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The Church of Oški // Architectonics and Ornaments* (part 1)

Architecture

The Georgian monastery of Oški¹ in Tao-Klardjeti, now in oriental Turkey, is situated on a hill high up on the left bank of the Tortum river, a little before its waters flow into the Tortum lake. Access to the church is easy along the modern road coming from the south: taking this road, it is necessary to turn to the left and, after the Tortum river flows into the lake Tortum, to continue along the river in the opposite direction to its current; the church is about another six kilometres from there.

The church (fig. 1) stands on an artificial terrace, which has to overcome the slope of the terrain descending from east to west. The church actually dominates the site of the modern village, which stretches over the slope watered by the Oški stream, a tributary of the River Tortum. The houses, which were built on the terrain of the ancient monastery, have invaded the space around the church, so that the passage to it is blocked on the northwest. Everything around is luxuriously green, while in the distance to the east and north, the immense mountains, grooved horizontally by the frozen lava, rise and their high escarpments and crests recall the ramparts of a fortress. This earthy-toned background makes the church stand out with its ashlar nuances in yellowish-pink.

The church of Oški can be associated with the cruciform architectural type

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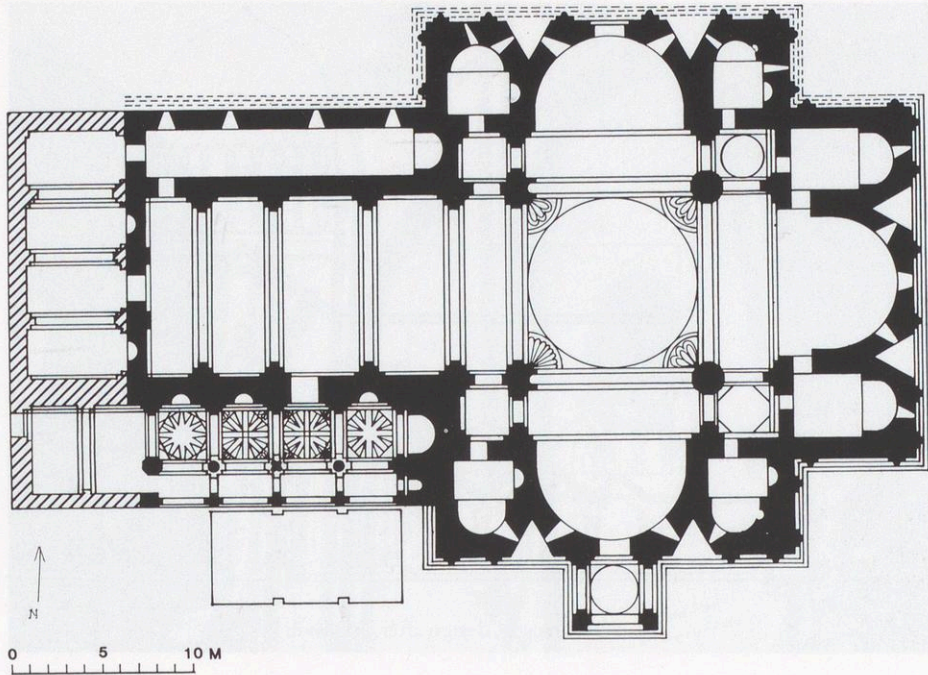
1 *Arkheologičeskaja ekspedicija 1917-goda v Južnye provincii Gruzii*, Tbilissi 1952, 45-67, fig. 20-33, pl. 39-78; V. Beridze, *Monuments de Tao-Klardžeti dans l'histoire de l'architecture géorgienne*, Tbilissi, 1981, 70, 78, 164-165, pl. 52-58, 104-116; R. Mepisašwili and W. Zinzadze, *Georgien: Kirchen und Wehrbauten*, Leipzig 1987, 261-262, pl. 395-400; W. Djobadze, *Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries in Historic Tao-Klardjeti and Savšeti*, Stuttgart 1992, 93-141, fig. 27-35, pl. 119-174; Ch. Hellier, "Turkey's Forgotten Georgian Churches", *Architectural Review* 1142 (April 1992), 74-80, fig. 10-16.



1. Church, general view



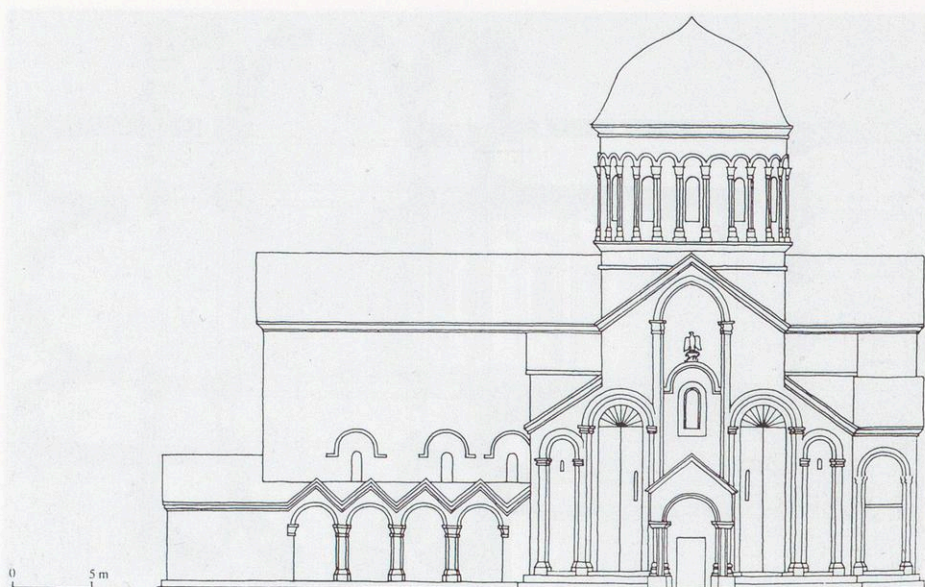
2. View from south



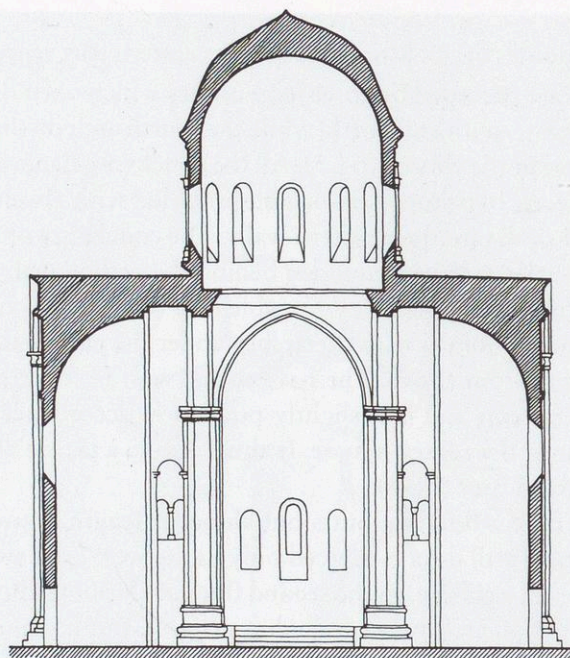
3. Plan after Takaišvili

crowned with a dome (fig. 2). More precisely, its eastern part represents a trefoil: the three conchs are preceded by three large arches which open onto the central square from the east, south and north, while the fourth arch on the west outlines the elongated nave of the church (fig. 3). All the conchs are flanked on both sides by secondary pieces, two storeys in height, provided with absidioles, and very small niches hollowed into their eastern walls. The conchs are of the type widespread in Transcaucasia: they are hidden behind the orthogonal walls of the façades with a pediment, issuing from the gable roof (fig. 4). The conchs spill over their annexes, and are joined with the arches under the cupola to be set against the thrusts coming from above. The nave to the west is covered with a barrel vault on transverse ribs and it is slightly pointed in accordance with the four arches elevated over the central square. It abuts also to a façade with a pediment because of its gabled roof (fig. 5).

North of the nave a building butts out along its length, but does not communicate with it; a small door is pierced only in the west extremity of the common wall. However, a gallery on the second floor of this north body opens onto the nave through high arch-headed windows (fig. 6). But it communicated formerly with the gallery situated along the western wall. This gallery, now demolished, was unlike the former, without any covering. It rested on three barrel



4. South façade, design after Takaišvili



5. Transversal intersection, design after Takaišvili



6. West nave, north gallery

vaults, the front of which formed an arcade to the east. On the other hand, the north gallery communicated with the western second-storey annex of the north conch, while its eastern annex was related to the pastophore over the prothesis; the same was on the south side; the pastophore over the diaconicon was in connection with the eastern annex of the south conch. Very narrow openings ensure the passage from one chamber to another. Each one has a window opening to the adjacent conch, but the pastophore oriented to the east have one more, bilobed, to the west. Opposite this window of the north pastophore, there is another one pierced in the eastern wall of the north gallery. One notes the difficulties the constructor has to overcome in ensuring communication between the spaces in the trefoil parts of the building and their illumination.

The access to the subsidiary chambers on the ground floor is possible through four square rooms. These rooms are of small dimensions but two storeys in height and are covered with domical or saucer vaults. Two of their sides, perpendicular to each other, have common walls with the two subsidiary chambers, belonging to the neighbouring conchs. More precisely, the north-west square room has its second side in common with the eastern wall of the gallery to the north, but the south-west one has its second side in common with the short east wall of the nave. The two other sides of the four square rooms, also perpendicular to each other, join the great free standing pillars. Arched openings, very nar-

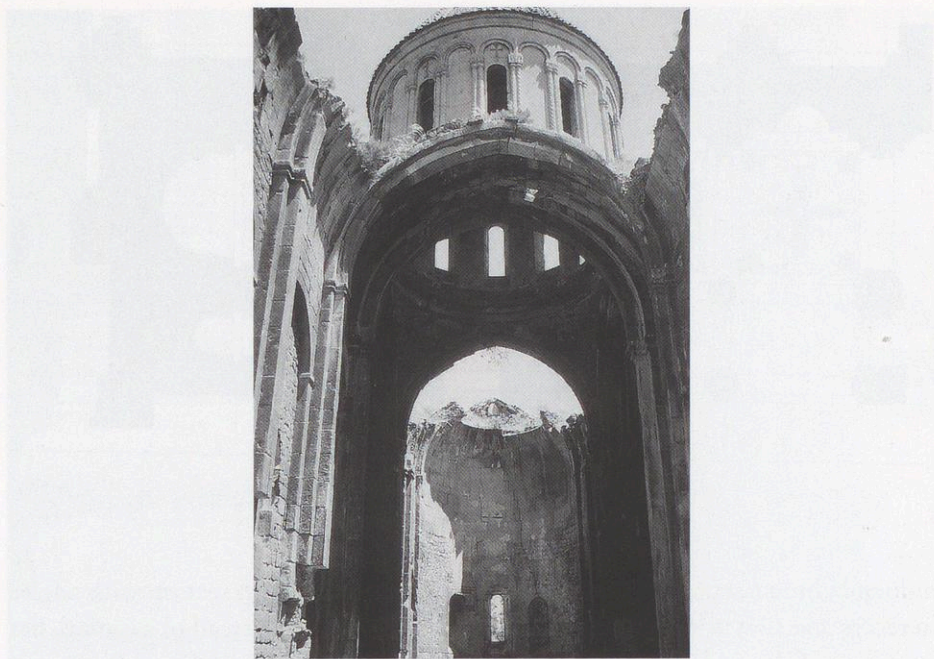
row and two-storeys high pierce these three sides. The masonry upwards from the openings reaches the pillar and thus the square room is closed on all sides. Actually, there is obtained a very high element, square in plan, to which the pillar is adjoined. The constructive element, so composed, acts as a support which is inside, not filled with masonry, and it can be qualified as a hollow support. Seen from below it resembles a high chimney closed at the top. The free-standing massive pillar is thus included in a supporting system, the aim of which is to lighten the construction from the heavy load of the stone masonry. Finally, the pillar itself is less charged, being an integral part of the compound body, which resists much better the pressure coming from the higher part of the building. This body transmits part of the charge more easily to the adjacent constructive elements (fig. 5).

The annexes on either side of the conchs were also meant to shore them up, and thus to contribute to the equilibrium in the trefoil part of the building. They were added as a measure of precaution as the builder had no thorough knowledge of the repartition of the loads coming from the high parts of the edifice, as well as of the capacity of those constructive elements charged to contrabalance them. Apparently the equilibrium was calculated on the basis of reinforcing the resistance of the main constituents of the edifice by the most possible elements. For this purpose to neutralize the forces of thrust and tension, produced by the burden of the masonry, the number of the subsidiary pieces increased, no matter what was their real contribution to the resisting processes in the edifice. This measure of security was a detriment² to the clarity of the plan and the free functional relations between the spaces inside the church. All this shows that the builders of Oški had not been accustomed to such a type of construction and it was a matter of a supporting system in an experimental phase (fig. 7).

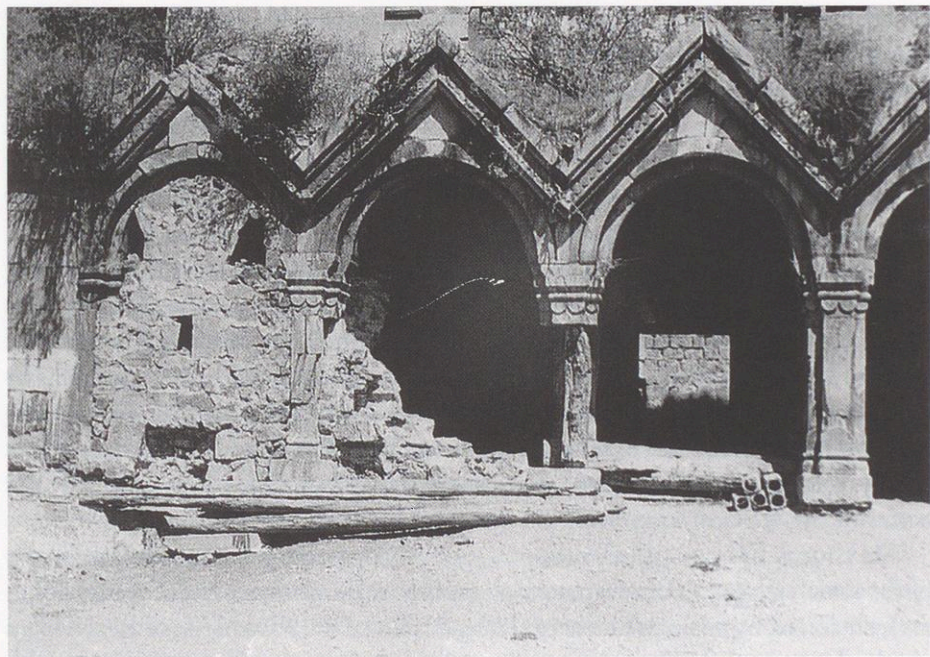
One of the most spectacular parts of the Oški church is the south gallery (fig. 8) which leans on the wall of the west cross-arm, while to the south it is limited by four columns of small height (2,70 m) and massive proportions, but of different types and unusual decoration, especially the two westernmost ones. The last one with octagonal section is a phenomenon, rare and unknown in Georgian architecture. They all form an arcade open to the south with intercolumnars over-passed by semi-circular arches. The columns are connected with transversal arches to the pilasters on the wall, and thus the gallery is divided into four compartments, each one provided with a niche inbuilt in the wall, except that one for the entry into the church. With its great apse at the eastern extremity the gallery reminds one of a chapel. Its four compartments are vaulted with saucers surprising with their decoration to which I shall refer later (fig. 9).

However, this spectacular arcade does not open directly to the exterior, being

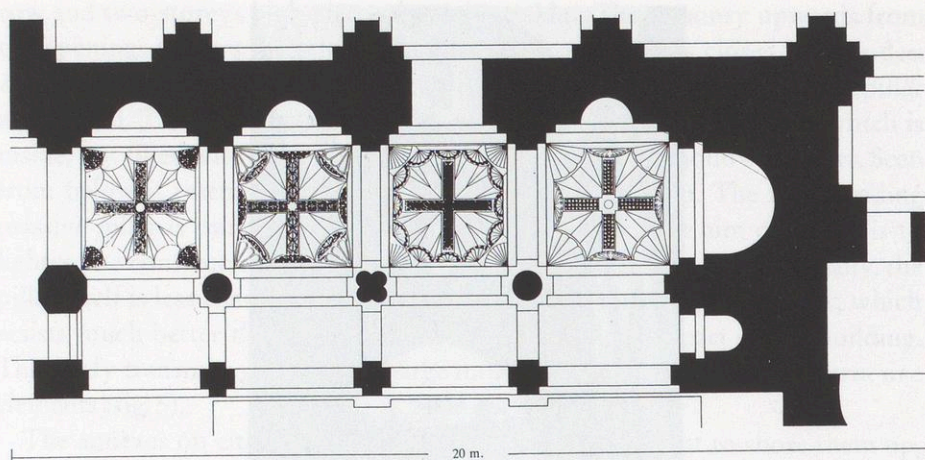
2 Beridze, *Monuments de Tao-Klardžeti*, 79.



7. Interior



8. Open gallery, façade



9. Open gallery, soffit, design

hidden behind a second row of supports, each one square in section with angles in recess and thus with dosserets on each side. The pillar, instead of a capital, has an impost, followed underneath by the lobes. The lobes, twice large, feature on the base, over its part similar to the impost, but inverse and set above a square block. The piers are connected with semi-circular arches, which are surmounted by small frontons so that each bay has its separate gable façade. Actually the common roof is sharply gabled, and its acute angles pointed upward and downward form the four frontons. On the façade the cornices in recess retrace the ridged roof. Thanks to the second series of supports a long narrow space was created also with an apse at the east end, its four bays covered with barrel vaults.

One of the outer pillars of the gallery had collapsed, more than hundred years ago. Apparently, there were points that were not solid enough in the construction. The annex added later at the southwest corner, which closed the gallery on the west and blocked two intercolumnars, acted as a buttress there. But it has no connection with the main nave and with the neighbouring narthex, now demolished, which has run all along the western façade, including the north annex. The narthex, according to the remains of the masonry, was erected before this southwest body, but at any rate, it was added later. The original west façade was totally open outwards and one can imagine there a solemn entrance that the traces of the wall corroborate.

The church has two other entrances, one on the north gable façade, in the axis of the conch while its counterpart to the south is the most richly decorated doorway, sheltered by a sumptuous porch (fig. 3). Once the worshipper entered from south, the eye caught the culminate space, the cupola surprising with its height. The effect of the vertically oriented central space was due not only to the gradu-



10. North-western pier, base

11. South-western pier, niche, reliefs
of Bagrat and David

ation in height of the conchs, pendentives and drum, preceding the dome, but also to its four supports which arrest the eyes with their large proportions and surprising high bases.

The two pillars on the east are twelve-sided, while those on the west are square faced with pilasters on all sides (fig. 10, 11). The pilasters rising up on the respective northern and southern side and western one of the west pillars, form the jambs of the two-storey high openings to the above-mentioned square rooms, situated at the west corners of the central square. It is the same with the east pilasters. They all give rise to the arches heading these openings. The other "strips" of the pillars go up to the springers of the great arches, which, at their tops, join the pendentives at the base of the drum. These pillars are crowned by a cornice, an impost, instead of a capital and this consists of a large flat moulding at the top, followed by a scotia, but underneath there is a shorter one, which is separated by a cavetto from the lobes that are finishing off the decor. Such a cornice runs round the base of the drum outside.

The same is the impost on the pilasters, from which spring the transversal arches carrying the barrel vault in the west cross-arm. More important is the fact that the pilasters supporting these arches are constructed on the same principle as the pillars: thus they represent half a pillar in section. The pilasters project out

of two pairs of strips: the, first, which lean directly on the wall, go up to a level lower than the other strips, and thus serve as springers to the blind arches which span the bays along the wall (fig. 6). The second pair of strips elevates to the above-mentioned impost, the corbel, from which onwards the transversal arches span the bays of the vault over the west cross-arm. These arches in corbel have to transfer part of the pressure of the barrel vault to the striped pilasters. At the same time, they and the lower blind arches sustain the weight of the incumbent stones over the openings, pierces underneath in the walls.

As has been said, the pilasters divide the walls of tile western nave into four compartments, but each one is of a different width. The lack of metrical unity in the proportions of the bays is a common feature of the medieval architecture in Transcaucasia, in Georgia, but no explanation has been found for this.

In the matter of the imposts which crown the pilasters and the west pillars, their simplified ornamentation is justified by assuming that it was less possible for them to have been the subject of contemplation. The east pillars which have the same significance as the western ones in supporting the cupola, are topped also by imposts with predominance given to the rounded off profiles, which are in harmony with their seemingly circular section. There is an ornamented bolster instead of flat moulding on the west square pillars, but it is followed by the same row of lobes at the end.

The bases of all these pillars, unlike their cornices, are spectacular in shape and ornamentation. They envelop the lower part of the pillars like cockleshells. With their imposing proportions and beauty, the bases are unificative constituents of the square space under the cupola. Their height contributes to this as it corresponds to the visual field, of the worshiper standing in front of the pillars, amazed at their magnificence. The enhancements of the eastern bases were the same but those of the western bases were different. On the east the decoration consists of a large flat moulding, a kind of plinth, separated from the torus by a second flat moulding running inwards. The torus is framed from above with a fillet, followed by a small twisted bolster running inwards and surmounted by the slightly advanced lower end of the main band, on which there are vertical repetitive large ribbons. This takes up the central part of the ornamentation and differentiates it with the relatively large size of its components. A fillet, which hardly advances over it, is dominated by a twisted cable, while at the top a row of tiny roundels run, framed with fillets.

The bases of the west pillars are 3m in height against the 2m of the east pillars. These proportions require larger decorated surfaces. So the northwest base (fig. 10) shows also a plinth at the base, followed by a twisted torus which, from below, limits a relatively high polyedrical surface. This is surmounted by a big bolster octoedrical in section, which is followed by a scotia between two fillets. Above it, the main large guillosh pattern develops, and it is composed of two rib-

bons, which start at an angle of 45 degrees from both borders, move into zigzags, and in their crossing form knots arranged in three rows. The guillosh is framed from above and below by two symmetrically disposed bolsters: the first twisted, the second, ornamented with guillosh. There is an upper decorative area placed on the large projecting band, which finishes off the base. It is framed also with fillets and enhanced with woven motifs: a double ribbon runs between the borders and trace shovels with opposite orientation. In their span they take in a tongue-shaped element.

The southwest base is of the same type and size as the north-west, but its ornamentation, though different, has some similar features. They have a common decorative scheme with two main areas, framed by thick bolsters of a polyedrical section. The lower area is enlivened with distant fluting which actually appears on all the bases. More original, on this southwest base, is the upper ornamental area, with its two round profiles, which start from the borders and unnoticeably join each other in the middle. So the upper part of this area is taken up by a row of pine-cones with various ornamentation: from the simple grid of rhombs to the most complicated one of flowering crosses in combination with the foliated motifs. The pinecones are linked to each other with arched stalks which give rise to tendrils in the shape of spirals. The lower zone of the same area is enhanced with almond like elements, each one flanked with a pair of hollowed leaves set horizontally underneath and above them, a pair of very small spoon-like leaves are lapped on either side of the almonds (fig. 12). The upper ornamental area is crowned with a strongly projecting string-course with an interlaced pattern, which recalls repetitive eights.

Finally, the most original are the niches³ at the bases of the western pillars. They project from the circular base almost half a meter and rise to a height of four meters with a width of 0,80 m, their conches inside display scallops with radiating fluting but on the outside they are slightly pointed. The front of the southern niche, including the jambs, is furrowed with grooved parallel lines, while the front of the northern niche is flat.

Very astonishing in the southern niche are the upper parts of the jambs crowned by something like attached capitals. However, the "capitals" of the northern niche are now without any sculptures. Unlike them, the "capitals" of the south niche make it possible to recognize the bust portraits of the donors – David Magistros and Bagrat, Eristav of the Eristavs (fig. 11, 13) – very damaged but identifiable by means of the inscriptions at the side.⁴ The portraits are of

3 The niches different in size and shape can be seen in the churches contemporary with Oški as Haḡuli, Ot'ht'a eklesia, Paḡali, etc. Takaišvili, *Arkheologičeskaja ekspedicija*, pl. 84, 94-95, 125, 147.

4 W. Djobadze, "The Donor Reliefs and the Date of the Church of Oški", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 69 (1976) 53-56.



12. South-western pier, base, detail



13. Bagrat and David, design after Djobadze

small size in comparison with the large proportions of the niche; their dimensions are: 0,32-0,35 cm in breadth and 0,48 cm in height, including the upper ornamented frame, equal to one sixth of the height. This frame is decorated with half-acanthi, which are symmetrically arranged along the longitudinal axis of the frieze so as to penetrate into each other with their smooth lobes. Apparently when it was carved, the orientation of the acanthi was not taken into consideration, which would have meant setting up the design vertically. But for the master it was easier to turn the design horizontally, and thus to be in line with the sculptured works running around the base.

The portraits of the donors are similar. Both princes have square haloes testifying to the reliefs having been made in their lifetime. They are in conventional poses of rulers, with the same gestures and attributes. Half-length representations, they carry in their right hands a sceptre topped by a cross with flared arms and attached with a knob, while their left hands are raised, the palms in a gesture of humility. The two princes are clad in caftans, which differ only in the design of the cloth. Bagrat's caftan is embroidered with rosettes of six petals, which are delineated within, in the way to form all together a six-pointed figure, a decorative motif well known from Islamic glazed slabs. Moreover, six intermediate petals complete the outline of the rosettes. Besides this, fine quatrefoils are fitted in the spaces between the rosettes. David's caftan is also embellished with rosettes, which have four heart-shaped petals and are inscribed in roundels. The collars of the caftans outline a V-shaped neck and like the wristbands are embellished with patterns of pearls and triangles. The caftans are fastened with belts, indispensable accessories of the formal costumes of high-ranking personalities. On their heads David and Bagrat wear caps, similar to those worn in Caucasian countries to the present day and characterised by large bands on the brim. The cap, better preserved, in the relief of Bagrat is bejewelled and thus comparable to the "stemma", an insignia of honour reserved for the Magistros, such as he was.

The donors are clad in the appropriate costumes of the high rank, they held in the social scale as Georgian rulers. They were invested with power over their compatriots by the Byzantine emperor in recognition of the services they had been rendering to him. At the same time, the Georgian rulers, who were attracted by Oriental luxury, wanted to compete with their Arab oppressors and by external insignia to demonstrate their political position and their relations with the imperial court in Constantinople, relations arising out of their economic and military power.

Small in size and set up 3,00 m high, the reliefs of Bagrat and David are treated as decorative elements, which form part of the immense niche dominating the base of the pillar. In spite of the respect paid to the donors in depicting their emblems of power in minute detail, the human image is reduced to a simple con-

stituent of the general decoration, underlining the architectural detail. The niche imposing its shape and structure is actually the main element of the richly carved base.

Moreover, two lateral sides project from the jambs of the niche 0,47 m in front and 1,30 m in height, and they look like the "sidearms" of a sedia. The floor within the niches is raised up by one step of 0,20 m. All this suggests that the niche may have had a utilitarian sense supposedly to shelter a throne reserved for a dignity, most probably the king of that region. The northern niche is with clearer proportions and flat surfaces without projections from the jambs, but there is also a step, which leads inside. It may also have been utilized for fitting in a seat.

Some parts of the carved ornaments on the bases are covered with lively colours, mostly red and blue and this increased the picturesque effect. This polychromatic enhancement harmonized with the wall paintings, which used to cover the interior of the church.

Of interest for the present study is the fact that the architectural detail, being in a synthesis with the decorative sculpture, dominates it. It is clear that the niche itself arrested the eyes and not the reliefs of the donors. This was an element imposed by the architectural fashion at that time. The niches, which were indispensable to the interior of the mosques and khalif's palaces, soon went beyond the boundaries of the Islamic world and penetrated into the countries which were in contact with the Abbassids in the 9th-10th centuries. With greater reason such details impressed the Georgians who had the ambition to rival their dominators on the cultural front and to show their skill as builders. Having their eyes on the works elaborated by the constructors of great renown, the Georgians were easily inspired by them in their creative activity. But once adopted, a model would be utilized for a new purpose; modified and assimilated, it evolved in a different context.

The niches are well known in the architecture from the remote past, that of antiquity even in Transcaucasia, but in the case of Oški, it was not a matter of revival of a detail of antiquity on the soil of Georgia itself. This type of niche developed and took root in Islamic architecture with its appropriate content during the centuries. At a definite stage in its evolution, it spilled over the borders of its artistic circle and, having become international, according to the fashion then in the world architecture, was adopted by Georgian masons.

Carved with flaring ornaments of spoon like fluting, the pendentives rise at the upper end of the pillars, between the springers of the four great arches, and bend forward over the central space. They carry out the transmission from its square base to the circle of the hoisted drum, which, with its twelve windows had to furnish the light in the church (fig. 7). The lighting inside was good. The conchs were pierced each one with three windows, their annexes, also let in direct light, as well as the long west cross-arm with its windows to the west and

south. These provided sufficient light which penetrated into the north two-storey gallery, also lighted directly from the north. One can imagine the sumptuousness of the interior with walls and pilasters covered with marble, and the blind arches framing the wall paintings and surfaces incrustated with mosaics and all this glittering in the sunshine coming through the alabaster windowpanes.

External View

The graduation of the volumes of the building in the exterior corresponds to the scale obtained by the elevation of the space in the interior. From a bird's eye view, the conchs and west nave depict the symbol of Christianity, the cross, with their pitch roofs. This is crowned by the cupola, raised where they cross (fig. 2, 4). A little lower, in the corners within the interspaces of the so-formed cross-arms appear the four lean-tos of the square rooms, which form part of the hollow supports of the domed construction. These lean-tos oriented to the south or the north, feature on either side of the respective cross-arm. The annexes of the conchs have also lean-tos, parallel to the adjacent slope of the relative gable roof. But their upper level corresponds to the lower one of the above-mentioned four lean-tos. The two-storey high northern body alongside the west nave is also covered with a lean-to at the north. This elongated narrow lean-to is balanced on the south by the sharply ridged roof open gallery.

From outside the church is impressive with the massiveness of the construction, the symmetry of the volumes and flat lines of the wall surfaces. The long walls on the south and the north are diversified with the projections of the transept with its gabled façades. The conchs and their subsidiary rooms are concealed, each one from outside, with three vertical walls so that their lateral sides meet the opposite ones at an obtuse angle and together form two symmetrical niches with scalloped shells at the top. The surfaces of the niches are pierced by the play of small windows. The outer lateral side of the annexes are, however, perpendicular to their frontal ones so as to form the right-angled projectings of the transept to the east and west. On the northern façade, the niches are without scalloped shells.

The façades are relived by pilaster strips connected by arches, which pass under the slopes of the main gable, over the niches and under the side lean-tos. The niches are the constructive forms to which is referred the ornamental scheme of the façade, dominated by the quintuple blind arcade (fig. 2, 14). They define the span not only of the arches surmounting them but also the neighbouring ones – this in the centre and those leaning on the annexes. The builder resolved successfully the façade's decoration in unifying the conch and its subsidiaries through the quintuple arcade, rendered in agreement with the constructive forms. The east fa-



14. South façade

çade is beautified on the same principle. The significance of the niches for the arcuating is confirmed by the fact that on the west façade where there are no niches, there is no more quintuple arcade. But there is also a research of its unification with the other gabled façades by means of architectural forms, as the bilobed window with its ornamented frames and the archivolt with extensions over it.

The quintuple arcades consist of six cylindrical massive shafts, which rise up at the base of the wall and elevate toward the roofs. Each one gives rise to two arches which spring to the left and the right, respectively, in a different level, except the shafts at the corners directly supporting the arches. In the bays formed in this way, the arches and their supports are doubled by second shafts, rectangular in section and set up in recess. The cylindrical and rectangular shafts are capped with more or less elaborated capitals at the springers of the arches.

The capitals crown all the pilaster strips as a whole on the central arch, while on the rest they cover only half the cylindrical shaft, leaving the other half free to pursue its movement upward in forming the neighbouring arch. In agreement with that the cylinders at the corners, which have no link with other shafts, are entirely capped but mostly with imposts of simple lobes. The central arches are pointed. The constituent of the main arch to the south is of polyedrical section instead of cylindrical as it is in the rest. All the arcades are rendered in three-quarter relief.

The main window of each gabled façade with the exception of that on the west, is pierced in its central bay of the quintuple arcade on the level of the second storey of the building. It is arch-headed, framed with ornamental carving and is surmounted at a certain distance, by a richly adorned archivolt with extensions, which takes all the span of the bay. The archivolt is topped by a figure sculptured in high relief. The second storey windows of the subsidiary rooms appear in the extreme bays of the blind arcade while those from the first storey open into the niches which contain also the openings of the conchs. All the windows are crowned with decorative arches mostly with extensions, surprising with their ornamentation often in an interlaced design. Though the constructive details are the same, the façades of the three conchs differ from each other in their stone plastic. The west façade shows common elements in its architectural sculpture with the arcuated façades and that reveals the unificative concept of the organisation of the outside-carved decoration.

Capitals

The blind arches in recess like those on the façades, feature on the twenty four-sided drums of the cupola. They are also without ornamentation, but the capitals under their springers are of great variety, some being of the same type as those of the quintuple arcade.

It is difficult to make an exact classification of the capitals because of the multiple nuances in their pattern and of the lack of the common elements with the classic orders. For the sake of conformity I will distinguish some groups as follows:

a) capitals with pine-cones, b) acanthus capitals, c) foliated capitals, d) capitals with figural motifs, e) volute capitals, f) fluted capitals.

The capitals of the façades can be referred to the two first groups.

a) With pinecones

The front of the capital consists of two pinecones suspended symmetrically on a tendril and between them, a ballflower from which a twisted wire hangs with another ballflower at the end. The tendril turns at the corners into spirals, from each of which a leaf goes out, marked with ribs and fastened with a stalk so that it stretches out in a spoon like shape. Such a leaf is symmetrically carved on the lateral side of the capital, where one half of the frontal pattern is reproduced. Seen from the corner, the two spirals with the leaves going out of them, recall helices. The capital caps the shafts of the highest arch on the eastern façade (fig. 15). It is a repetitive capital.

The left capital of the same east arch shows a variant of the foregoing one. The tendril is bent under the weight of the two pine-cones and it gives rise to three vine leaves, two small at the corners and a big one in the middle, from which a cross, carved over a bud, is suspended on a fine chain. Apparently there is some connotation between the pinecone and the cluster of grapes treated in a geometrical device.

The third variant features on the mullion of the bilobed window on the western façade. The pattern is simplified in regard to the smaller size of the capital and only the pinecones are hanging on the tendril, which whirls in spirals at the corners under the abacus (fig. 16).

The shafts of all these arches are decorated with a pad of interlaced basket motif and placed at a short distance from the capital. The pad does not form part of the capital itself and it is incorrect to consider it as its base. The pad has a long story: it has been known from remotest times, being in common use in East Hellenistic architecture. One of its famous examples were the capitals of Bana, in Transcaucasia, going back to the seventh century, but it appeared much earlier. Survivals of the pad are the tiny bulbs of the twin colonnades flanking the west window, as well as those on the shafts of the multiple ones of the drum. Finally, the pad in the case of the quintuple arcades and the mullion of Oški is clearly separated from the capital and belongs to the shaft.



15. East façade, blind arch, capital, detail

b) Acanthus capital

The term is not quite correct. The capital consists of two pairs of great S-shaped leaves while those of the third one turn inwards into spirals and meet each other midway. This ornamentation develops on the frontal side of the capitals which cap the twin colonnettes flanking the bilobed window on the west façade (fig. 16).

The capital appears in a richer variant on the blind arcade of the drum, where it is joined by an axial leaf of equal size with the S-shaped ones and moreover, two very small leaves rise up on either side of it. The main rib of this great leaf coincides with the meeting line of the neighbouring sides of the drum. Thus the edge between them disappears under the carved decoration, which is treated in agreement with this constructive peculiarity (fig. 17). Yet, half the plant motif, described in the first variant, features on the lateral faces of all the acanthus capitals. Furthermore, the pattern develops partly on the underside, because it has to be seen from below.



16. West façade, detail



17. Drum, blind arcade, capitals

c) Foliated capital

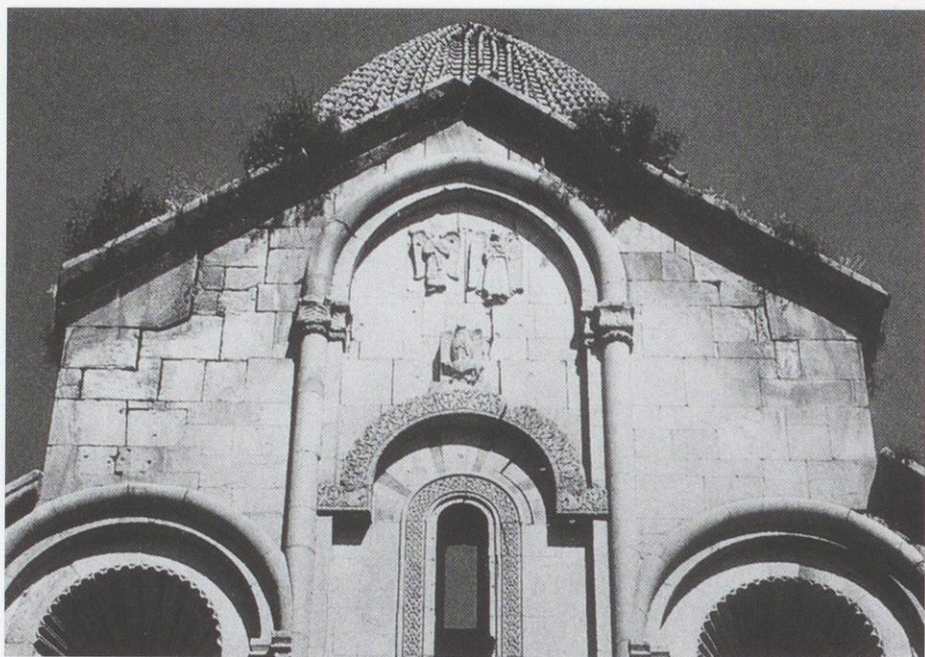
The foliated capitals are characterized by a predominance of the half palmette which appears in various combinations and that increases their nuances.⁵ For the sake of clarity I will describe them separately.

1. The frontal side represents two halves of a plant ornament, difficult to qualify as palmette, which flare out of the corners and meet with their numerous lobes arranged on either side of the axis of the capital. But such a half oriented in the opposite way is carved not only on its lateral side but also on the neighbouring pilaster strip. These repetitive capitals support the central arch in recess, on the southern façade (fig. 18).

2. In the front two upright half-palmettes are set side by side in the middle so that their lobes join each other while they are linked, at their base, by two stalks shaping a loop. Two half-palmettes stand also at the extremities in order to form with their counterparts of the lateral sides the same plant motif as in the centre (fig. 19).

3. In other cases the foliated motif appears twice being set side by side on the

⁵ It is difficult to show the comparatives of the spectacular foliated capitals with the contemporary Georgian ones. However some of them represent new variations of Omayyad models, which were modernized according to the tenth-century artistic visions.



18. South façade, blind arch, capitals



19. Drum, south side, capitals

front and once more on the lateral faces of the capital. Besides this the so-double motif is flanked with the same half palmettes oriented toward the corners.

4. The half palmettes are set side by side while their stalks at the bottom, instead of linking together, turn upward so as to form two small half palmettes set upright, back to back. This plant motif features twice so that the adjacent lobes meet each other in the axis of the frontal face. The lobes there are oriented outward on the contrary to those, inward of the preceding type of pattern (fig. 20).

5. The decoration can, however, be much more complicated: the half palmettes, as the basic elements of the pattern, are subjected to elaborate combinations, which suggest amazing forms. Thus two inverse elongated palmettes are placed one over the other in the middle and two half-palmettes at each extremity of the capital. The pattern develops into two zones: in the upper zone two fine stalks, shaping into fleurons at the ends, spring to the left and the right from the indentations of the upper central palmette and turning downwards touch the summits of the lateral half-palmettes. At the same time, between their two lobes the stalks spring out and shape into similar elements oriented in the opposite way round, but placed horizontally. In the lower zone two trilobed half-palmettes spring out of the lateral inverse half-palmettes and turn downwards, being face to face with them, while their tops join the summit of the middle palmette. In the upper zone a special arrangement signalises and shapes into several fleurons, which remind one of the lovely heads of birds⁶ (fig. 21).

6. A variant of this pattern displays less complicated composition. The middle and the corner constituents are the same, but the plant elements which go out of them are unified as tri-lobed half palmettes. Those on either side of the upper palmette turn upwards while the progenitives of the lower one return to the bottom. A middle pair of such tri-lobed elements starts out of the base of the same lower palmette and, oriented sideways, complete the interfacing of the lobes in the pattern (fig. 19).

7. A palmette in the middle and two halves at the corners of the frontal side develop with the summits downward along all its height. Their opposite spoon-like lobes arranged in a common vertical line and the cut-outs between them, outline two symmetrical roundels at the top while at the base, the interspaces between the summits of the palmettes are each taken up by two small fleurets which, placed with the lobes downwards pass over the edge of the underside of the capital (fig. 20).

8. Combinations, based on the stalks ending with half-palmettes are numerous. Thus the pattern consists of four stalks linked to a central roundel. The two

6 Similar half-palmettes giving birth to one another in such a way, but developing in a circle, feature on the outside of the base of the Hephtalide bowl in the British Museum, London, No. OA 1963.12.10.1 from the 5th-6th century. Apparently the Oški sculptor could have been inspired from a Sassanian motif renewed at the time.



20. Drum, northwest side, capitals



21. Drum, capital, foliage recalling birds

upper ones rising out of the centre turn to the left and the right and after going in a circular way, return to the roundel, posing horizontally the half-palmettes, shaping at their ends. The lower stalks starting out of the same centre develop in the opposite way so that their half-palmettes appear back to back with the first ones. The pattern resembles a quatrefoil. Inside two semicircular stalks, one opens upward, the other, downward intertwine with the quatrefoil. Besides this, in the upper and lower interspaces of the lobes of the quatrefoil two small palmettes penetrate, with the summits toward the centre. At the same time, the internal part of all these stems is aimed at forming a six-ray star, which takes the central place of the design. The pattern is characterized by the intricate treatment of the ornaments submitted to geometrical notions (fig. 22).

9. The capital stands out with the dynamic forms of its foliated motifs. The design consists of a great split palmette the wings of which are separated by an elongated axial bud. The three petals of its halves resemble three leaves in an accelerated movement with their stalks turning in a large roundel at the base. Moreover, two inverted halves of a small wing palmette, oriented in the opposite way, feature on the upper part of the capital. Their leaves similar in shape to those of the great palmette, grow out of the roundel of their stalks and run middlewards. Finally on either side of the bud, the great and the small foliated



22. Drum, east, northeast, north sides, capitals



23. Capital, palmette recalling living beings



24. Capitals with crosses

parts are in amazingly skilful combinations that in their common trend seem to point to a living creature⁷ – a rabbit or a knotted scarf on a woman's head (fig. 23).

10. Two axial palmettes oriented upward and downward respectively are arranged one over the other as well as their halves at the extremities of the capital. The upper plant elements are nevertheless reduced on account of the shortened upper decorative zone, which is in accordance with the two crosses inscribed between the middle and lateral plant components. The vertical cross-arms shape at the ends, each one into a split palmette, and its wings of two spoon-like leaves. The horizontal ones achieve the space between the lateral halves and this, between the axial palmettes, from the left and the right. Thus the horizontal cross-arms look as though they were giving rise to wing palmettes. Finally the arms of the two crosses are all flourishing at their end with wing-foliated motifs, which, at the same time, are in connection with the axial, and the lateral plant motifs (fig. 19, 24).

11. A large grooved axial stem coming from underside, rises up and diverges

⁷ The plant motifs resembling the heads of birds appear on the ceramics plates originating from Nishapur in the Metropolitan Museum, from the tenth century, No. 53.170.2, No. 56.44, No. 58.152.



25. Drum, foliated and fluted capital

on a certain level into two diagonal stems, which reach the upper corners of the capital so as to return vertically, and shape into inverted half palmettes along the extremities. At the base the same stem gives rise, on the left and the right, to two palmettes with their lobes arranged in two groups: the inner lobes following in parallel the diagonal stem line, and the external ones, returning to the base in order to harmonize with the opposite lobes of the upper half-palmette, at the corners. At the same time, the diagonal stem gives rise to two upright half-palmettes, oriented inward and linked to the axial cluster suspended under the abacus (fig. 23).

12. Two pairs of stems emerge from the underside, go towards the front, rise up together and develop on two levels, each stem shaping into a half-palmette at its end. The lower ones, which turn back downwards, take their places on either side of the stems of the second pair. These intertwist not only at the bottom but also at the top so as to form a wing palmette. Actually the design consists of two split palmettes, though the stems of the upper one separate the two halves of the lower one. At the upper corners the petals of this palmette touch the clusters of grapes suspended at the edges of the capital. Seen from the corner, the cluster looks like the middle element of a pattern, comprising the half frontal ornamentation and its counterpart on the lateral face of the capital (fig. 25).

13. Following the same principle of organisation, the constituents of the pat-



26. Drum, foliated, figural and volute capitals

tern abuts on another attractive variant of the foliated capital. There are also two pairs of stalks which rise out of the base, cross each other in its middle and develop at their ends into two spoon-like leaves instead of a half-palmette. The first pair of stalks turn upwards so that their leaves are arranged on either side of the axial rib of the capital while the second pair of stalks bend downwards with their leaves touching the base. In each half of the pattern the upper and lower plant elements are combined in such a way that they give the impression of shaping into a wing-foliated motif together and this fans towards the upper corner where a cluster of grapes is suspended (fig. 26).

14. As shown on another capital such a plant motif appears in different combinations as, for example, with a cross, which takes up the central place. Two stems perpendicular to each other form this cross. Each one of the cross-arms develops at the end into two stalks that return at forty-five degree shaping into half-palmettes. These poised, in the interspaces of the cross-arms centre. Besides this, a pair of stalks, each one shaping into two spoon-like leaves, emerges out of each horizontal cross-arm and recalls a wing palmette. Finally, the design is comparable to a quatrefoil with heart-shaped petals, which is flanked by the wing palmettes open sideways (fig. 25).



27. Capital with rabbits

e) Capitals with figural motifs.

1. The capital represents two great inverse half-palmettes, set at the extremities with the lobes outward. Two tendrils spring out from below their summits and shaped at the end into small half-palmettes, which turn round and meet each other midway. In their loops two rabbits are placed face to face. High up a split palmette is spanned with its lower lobes shaping into stalks, which, directed downwards, diverge from one another, for the purpose of joining the small half-palmettes below. However, they achieve the heads of the rabbits and disappear as though they had been carried off by something behind them, but the curve they should have described is, nevertheless, completed by the hind legs of the rabbits. There is a perfect integration of the animal motif with the plant pattern, thanks to the dynamic forms of the foliated elements, in harmony with the outline of the leaving creatures (fig. 27).

2. Two standing lions are placed face to face, their front legs leaning opposite to each other above a split palmette, which rises up at the base of the capital. At its upper corners two half-palmettes with summits downward shelter the lion's tails with their balls at the top. The animal motif dominates the design completed with foliage (fig. 26).

3. Finally, the capital, which stands out from all the rest, represents a human

being, half-length, a rare phenomenon in the decoration of the cupolas, which I'll discuss later.

e) Volute capitals

The volute capital also takes place on the drum of Oški, but its forms are very simplified. It shows two flat spirals bound from underneath with their ropes, which cross at the base. On the lateral sides, the volutes, nevertheless, appear with their bare cylindrical bodies (fig. 26).

f) Fluted capitals

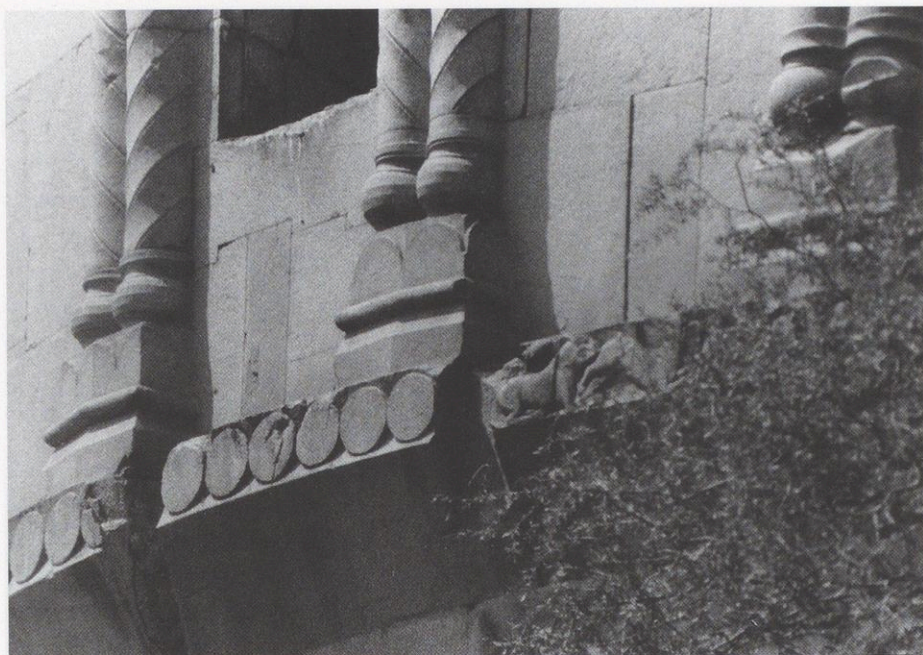
Another type of capital displays fluted ornamentation grooved on its frontal and lateral sides, which, at the top slightly turns forward to join the abacus. So-projecting the flutes finish with minute arcuations. This capital enjoyed a great success during the 5th and 6th centuries in Syria,⁸ where it took deep roots and thereafter was transmitted to the neighbouring countries, including Transcaucasia, as in the Işhani church (about 636). Adopted by the regional tradition, it was revived by the Georgians (fig. 25).

The shafts of the colonnettes are also decorated: often twisted with ribs, or covered with ribbons which in their opposite movement intercross or interlace throwing in relief squares or rhombi, the latter sometimes enhanced inside with a small roundel. In another case the basic elements are triangles arranged side by side with the summit downward and bases with trilobed contour, which is in line with the beads joined between them. (figs. 19, 23, 25, 26, 27).

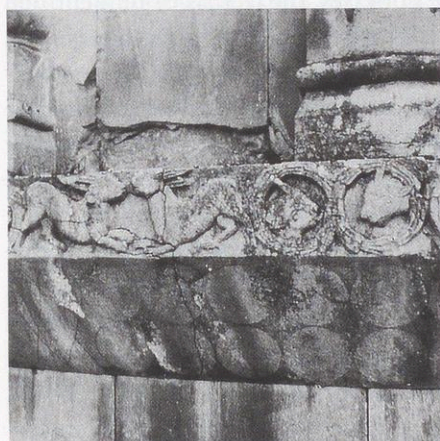
The bases, equal in shape and size, are very simple, since they were hardly exposed to the viewer. The bulbous parts of the twin colonnettes are separated by a scotia from the large block with the lobes, which is framed underneath by a slightly projecting astragal and a cavetto followed by the sloping upper surface of the protruding base (fig. 20, 22). All the bases of the colonnettes rest on a projecting string course with flat frontal side, which is decorated with red roundels (fig. 28). On the north and northeast, they are interrupted by a row of animals. Underneath a double row of smaller roundels runs on the surface in recess finishing the base of the drum (fig. 29).

The frieze of the animals show amazing figures carried out in a style with naturalistic effects. Usually coupled, the animals appear either in front of each other, especially the rabbits (fig. 29) or in a chase, as the lion and the antelope (fig. 30) and also in simple running. They are all alternating with couple of protoms framed by round scrolls of triple stems. The heads are of herbivorous or

8 H. Butler, *Early Churches in Syria*, Princeton 1929, 167, fig. 47D, 177.



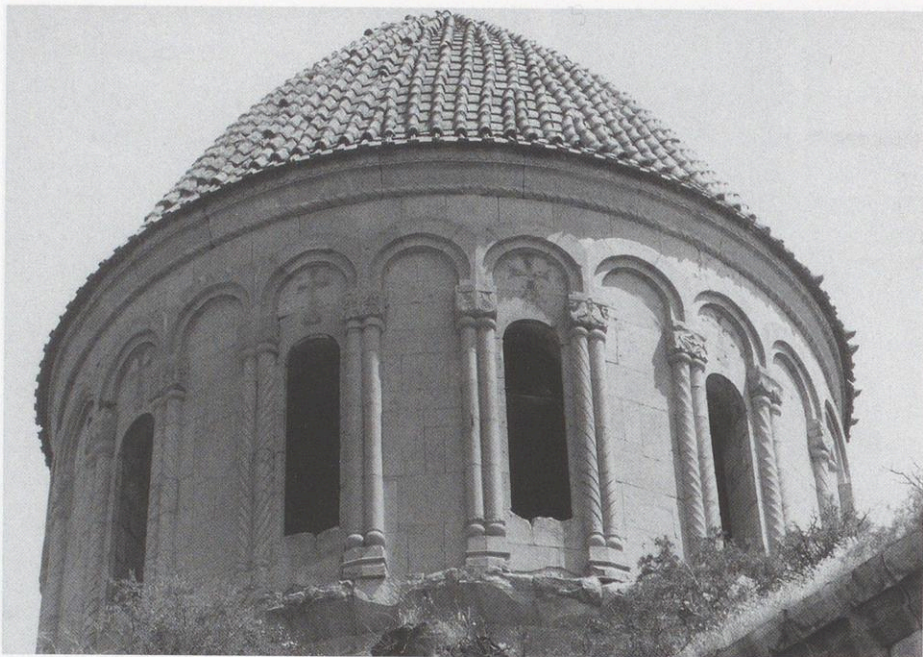
28. Drum, bases of the colonnettes



29. Base of the drum, row of animals



30. Animal frieze, detail



31. Dome

teratogenic animals and birds. More variable than the preserved figures, they are oriented to each other, as the antelopes, the lionesses, the jackals or unidentified protoms. A couple of heads, nevertheless, is depicted back to back: an eagle and a herbivore, both with necklaces of pearls in two rows and with hanging jewellery in the former. Unfortunately the frieze is badly damaged and it is impossible to establish the order of the figures. The animal friezes decorated the façades of Byzantine and Armenian buildings in the tenth century, but the heads in scrolls reveal renovated Sassanian models.

The cornice of the drum consists of a thick twisted cable and above it, a large string course with a sloped frontal side, followed by the last constituent, strongly projecting and also at slope, but adorned with lobes; the latter turn in the opposite direction on its upper surface in recess, which at the top joins the roof. The same cornice recurs on all the façades of the church (figs. 22, 25, 26, 31).

Ornaments

As was pointed out, architectural sculpture besides developing on the cupola, is carried out round the openings on the façades. The ornamental designs feature generally on the frames of the windows or their lintels as well as the shafts of the attached columns.

The windows of the subsidiary rooms as well as the lateral ones of the conches are also crowned with archivolt, very often with long extensions. The patterns within these limits are usually framed with a listel. The ornamentations can be grouped in vegetal, sometimes with animals, or birds, and geometric ones, but any strict differentiation is difficult to make, the support of geometry being inevitable almost everywhere.

To the first group, the following decorations can be referred:

1. Two partridges are placed at the springs of the archivolt, and from their open bills two plant scrolls grow and coil opposite each other, forming circles with rosettes. The coils give rise to offshoots of three leaves placed in their interspaces on the borders, so that a greater one caps the pattern on the key of the archivolt. The partridges have fine necklaces, a constant feature of their representation, inherited from Sassanian art, although the theme of the two birds with twigs in their beaks is purely Christian. The body of the partridges drawn with a grid of lozenges as well as their tails and primaries, with parallel lines, matches the geometric treatment in accordance with the symmetrical rolling of the scrolls. The so-decorated archivolt crowns the second-storey window of the southern subsidiary room on the east façade.

2. More complicated is the pattern over the west window of the south conch. The archivolt has an unusual form, a rounded trifoliated intrados that joins the extrados at the springers. The borders of the decorative surface have horizontal extensions, on which two birds are perched. Their flying ribbons on the neck are enhanced with jewellery, abundant also on the tails and the twigs hanging on the beaks. Within the borders the foliated ornamentation also displays coiling stems, but the device, contrary to the above-discussed one, develops from the key towards the springers of the archivolt. A lyre-shaped ornament is the centre from which two stems descend to the left and the right and coil, between the borders giving rise to the spirals. Foliated elements similar to half-palmettes or fanlike bunches of leaves appear in the interspaces of the stems while a big leaf with spiral outshoots crowns the key, from which downwards two oblong lines enclose the central part of the pattern. No doubt, the foliated composition is subjected to a geometrical scheme whereby all the constituents are interconnected (fig. 32).

No less interesting is the technique of this ornamentation looking like a graphic design which, to a certain degree, recalls the hollow moulding. There



32. South conch, west window

only the contour surrounding the flat surface of the ornaments is carved and the background is cut in some places.

The same technique is applied to the archivolt over the east lateral window of the south conch but the background here is entirely cut. The ornamentation consists of two scrolls, which coil symmetrically from the extensions of the archivolt towards its key, where they join each other in a tangent to the extrados. In their coils, the scrolls develop offshoots with seeds similar to half-palmettes. Very impressive is the flat relief of the pattern, which stands out on the colour-cut background.

Second group – Geometric patterns

1. One of the simple designs displays repetitive circles with tiny discs within them. The trelliswork consists of two triple grooved braids, which emerge from the upper and lower parts of the short vertical border, framing the left extension of the archivolt. The braids coil tangentially to the intrados and extrados so as to interlace, forming the circles, which contain small roundels. The pattern crowns the unique lateral window of the west subsidiary chamber of the south conch.

2. The design exhibits a more complicated treatment of the circles than the forgoing one. The circles composed of three concentric rings run between both

borders. They penetrate into one another so that in the centre of each circle, its two neighbouring ones join each other but, at the same time, interlacing with it, they fill its inner space to such a degree, that this appears as four dark tiny roundels, situated at the ends of its horizontal and vertical axis. Remarkable is the exactness in the repartition of these elements in shadow at an equal distance from each other, on the middle curve of the archivolt and also at an equal distance from the centre to the borders. Thus placed they make detectable the densely interlocked constituents of the design, meanwhile they also diversify. This ornamentation with the interlaced triple circles features over the arch-headed first-storey window of the south pastophory on the east façade.

3. The grids of interlaced threads hold an important place in the geometric patterns. A frequent one consists of two double-grooved threads running into zigzag all along the archivolt. More precisely, starting from one of its sides, they move between both borders, but without reaching them. However, nearby they pleat over themselves and form something like buckles which, arranged in two parallel rows, determine the outlines of the pattern. The threads in their zigzag moving intercross within small circles, which emphasize the axis of the archivolt. The design enhances the arching frame over the first-storey window of the east subsidiary room, open towards the niche, adjacent to the south conch (fig. 33).

4. More ample is the pattern designed on the same principle of the intercrossing double-grooved threads on the blind arch above the statue of Saint Simeon the Younger whose pedestal rises over the window frame on the west façade. However, the knots, the threads tie, are larger and the plait they form, more compact (figs. 17, 19). Besides this, they interlace with the threads running alongside the borders and thus the rows of the knots increase to four. The closely interplaited threads that interlace knots are the main characteristics of the design which is remarkable for the craftsmanship of its carving.

5. The latticework is more complicated on the frame around the central window of the south conch (figs. 14, 34). The grid is characterized by a dynamic intricate movement of the double-grooved threads. Two braids go out of the vertical borders of the frame: moving into zigzag opposite to each other, they meet at the centre, lace a large buckle and turn back in order to knot another buckle with the bordering braids. In their moving forwards and backwards they depict curves which, connected by the four buckles, form a circle. A second pair of braids opposite goes the same way but with linear tracing: at the centre they interpenetrate, shaping a small square tilted at forty-five degrees and turning back to the borders, interlace buckles between those of the first pair. Their four points of contact represent the ends of a square, also tilted, in the centre of which a large buckle recurs, connecting the circles that are accentuated by the small squares within them.



33. East subsidiary room, first-storey window



34. South conch, central. window, frame and lintel, fragment



35. East conch, central window

6. Elsewhere, the pairs of braids forming the circles are in combination with two other double-grooved braids, which move into zigzag between the borders. The latter interlace with the bordering threads, in alternation with those depicting the circles. In their run the zigzag ones simply cross each other in the centres of the circles but, at the same time, as in the foregoing pattern, their points of intercrossing and those of the trellising on the borders, constitute the four ends of a square tilted at forty-five degrees, while the buckle knotted by the braids tracing the circles appears in the centre. Finally the pattern reveals the repetitive motifs of interpenetrating circles and tilted squares, which are discernible all around the frame of the central window of the apsis (fig.35).

7. The zigzags of the double grooved threads are used in a less complicated grid. The decorative pattern shows a clearer intertwining of the threads, which run between the intrados and the extrados of the archivolt without twisting with the bordering ones. Moving parallel into zigzag the two threads intercross but pleating in each turn, they round the angles, and that contributes to the lightness of the network. Placed over the south window of the apsis, this delicate device goes very well with the lettering at the side.

8. The repetitive zigzag combinations of the braids form the marvellous plait of the archivolt above the apsis window to the east. Two pairs of ribbons op-

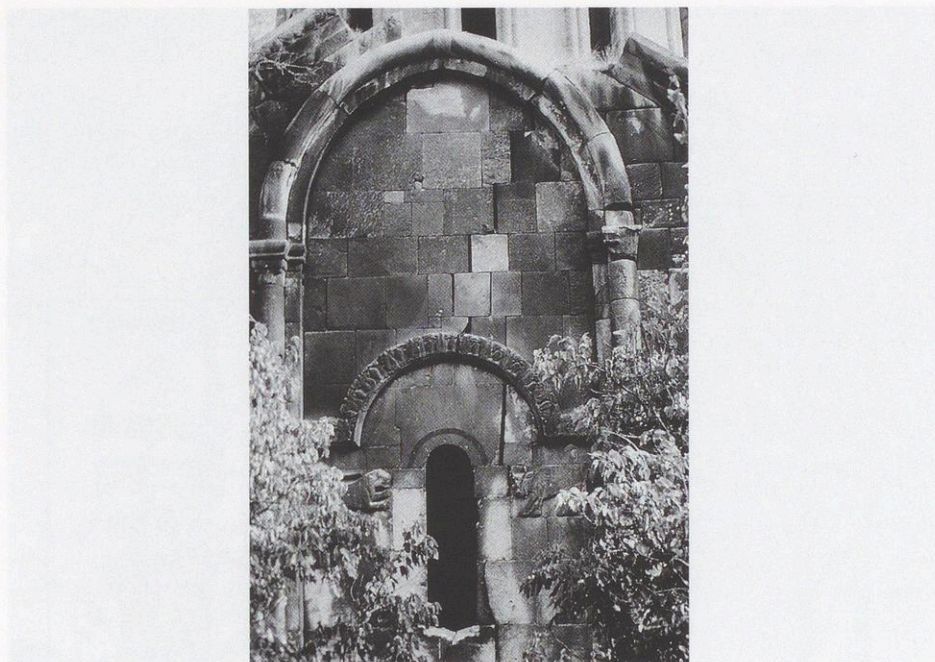
posite to each other start from the two borders of the archivolt. The ribbons of the outer one, moving parallel, interlace at the centre with the ribbons of the second pair. As it is a matter of the upper ribbons, they have a curved outline and each one in its return intercrosses the adjacent one and arch-shaped elements appear there, which, going out of one another, follow the curve of the extrados. The lower ribbons, however, arrange their angular pleating along the inner border, and small roundels fill their interspaces. A twisted cable frames the archivolt from below. The device is distinguished from all the rest of the geometric ones with its style characterized by flat surfaces regardless of their shape. The fretwork stands out with its fine workmanship (fig. 35).

Vegetal ornaments

The foliated ornaments which are less numerous, also appear in Oški, as is shown on the archivolts above the central windows on the façades of the transept. On the south archivolt, the plant pattern is very complicated: two half-palmettes, face-to-face, form a budlike element oriented toward the intrados. In mid-way from the borders their stalks intertwine with those of a second pair of half-palmettes, set back to back with the summits oriented toward the extrados. The stalks of the second pair return upward converging in elegant curves and join a five-lobed palmette at the extrados. Finally a delightful elliptic motif is delineated by these stalks and the budlike element of the first pair of half-palmettes. In the interspaces of these elliptic motifs, *feuille-de-lys* raise up at the inner border and small offshoots at the outer border of the archivolt (fig. 14, 34).

Besides this the adjacent stalks of the neighbouring ellipsis are fastened with a lace-like stem, which appears at the level of the intertwining of the stalks of the two pairs of half-palmettes. In its regular movement, the stem ties the stalks all along the pattern and its angle knots, developing in the middle of the design, unify the plant motifs.

The extensions of the archivolt are emphasized with zoomorphic motifs, which are perfectly integrated with the foliated ornamentation. On the left side the carving was said to be a lion bust, but it is away from the real image of the animal. Its mane is drawn with the intention to match the foliage surrounding the figure while its natural posture is neglected. The decorative approach was more important for the representation than the realistic features of the lion. The animal bust carved on the right extension is a quadruped herbivore, very likely an antelope, as it often recurs to be the antithesis of the lion. An antelope is persecuted, for example, by a lion in the animal frieze at the base of the drum. The association here of both animals is apparently more likely than the proposed partnership of the lion and the ass as astrological emblems of the planets Leo and



36. North conch, central window

its malevolent antithesis Zual.⁹ It is difficult to accept that the carved lion had the symbolic meaning of the good and its counterpart, of the evil. The lion, which devours the antelope in the frieze contradicts this interpretation. It is more probable that the lion incarnates the brute power and the antelope, the innocence. On the other hand, the symbolic meaning was not always related to the representation of the animals.

The central window of the north conch has no ornamental frame but the lintel above it is richly decorated with lyre-shaped motifs (fig. 36). The lyres are formed with double threads and arranged radially. A big bud surges up in the flare of the lyres, going beyond their convolutions, while two stems with minute helices at the end sprout out on either side of it. These stems emerging out of the lyres at the upper border interweave with the neighbouring ones, and give rise to a pendant cluster of grapes in the interspaces. At the same time, a double string passes alongside the lower border and plaits knots with the bottom of each lyre. Finally the pattern brings to mind an interlaced design. In other respects, the main motif can be compared with the tulip, which is one of the favourite ornaments of Islamic art.

9 Djobadze, *Early Medieval Monasteries in Tao*, 120.



37. West façade, bilobed window, detail

Figural decorations

The jambs of the same north window are flanked with the reliefs of a lion and a bull (fig. 36). The animals carried out in a flat moulding show a graphic design, especially the stylised mane of the lion, done in profile, which is expressive with its big teeth and its snarling mouth. However the volume is researched by the carving in depth of the surface round the animals. The bull is depicted with the head turned towards the viewer and its countenance with stretched horns reveals a naturalistic effect. Animal representations had a great success in architectural sculpture of the tenth century. The apotropaic meaning of the lion and the bull, set up on either side of the window is not excluded.

The second storey window of the south pastophory is adorned with a figural pattern, which spreads its lintel with a hunting scene: two stags on either side of a tree are gazing its pinnate leaves. The tree is with a round crown so that its branches could not stretch outwards at the bottom. The wide curves drawn here are the horns of both stags. The right one is followed by a third animal, which seemingly is a doe, the stone being very weathered. At the left corner of the scene a hunter is kneeling and tiding his bow ready to shoot the arrow over the stag (fig. 38).

Below the window a second relief is carved, square in shape and like the upper



38. South pastophory, second-storey window, hunting scene

one, framed with a cable. It represents two lionesses devouring a stag while a third smaller lion, probably the offspring of the right one, is moving away towards the upper corner. Here as in the previous relief it is not necessary to look for a symbolic meaning of the images. The themes associated with the hunting life became familiar to Georgians, though their origin is Sassanian.

The unification of the different kinds of decorative motifs achieves its perfection on the archivolt of the bilobed window on the west façade. Striking are the intermingled heads of the fighting lioness and bull, on the left archivolt, integrated in a composition with coupled S-shaped figures set up at the springers. These figures give rise to two moving half-palmettes at its ends and together they call to mind the lovely heads of birds. Besides this, the lion cub behind the lioness brings out a naturalistic effect to the picture (fig. 16, 37).

On the right archivolt three griffins¹⁰ balance the animal motif from the left side. Two of them are standing face to face with a twig in the mouth and holding each other's frontal paws. Their spread up wings rounded at the end, are drawn with parallel delineations, but their tail with the same orientation displays a half-

10 P. Harper, "The Semurv", *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 20 (November 1961), 95-101.

palmette. The third griffin behind the left one is smaller and its stylised body, wings and tails are rendered in a graphic manner. However, the appropriate to the griffins eagle's heads and paws are replaced with weakworked herbivorous ones. Apparently the stone master was not acquainted with the exact image of the fantastic protectors. Adopted in remote times by the local tradition, the Sasanian "simurg" became a favourite creature of Georgian masters.

The S-shaped motifs at the springers are treated with parallel curves in agreement with the decorative texture of the animals. They appear equal in size in front of each other at the common inner springer of the bilobed arch, and with their upper foliated progenitors remind us of the moving heads of rabbits. The S-shaped figures, which unify both parts of the design, at the same time, underlie the symmetry of the architectural detail. The bilobed archivolt is framed with a twisted cable and in its spandrel a split palmette rises out, filling in the space under the pedestal of the Saint Simeon's column above.

The figural representations rendered in three dimensions also feature on the façades as the above-mentioned Saint Simeon in the bust on the west. A big eagle with outspread wings, which is burying its claws in a goat is represented above the lintel of the south window, under the archangels Michael and Gabriel. The eagle's body rendered almost in the round sculpture is impressive with its concise tufts of down, like plates, arranged in overlapping rows recalling the scales of fish. The down of its wings is also rendered with plates but more elongated than on the body and set in layers, followed by the primaries (fig. 14). One notes a tendency to accentuate the adornment of the façades with pediment with a three-dimensional figure, which on the east, was a lion, now entirely damaged while to the north, the reliefs of the lion and the bull substitute it.

(To be continued in Volume 87, 2003)