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## Four Deësis Themes in the Church of Oški\*

The renewed interest in *Deësis* themes and their essence suggests that a "firm univocal definition of δέησις is impossible"<sup>1</sup>. This opinion is supported by four little known variants of a ctitoric *Deësis* theme preserved in the Georgian church of Oški in the historic province of Tao located in northeastern Turkey. The church was built from 963 to 973 by the local rulers, Bagrat, Duke of Dukes, and his brother, David Kuropalates, both well known from Georgian, Byzantine and Armenian sources.

Our *Deësis* themes are significant for their early date, their structural and iconographic variations, the firm dates of their execution and for the content of their accompanying inscriptions, providing us with additional information concerning the meaning implied in a *Deësis*. Three of these *ex voto* compositions in limestone relief are contemporary with the construction of the church in 963-973; the fourth is a wall painting firmly ascribed to 1036.

The first *Deësis* (fig. 1) is located on the eastern portion of the lavishly decorated exterior south wall of the church. It consists of a "normal", fully fledged *Deësis*: the Saviour stands on a suppedaneum in frontal position with His right hand raised in the gesture of benediction. The Virgin, now fallen from her original place on Christ's right, and the Prodomos on His left, are shown with arms outstretched in supplication to the Saviour. Accompanying them are Bagrat, Duke of Dukes, and David Kuropalates, the crowned donors in their official attire, each holding a model of the Oški church. The reliefs of both the rulers and the Virgin are rather well preserved, whereas those of Christ and the Prodomos are badly weathered. The entire background of this framed composition was originally painted with purple pigment. The figures must likewise have been painted in clear contrasting colors, as I found traces of light blue and rose on the Omophorion of Mary and her footstool revealed the traces of white and gold pigment. Gold was also applied to the coat of David Magistros which is embellished with circular patterns inhabited by eagles holding suspended heart-shaped "royal jewels" in their beaks. All of the

\* This paper was submitted to the 17th International Byzantine Congress held at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C. in 1986, but was not delivered due to the author's illness.

1 Ch. Walter, "Two Notes on Deësis" REB 26 (1968) 324; A. Cutler, "Typical Trimorphon" or Deviant Deësis? A Problem of Middle Byzantine Art and Literature", *Ninth Annual of Byzantine Studies Conference, Abstract of Papers*, November 4-6, 1983, 21.





*Fig. 1: Deësis on Southeast Wall of the Church (963-973). The Relief of the Virgin is mounted in its Original Place. Photo: W. Djobadze.*



figures are perceived in high relief on a life-size scale and are enhanced by the use of colors they must generated on almost magical impression upon the spectator.

This scene differs from all *Deësis* representations known to us by its natural dimensions (h. 1.46 m., w. 0.70 m.). Even the royal donors, who are not shown as humble supplicants seeking salvation, but stand upright, are as large as the *Deësis* figures themselves. In the brief inscription above each ruler—David on the right of the Virgin and Bagrat on the left of St. John the Baptist—requests are made to their respective intercessors, without addressing them by their name asking for exaltation and salvation in both of their lives<sup>2</sup>, thereby revealing the eschatological meaning of their supplication<sup>3</sup>. More direct is the supplicatory inscription over the *Deësis* proper in six lines in which the rulers invoke the Virgin and the Prodromos to provide exaltation and success:

1. "Holy Mother of God and holy [John the] Baptist exalt our kings
2. your humble slaves, builders of this holy church
3. and also lead to success
4. our Kings Bagrat and
5. David"<sup>4</sup>.

It is significant that the term *Deësis* does not appear in this supplicatory inscription.

The second example of *Deësis*, located in a niche of the south-western pier (fig. 2), is incomplete. It contains the half figures of the same donors and their corresponding intercessors (David with the Virgin and the Prodromos with Bagrat), who due to the prohibitive space are not physically shown, but are represented by the inscriptions of their names in the nominative case. Each ruler is accompanied by a supplicatory text which in essence is identical to the content of the inscriptions above David and Bagrat in our previous example. They are:

	David's:		Bagrat's:
Holy Mother of God	The slave of God David Magistros builder of this holy church. Be exalted by God. Amen.	Holy (John) the Baptist	Our King Bagrat, Duke of Dukes, builder of this holy church. Christ exalt [Bagrat]. Amen <sup>5</sup> .

2 On this inscription see W. Djobadze, "The Donor Reliefs and the Date of the Church at Oški" *Byz* 69 (1976) 43.

3 Th. von Bogyay, "Deësis und Eschatologie", *Byzantinische Forschungen, Internationale Zeitschrift für Byzantinistik* II (1967) 63f., 71f.

4 This now considerably weathered inscription was read in 1917 *in situ* by E. T'akaišvili, *1917 C'lis ark'eotogiuri ekspedicia samhret' sak'art'veloši (Archeological Expedition in Southern Georgia in 1917)*. Tbilisi 1960, 52, 53. English translation of this inscription by Djobadze, *op. cit.* 43.

5 Djobadze, *op. cit.* 54f.





*Fig. 2: The Fragmentary Deësis in the Conch of the Southwestern Pier. Photo: W. Djobadze.*



Here the fragmentary image of Christ, painted in the middle of the niche has been covered with white-wash.

The third example of a “great” *Deësis* located in the west end of the southern porch is carved on an octagonal shaft extending over its capital (fig. 3)<sup>6</sup>. The three main participants are shown standing in strict frontal position. The Saviour and the Virgin hold in their left hands unrolled scrolls which reach the tips of their feet (fig. 4). The Prodomos, however, who gestures towards Christ with emphasized hands, is left without a scroll. The unusual scene could be explained by suggesting that the Prodomos’ intercessory plea and his added prayers have already reached the Saviour, who approvingly lifts His right hand in the gesture of blessing, a possibility reinforced by the small kneeling figure under the Prodomos’ feet of the construction supervisor Grigol, depicted with raised hands. Participating in this *Deësis* are the heavenly forces: archangels, seraphims, tetramorphs, cherubims and saints. The illuminator of Georgia, St. Nino, and St. Symeon Stylites the Younger, the model of Georgian monachism, are shown as *orants*. In addition are large size bust representations of the famous healers (*anargyroi*), SS. Cosmas and Damian, holding traditional probes in their right hands and pots of medicine in their left. Most of these figures, located on the capital above the *Deësis* proper, are invoked in the liturgy during the great intercession that forms the *Proskomidi*<sup>7</sup> and consequently, are connected with the *Deësis*. In this connection it should be mentioned that the Great Intercessory Prayer is inscribed on the external wall of our church’s south arm (“Jesus Christ, through the intercession of the Holy Mother of God and the Holy John the Baptist and the Holy Wood of Life and all the Saints, exalt our Kings ...”), and that another donor’s inscription appears in the tympanum of the south door<sup>8</sup>.

Originally all component figures of the *Deësis* were identified by Georgian *mrgvlovani* inscriptions, some of which are legible even now. However, the intercessory prayer of Grigol, which was inscribed upon the open scroll held by Christ and could have provided us with additional information concerning the content of the supplicatory text, has completely disappeared.

6 The good photographs (by D. Winfield) and the accurate drawing of all eight fascets of this column (by J. Winfield) are published by D. Winfield in “Some Early Medieval Figure Sculpture from North-East Turkey”, *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 31 (1968) 45-57.

7 F. E. Brightman, *Liturgies Eastern and Western, I, Eastern Liturgies*. Oxford 1896, 544, 545. For the significance of the liturgical text in the formation of the “Deësis” see J. Myslivet’s “Proiskhozdenie Deisusa” in *Vizantia j usnye slavijane i drevnaja Rus Zapadnaja Europa*, in Honor of V. N. Lazarev (Moscow 1973) 61f.

8 W. Djobadze, “The Georgian Churches of Tao-Klarjet’i, Construction Methods and Materials: (IX to XI Century)” *OrChr* 62 (1978) 126f.



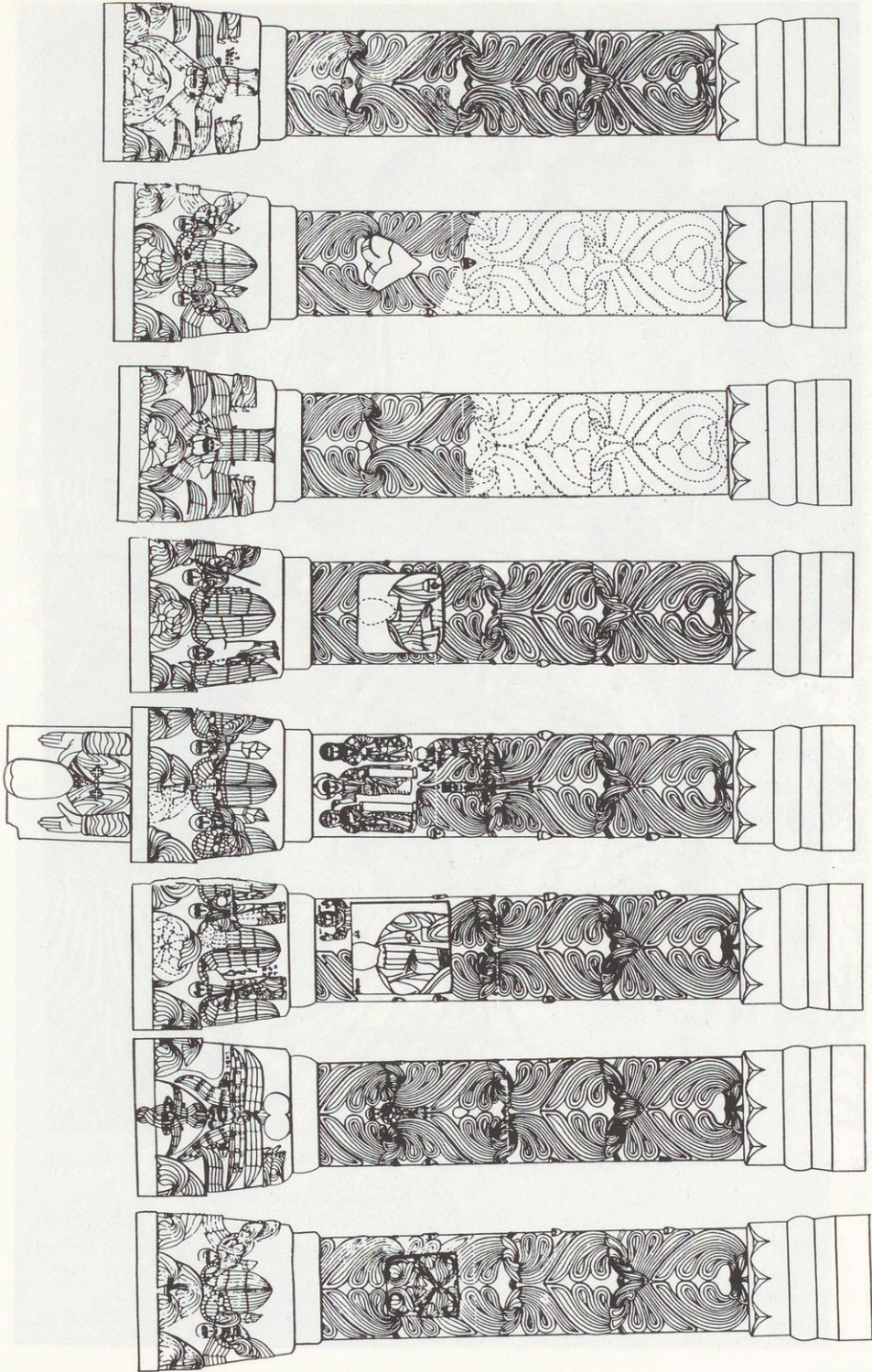


Fig. 3: Facets of the Octagonal Column in Southwestern Porch. Drawing by Mrs. Juno Winfield.



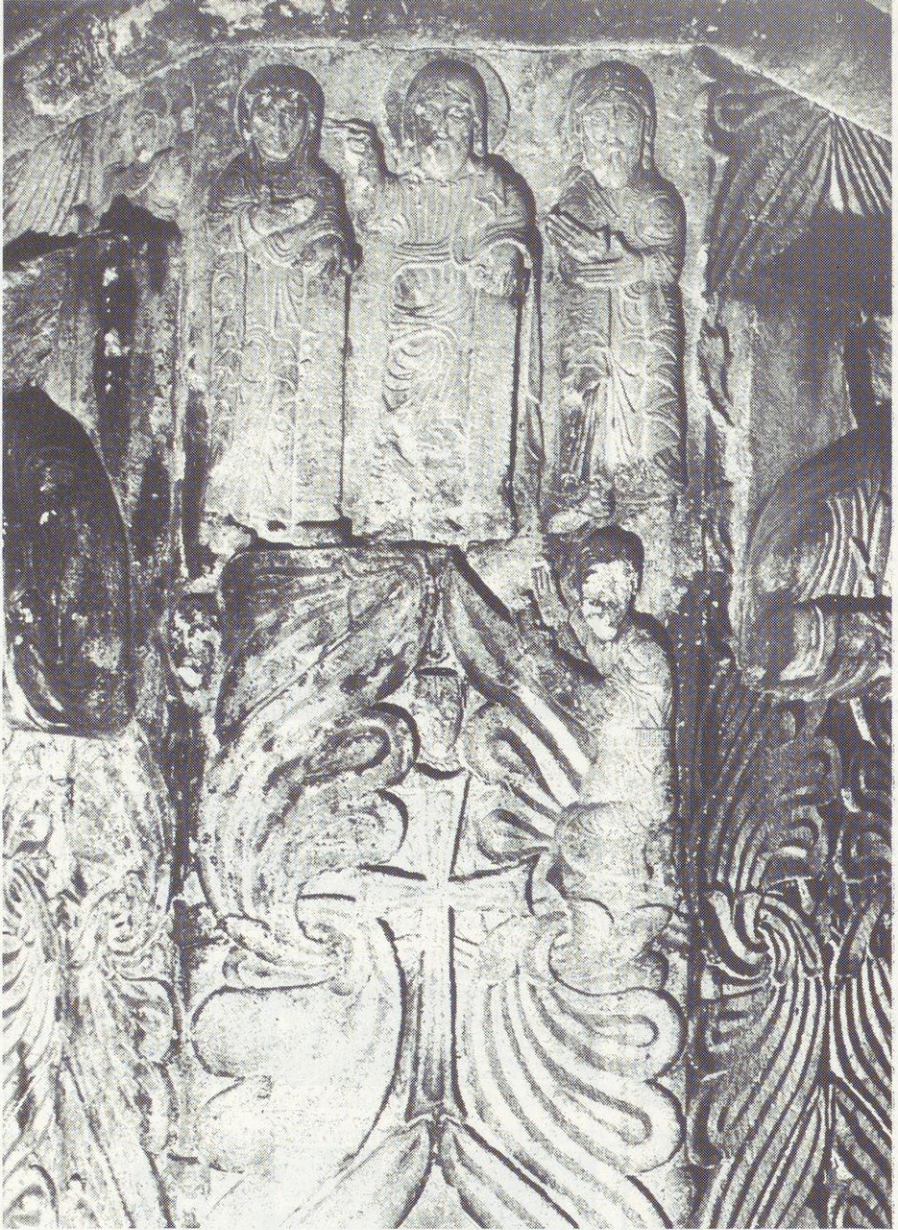
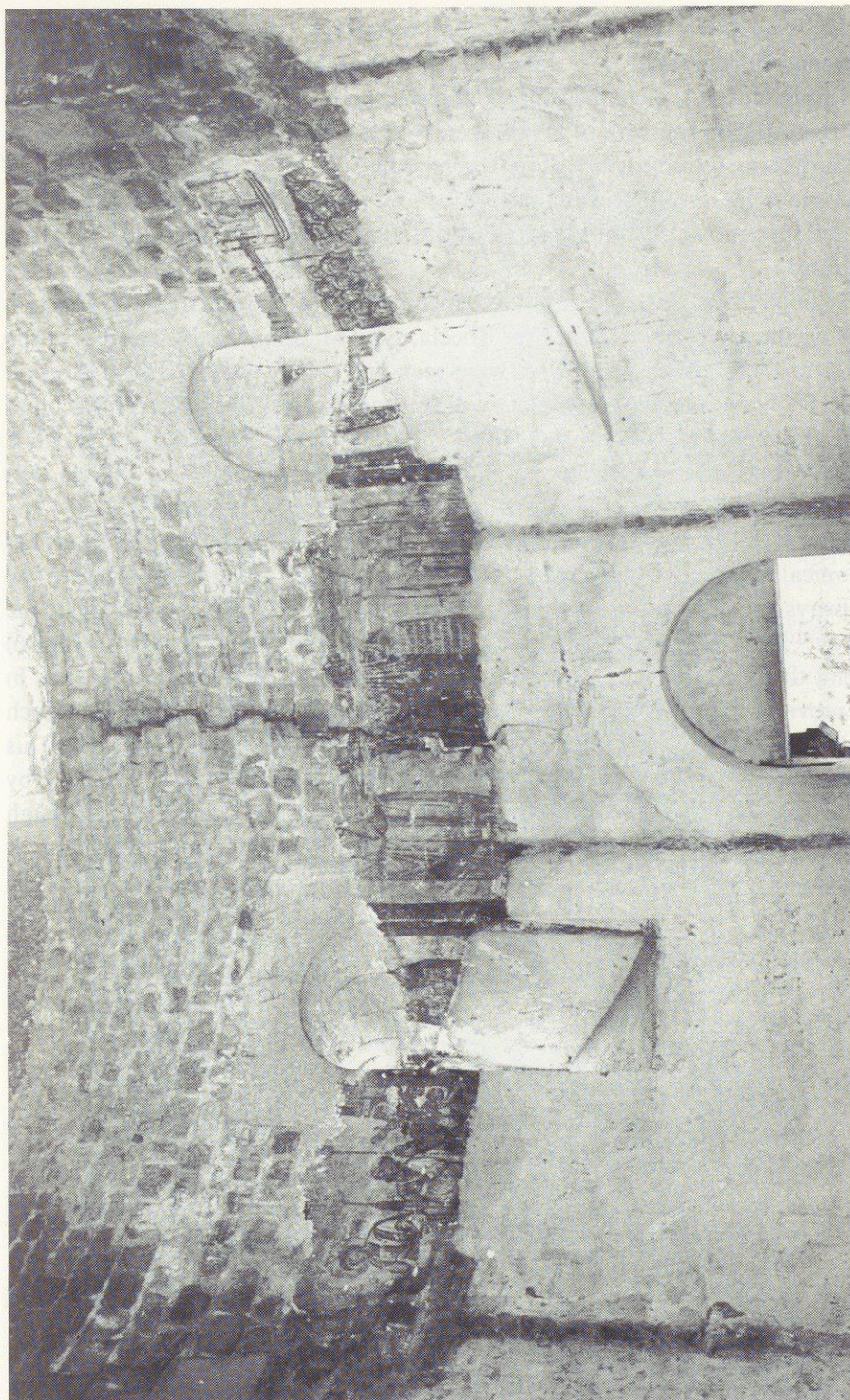


Fig. 4: Deësis on Western Face of Octagonal Column in Southwestern Porch. Photo: D. Winfield.





*Fig. 5: Fragment of Painting including Deësis (in the Middle) in South Arm of the Church (1036). Photo: W. Djobadze.*



In this regard we are in a better position to interpret the fourth *Deësis* (fig. 5) representation painted in a conche of the church's south crossarm in 1036. This fragment of the wallpainting, published here for the first time, I surveyed and recorded on the 14th of September 1983 after a Camii built into the south crossarm was removed, revealing the narrow strip of painting. Consisting of their main figures (Christ flanked by the Virgin and the Prodomos) it is located just above the door leading to the south crossarm and its two flanking windows.

Originally this *Deësis* should have included more figures, some of which—such as the angel above and Sta. Thecla, Sta. Macrina, and a cherub in the jambs of the flanking windows—were seen and briefly recorded by Takaišvili in 1917<sup>9</sup>. Now they have completely disappeared or are reduced to unrecognizable fragments. Of the central *Deësis* only the middle portion remains while the paintings above the figures' shoulders are chipped off and the portion below the knee level is covered with a thick layer of white-wash.

Here, as in the other examples discussed in this paper, the artist follows the canonical approach by placing the Virgin on the right side of Christ, since she is always the first intercessor to be invoked in the intercessory prayer of the liturgy<sup>10</sup>, and by placing the Prodomos on Christ's left side. Both (fig. 6) extend their arms in the gesture of prayer or supplication toward Christ as in the previous example. However, it is St. John the Baptist to whom the church of Oški is dedicated and who acts as intercessor to Christ, not the Virgin. This is confirmed by the Georgian *mrgvlovani* inscription on the scroll held by Christ (fig. 7), of which the first two lines can be partially read, and although the lower portion is hidden under white-wash, the remaining eight lines in between are quite legible<sup>11</sup>. They read:

“... ვო,ნ, ..... ო  
 სული ც[ო]დვ(ა)  
 თა ამხმ(ე)ლო  
 გ(ე)ვ(ე)დრ(ე)ბი ჳ(ითარც)ა  
 წ(ი)ნ(ა)მ(ო)რბ(ე)დი და მ(ე)  
 გ(ო)ბ(ა)რი იხილე უძლ  
 ურ(ე)ბ(ა)ე გ(ო)ნ(ე)ბ(ი)ს(ა)ე რ(ომელ)იც  
 ა შ(ე)იმოსე: ულხინე  
 მ(ე)ოხებ(ი)თა ვ(ითარც)ა ლ(მრთი)ს(ა)ე”

“... Reliever of the sins, I beseech you as the precursor and relative, behold the wickedness of the mind which was revealed to you, forgive through intercession as God's ...”

9 *Expedition*, 44. pls. 61, 62.

10 F. E. Brightman, *op. cit.* 357, 388, 406.

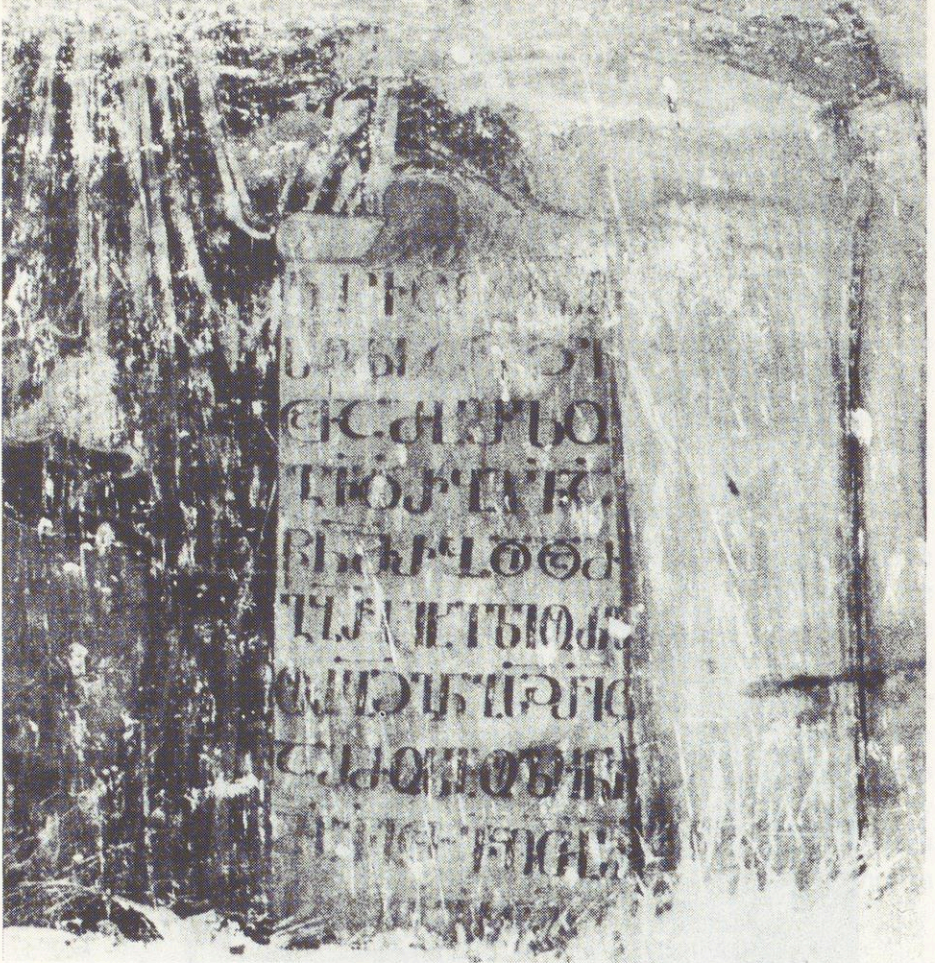
11 I would like to thank Prof. A. Šanidze, University of Tbilisi, who kindly improved my reading in a letter of 19.VII.1984.





*Fig. 6: Dečsis. Detail of Figure 5. Photo: W. Djobadze.*





*Fig. 7: The Supplicatory Scroll held by Christ in the Deësis. Photo: W. Djobadze.*





*Fig. 8: Christ is led to the Crucifixion. Detail of Figure 5. Photo: W. Djobadze.*



From this incomplete inscription it appears that the intercessor is the Prodomos and, as in the *Deësis* of the octagonal column, the supplicatory text on the scroll is not being presented to the Saviour as one would expect, but has already reached Him. The uniquely privileged position that the Prodomos enjoys in this *Deësis* is not only explicable by his role as precursor and close relative of Christ, being a member of His family<sup>12</sup>, but also by the fact that St. John is the titular saint to whom our church is dedicated. These virtues, emphatically stated in our inscription, must have played an important role in the process of intercession.

At the same time our supplicatory text offers the first instance of the Georgian equivalent (ვედრება = vedreba) for the Greek term δέησις. Unfortunately it does not reveal the redemptive object, but indicates that it could have been of a historical nature as is suggested by the sixth and seventh line of our inscription referring to the wickedness of the human mind, and by the two seemingly related compositions flanking the *Deësis* on either side: on the right (east) side a youthful, nimbed Christ is led away by two Roman soldiers (fig. 8) to be crucified, one holding a lance, the second a sponge on a long pole. Christ does not bear the cross which the passerby Simeon of Cyrene was compelled to carry for Him (Mt. 27.32; Mk. 15.21; Lk. 23.26): "And there followed him a great company of people, and of women, which also bevailed and lamented him" (Lk. 23.27). They are shown emerging vividly agitated and gesticulating from a walled city gate of Jerusalem partly visible in the background. On the left (west) side of the *Deësis* are also two groups of men divided here by a vertical strip (fig. 9). Their heads are turned toward the left and they seem to be listening attentively and staring at something that can no longer be determined, since this painting has been completely chipped off. These men are distinguished from each other not only by their hair styles, beards and facial features, but by different coloring as well, indicating the artists attempt to individualize them.

Above the right group is shown a centrally planned circular structure surmounted upon a triple stepped platform. Its exterior walls are articulated by continuous rows of evenly spaced blind arcades resting on engaged columns equipped with capitals and bases. Each blind arcade is pierced by a single, roundheaded window. Above the blind arcades appears to be the roof. In the middle of the building is an open porch surmounted with a double pitched roof covered with pantiles. The porches' pediment and arch are supported by engaged columns with the same form as those on the exterior wall of the building. A second similar porch is on the left side. On the opposite, right side, which could be identified as the south facade of the cathedral, is a tall narrow

12 E. Kantorowicz, "Ivories and Litanies", *J. Warb.* 5 (1942) 71 ff.; S. Der Nersessian, "Two Images of the Virgin in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 14 (1960) 75f.; Ch. Walter, *op. cit.*, 327.



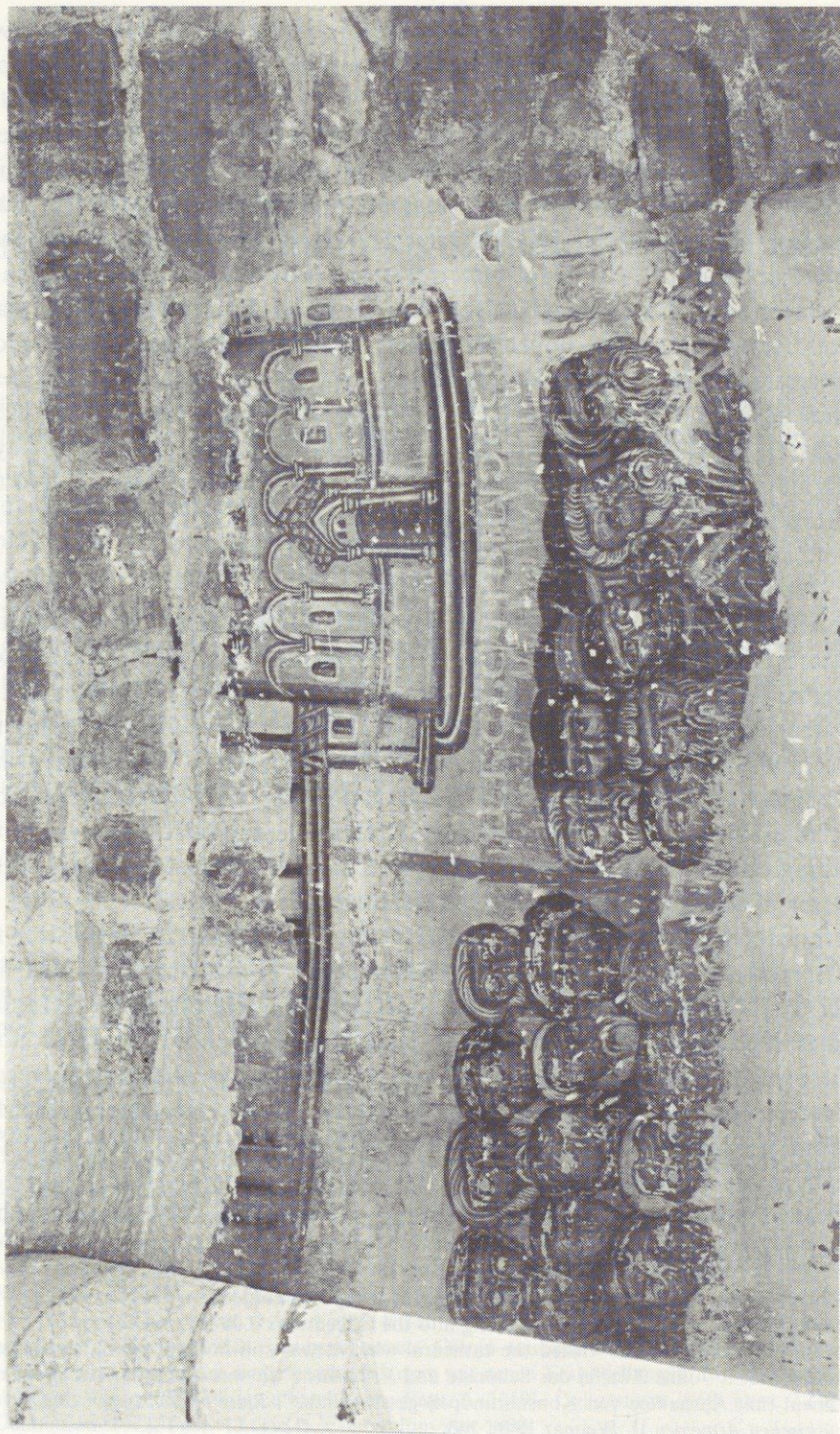


Fig. 9: Church at Bana. Detail of Figure 5. Photo: W. Djobadze.



structure resembling a tower that seems to consist of two stories<sup>13</sup>. The lower one has two windows one placed above the other, the upper level has four small windows and a low roof(?).

All of these features are characteristic of the cathedral at Bana, and indeed the building is identified as such by an incomplete, single line Georgian inscription placed below it. This magnificent cathedral<sup>14</sup> built by King Adarnase between 881 and 923 is a tetraconch enclosed by a circular, two-storied ambulatory. It was not only a bishop's seat but a cultural center and the power base of the rulers of Tao, many of whom found their resting place there. Unfortunately, the upper portion of the cathedral and its dome, whose reconstruction is a controversial subject among art historians, has been completely chipped off in our painting. Nevertheless, the lower parts of the cathedral, namely the platform, the west and north porches, which display a close affinity to the porch of the south crossarm on Oški and, above all, to the south porch with its elaborate towering structure, can be reconstructed.

The incomplete inscription below the cathedral states:

ბანას ეკლესია(ა)დ ღამ ... "in Bana the Church was ...".

The remainder of this sentence is unfortunately hidden under the white-wash. Perhaps it could help us considerably to understand why this cathedral was depicted here, although even the legible part of the inscription suggests that it was the scene of some significant event, but specifically what and whether the two compositions flanking the *Deësis* are part of it can only be answered when the white-wash has been removed. This would restore not only the inscriptions (including the one on the supplicatory scroll) but perhaps also the image of the Georgian nobleman Patrikios Djodjik, who in 1036 completely decorated the interior of the Oski church with wall paintings<sup>15</sup>.

Until then we may tentatively suggest that the selection of themes for the south crossarm in Oški could reflect the traumatic events of 1021 to 1022 and 1027 to 1028, when Georgian forces suffered a decisive defeat by Byzantine armies in Tao, and the ensuing disastrous outcome which was legalized in the course of diplomatic discussions between the Byzantines and Georgians conducted in 1034 in the very church of Bana. One could also propose that the solemn procession depicted below the cathedral refers to more agreeable events in the History of Georgia: the coronation of Bagrat IV in 1027 or his wedding to the niece of the Byzantine emperor Basil II in 1032 since both had taken place here as well.

13 The preserved walls indicate that the interior of this porch could have been ca. 4.00 m<sup>2</sup>. The door, which I measured in 1968, leading into the cathedral is 2.00 m. wide.

14 According to Koch who visited the cathedral when it was still in good condition and who stated that it "ohne Zweifel das Schönste und Erhabenste ist, was ich in der Art im ganzen Orient (mit Ausnahme von Konstantinopel) gesehen habe". *Reise im pontischen Gebirge und türkischen Armenien* II, Weimar 1846, 243.

15 This is known from the Georgian *mrgvlovani* inscription preserved in the apse of the church in Oški (E. Takaišvili, *op. cit.*, 56-58).