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*Monuments of the Medieval Georgian Wall Painting in the North-East Turkey (History and Present State)*

Tao-Klardjeti, a historical region of Georgia, at present in the north-east Turkey, used to be one of the most prominent political and cultural centers of Georgia in medieval times, and in the period between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in particular. Activities of St. Grigol Khandzteli (St. Gregory of Khandzta) (759-861)<sup>1</sup> and his disciples having founded the monasteries throughout the region led to the flourishing and enhancement of all fields of culture, including wall painting. The history of the monuments is closely linked with the most crucial moments in the history of Georgia, including the upsurge of a strong movement aiming at the unification of Georgian kingdoms and principalities, which was initiated in this very region in the period from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, under the leadership of the Bagrationi royal family who reigned in Georgia until the annexation of the Georgian state by the Russian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. Further dramatic events in the region resulted in the destruction of numerous monuments of medieval Georgian architecture and the murals adorning them respectively.

The cultural impact of this region over other regions of Georgia was by all means very important, no less than the political<sup>3</sup>. The period between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries was marked with the development of a specific painting school in Tao-Klardjeti, which despite revealing many features in common with the medieval Christian painting in general and the Georgian painting in particular, contain noteworthy peculiarities which may be explained by closer relations and cultural links with Byzantium and the Near East<sup>4</sup>.

To our knowledge, murals have preserved in the following churches: Otkhta Eklesia (Dört-Kilisa), Khakhuli, Oshki, Ishkhani, Parkhal, Tbeti, Doliskana, Opiza, Niakomi, and Esbek. However, the discovery of new fragments in other places is also highly probable.

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgi Merchule, Shromai da mogvatseobai Grogolisi archimandtritisai Xandztisa da Shatberdisa agmashenebelisai, in *Dzveli kartuli agiograpiuli literaturis dzeglebi* (Monuments of ancient Georgian hagiographical literature), ed. I. Abuladze, vol.1, (Tbilisi, 1963), 248-319.

<sup>2</sup> For general information on the history of Georgia see: M.F. Brosset, *Histoire de la Géorgie depuis l'antiquité jusq'uen 1469 de J.-C.*, (St. Petersburg, 1849); W.E.D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People*, (London, 1932); K. Salia, *History of the Georgian Nation*, (Paris, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> V. Beridze, *Monuments de Tao-Klardjeti dans l'histoire de l'architecture géorgienne*, (Tbilisi, 1981). W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries in Historic Tao, Klardjeti and Šavšeti*, (Stuttgart, 1992); D. Khoshtaria, *Klardjetis eklesiebi da monastrebi* (Churches and monasteries in Klardjeti), (Tbilisi, 2005)

<sup>4</sup> A. Volskaia, : "Painting schools in the medieval Georgia", offprint from II<sup>e</sup> Symposium international sur l'art géorgien, (Tbilisi, 1977).

These murals have been a subject of research since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The studies conducted so far cover only a part of the murals and those addressed have not been investigated with equal attention. The works of the French scholar M-me Nicole Thierry<sup>5</sup>, as well as those by E. Takaishvili<sup>6</sup>, V. Djobadze, E Privalova<sup>7</sup>, Z.Skhirtladze<sup>8</sup> are particularly noteworthy in this regard.

Regrettably, in the Soviet period Georgian scholars were denied access to this region and thus lacked the opportunity to carry out *in situ* investigation of frescoes. They had to rely on the materials obtained and published before the year 1921 and those gathered by our foreign colleagues. It was only after regaining political independence, in the 1990s, that a number of scholarly expeditions were organized by the experts of the G. Chubinashvili Institute of the History of Georgian Art.

Most of the paintings date from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, i. e. from the very period when the Georgian rulers from the Bagrationi family launched political activities oriented towards the consolidation of the country. These murals equally reveal the air of grandeur, monumentality, splendor and refinement typical of the architecture of this region. They are characterized by original iconographic programmes with certain themes (e.g. the Glory of the Cross in the dome) and artistic features recurring in various monuments.

The murals are especially important as they provide rich evidence for creating an overall picture of the history of the East Christian painting in the period lacking Byzantine monuments proper. Besides, they display the integrity and interrelation of the rich cultures flourishing in the Near East.

The wall paintings surviving in Tao-Klardjeti, along with a very specific individual artistic character, reveal many common features, which allows us to point out the original Tao-Klardjeti painting school. Iconographic programmes are most noteworthy in this regard: the programmes of the sanctuaries are mostly dedicated to the “*Majestas Domini*”, with the registers of the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church and the obligatory figure of the Virgin in the middle of the Apostles flanked by the Angels (indication to the Ascension) or together with St. John the Baptist (indication to the Deisis).

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<sup>5</sup> NN. et M. Thierry, “Peintures du X<sup>e</sup> siècle en Géorgie méridionale et leurs rapports avec la peinture byzantine d’Asie Mineure”, *Cahiers Archéologiques*, XXIV, (Paris, 1975), 73 –113; N. Thierry, “Peintures Géorgiennes en Turquie”, *Bedi Kartlisa*, (revue de kartvélogie), vol. XLII, (Paris, 1984), 131-167; N. et M. Thierry, “La cathédrale de T’Bet’i”, *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 47, (Paris, 1999). 89-96.

N. Thierry, “Peinture Historiques d’Osk’i (T’ao)”, *Revue des Etudes Géorgiennes et Caucasiennes*, # 2, (1986). 135 – 170; M. et N. Thierry, “ Notes d’un voyage en Georgie Turquie”, *Bedi Kartlisa*, v. 34-35, (1960),. 10-28.

<sup>6</sup> E. Takaishvili, *Archeologicheskaia ekspedicia 1917 goda v juznye provincii Gruzii* (Archeological expedition of 1917 to the southern provinces of Georgia), (Tbilisi, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> E. Privalova , *Zogi ram tao-klardjetis moxatulobebis shesaxeb* (Notes on the wall-paintings of Tao-Klardjeti) in *Issues of the History of the Georgian Church, Ecclesiastical Literature and Christian Art* (Tbilisi, 1948), 314-336.

<sup>8</sup> Z. Skhirtladze, “The Mother of All the Churches. Remarks on the Iconographic Programm of the Apse Decoration of Dort Kilisse”, *Cahiers Archéologique*, 43, (1995), 101-116.

Tao-Klardjeti monuments, unlike Byzantine ones, are characterised by an established programme of dome painting, involving the representation of the *Triumphant Cross* (e.g. in Khakhuli) or the *Ascension of the Cross* (Ishkhani). It is only the Doliskana and Opiza domes that contain an image of the *Ascension of Christ*, more familiar for the Byzantine monuments.

The representation of the Cross, painted as well as laid out in stone, in the domes of the Georgian churches, takes roots in the early Christian period and is closely related to certain events taking place in Georgia in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, namely the miraculous apparition of the Cross in the sky over Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Georgia, described in the historical treatise “*Moktsevai Kartlisai*” (Conversion of Georgia).<sup>9</sup> Although the tradition of the representation of the Glory of the Cross in the dome is presumed to be based on the Jerusalem tradition, which was strong in Georgia nearly up to the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>, we may argue that the interest in the national history and testimonies of the ancient Christian past, as well as highlighting the signs of the statehood in the past coincided with the aspirations of the rulers of the Bagrationi family who appeared successful in re-establishing the united kingdom of Georgia.

Another feature that makes Tao iconography distinct from others is the representation of Biblical themes as well as the multitude of astral personifications (e.g. the moon and sun in Khakhuli and Ishkhani) in the dome (e.g. *Zacharia’s Vision* in Ishkhani; the *Ascension of St. Elias* in Khakhuli). It must be noted that the compositions of the domes in the Khakhuli and Ishkhani churches are unique in whole east Christendom both from the iconographic and artistic points of view.

The sanctuary window of Dört Kilise church preserves a rare image, namely the representation of Sion, depicted as a half figure of a woman holding a church model (imitating a real church to the smallest detail) and wearing a crown having a shape of a building (again allusion to the Church – Mater Ecclesia - Sion)<sup>11</sup>.

Like the stone reliefs adorning the façades of Tao-Klardjeti churches, the wall paintings include a number of secular portraits, e.g. that of Djojik Patrikios in Oshki, and the kings of the Bagrationi family in Ishkhani. The south apse of the Oshki cathedral contains a rare composition representing a historical event that took place in the cathedral of Bana (presumably, the wedding of King Bagrat IV and the Byzantine princess in 1032) identified through a relevant Georgian inscription<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> A. Okropiridze, “Mtskhეთის ჯვრის თაძვრის შინაარსისათვის” (*On the content of the Church of the Holy Cross in Mtskheta*), in “Rtsmena da Tsodna”, Tbilisi, 1(11), (2002), 34-37.

<sup>10</sup> T. Mgaloblishvili, *Klardjuli mravaltavi (Klardjeti Policephalon*, (Tbilisi, 1991), 180-182; E. Privalova, *Rospis Timotesubani (Timotesubani murals)* (Tbilisi, 1980), 15-17; NN. et M. Thierry, “Peintures du X<sup>e</sup> siècle en Géorgie méridionale et leurs rapports avec la peinture byzantine d’Asie Mineure”, in *Cahiers Archéologiques*, XXIV, (Paris, 1975), 94.

<sup>11</sup> NN. et M. Thierry, *Peintures du X<sup>e</sup> siècle en Géorgie méridionale ...*, 75-86; Z. Skhirtladze, *The Mother of All the Churches.*, 101-116.

<sup>12</sup> N. Thierry, *Peinture Historiques d’Osk’i (T’ao)*, 144

The painting school of Tao-Klardjeti is distinguished not only for its sophisticated and unique iconographic programmes, but also for its high artistic level, as well as the air of grandeur and magnificence that characterizes the architecture of this region. Even in the present obliterated and demolished state, the wall paintings of the churches and cathedrals of Tao-Klardjeti impress the beholder with refined linearity, rich coloring based on deep lapis lazuli, shining green and vermilion, pure white and numerous shades of ochre, elongated and elegant proportions of figures, representative postures and gestures, plastic rendering of forms, multilinear treatment of drapery, deep spirituality of images, dynamic compositions and monumentality of the overall layout, etc., along with rich and diverse ornaments borrowed from the Hellenistic repertoire.

The issue of the cultural “prominence” of these paintings has been widely discussed. Many assumptions have been made as to which national culture they may belong, although the history of these monuments and their donors, as well as predominantly Georgian inscriptions attest that they belong to Georgian art. And above all, the specific sense of a balanced compositional arrangement and colouring, the original artistic taste and approach to the treatment of forms, as well as other purely stylistic characteristics are indicative of Georgian cultural traditions. Indeed, the monuments of Tao-Klardjeti reveal closest affinity with the paintings surviving in other regions of Georgia. It does not seem justified to compare and moreover, attribute these paintings either to Byzantine or Armenian art.<sup>13</sup> A number of common features cannot warrant such arguments. The similarities can be easily explained by the common East Christian iconographic and artistic sources and traditions. Even the painting of the New Tokali Kilisse in Cappadocia, most frequently referred to in regard with Tao paintings, reveals only a distant proximity with them<sup>14</sup> as well as the monuments of so-called Macedonian Renaissance.

Certainly, the geographical position of these regions, located nearer to Byzantium proper than other parts of Georgia, determined closer cultural ties<sup>15</sup>. Unfortunately, the number of surviving genuine Byzantine (Constantinopolitan) wall paintings is not sufficient to make further generalizations.

Thus we face the issue of the national artistic forms and traditions in Christian art in general, which is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be noted that close affinities both in terms of iconography and artistic rendering are to be found with the contemporary frescoes in the other regions of Georgia, e.g. the *Crucifixion* in the south apse of the Oshki cathedral seems to be executed by the Royal painter Tevdore, whose four paintings survive in Upper Svaneti (highlands in the West Georgia)<sup>16</sup>; the painting in the diaconicon of the same cathedral seems to be removed from the paintings of the

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<sup>13</sup> NN. et M. Thierry, *Peintures du X<sup>e</sup> siècle en Géorgie méridionale*, 8; 105-112); N. Thierry, *Peinture historiques d’Osk’i (T’ao)...* 138. «Armenia» in *Pravoslavnaia encyklopedia (Orthodox Encyclopedia)*, v. 3 (Moscow, 2001), 306-317.

<sup>14</sup> NN. et M. Thierry, *Peintures du X<sup>e</sup> siècle en Géorgie méridionale*”, 105-107.

<sup>15</sup> NN. et M. Thierry, *Peintures du X<sup>e</sup> siècle en Géorgie méridionale...*, 105-108.

<sup>16</sup> N. Aladashvili, G. Alibegashvili, A. Volskaya, *Rospisi xudojnika Tevdore v verxnei Svanetii (The wall – paintings of the royal painter Tevdore in Upper Svaneti)*, (Tbilisi, 1966).

Sabereebi monastery in David Gareji deserts (East Georgia, Kakheti); the apse compositions of the *Majestas Domini* have striking similarities with the same compositions in Svaneti, and the astral personifications in Kakhuli and Ishkhani with those in Manglisi and Sabereebi; the figures of the Apostles in Doliskana with the Apostles in Ateni, etc. Even the strong Hellenistic influence highlighted while discussing the paintings of Tao may be found in contemporary frescoes of the Ateni church, namely personifications of the Rivers of Paradise in the squinches<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, as it was noted above, Tao-Klardjeti frescoes are characterised by unsurpassed grandeur, nobility, splendor, solemnity, brilliance, richness of colors and ornaments that make them distinct from other examples and allow us speak about an original painterly school.

It must be noted that certain artistic trends, noticeable in the history of the development of Georgian sculpture, can also be traced in the history of Tao-Klardjeti wall painting. More specifically flat, block-like forms, spatial rendering, a-plastic drawing, and expressive deformation in the 10<sup>th</sup> century works reveal tendency towards more plastic, refined forms and drawings, soft modelling, more “classical” forms and proportions between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>18</sup>. This attests to the homogeneity and common basis of the medieval Georgian art between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It is also noteworthy that Tao-Klardjeti monasteries possessed grand scriptoria, where a large number of well-known Georgian manuscripts, revealing similar artistic features, were written and illuminated. It appears without doubt that these monasteries also had icon painting workshops, but unfortunately, we do not have enough documentary evidence to assign particular Georgian painted icons to these workshops<sup>19</sup>.

The brilliant wall paintings surviving in Tao-Klardjeti still pose numerous questions to the researchers. They need to be properly recorded, photographed, published, but the most urgent task is to safeguard them from further deterioration.

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the critical state of medieval wall paintings preserved in Tao-Klardjeti. These murals share the tragic fate with the architecture they adorn. However, the condition of some of them is even more severe, which can be explained by the fragility of the material, strong impact of precipitation, bacteriological attacks, human vandalism and ignorance, as well as the total absence of day-to-day maintenance, etc. The murals are most severely affected by the flaking of the painting layer, detachment and destruction of the plastering; deformation of pigments; mould; salts etc.

Consideration of the high artistic and historic value of the wall paintings allows us to better understand the urgent need for resolute measures for safeguarding the murals of Tao-Klardjeti.

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<sup>17</sup> T. Virsaladze, *Atenis Sionis moxatuloba* (Wall painting of the Sioni church at Ateni), (Tbilisi, 1984), ill.13-16.

<sup>18</sup> N. Aladashvili, *Monumentalnaya skulptura Gruzii* (Monumental sculpture of Georgia), (Moscow, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> G. Alibegashvili, “La miniatura e le icone depinte” in *I Tesori della Georgia*, ed. Giulio Ieni, (Milano, 1984), 109-144.

Given their significance for both Georgian and Byzantine art, these murals require urgent help. However, conservation programmes should not be implemented haphazardly. Any kind of intervention should be based on an in-depth feasibility study, including graphical and photo recording, measurement, technical survey, assessment of damages, testing of proposed conservation materials.

Taking into consideration the high historic and artistic value of the wall paintings embellishing the Tao-Klardjeti churches, responding to nearly all the Criteria set by International Committee for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage for the evaluation of properties of outstanding universal value, and the lack of scholarly studies on these unique monuments of world culture and Georgian culture in particular, the following activities should be carried out:

1. arrangement of joint scientific field works in Tao-Klardjeti;
2. assessment of the current physical state of buildings, technical study of wall-painting: analyses of pigments, plastering, and damage at different chronological layers to establish the dating of paintings; ultra-violet and x-ray investigation aimed at revealing original layers, re-paintings, inscriptions, etc;
3. drawing up of graphical documentation, indicating the chronological layers ;
4. producing 1:1 transparencies of paintings;
5. assessment of the condition of wall paintings,
6. revealing, survey and study of inscriptions on stones and frescos;
7. overall photo-recording of the monuments;
8. art historical study of all monuments by means of scaffoldings and electric lighting;
9. investigation of theological programmes of wall paintings;
10. elaboration of the conservation programme.

All these activities should be carried out by a joint group of Georgian, Turkish and European experts with the assistance (modern technologies, technical laboratories) of international organizations (e.g. ICCROM).