Zapiski o Batumskoy oblasti", Izvestia Kavkazskoe otdelenie Imperatorskogo rossiyskogo geograficheskogo obshchestva [Caucasian branch of the Russian Imperial Geographic Society] VI (1879–1881), 153–167.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> G. KAZBEG, "Tri mesyatsa v Turetskoy Gruzii", Zapiski Kavkazskoe otdelenie Imperatorskogo rossiyskogo geograficheskogo obshchestva [Caucasian branch of the Russian Imperial Geographic Society] X, I (1876), 1–140.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> P. UVAROVA, Putevie zapiski. Kavkaz: Adjaria, Shavshetia, Poskhovskiy uchastok, II (Moscow, 1891), 300–315.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> A. PAVLINOV, "Ekspeditsia na Kavkaz 1888 goda", Materiali po arkheologii Kavkaza [Materials for the Caucasian Archaeology] III (1893), 1–91, pl. XXIII–XLVII.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> N. MARR, "Dnevnik poezdki v Shavshiyu I Klardjiyu", Teksti i razyskaniya po armyano-gruzinskoy filologii [Texts and Studies in Armenian-Georgian Philology]. VII (1911), 1–202.

W. DJOBADZE, "The Georgian Churches of Tao-Klarjet'i: Construction Methods and Materials", Oriens Christianus 62 (1978) 114–134; id., "Observations on the Architectural Sculpture of Tao-Klarjet'i Churches around One Thousand A. D.", in O. Feld and U. Peschlow, eds., Studien zur spätantiken und byzantischen Kunst, Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann Gewidmet, II (Mainz, 1986), 81–100; id., Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries in Historic Tao, Klardjeti and Šavšeti (Stuttgart, 1992); id., "A Brief Survey of the Monastery of St. George in Hanzt'a", Oriens Christianus 78 (1994) 145–176.

N. and J.-M. THIERRY, "Notes d'un voyage en Géorgie turque", Bedi Karthlisa VIII-IX, 34–35 (1960), 10–29; "Notes d'un nouveau voyage en Géorgie turque", Bedi Karthlisa XXV (1968), 51–65; J.-M. THIERRY, "Topographie et état actuel des monuments géorgiens en Turquie orientale", Revue des Études Géorgiennes et Caucasiennes 5 (1989), 129–167; id., "Notes sur les monuments de la valleé du Karçkal", Revue des Études Géorgiennes et Caucasiennes 8–9 (1992–1993), 233–235.

78 David Khoshtaria

kish investigators – first M. Kadiroğlu<sup>11</sup> and later some other authors as well (O. Aytekin<sup>12</sup>, F. Bayram<sup>13</sup>) are actively contributing to the study of the monasteries of Klarjeti. As for Georgian scholars, only after the collapse of the Soviet regime, they became able to join in the exploration of the antiquities of the "Georgian Sinai"<sup>14</sup>. In 1990s, my team and I conducted field surveys in Klarjeti. Expeditions in 1994 and 1995 were especially fruitful, as during those two seasons we measured almost all of significant structures and made detailed graphic documentation<sup>15</sup>.

What is the "Georgian Sinai" and why and how should we study it? It is a unique cultural and spiritual phenomenon actualized in dozens of architectural monuments. Regrettably, despite the increased interest of scholars in those monuments, they remain little-known. In general works dealing with the art and architecture of that great cultural entity, which we usually call Byzantine, one can hardly find even a brief mention of the churches of Klarjeti. At present, it is clear that a careful appraisal and reassessment of the existing material, including both the preserved monuments and the narrative sources, are needed most. The important step in this direction is the critical discussion and overcoming of traditional methodological schemes, which focusing on the imperial centers often depreciate the art of outlying countries even if distinguished by a high level of the cultural achievements. The further study of the "Georgian Sinai" will in addition contribute to the clearer definition of the notions of "metropolitan" and "provincial" and their geographical and axiological connotations in respect to the East Christian art.

The early stage of monastic building in Klarjeti is illustrated by the monastery in Tsqarostavi, constructed around 840 by the monk Ilarion. At present, the main church of the monastery is destroyed, however its plan can be reconstructed using its description made by N. Marr, who saw the church in the better state of preservation. It was a cross-domed building with short transept and long westarm expanded by two adjacent vaulted compartments on the north and presumably on the south as well. Relatively well-survived room to the north of the sanctuary is unusually large. It was connected with the apse by means of a huge arched door. Neither in Georgia nor in neighboring countries exact analogues to this plan are known.

Along the church, a nearby chapel, and a refectory, which form the core of the monastery, there are three other chapels erected on rocky hills and a number of subsidiary structures in the environs. Their study may shed more light on the aspects of the economy and everyday life in the monasteries of the Early Byzantine period.

The monastery at Parekhi is another amazing illustration of the activity of St Gregory's followers. Founded in 840s as a hermitage, it soon turned into a coenobium. Monastic buildings are sheltered by a horizontal ledge and form an organic whole with the surrounding landscape. Two ninth-century churches, a single-nave structure and a basilica, stand in the middle of the monastery next to each other.

A small ninth-century church called Nuka Kilise or Nuka Saqdari is distinguished for its breath-taking location. It is erected on an inaccessible rock high above the modern village Alabalik. On the north, the church abuts upon the rock and is partly cut in it. Due to the confined size of the construction site, the northern aisle of the basilican church is rudimental.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> D. WINFIELD, "Some Early Medieval Figure Sculpture from North-East Turkey", Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute 31 (1968), 33–72.

B. BAUMGARTNER, "Drei vergessene georgische Klöster in der Nordosttürkei: C'q'arostavi, Nuka Kilise, Mižnazori", Revue des Études Géorgiennes et Caucasiennes 8–9 (1992–1993), 193–221; id., "Studien zur historischen Geographie von Tao-Klaržeti" (Dissertation Universität Wien, 1996).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> M. KADIROĞLU, "Untersuchungen an mittelalterlichen georgischen Baudenkmälern in Nordost-Anatolien", Georgica 22 (1999), 8–19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> O. AYTEKIN, Ortaçağ'dan Osmanlî Dönemi Sonuna Kadar: Artvin'deki Mimarî Eserler (Ankara, 1999).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> F. BAYRAM, Artvin'deki Gürcü Manastîrlari (Rahip Grigol Handzta Dönemi) (Istanbul, 2005).

N. ALEXIDZE and D. KHOSHTARIA, "akhali tsnobebi tao-klarjetis sidzveleta shesakheb", Literatura da khelovneba 1 (1991) 117–161; D. KHOSHTARIA, "shavshet-klarjetis eklesiebi", Literatura da khelovneba 2 (1998), 53–80; id., "Dreischiffige Basiliken in Klaržeti und Šavšeti", Georgica 25 (2002), 55–67; id., Klarjetis eklesiebi da monastrebi (Tbilisi, 2005).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Graphic Documentation of the Architecture and Mural Painting of Tao-Klardjeti (North-East Turkey): Exhibition Catalogue (Tbilisi, 1996).

From the little evidence that survives, it seems that the ninth-century masons in Klarjeti customarily used to construct churches of roughly cut stone. The character of masonry noticeably varies in different buildings. In Tsqarostavi, stones are bigger and better fitted to each other. In the small church of Parekhi, the masonry consists of rough mortared rubble. The basilica next to it displays better workmanship. On its east and west façades alternation of high and low bands of accordingly vertically and horizontally placed rectangular blocks creates a peculiar effect. In Nuka-Saqdari slipshod façade masonry sharply contrasts with smoothly hewn stones of the conch and the barrel vault.

In accordance with the severe character of façades, carved decoration is humble. Of course, we have to take into consideration that many buildings have lost their decoration. Nevertheless, few still existing examples, such as plain brows above windows in Tsqarostavi and a cross over the south door in Artanuji, witness for the minimalism of the carved adornment of the ninth-century churches in Klarjeti.

From the early tenth century, a new wave of construction activity started in the "Georgian Sinai". It was caused by increasing in number of monks on the one hand and by changed demands on the other. The Monastery of St George in Khandzta, the cradle of monasticism in Klarjeti where St Gregory himself began his activity, underwent significant renewal in 910s and 920s. Here Amona, a master mason, constructed a church, which heralds new developments in the architecture of the region. It shows that the previous humble churches built of roughly cut stone corresponded no more to the aspirations of the time. George Merchule refers to Amona as the "builder with great wisdom". This fact is especially interesting for in George Merchule's work, which describes numbers of constructions, no other architect or master mason is mentioned. The architecture of the church confirms that Amona was really an outstanding master. His professional proficiency deeply impressed his contemporaries. Amona obviously was aware of and respected the architecture of the previous times, for he applied graded scheme of the squinch system with three rows of squinches, which never appears after the seventh century in Georgia and its neighboring countries. A tall octagonal drum is erected above four big squinches. In the upper corners of the drum eight smaller squinches and above them sixteen diminutive ones are made. This reminiscence witnesses for Amona's knowledge and appreciation of classical forms rather than for his conservatism.

The church of Khandzta is an inscribed-cross structure with a dome supported by apse projections on the east and two free-standing piers on the west. Apparently, Amona achieved high stability of church using very strong mortar, which bound so well that the dome still stands in spite of the fact that the piers, *i.e.* two of its four supports, are almost completely destroyed.

Six fragments of Georgian inscriptions have been found in Khandzta<sup>16</sup>. They contain rich information about the history of the monastery but their interpretation is still questionable because of lacunae in the damaged stones.

Klarjetian architects of the later half of the tenth century owed a good deal to Amona. It makes itself felt already in the mid-tenth century restoration of Opiza and the construction of Dolisqana.

According to the Georgian chronicle, the *Life of King Vakhtang Gorgasali*, the celebrated monastery of St John the Baptist at Opiza was built in the second half of the fifth century by the foster-brother of the king. The date is still disputable as the chronicle contains some legendary stories and, as a whole, is not a quite trustworthy source. However, it is doubtless that Opiza was the earliest and perhaps the biggest monastery in Klarjeti. Regrettably, a little has survived of its structures, recorded by A. Pavlinov and N. Marr. The refectory, now almost completely ruined, was one of the best examples of that type of building as far as we can judge by A. Pavlinov's photos. According to the lost inscription published by N. Marr, it was built by King Ashot in four years. That should have been Ashot IV (945–954). Only parts of walls remain of the church: its vaults collapsed in the nineteenth century and the dome was pulled down in early 1960s<sup>17</sup>. The cross-shape plan of the church with the elongated westarm and two additional chambers on the both sides of the sanctuary date back to the second half of the ninth century, while architectural features of the dome point to a date near 950. Seemingly, Ashot IV reconstructed the church as well.

At present, two of them are kept in the Georgian National Museum and four are lost. They have been published by N. MARR ("Dnevnik", 140–146, 202).

W. DJOBADZE, Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries (n. 7), 65-67.

80 David Khoshtaria

Construction of the church at Dolisqana was also connected with the Royal family. Two of its inscriptions mention King Sumbat (954–958). W. Djobadze suggested that Sumbat completed the construction started by his elder brother Bagrat in 930s<sup>18</sup>. Its plan with cruciform core and additional rooms in all four corners is inscribed in rectangle. Façade decoration became richer in comparison with the earlier churches. Here, fully developed seemingly for the first time, huge ornate brows above windows are made. Figurative sculptures appear too. The relief of King Sumbat is inserted into the drum. Decoration of the southern window includes the images of the Archangels and of deacon Gabriel, which is believed to be one of the master masons of the church.

Apparently in the same period, the Monastery of the Mother of God in Berta also underwent large reconstruction. The main church of the monastery was a domed structure faced with smoothly finished small blocks. In the nineteenth century, the church was completely altered and turned into a mosque. The ruins of a refectory have survived to the north of the church.

The last significant monastic building in Klarjeti is the church near the modern village Yeni Rabat constructed around 1000. Apparently, it is the remnant of the "Glorious Laura" of Shatberdi, famous for its erudite monks, which made outstanding contribution to the Georgian literature. In comparison with the other churches in Klarjeti, Yeni Rabat is better preserved. It lacks only parts of conch and vaults of arms as well as facing ashlars in the lower portions of walls. Presumably, we should owe saving the building to the Armenians, which possessed it in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They maintained the church and even restored it in 1860s.

Yeni Rabat follows a standard church plan of the "Georgian Sinai" implying a nave and a transept, which form cruciform plan with four arms. Two additional chambers flank the sanctuary. On the west, the church had a timber gallery. A small rectangular door, which could only have been reached by ladder, gave access to the gallery. Richly ornate frames of windows and blind arcadings enveloping the dome and the lower portions of walls reflected the tendency to the increased decoration, which was common for the Georgian architecture of the late tenth century.

Tenth-century churches of Klarjeti provide interesting material for the study of the medieval transitional techniques from the central square bay to the round basis of the dome. In Opiza, Dolisqana, and Yeni Rabat architects applied a particular system, which can briefly be described as the combination of squinch and pendentive. It had special importance in the architecture of Tao-Klarjeti and thus merits special attention.

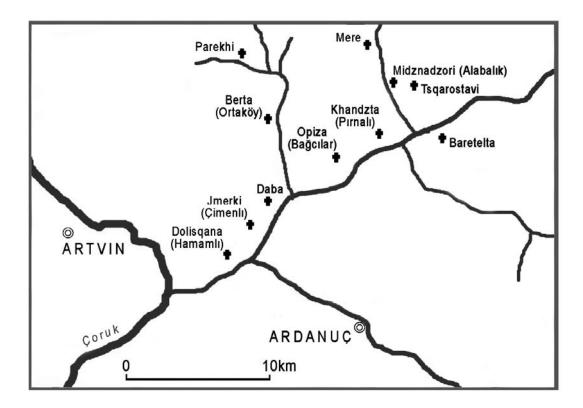
By the eighteenth century, the monasteries in Klarjeti were abandoned and their devastation started. At present, they are in different states of preservation. Some of them have almost completely came down (Baretelta, Jmerki, Daba); some have survived as the groups of more or less ruined buildings (Opiza, Khandzta, Midznadzori, Tsqarostavi, Parekhi); in some monasteries, only churches have escaped destruction (Yeni Rabat, Dolisqana). Destruction is caused by various factors. Among natural reasons earthquakes, floods, mudflows, and rains should be mentioned. Human intervention is mainly caused by practical reasons – desert monasteries have been converted into quarries. Gold diggers have also caused much damage to the monuments. In the last decades, the cases of tourist vandalism have been registered as well<sup>19</sup>.

Until recently, one should feel anxiety for the further fate of the "Georgian Sinai". However, the latest changes in the cultural politics in Turkey raise hopes that the state will take more trouble about the monuments. Local communities also show more interest in medieval buildings, which can attract tourists. The case of Dolisqana is indicative of such interest. In the nineteenth century, the above-mentioned church was turned

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> The villagers justified the destruction by the fact that the dome was unsafe. See D. WINFIELD, Some Early Medieval Figure Sculpture from North-East Turkey (n. 9), 35.

In the recent years, stealing sculptural images from Georgian churches has become a common occurrence in Klarjeti, Shavsheti, and Tao. In 1993, the stone with carved cross was taken down from the eastern façade of Tbeti Cathedral. In 2000, thieves vandalized the most part of the famous octagonal column in Oshki Church and took away several sculptural figures. In 2002, the stone with sundial in Doliskana Church disappeared. In 2006, unknown thieves have stolen the big sculpture of the Virgin from the Deesis group of the southern façade of Oshki Church. Apparently, these are crimes of forethought organized by fraudulent collectors of antiquities and committed by paid local residents.

into a mosque. It has prevented the building from destroying<sup>20</sup> on the one hand, but caused some disfiguring alterations on the other. At present, it is one of the well-preserved churches in Klarjeti. This fact together with an advantageous location not far from Artvin, the regional centre, creates favourable conditions for the development of tourism here. Local authorities properly assessed the situation and took measures to better display the church. Recently, a new mosque has been built nearby and all later additions to the church including the imam's house built on to its southern wall have been removed. Now the church produces much more effect. We may be sure that the community will take care of its maintenance. Thus, we have at least one encouraging example of a new approach to the heritage of the "Georgian Sinai"<sup>21</sup>.



Georgian Monasteries in Historic Klarjeti

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> W. Djobadze marks out Ilker Demir, the local imam, who did much for preserving the building (Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries, 57).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> After I had presented this paper on the Congress, Mine Kadiroğlu said the case of Dolisqana could hardly be considered successful as the new mosque was built too close to the church, in the protected zone.