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The Church of Oški  
/ | Architectonics and Ornaments\*  
(part 2)

The Porch

The official south entry is remarkable for its porch, which is in line with the south gallery: with its slanting roof and compound supports, it looks like a bay of the arcade. The porch (fig. 40) is square in plan and covered with a saucer vault, built in circles of coloured stones, depicting a cross on the soffit. The calotte rests on four supports: two piers and two pilasters. The piers are square in section but with angles which have been taken off so that their inner sides are like pilasters faced with twin colonnettes. Their outer corners, in recess, comprise attached columns but larger and decorated to almost half their height. The two pilasters against the wall of the church show the same construction with attached twin colonnettes like those on the opposite sides of the piers. The so-formed four supports, capped with capitals, give rise to slightly pointed stilted arches in recess, which assure the elevation of the saucer. The attached colonnettes reinforce the pillars, placed in accordance with the springs of the arches, which charge them through the capitals.<sup>11</sup>

The twin colonnettes as well as the corner columns have bulbous bases situated over a block with large lobes running all along the inner sides with the

\* Continuation from Vol. 86, 2002, p. 103-144.

11 The square piers with attached nook columns are largely spread in Islamic architecture as can be seen in the mosque Ibn Tulun in Cairo from the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century; *Encyclopaedia of World Architecture*, Fribourg 1997, 337-2. The columns flanking the entries of the churches are known from the early Christian epoch as those from the Dorade, in Toulouse, now in the Metropolitan Museum, from the fifth century. They exhibit plant ornaments, natural in shape and picturesquely distributed in the way quite different from those on the right shaft of the porch, denaturalised, densely arranged and subjected to geometry, though they reveal some common foliated basic elements. The engaged columns with prevailed over geometric design stand on either side of the entry of the restored church of Baouit, in the Louvre from the sixth century. The flat style and the ornamental composition of the Oški nooks reminds, nevertheless, some Omayyad works as the decorated column from the Wasit mosque (704/705) in the Iraqi Museum, Baghdad. H. Franz, *Palast, Moschee und Wüstenschloss. Das Werden der islamischen Kunst 7.-9. Jahrhundert*, Graz 1984, 77, pl. XLVIII-2.





39. South conch, archangels, detail

angles taken off, while a projecting square plaque with a round profile underneath, separates them from the common square base. The same bulbs crown the twin colonnettes and the corner columns of the piers, and they are separated from the shaft as those on the base, with a flat moulding and, a cavetto or scotia respectively. The twin colonnettes of the pilasters are capped, nevertheless, with a row of lobes, which also pass sideways. They are all surmounted by a projecting plaque with a round profile, crowned by the abacus.

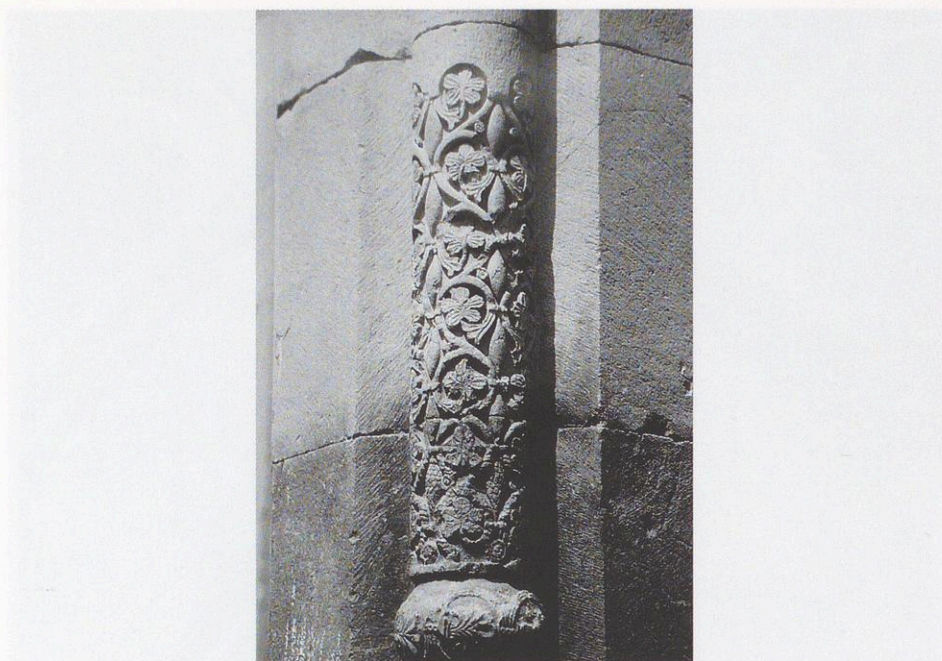
The shafts of the attached columns at the corners are decorated with foliated patterns, each one different but finishing on the same level. The design of the east shaft is very complicated. The plant motifs develop in height. At the bottom the main motif consists of two symmetrical stems which turn to the left and the right with a vine leaf inside and they are followed by a second pair of stems which also give rise sideways to two high stalks with wing palmettes at the top. In the middle, in their interspace the second pair of stems also gives rise to two symmetrical foliated elements on bending stalks. An axial vine leaf above, hangs on the base of a wing palmette, which is elevated much higher than the lateral ones. In the opening of this palmette a square, tilted at forty-five degrees and covered with a diaper motif, is carved. It serves as a link to the foliated motif above, which is the same as the preceding one. The carved surface of the shaft is limited from above with widened arches, which correspond to the upper contour of the





40. Porch, general view





41. Porch, attached column, detail

ornaments underneath, and together they form the space enlivened with a quatrefoil, the top end of the carved decoration.

The ornamentation of the attached western column exhibits scrolls, arranged one over the other, which turn in the opposite direction, giving rise to a five-petal leaf within. The scrolls touch the neighbouring ones to the left and right, while a short horizontal stem fastens them together. Between them, clusters of grapes, strongly geometrised and ranged one above the other, have their point of contact on the same stem. Accentuating the verticality of the scroll grid, the clusters can be conceived as the axial constituents of a new and larger plant motif (fig. 41).

There is a perfect arrangement of the plant elements with the support of geometry. Moreover, the decorated surface of the shaft is treated in a special manner: the ornaments of the bottom are carved with the finest details, which gradually diminish as the design advances upward. Thus the minutiae disappear as, for example, the articulated sections of the scrolls or the clusters that, loosing the grapes, develop into bolsters with ends like stalks. The shapes become concise and the design somewhat simplified, although the regularity of its intertwining constituents is maintained. The grid of the scrolls is completed at the top with stilted arches set at a short distance from each other so that the uppermost series



of the vine leaves are fitted into their inner spaces. Apparently, the definite limit of the carved decoration is being searched for.

As the columns are ornamented to a certain level, their carving was considered by Takaišvili as an unfinished work, and the authors thereafter, repeated what had impressed him at first sight. However, I admit this level, equal for both ornamentations of the shafts, was very likely designed beforehand for aesthetic reasons. The stone master did not want to break down the homogeneous flat surface of the compound pier, which, as a whole, looked better against the carved decoration of the capital entirely posed above. It is difficult to accept the impossibility of achieving the ornamentation of the columns which were exposed to the sight of all those who entered through the porch in the church. As it is already known, the building work took over ten years and later renovations of the church were undertaken, so that it would have been very easy in the meanwhile, to carry on the carving of the shaft to the top if it had been necessary.

The base of the column, more precisely its torus, similar to a large bulb, is also decorated with repetitive foliated patterns. Each one consists of a bunch of leaves like a seven-lobed palmette, pointed horizontally with the summit on the circumference of the torus. The bunch is set in something like a vase and all this is encircled with double ribbed stems that are fastened to the neighbouring ones with a horizontal link, formed by three miniature roundels, the same as those for the scrolls on the shaft.

The capital, especially its surface under the abacus, is enhanced on the outer sides with hanging clusters of grapes, joined to one another with arched stems, while the inner sides display foliage as removed palmettes, inserted to each other. The latter recall the ornamentation of Syrian capitals from the sixth-seventh century. Some decorative elements of the shaft recur in the patterns of the base and the capital, as for example, the hanging clusters of the framing scrolls and their horizontal joins.

The capital of the east attached columns, which is with the same structure as the foregoing one, shows a row of seven-lobed palmettes running all along its sides. The base, nevertheless is damaged (fig. 42).

The plant decoration of both columns especially of the shafts is characterized by the density of the design. The nature of the forms is recognisable, although these are directed to the abstract inventions of linear geometry.

### Decoration of the Gallery

The open gallery is remarkable with its decoration which develops in the supports especially the octagonal pier and the ceiling.

The easternmost support of the gallery (fig. 59) is a column of stout pro-





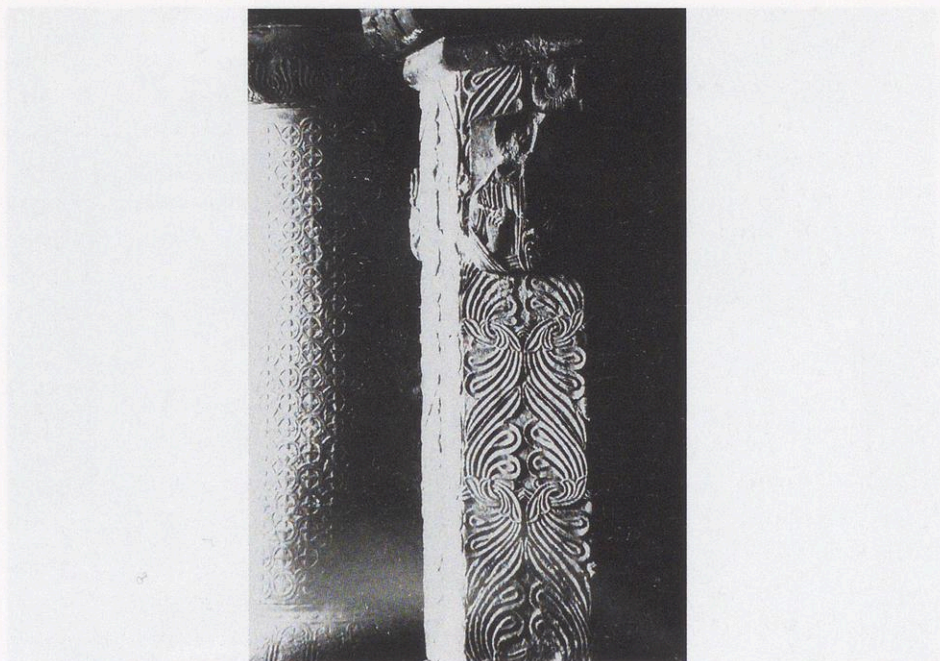
42. Porch, capitals, detail

portions and like the others. 2,70 m in height, its capital consists of an echinus like element surmounted by a torus and capped with an impost, on which rest the springers of the arches, perpendicular to each other. The base is composed of a great torus posed over a plinth. The shaft of the column is fluted and the cannelures, slightly modified, pass over the echinus of the capital and the torus of the base.

The second support is a clustered pier with a section of quatrefoil. It consists of four cylindrical shafts attached to each other and engraved with chevrons. The non-decorated capital is in the shape of an echinus separated by a trochilus from the shaft. More interesting is the impost above, with its imitations of roof-trees. It is tripartite in height: the middle part is made up of tree trunks, while the upper and the lower ones are flat bulks. The impost is in section cruciform with projecting corners. Its lower part has chamfers. The impost was suitable for supporting the springers of the arches, which separated the shallow domes as well as the barrel vaults over the bays of the portico.

The third support (fig. 43) has a cylindrical shaft, crowned with a capital similar also to an echinus, while its base features a torus and a round plinth underneath. The column is entirely ornamented and this dwarfs the impression that its proportions are heavy. The shaft is covered with a grid of roundels formed with double-grooved wires which, in their coiling and interweaving, give rise also to fine trefoils, two of which spring out of every other roundel, one horizontally and the other vertically. In this arrangement the trefoils suggest a secondary grid, emphasizing the regularity of the design. The roundels are filled with quatrefoils.





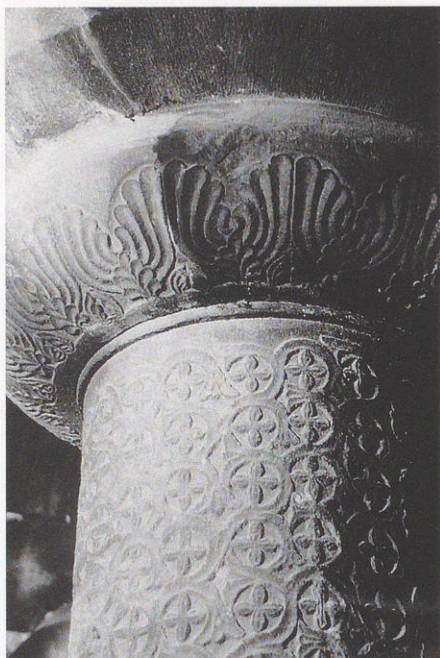
43. South gallery, supports

The capital is decorated with repetitive motifs of half-palmettes with four lobes placed back to back, and between them a small nine-lobed palmette which looks like a bud springing up out of their base. At the same time, each one of the half-palmettes, along with its neighbouring one, forms a split palmette. At the top of this a bud is outlined by a pair of tiny palmettes, set tip to tip (fig. 44).

The base, more precisely the torus, is enhanced with complicated plant motifs which increase in height within arch-headed rectangular fields, separated from each other by coupled colonnettes. One of the ornamentations represents two diagonal stems, which rise up from the corners in order to unify into an axial one. This gives rise to two half-palmettes oriented sideways, and over them spread the lobes of a wing palmette. The plant is crowned at the top with a bud, also traced by tiny half-palmettes. In another decoration, the middle palmette is replaced by two buds on fine stalks under two great leaves but the bud at the top is almost the same. These foliated motifs are never quite the same and do not follow any definite order. The arcade is bounded above by a row of half-rosettes open downwards, while it is limited from below by the short bare surface of the torus. The downward projecting half-torus of the base is also without embellishment.

The spectacular decoration of the westernmost octagonal pier makes it stand out from all the rest (fig. 43, 45). Actually it is square in section with angles cut off diagonally so that the sides at the corners are slightly smaller than the frontal





44. South gallery, column, detail



45. Octagonal pier

ones. Its capital represents an octagonal echinus with sixteen bosses under the upper edge. It is capped with a plinth and surmounted with the impost, like the foregoing supports of the gallery. The base is composed of a plinth, followed by a large scotia which separates it from the torus surmounted by the row of the lobes pointed at their upper ends.

The decoration of the pier<sup>12</sup> is striking because of the way it is adapted to the architectural detail. It consists of foliated and figural patterns: the former prevail on the shaft, the latter, on the capital. Both are distributed with the respective regularity which, however, may be omitted when the components of Christian dogma or historical importance had to be introduced, but without destroying the aesthetic unity of the design.

Angelic choirs are depicted on all the sides of the capital (fig. 46): on the west one, two flying angels (fig. 47) who are flanked on the north-west by the standing archangels, Michael and Gabriel (fig. 48), and on the south-west, Raphael (fig. 47), coupled very likely with Uriel. The Latter is depicted flying, apparently because the sought-after symmetry in the wings, penetrating on both sides into

12 D. Winfield, "Some Early Medieval Figure Sculpture from North-East Turkey", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 31 (1968), 45-57, 67-68, pl. 11-27, with drawings of the decorated octagonal pier by June Wainwright.





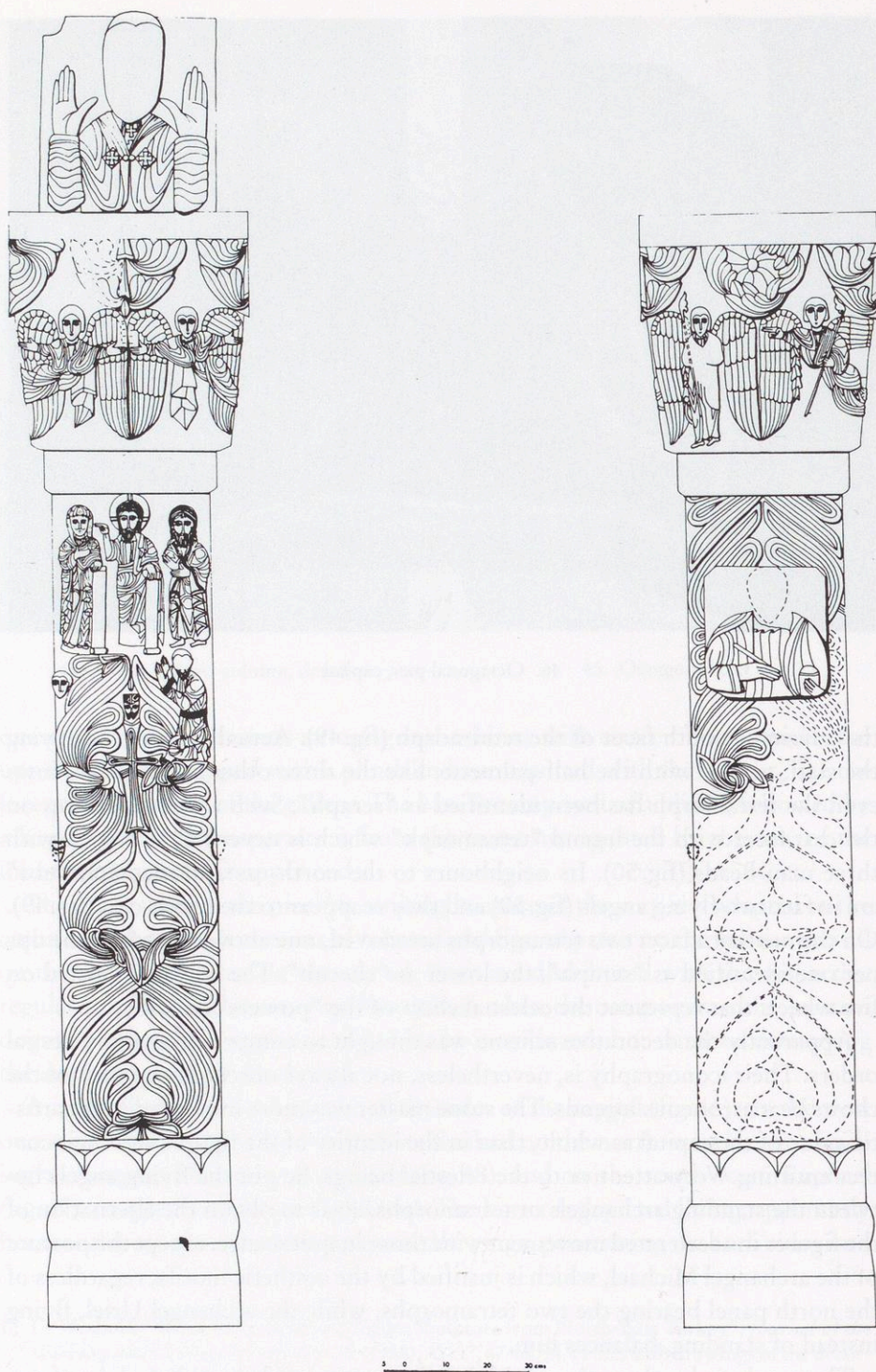
46. Octagonal pier, capital

the adjoining south facet of the tetramorph (fig. 49). Actually Uriel is carrying the staff, topped with the half-palmette, like the three other archangels. However, the tetramorph has been identified as “seraph”. Such a figure features on the east facet with the legend “tetramorph” which is nevertheless carved with three man-heads (fig. 50). Its neighbours to the north-east, entitled “cherubs” are in fact two flying angels (fig. 50) and they reappear to the south-east (fig. 49). On the northern facet two tetramorphs are carved, one above the other: the upper one identified as “seraph”, the lower as “cherub”. The latter is elevated on fire wheels that represent the celestial choir of the “powers” (fig. 48).

Apparently the decorative scheme was thought to comprise the nine celestial orders. Their iconography is, nevertheless, not always observed and four of the choirs bear erroneous legends. The stone master was more interested in the artistic value of the capital as whole, than in the identity of the figures and their correct entitling. Very attentive to the celestial beings, he put the flying angels between the standing archangels or tetramorphs, so as to obtain the alternation of the figures in accelerated movement with those in quiescence, except the posture of the archangel Michael, which is justified by the aesthetic motifs, regardless of the north panel bearing the two tetramorphs, while the archangel Uriel, flying instead of standing, balances him.

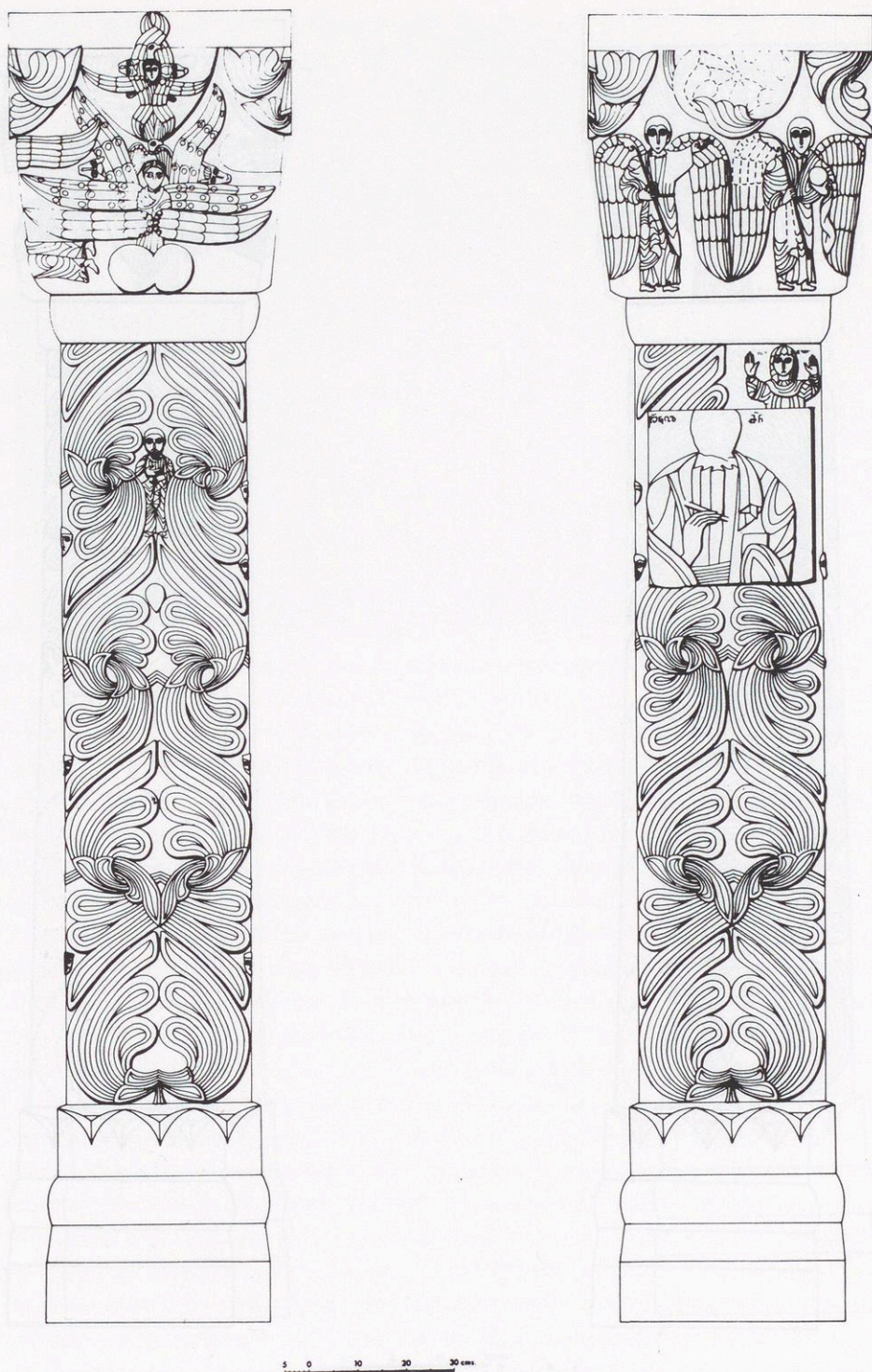
The angels and archangels unfold their inner wings side by side and thus form





47. Octagonal pier, west and southwest facet design after Winfield





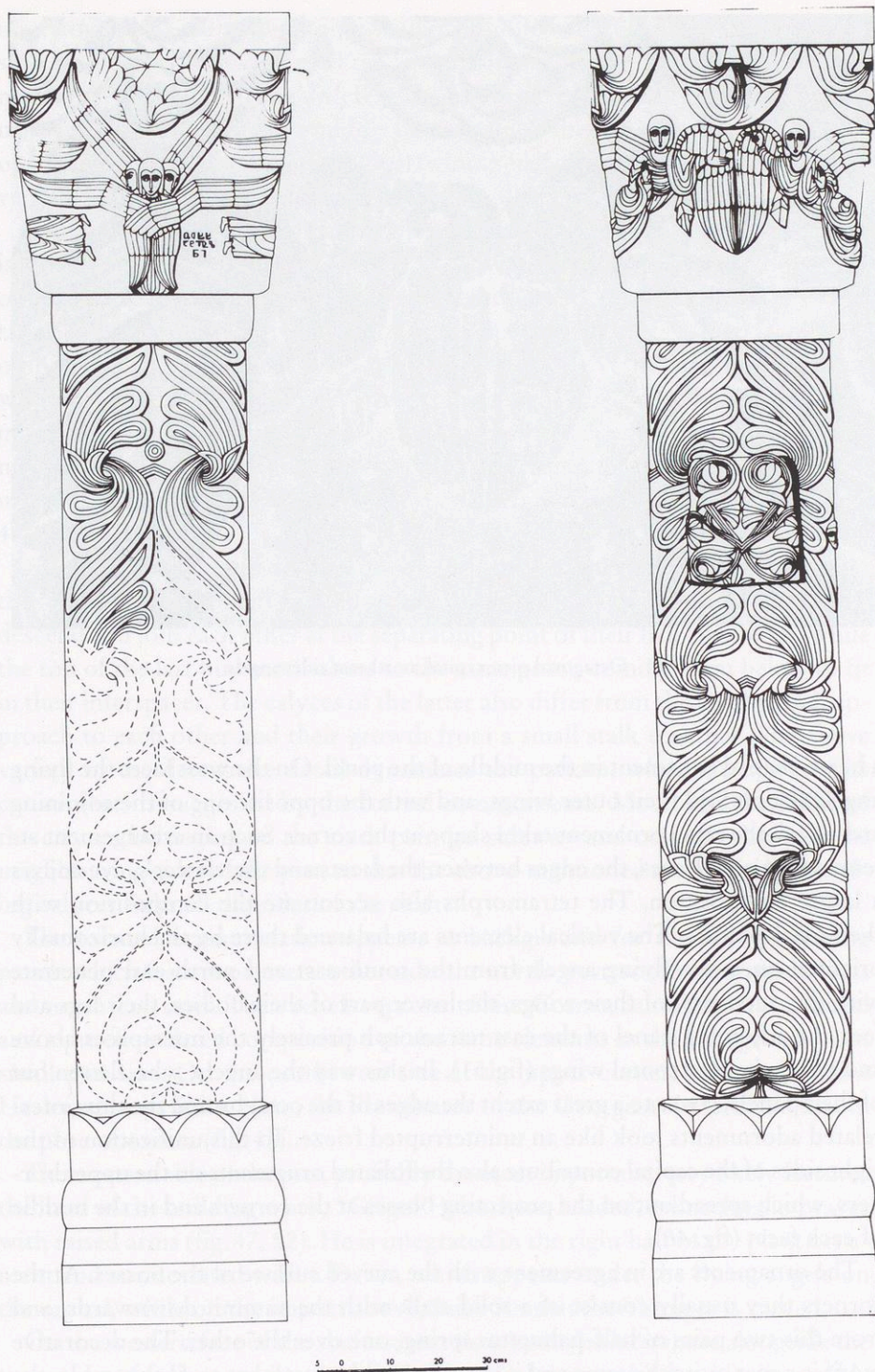
48. Octagonal pier, north and northwest facet, after Winfield





49. Octagonal pier, south and southeast facet, design after Winfield





50. Octagonal pier, east and northeast facet, design after Winfield





51. Octagonal pier, capital, northeast side, angels

a heart-shaped ornament in the middle of the panel. On the west facet the flying angels also unfold their outer wings, and with the opposite one of the adjoining archangel, the same ornament takes shape at the corner. Such an arrangement attenuates, if not effaces, the edges between the facets and the viewer's eye enjoys a larger composition. The tetramorphs also accentuate the composition with their axial posture. The vertical elements are balanced there by the horizontally oriented ones: the flying angels from the south-east and north-east penetrate with the outer part of their wings, the lower part of their bodies, their legs and feet, the adjoining panel of the east tetramorph precisely the interspaces above and below its horizontal wings (fig. 51). In this way the angels, who flatten out of their panels, cover to a great extent the edges of the octagon and the thus inter-related adornments look like an uninterrupted frieze. To this unification of the eight sides of the capital contribute also the foliated ornaments on the upper borders, which spread out on the projecting bosses at the corners and in the middle of each facet (fig. 46).

The ornaments are in agreement with the curved surface of the bosses. At the corners they usually consist of a solid stalk with the summit downwards, and from this two pairs of half-palmettes spring, one over the other. The decorative motif is never quite the same and it shows variable treatment as, for example, the



interwoven half-palmettes from the upper and lower pair on either side of the stalk or the intertwined ones of the lower pair, visible on the middle boss of the north-east facet. No strong differentiation is made between the central and corner patterns. At any rate five middle bosses exhibit the same decorative motif: an open upward wreath, formed of intertwining half-palmettes, from which converge six lines towards a central roundel (fig. 47, 49).

As has been said, the shaft of the pier is decorated all over (fig. 43). Each side is calculated to comprise seven pairs of half-palmettes arranged one over the other, but placed in the opposite direction to each other, according to the orientation inward or outward of their lobes. Set up with the lobes face to face, those of the first pair under the capital form a budlike motif. At the base they interlock with the lower pair of half-palmettes which appear back to back with the summits downward stretched, so that in their interspaces is fitted the bud motif formed by the pair underneath. In this alternation from up to down of the foliated motifs every other one penetrates the above-standing one with its summit (figs. 47, 48, 49, 50).

All the half-palmettes develop out of calyces which sometimes diversify as do those of the sixth stretch pair. After interlocking with the preceding ones, they descend and join each other at the separating point of their half-palmettes, while the top of the last bud motif abuts to the same point, coming from below to fit in their interspaces. The calyces of the latter also differ from the rest by their approach to each other and their growth from a small stalk together. The above variety of the decorative detail dynamizes the pattern, while the unity of its constituents is suggested by the formal common base. Moreover, the stalks of the calyces belonging to the sixth pair, go sideways and connect those of the neighbouring sides of the pier, so that the above-mentioned motif with protruding calyces links all the sides of the shaft.

The foliated ornamentation appears as background for the four projecting panels which feature on every other side: the north-west, south-west, north-east and south-east ones. Their reliefs represent Saint Cosma, Saint Damian, an angel and a purely foliated composition of the same elements as the background, but smaller in size. On the north-west side at the upper corner, behind the Saint Healer, appears Saint Nino, the illuminator of the Georgians in Christianity, in the pose of oranta (fig. 43).

The western side of the pier, probably the most important, very likely features the head of the building work, "Grigol" who, bare-headed, is kneeling in prayer with raised arms (fig. 47, 52). He is integrated in the right half of the plant ornament and surmounted with a Deisis, which appears under the flying angels on the capital, while on the impost above, Saint Simeon the Younger is carved.

On the western face of the shaft a cross rises up in the interspace alongside the two ranks of foliage, while a human being with a cap on his head is discernible





52. Octagonal pier, »Grigol«, detail

behind (fig. 52). In the same place, on the north side of the pier, stands a man dressed in a caftan and with the traditional Georgian cap, who is carrying in his two hands an unidentifiable object (fig. 53).

Numerous masks are inserted in the interspaces of the plant motifs on all the sides of the shaft (figs. 47, 49) and often visible at the edges. Now to a great extent demolished, they represent man-heads with caps typical of Caucasia. The carved heads do not astonish after having been updated by the architectural fashion at that time. They appear, for example, in a string course high up on the façade of the church in Aghtamar (913)<sup>13</sup>. The male and female busts projecting out of acanthi are well known from the stucco rosette in the palace Khirbat al-Mafjar.<sup>14</sup> Human heads feature occasionally on the capitals, as they do on the one in the Museum of Jerusalem or on another one in Constantinople from the early Christian epoch. The introduction of human shapes as pure decorative motifs into foliated patterns was in use in remote times. An earlier example is the series of human torso holding musical instruments that are inserted in the second row of acanthi on a cornice from Airtam in Turkestan<sup>15</sup> from the first cen-

13 T. Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey: an Archaeological and Architectural Survey*, 1, London 1987, 193-197, pl. 21-22.

14 R. Hamilton, *An Arabian Mansion in Jordan Valley*, Oxford 1959, pl. LIII-LIV.

15 R. Ghirshman, *Iran, Parths und Sassanides*, Paris 1960, fig. 347.





53. Octagonal pier, north facet, human figure

tury B.C. It is, after all, impossible to agree that the masks of Oški have had symbolic meaning, or to think they exhibited the apotheosis of Georgian rulers<sup>16</sup>. The opinion that these disembodied heads could have been the masons of the church is also difficult to accept. The purely decorative sense of the masks on the octagonal pier is evident.

The style of these carvings is distinctive. The vegetal ornament consists of elements issuing out of the nature, but stylised and compounded in new decorative motifs, which are in agreement with the architectural detail they enhance. So the half-palmettes are treated in different ways as constituents of the patterns, on the bosses of the capital and look different from those on the sides of the shaft. The lobes of the latter are delicately carved with a groove contour, which is retraced, while the veining itself is neglected and only the main rib, depicted, but it takes the shape of a bud at its end. The plant ornaments interlock or inter-twist according to the orientation of the design, subject to geometric principles. The half-palmettes, treated in linear style, are with dynamic forms, their lobes and calyces in movement, thanks to the skilful ornamental work. The linear style is applied in the same way to the foliated and figural motifs in the composition and thus it contributes to their unification.

16 Djobadze, *Early Medieval Monasteries in Tao*, 108.



Impressive too is the integration of the human being into the foliage as, for example, the person behind the cross, or Grigol who is emerging out of the calyce of the half-palmette in which he is integrated. Addressing his gratitude for the divine help in the grandiose work, Grigol waited for his prayers to ascend to the holy persons represented, in the hope of obtaining their mercy for his own salvation. Portraying himself under the Deisis he wanted, at the same time, to show his compatriots the righteously high level he had achieved in the social scale as the creator of a house of God.

As it concerns the holy persons of the Deisis (fig. 54) and Saint Nino, their small size equal in height to the half-palmettes, and their place on the border is the result of the same sought-after ornamental unity on the shaft. The relief is flat except the human beings, head-and-shoulder length, carved in high relief on the projecting panels.

The capital is in compliance with a decorative scheme that establishes the adornment of the facets with an eye to their unity. The figural motifs are to some extent related to those of the neighbouring compositions. As far as it is a matter of the ornamental link between them, the angelic figures sometimes modify their poses in agreement with the posture of the adjacent ones. The flying angels on the west facet, for example, are with the upper part of their bodies raised and turned towards the viewer more than are the others, and their foreshortening is so considerable that the legs and thighs are hardly visible. The lack of the lower part of the drapery is balanced by the scalloped ends of their outer wings, which are folded in order to go with the opposite ones of the archangels in the adjoining facets (fig. 55). The northeast and southeast flying angels, who penetrate the side with the tetramorphs, show all their draperies, and the edges of the capital, also overlapped by the wings determine the pictorial arrangement of the feathers in their expressive layers (fig. 46).

The draperies fall in elegant folds that form patterns suggesting the parts of the body they cover. The folds are treated in a graphic manner and their relief is flat. However, the effect of three-dimensional human being is obtained with the fine curves, which suggest shapes but always with special attention to the decorative value of the device. The stone master was not interested so much in the clothing itself as in the patterns traced by the elegant folds that magnify the draperies. The folds tend to close curves which turn ever more sweepingly so as to suggest the sloping surface of the relief, the highest point of which is accentuated with a roundish element, as it on the shoulders, knees, hips, thighs and calves (figs. 52, 53). Very characteristic are the two almost symmetrical patterns formed with convoluted curves, depicting the oval of the draperies suspended from the shoulder to the waist on the western flying angels. In similar shapes fall the hymations of those on the south-east and north-east facets, but the arrangement of the folds within the patterns always shows a slight difference, even more be-





54. Octagonal pier, »deisis«



55. Octagonal pier, capital, west side, angels





56. Octagonal pier, capital, archangels

tween the left and the right side of the body. The curvilinear folds surrounding the highest point of the pattern are followed by V-shaped ones. These feature under the convolutions of the hips and go on to the thighs. The V-shaped folds mould the drapery, emphasizing the calves under the roundel, but they are largely embraced by the curvilinear ones at the lowest part of the hymation.

Between the patterns with similar curvy development of the folds appear intermediary ones, like those of the triangular folds that fall in series on the cloak under the right arm of the archangels and left-flying angels. In other cases of connection between the patterns, the folds describe curves, which pass fluently from one direction to another, tracing widely open sinuosities, such as those on the draperies which are slung over the shoulder and fall loose over the arms (fig. 51, 55). The gesture of the bent arm with one hand, palm outward, and of the other outstretched with the hand in a pointing gesture of the angels, as well as those of the archangels carrying the tapering staffs, define the arrangement of the folds in roundly formed patterns. To their agitated motion and seemingly high relief is juxtaposed the motionlessness of the slightly waved or wrinkled folds on the chest of the figures on the south-west or south-east facet respectively. The vertical accent is preferred for the opening between the two front parts of the hymation, one of which displays an elegant border falling down in a large cascade (fig. 56), as it is in the standing archangels. In the research into the common



outline of the bundled-up folds, occurs a fanlike pattern which is beside a similar one as can be seen on the cloak of the western angels and Uriel whose chiton, however, is finished with a fluted hem. Contrary to the fine graphism in the carving of the garments is the end of the cloak hanging from the shoulder in a large cascade but moulded without any fine curves as though it were showing a band of brocaded texture.

The picturesque patterns, each one well delineated by the folds with a definite orientation are subjected to geometric principles appropriated to the linear style. Thanks to the linearism applied with extreme dexterity, different parts of the body acquire their relief, though the forms are somewhat theoretical in representation.

The ensemble of the patterns on the draperies of the angelic creatures calls to mind the folded garments on the virtues in fresco technique on the sealing of the Palatine chapel<sup>17</sup>. Their treatment led in graphic style reveals the same conception for the representation of the draped figure. Besides this, they show Islamic elements with Sassanian origin, which the painters develop on the Christian base after having been inspired by the Fattimid art in Egypt. The introduction of these elements supposes a disposition for their adoption which existed in Sicily, the country has been since long ago in the hands of the conquerors, holders of Islamic culture.

The wings of all the celestial creatures are skilfully designed with the same structure. In contrast to the representations with elongated feathers known in Byzantium, they are very much stylised and display articulated layers, which develop perpendicularly to their length. Each one consists of feathers arranged in bands which are separated by scalloped seams. Proportioned in harmony with the wings, the layers are slightly different in height so that the schematising regularity of the design is avoided. Thus the opposite ones of the two wings in the heart-shaped motif do not meet each other on the same level and the removal of their scalloped seams gives life to the large surface of the feather pattern. The upper edge of these wings is crowned with a band of tooth-like ornaments, which harmonize with the scalloped links between the layers. The toothed motif is in line with the stylised tufts of the smooth feathers of the upper part of the wings. The top border, so created, also unifies the wings raised opposite each other in the adjoining edges of the facets.

The tetramorphs are in line with the established iconography of the six-wing creatures. Represented in solemn poses they help to give monumentality to the composition, they dominate on the south (fig. 49), east (fig. 58) and north (fig. 57) facets of the capital. However, they are distinguished from each other by

17 E. Grube, "La pittura islamica normanna del XII secolo", *La pittura in Italia. L'Altomedioevo*, Milan 1994, 416, 418.



some individual characteristics, and that is in accordance with the basic principle of the decoration, the prevention as far as possible of uniformity of the facets. The southern and the eastern ones, for example, differ in the position of their pair of horizontal wings which, in the former, intercross in front of the body while in the latter, they spread only sideways as in the northern ones. In both images the lower wings fall downwards all over the figure and in the opening between their scalloped ends, the chiton emerges with its vertical folds. Sensitive is the difference in their faces: the eastern tetramorph is depicted with three man-heads, instead of the four, symbols of the evangelists, as it is in all the rest.

The four symbols appear as an unifying centre for the outstretched wings, especially the eagle in its position over the man head, and its wings folded in the background of the upper ones of the southern tetramorph. The same impression of a neat figure is given by the eastern tetramorph whose three heads form a compact element on the frame of the upper wings, and thus it becomes the centre from which the three pairs of wings radiate.

With their lower wings vertically hanging, the eastern and southern tetramorphs call to mind armoured figures as they really are in the quality of divine guards. Their upper wings stretched high over the heads as though they were supporting the floral boss above, reinforce the impression of the powerful beings.

On the north facet, as has already been said, the two tetramorphs are placed at different levels, so that the upper one is depicted on the projecting boss and it increases in height. Its vertical shaping is in opposition to the horizontal deployment of the lower tetramorph. The latter is elevated on the fire wheels, an image of the celestial choir of the powers, and therefore its lower pair of wings spread sideways and adopt the waving tracery of the horizontal ones over them. On the feathers of the middle and upper wings small rounds are spread which show the ever watchful eyes of the divine heaven. They match the toothed ornaments surrounding the top edge of the lower wings (fig. 57).

The upper tetramorph is distinguished from all the rest by the position of its upper and lower wings, which are involved in elegant curves. More precisely, the lower ones do not fall vertically from the shoulders, but diagonally oriented, they approach each other and then swell out downwards. This narrowing of the form they trace by joining up together, recalls the waist of a human figure. Besides this, in the opening outlined by their scalloped ends appear the folds of the chiton, which emerges also round the neck. The horizontal wings, going beyond the decline feathers of the lower wings, on the bust of the tetramorph, look like large open arms, while the small hands below them are a simple iconographic detail. The swelling of the lower wings is balanced by a smaller one made by the intercrossing of the upper wings, which form something like a figure eight, so as to





57. Octagonal pier, capital, north side, tetramorphs



58. Octagonal pier, capital, east tetramorph



integrate the eagle and shelter the lion's and bull's heads. Touching down the border of the boss, the upper tetramorph is in contact with the lower eagle whose slightly declined feathers of the wings look as though they were the legs of the former. All this suggests the wish of the sculptor to revive its representation with details reminding one of the human being, and that is also confirmed by the clothing of the lower tetramorph.

The heads of the angelic creatures are of the same type with a slight difference in the headdress and eyebrows. They are of round shaped and have similar tightly fitting hair-styles. However, the hair of the angels and archangels is unarticulated, while that of the tetramorphs is symmetrically done in parallel shallow lines on either side of the middle parting. The two arcuated headlines over the forehead match the high curves of the eyebrows that turn in accordance with the striking eyes, but in some cases they are horizontal. The features are concise and moulded in shallow relief. The main line of the elongated nose goes down from one of the eyebrows. The characteristic oval gives finish to the face, which is not deprived of expression in spite of the limited means of the carving.

The holy persons of the Deisis (fig. 54) at the top of the shaft differ, to a certain degree, from the winged creatures on the capital. The nuances are perceptible but the style is almost the same. Christ, Saint John and the Virgin are in the poses and gestures established by iconography but their clothing shows some personal conceptions of the carving of a standing figure in Georgia at that time. With heads forward-looking, Saint John and the Virgin are slightly turned towards Christ with whom they intercede for the salvation of humanity. The proportions of the holy persons are somewhat shortened, the heads large, especially those of Saint John and Christ with their hair-styles and long beards. The folding of the garments recalls those of the standing archangels but the patterns on the draperies are modified according to the gestures. There is a tendency towards a rhythmic approach to the group through the position of the attributes and clothing of the figures. Thus the turned-back frontal border of Saint John's cloak, which overlaps his wrist and falls down, matches the vertically unrolled scrolls in the left hands of the Virgin and Christ. A common feature in the moulding of the garments is their ends hanging in a series of triangular folds. Round the necks the clothing exhibits angular pleating at the top of the folds, which descend vertically in front of the body. Underneath the chest, however, the design takes a curvilinear orientation, and two roundels appear downwards, one after the other with their circular convolutions, followed by V-shaped pleats, as it is on Saint John's tunic, between the bejewelled edges of his cloak, or under the belt like folding on the chiton of Christ. Characteristic of the style are also the fanlike patterns on the skirts, which are bordered with a straight-cut hem with an edge contour open irregularly.

Often the roundels, showing the parts in relief of the draped figure, are de-



picted not in the place they ought to be, but slightly shifted as, for example, those brought from the shoulders to the arms of Saint John, or even displaced from the hips and thighs forward to the right side of Christ. In this way the relief is suggested through the decorative motif established for that purpose but, in fact, the highest part of the body is theoretically represented and its real place has to be taken for granted.

At the adjacent side Saint Nino, figured in bust length, is dressed like the Virgin. Both wear the traditional hood which falls over the head in gouged out folds whose angular pleating round the face matches that of the neckline. Similar to the female Saints, Christ and Saint John have a common facial type but with some nuances, more precisely in the carving of the eyes and the hair. Though the features are rather crude the faces of the holy persons are not deprived of life. The drapery is lead in the linear style. The folds are with very little depth but the background on the side of the figure is made deeper so that the relief looks higher. The moulding is rather more pronounced on the heads. The same effect is achieved on the capital, where the foliated patterns on the projecting bosses look as though they were in high relief, again the angelic creatures engraved with a shallow depth. However, the flat surface of the facet is deeper-cut alongside the figures as it can be observed in the depiction of the two tetramorphs. This technique on the capital may be referred to the so-called carving in two levels.

Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian represented in bust on the north and the south panel respectively, are carved in high relief (figs. 43, 47, 48). The Saint Healers reproduce a common iconographic type: dressed in the traditional tunic and mantel, they are carrying the probes in the right hands and the pots of medicine in the left hands. Designed on a greater scale in comparison with the above-discussed living beings, they make it easier to understand the minutiae of the style. Characteristic is the treatment of the elbow shape entirely enveloped in the clothing. The cloak, which hangs on the right shoulder, falls behind the arm and retained by the elbow, turns forward to the hand and frames the right side of the figure, so that the roundel with elliptic convolutions on the sleeve of the tunic matches that of the left shoulder of the cloak.

Though Saints Cosmas and Damian come from a common model, there are enough distinctive elements to reveal the wish of the stone-master to diversify their portraits. Thus the falling of the draperies shows variety in the arrangement of the folds. The cloak overlapping the left shoulder of Saint Cosmas hangs loosely and its folds form a nest for the box of medicine carried in the draped hand.

In the second figure, the cloak is at a distance from the neck, and leaves a part of the tunic uncovered. Slightly twisted, it falls from the shoulder in smooth pleats, which loop the wrist so that the fingers emerge carrying the box. Another difference of the two reliefs is the position of the right hand raised upright or



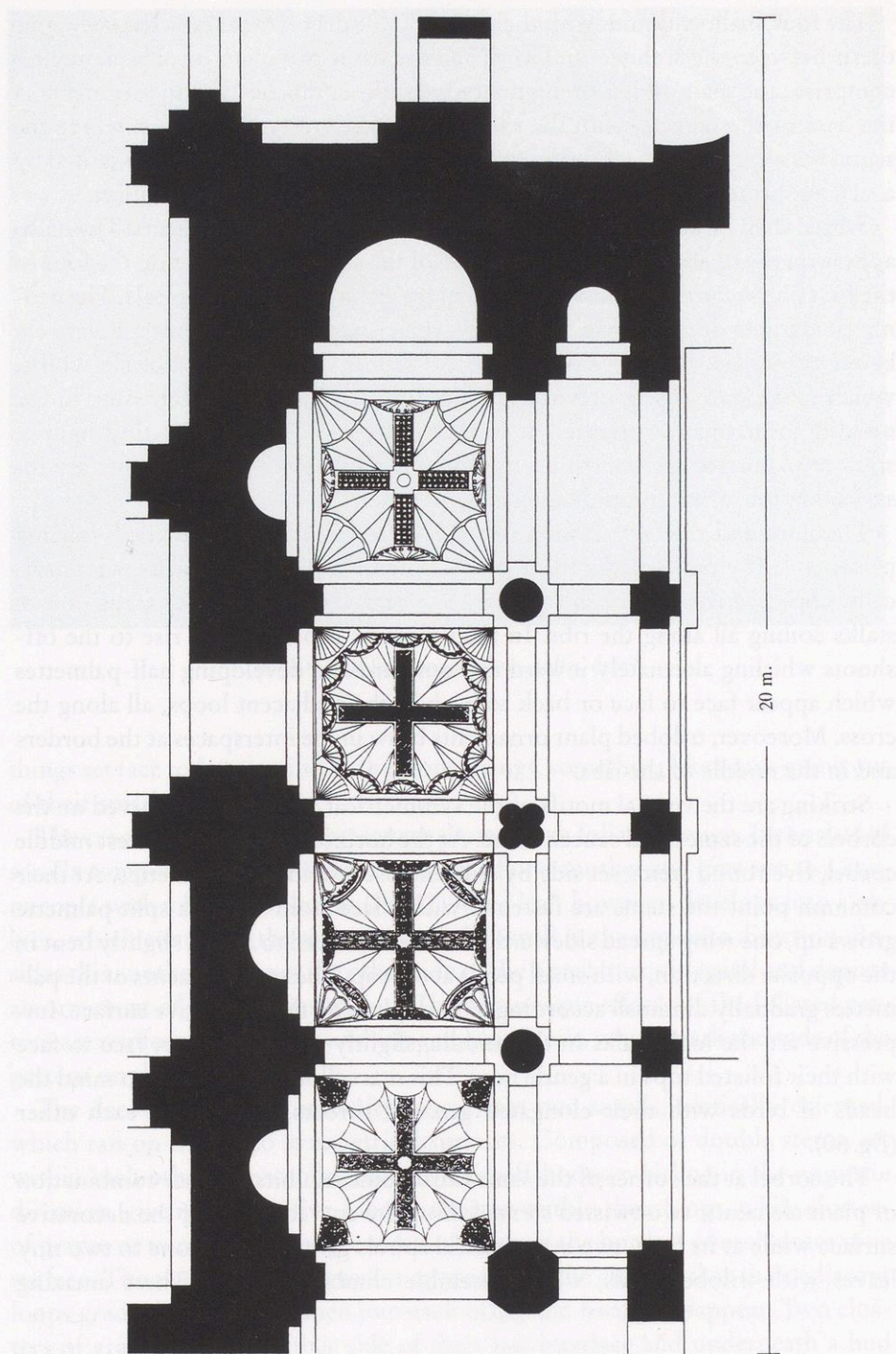
horizontally, which also influences the motion of the drapery. Though the two Saints are in high relief, the folding is carved with very little depth, but the design is so fine that the parts of the body are easily recognizable.

Now the heads of the sculptures are lacking but that of Saint Cosmas moulded almost three-dimensionally can be seen in the Museum of Arts in Tbilissi. His facial type recalls to a certain degree some earlier portraits of Saint Peter, as, for example, those on the metal work of the sixth century. Saint Cosmas has short hair, oval beard and little moustache. His face has regular features, especially well shaped mouth, vivid eyes under arched eyebrows while the forehead looks shortened, apparently by the cap tightly pressed down on the head. In the photograph taken with the head the face is slightly turned to the left as in the portrait of a living person. Saint Cosmas differs from all the rest preserved in Oški through the vividness of the expression.

Saint Simeon Stylite the Younger, like the saint Healers is carved in high relief in his two representations. The first one on the impost of the octagonal pier (fig. 47) is relatively better preserved than the other above the west window, which is badly damaged by a fallen block from the cornice (fig. 16). The two sculptures do not differ essentially from each other, in reproducing the same model. In both reliefs Saint Simeon is carved bust-length and elevated on a three-step pedestal, in reference to the column on which the stylite was perched. He is portrayed according to the established iconography, in the gesture of the orans, palms forward; he has a long bushy beard and a cowl on the head, but the face is weathered. Saint Simeon wears a tunic and a cowl, which falls from the shoulders to the front of the body, and its folds take the shape of two symmetrical patterns of half-elliptic convolutions at an equal distance from each other. This type of folding continues in the opposite direction in the tunic under the raised arms, the sleeves of which are also draped in parallel curves. The borders of the cowl are joined in the front with a strap, which is attached on either side with buckles in the shape of crosses. On the relief of Saint Simeon on the west façade (fig. 16) these crosses hang, one after the other, on his cowl. However, his bust-portrait is distinguished from the above-described one by its unarticulated forms and very slight moulding of the garment, only over the shoulder, the rest being flat surface.

Not only the piers of the open gallery are richly decorated, but also the saucer-shaped ceilings of the four bays they support. The transition from the square space of the bay to the shallow dome is obtained by the squinches which draw with the arches (over the piers) an octagon, from each side of which a corbel in the shape of segment advances over the bay, thus the eight or twelve corbels constitute the octagonal or dodecagonal base of the saucer. Above the corbels the ribs advance and converge up to the summit of the intrados emphasized with a roundel. The ribs are flanked with the webs. The central ribs perpendicular to each other form a cross, which stands out with its rich ornamentation (fig. 9).





59. Open gallery, detail, design after Takaišvili and Djobadze



The four shallow domes with their remarkable decoration show the very synthesis between the architectural form and the stone carving. The ornamentation comprises the main ribs forming the crosses, the squinches and the segments at the base of the saucers, with the exception of the westernmost one, where the segments were left bare while the stalactites replacing the squinches benefited by a rich adornment. Each dome is subjected to an elaborated composition.

Fluted shell ornaments embellish the squinches of the three saucers. They also appear on the twelve segments at the base of the second dome and on the four of the first one, where the fanlike fluted pattern are crowned with spirals. The geometric designs dominate the carving on the crosses of these domes. Relatively better preserved, the cross of the second saucer displays two double whirls, which move into zigzag between the borders and in their intercrossing in the middle, form squares oriented at forty five degrees. Four-edged tiny figures, stars or palmettes are set within the squares while trilobed ornaments are inscribed in the areas alongside the borders.

The third and the forth domes (from east to west) are adorned with foliated patterns<sup>18</sup>. The cross of the third shows repetitive plant ornaments symmetrically poised to the axes of the cross-ribs. The decorative motif consists of two stalks coiling all along the ribs. In their sinuous run they give rise to the off-shoots whirling alternately inward and outward and developing half-palmettes which appear face to face or back to back in their adjacent loops, all along the cross. Moreover, trilobed plant ornaments blow in the interspaces at the borders and in the middle of the ribs.

Striking are the vegetal motifs of the symmetrical compositions carved on the corbels of the same third saucer dome. At the horizontal base of the west middle corbel, five round stems set side by side enclose five inverse palmettes. At their common point the stems are fastened with a lace from which a split palmette grows up, one wing spread sideward, the other reduced to a stalk slightly bent in the opposite direction, with small petals at the top. These constituents of the palmettes gradually diminish according to their place on the decorative surface. Impressive are the high stalks in the middle, slightly twisted and set face to face with their foliated tops in a gentle bow. This marvellous design calls to mind the heads of birds with their elongated graceful throats, in front of each other (fig. 60).

The corbel at the corner of the same third dome exhibits another combination of plant elements: two twisted stems follow the curved frame of the decorative surface while at its base, two symmetrical spirals give rise, each one to two tiny leaves with trilobed ends, which resemble climbing figures. These amazing

18 Djobadze, *Early Medieval Monasteries in Tao*, pl. 144.





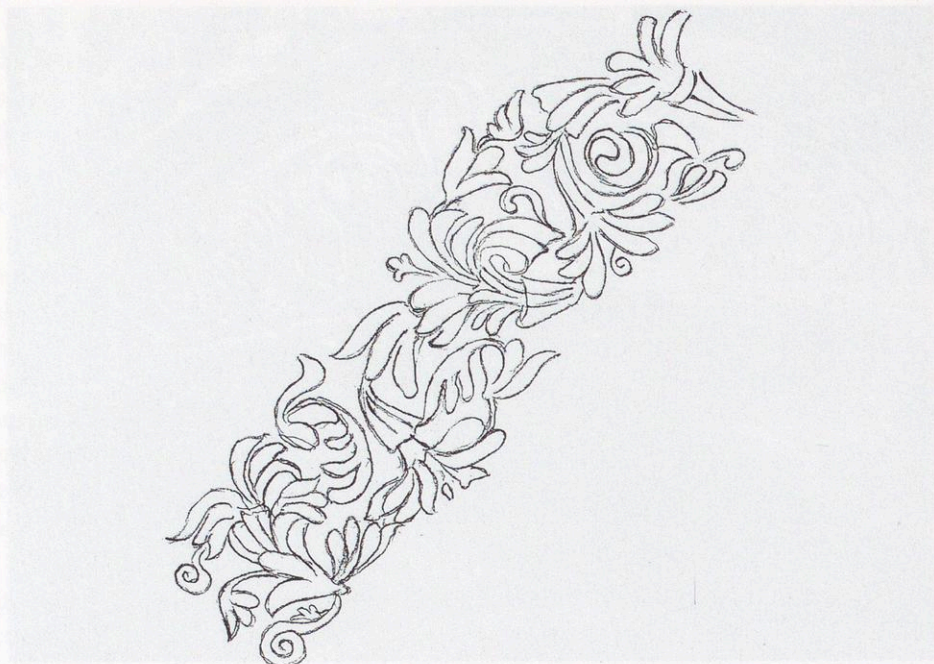
60. Open gallery, saucer dom, soffit, detail

things set face to face remind of the living beings, something like snails going out of their spiral shells.

The cross of the westernmost saucer shows a rich foliated design. It consists of scrolls composed of calyces, which go out of one another and give rise to a cornucopia with a bunch of leaves (fig. 61). One leaf, however, develops into a calyce, which continues the movement of the scroll in the opposite direction. Besides this another calyce at the other side of the bunch turns in spiral and depicts an ornament of three leaves within. The picturesque effects of the foliated pattern are reinforced by the tiny whirls and quatrefoils, which mark the ends of the pattern on the ribs.

The decoration of the stalactites comprises two scrolls, vertically oriented, which ran on their two symmetrical surfaces. Composed of double stems, set within each other, the scrolls coil and their offshoots, whirling in the opposite direction, give rise to the five-lobed palmettes within their loops, while clusters of grapes or two-lobed leaves grow out of them, at the borders of each decorative surface. The two scrolls interweave approaching the cusp so that their adjacent loops gradually diminish, then join each other and finally, disappear. Two clusters of grapes hang on either side of their last interlace and underneath a bud points the cusp.





61. Open gallery, saucer, soffit, design, detail

### Angels on the Façades

The angelic figures<sup>19</sup> in full length have the highest position in the church: Michael and Gabriel appear on the south fronton (fig. 39), while on the west part of the south façade three angels stand at a distance from each other under the cornice (fig. 2, 62). High up, under the central blind arch on the east façade the angel, now disappeared, is well known from the photograph and the design made in 1917. All these celestial beings are in solemn poses with outstretched wings and dressed in long tunics and cloaks. The archangels carry staffs and orbs in their hands, while the angels make the gesture of the raised hands with palms forward. However, Michael is distinguished by his proportions and the treatment of his garments from all the rest. At first sight the archangel Gabriel and the other angels seem to share a lot of similarities, but an attentive observation reveals personal features in each one.

The eastern angel of the south façade has his cape suspended between the raised hands, and the hanging drapery forms a large curve, which is followed upward by the smooth folds. Noticeable is the naturalistic effect obtained in the at-

19 Winfield, "Some Early Figure Sculpture from North-East Turkey", 46-54.





62. South façade, angel

tachment of the cape on the right shoulder, with its end re-pleated in the shape of a trefoil, after being fastened in a metal buttonhole. The discs suggesting the relief of the shoulders are also carved, the right one, nevertheless clumsily made, confirms ignorance of perspective. But logical in doing his work, the sculptor cut off the side of the cloak, shorter, because of being brought to the front of the body. Striking is the drapery of the tunic with its vertical folds, regularly pleated and fallen right down to the bottom end so that the feet are entirely hidden. These extended folds finish with a fluted bottom hem, which, at the same time, outlines the stone that should have served as a pedestal of the angel. The fluted hem of the garment, which coincides with the bottom contour of the relief recurs in the middle angel, now entirely broken off, on the same south façade. This vertical arrangement of the folds with geometrical exactness calls to mind the design of the east Hellenistic figure with a column-like body. Such treatment of the clothing plays a great part in the height of the figure whose proportions are also elevated.

The westernmost angel on the south façade (fig. 62) in a posture and gesture like the above-discussed, is wearing the same garments but with some variations in the design. His raised hands emerge out of the cloak, also fastened at the shoulder but with frontal borders fallen in a cascade. The visible surface of the



tunic draped with repetitive triangular folds contributes to the sought-after verticality in the depiction.

On the south fronton the archangel Gabriel (fig. 39) is represented with his usual attributes which are, however, treated in a special manner: the orb in his right hand is depicted as a rosette with eight petals, and that is in line with the half-palmette at the top of the staff in his left hand. In this respect, the ornamented cuffs and band on the right sleeve of the tunic complete the decorative accents of the design.

The drapery of the tunic is treated with concise patterns. The relief of the hips is suggested by small elliptic, followed by V-shaped folds over the legs. The roundels with concise convolutions are carved, one near the right shoulder on the tunic and the other on the left elbow on the cloak. The bottom hems of the tunic and of the turned-over frontal parts of the cape are together outlining an angular pleating open at irregular intervals. The neckline of the tunic features a hem-like border, which represents the curvilinear top ends of the folds. In some of the angels it takes the shape of a fluted hem.

One notes that the V-shaped folds in the front of the body are rigidly angular, due seemingly to the stiff texture of the cloth, which is unlike the smooth one of the above-mentioned piece of the cloak round the neck and fastened at the shoulder. It seems that the stiff frontal part, bent at an angle over itself, would have represented another piece worn over the dress. This thought may have been aroused by the garments of the angel on the east façade where the supposed item of clothing is more precisely designed.

The head of this eastern angel and the legs from the knees downwards are lacking, but the torso is very well preserved as can be seen from the former design and photograph.<sup>20</sup> A large band, which corresponds to the turned-back frontal border of the cloak comes up vertically so as to be suspended on the forearms and pleated at an obtuse angle between them; meanwhile its right end is hanging freely up to the elbow. At the same time the border of the cloak is diagonally brought to the shoulder in order to be fastened and its end displays a trefoil ornament as on the garment of the eastern-most angel on the south façade.

The fact that this band is not retained in the fastening of the cloak and is bordered on either side with jewellery, allows one to think of a separate piece which makes allusion to the *loros*, associated with the garments of the standing angels.

The angelic figure shows a delicate moulding of the clothing with a better approach to the human shape than the above-discussed ones. The curvilinear small surfaces emphasizing the parts of the body in relief, are followed by fine convolutions. The draped thighs are moulded with elliptic elements, followed by the

20 Takaišvili, Ekspedicija, 65-66, pl. 55-1,2.



graceful curves, which form a triangular pattern between the legs, under the stiff bejewelled band and the intricate folds of the belt that appear on either side of this. In the front of the body the repetitive triangles are slightly removed thanks to their two orientations. On the shoulders the rendering of the drapery is purely decorative in accordance with the adjacent pictorial letterings on the upper part of the wings. This pictographic motif replaces their downy feathers, but at the same time, it reveals an important text, which says that the building work was extended over ten years. Under the lettering the long feathers are decorated with vertical strings of pearls, which are in line with the bejewelled borders of the band hanging on the left side of the figure. There is a tendency to unify the constituents of the relief no matter what their nature is.

The wings of the angels are treated with layers of feathers, stylised in the shape of rectilinear elements with scalloped ends. The feathers are vertically arranged, and their ends depict the horizontal articulated delineation of the sections. However, the swollen parts at the top of the wings are recorded with the oblong position of the bands, so that the ends of the feathers offset their curvature, while the rest show a straight vertical outline or a slightly concave one near the lower end. However Gabriel's wings are rendered like those of the eastern angel, with long feathers embellished with strings of jewellery.

As has already been said, the archangel Michael is distinguished from all the other angels carved on the façades by his style. His wings also consist of almost equal bands of feathers, whose articulated delineations take up a slightly oblong position and thus enliven the texture. The downy feathers form toothed motifs which follow the lovely upper curve of the wings, like those of the angels on the decorated pier. Michael's wings are given an elegant S-shaped contour in their whole length but at the bottom, a scalloped outline.

In his proportions Michael (fig. 39) is very close to the human figure, and different from the tall figures of the other angels. Since his posture and body on the whole suggest reference to the anatomy, the rendering of the garments strays from the realm of nature. The drapery is subjected to strong stylisation, which leads to the patterns with geometric constituents. Characteristic are the circles with spiral convolutions, which mould the shoulders and the hips while on the thighs they are modified into ellipses followed downwards by V-shaped angular folds. The circles with their spirals emerge not only on the parts in relief but become essential constituents of the design in the front of the body, and even the orb in the hand of Michael is decorated with spirals. The stone master does not pay attention to the natural fall of the clothing, he is concentrated on the linear combinations in the design. Thus ribbed folds in zigzag develop from the right shoulder all along the sleeve but form a circle in agreement with the ornamented cuff.

At first sight these zigzag delineations call to mind the folds on the cloaks of





63. South façade, »deisis« flanked by the donors, David and Bagrat

the figures on tenth-century ivory reliefs. But the resemblance in the angular repetitive motif on the cloak, is due to the identical position of the arm with bent elbow. It is difficult to see here influences of Byzantine art because the Oški garments are deprived of the plasticity appropriated to the flowing edges of the ivory drapery.

In the case of Oški it is important to conceive the figure on the whole with its patterns subjected to the principles of an abstract geometric conception, but without forgetting the coordination of the decorative motifs schematised as much as possible as they are. The turned-back frontal border of the cape, for example, shows the same uninterrupted triangles as those on the arm. The very extended V-shaped folds of the fanlike pattern between the legs, as well as on the thighs and legs finish in a fluted bottom hem. The same fluted hem describes the neckline at the top of the folds of the tunic. All these dynamic forms of the pleating influence the attitude of the figure. The archangel Michael emanates the vitality and the power of a living being while the other angels look somewhat petrified in their static postures.

#### Reliefs of the Donors

On the last eastern part of the southern façade, actually the external wall of the diaconocon, there are full-length portraits of the donors on either side of the Deisis scene (fig. 63). Turned three-quarters, the two men hold each one, the model of the church in their hands, the church they are offering to the saintly persons represented. The five figures, three of which form part of the Deisis, are carved



on separate strong sandstone plaques, each one 0,65 m in width and 1,46 m in height. The whole composition spans an area 3,65 m in width and is framed from above by a cornice with a string course of herring-bone ornaments, followed by an inscription in Georgian, which is written in horizontal lines without the words being separated from each other, as was customary then. A blind arch, which matches up with those on the neighbouring façades to the south and east, crowns the reliefs that are framed on the sides with semi-cylindrical shafts, capped by the impostes with lobes supporting the arch. Here as elsewhere, in the Deisis, Christ is in the centre with the Virgin Mary on the left and Saint John the Baptist on the right, who are flanked by the donors respectively, David Magistros and Bagrat Eristav of the Eristavs, high ranking dignities and brothers whose identity is established by the text above.

The saintly persons are clad in the manner common to their iconography: the Virgin in a stole and maphorion, Christ and Saint John in chitons and himations, and they make their invariable gestures. Christ giving his blessing with his right hand, while Saint John and the Virgin Mary are turned to him in prayer. The mother of God raises her hands in a sign of intercession to Christ for the salvation of the mankind. Here the two kings are addressing themselves to her and Saint John and, as can be seen from the text, they are begging them to intercede for them. All the holy persons have circular haloes while the donors have square ones, characteristic for persons still living.

The donor's portraits flanking the Deisis are of great interest in researching the mentality of the persons represented, as well as in the study of the vestments of these titleholders of great endowments, as high officers linked with the imperial court in Constantinople. The two donors are clothed in the same manner, in kabadions<sup>21</sup> (caftans), and cloaks, but embroidered with different patterns. David (fig. 64) is wearing a caftan of heavy Persian cloth ornamented with palmettes with six petals, each of which turns into a spiral. The palmettes are enclosed in circles of pearls, and in the rhomblike spaces between these circles, two small buds are inserted. The collar, wristbands and hems are embroidered with alternating squares and rhombs in rectangular fields and the borders of these bands are outlined with beads. David's cloak is patterned with great circles enclosing a large band of small roundels and, within this space there is a bird seen

21 Kabadion, probably of oriental origin is called "the costume of the ethnikos" by Phylotheos in 899, but a "standard article of imperial and court costume". It was worn by the despots, the megas magistros, the megas logothetes and the megas myrtaites. The kabadion translated kaftan was apparently "fastened down the front and its twin edges were embroidered with gold". According to Pseudo-Kodinos the kabadion of Apocaucos was decorated with heraldic lions and it was worn over a skaranikon. J. Vepreau, *Pseudo Kodinos. Traité des Offices*, Paris, 1966, 146,2; 153,18-166,14; 195,22; 200,7; 206; N. Oikonomides, *Les listes de présence byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles*, Paris 1972, 177,32-179,1. The Georgian national dress is called "kaba" which really is the caftan.





64. David, design after Djobadze

in profile and similar to an eagle, holding in its beak a fine wire with two jewels. The circles are connected to one another from above and from below with small rosettes. The cloak is hooked on the left shoulder. It is bordered with the same decorative band as the caftan, and this is also set in the inversed hems of the separate twin edges of the front of the cloak and, between these edges the caftan is discernible.

The caftan of Bagrat (fig. 65) is decorated with great circles formed by pearls and within this frame there are trefoils fitted into petals, traced like hearts, their summits towards the centre that is taken up by a round bud. The design of the ornamental band on the hems and the neck is the same as that on David's clothes. The cloak of Bagrat is also ornamented with great circles bordered with a band of guilloche motifs, and marked with a small disc in the centre. The area between this and the guilloche frame is reserved for the main decorative motif which is composed of two concentric circles, each one formed of elements in the shape of denaturalised petals. The spaces between the main circles are retraced with beads and, in the rhombi, so-formed small discs with a linear design feature.

As has already been said, the bands fixed to the caftan and the cloak are of the same design, one that is identical with that on the garments of David. However, the bent arm of Bagrat who is holding the model of the church in it, evidently





65. Bagrat

created some difficulty in the representation of the cloak, displaced as it was, by the arm being in this position. The artist wanted to show the slight curve on the chest with all the details of the pattern, but not knowing the rules of perspective, he did not succeed in doing it properly. He depicted the inverse of the twin hems in front of the cloak, with the left one slightly curvilinear, opposite to the right in a straight line, but he evaded their beaded contour as though the edges were not entirely in place, because of the arms raised forwards. Thus, some elements of the caftan's embroidery came to the fore, and these form a common pattern with those of the hems, and this pattern may have recalled a tablinum, but there is not any tablinum shown. The tablinum did not form part of the "ethnic" costume, which I will discuss later.

Both princes are shown in boots, which are rounded out and not pointed as are those in the ruler's portraits in Byzantium and Bulgaria at that time. In reality, the donors are depicted as riders with footwear, banded with small straps of twisted cords that are knotted at the ankle. The heads are now very damaged but the "stemma" and "pendulla" are discernible, which used to go with the pompous costumes of high dignities, invested with power by the supreme authority. The caftan they are wearing, was called the costume of the "ethnicos" by Phylotheos in 899, and it corresponds exactly to the degree of dig-



nity in Bagrat and David's relationship with the Byzantine imperial court. They were rewarded to wear it as Eristav of the Eristavs and Magistros Megas, titles that were among those of office-holders, enumerated by the above-mentioned author.

Diadem and pendula were signs not only of sovereign power. They were worn by high-ranking imperial officials and officers awarded with titles of honour and local rulers, as they appear in donor representations in Byzantium and Slav countries in the Middle Ages.

One notes that the cloak of both princes are hooked on the left shoulder instead of the right. At first glance this could be taken for a mistake on the part of the sculptor. Besides this, the model of the church, better preserved in the hands of Bagrat, is depicted with the south façade and the elongated part of this with horizontal cornice features, nevertheless, to the right of its gable part, which means to the east, instead of the left, to the west (fig. 65). All this suggests that the sculptor represented the model as he stood with his back to the south façade and not in front of it as well as with his back to the persons represented. As it concerns the models of the offering depicted in such a way it was a frequent phenomenon in the Middle Ages. Apparently the same notion had led to the fibula being shown on the left shoulder, which corresponded for the master to reality. It seems that the artist was not accustomed to such representations, the Oški portraits being the oldest ones in Tao-Klardjeti of this type, preserved to the present day.

### The Date

Many inscriptions can be seen in red and blue pigment or carved on the walls of the church. More numerous in the past, they looked like a chronicle of the rulers of Tao-Klardjeti, but a great part of them have disappeared or have been damaged. However, the rest of the texts offer enough information about the erection of the church, its builders and some historical events concerning the region of Oški. The most important and exhaustive inscription is on the tympanum above the solemn entry to the south. It speaks<sup>22</sup>:

By the grace of God who protects all those having high respect to him and accords success in all good deeds to those admiring his name, with the belief in the Holy Trinity and the intercession of our holy Queen, the Mother of God, with the goodwill of the holy Wood of life, with the help and intercession of the great Baptist and all the saints who were devoted to God from the immemorial centuries, (in the wish) to exalt and glorify all these saints, our God's crowned kings began to erect this holy church so that in it the feasts could be celebrated and the memory of the

22 My translation is from the Russian text of Takaišvili, *Arkheologičeskaja ekspedicija 17vo goda v Južnye provincii Gruzii*, 57-58.



saints praised highly, as it is written: "take part in the commemoration of the saints". Of the will of all these saints our great kings were not spearing the transient riches for the eternal ones, so as to merit the assistance of all these saints. Lord, help in both lives the sons of the blessed by God Adarnase Kuropalat: Bagrat Eristav of the Eristavs (and) David Magistros. Holy Trinity, take them all the three under thy Dexter and praise in both lives.

Me Grigol Lord honoured to display them this my service, before God and I was set at the head of the building works, and God suggested them the consciousness of my devotion, their servant.

The annual expenses for the stone masons and labourers and for the oxen wagons with sand, amounted 20000 drachma, 5000 "fisos" wine, 50 "litres" steel, 250 "grives" wheat; the stone-masters, the carpenters and the blacksmiths who steadily worked, were 70; the oxens drawing carts with stones, 30; the mules and other pack animals which were transporting tufas from Grigol Cminda were 30; the other carriers with which (also) were gathering – 60 and all the craftsmen and workers – 80.

The end of the inscription where, in principle, the date should be indicated, was destroyed by the filling in of the door underneath, during the transformation of the church into mosque.

Takaišvili brilliantly deciphered and interpreted the inscription, correcting the mistakes of earlier readers and proposed a convincing date for the church. He identified the historical personages on the base of the literary sources and established that Adarnase, mentioned here, was Kuropalat from 958 to 961 and that his sons: Bagrat Eristav of the Eristavs († 966) and David Magistros († 1001) were the builders of the divine house and not their father as was supposed before. Thus Djavahišvili considered Adarnase also the builder of the church and put its construction in the period from 958, date of his reward of Kuropalat to the year 966, before the death of his son Bagrat.<sup>23</sup> However, the inscription outside on the east wall, which Takaišvili<sup>24</sup> discovered, informs that the building works were extended over ten years and, in accordance with this text, he concludes that the edifice was most likely begun in the mid-tenth century about 950 and finished in the lifetime of Adarnase by 961.

Since 1970 the church of Oški was abandoned by the Muslims and after that small recoveries were undertaken inside. In consequence the remnants of the inscriptions were lain bare on the blocks inserted into the Turkish wall, the western one of the former mosque, installed in the south part of the edifice. A damaged and blurred inscription was deciphered by Djobadze and it served him as a

23 I. Dzavahisvili, *Gruzinskaja paleografia*, Tbilisi 1919, 164-165 (in Georgian) quoted by Takaišvili, *Ekspedicija*, 60.

24 Takaišvili, *Ekspedicija*, the inscription speaks that the church was being built for ten years, 65-66, pl.55-1.



motive to develop his attacks against the research of Takaišvili on the date of the monument<sup>25</sup>.

In the first place, Djobadze ascribes to Takaišvili a wrong dating of the church: "Takaišvili suggested that the construction must have been begun after 958 and have been completed in 961 before Adarnase's death. Takaišvili's conclusion is incorrect. Furthermore it is quite unlikely that such an immense and complex church as Oški could have been built in three years."<sup>26</sup> In the last sentence Djobadze just repeats the reflection of Takaišvili word by word on his own account.

In addition to his extravagant speculations, Djobadze assigns the above-mentioned inscription as a proof of his conviction for a later dating than the accepted one involving the ten years building from about 550 to the time when Adarnase had the status of kuropalat (958-961), at least by 961. The recently discovered text is in Georgian script "Mrgvlovani", and Djobadze's English translation runs<sup>27</sup>: "We began construction of this church in chronikon RPG March KE of the day of Annunciation. Bagrat Duke of Dukes builder of this church died in Chronikon RPY the day of October B Tuesday. Be glorified his soul and be exalted by God David." According to Djobadze's estimations the chronikon RPG corresponds to  $183 + 780$  (the cycle) = 963, the year when the construction began. The author recognizes that the remaining parts of the two last figures – 8 and 3 were "considerably damaged". These remnants, on site, are very scant, which makes somewhat problematic their integration in the letters respective to the chronicon 183.

It is difficult to accept the proposed date 963 as beginning of the building, since in the main inscription, the devout supplications are made to the Saint Trinity, "for protection in both lives of all them three (Adarnase and his two sons)". The literary sources inform that Adarnase was no more kuropalat after 961 and soon he died "forcibly clad in rugs" in the monastery of Oški. Neglecting the historical data, Djobadze concludes in an inadequate manner that "construction of the church began after Adarnase's death and ... completed within ten years ... in 973".<sup>28</sup> However, the date 973 as the end of the building works is in full contradiction to the facts, precisely the account of the expenses which could have been given only after the finishing of the edifice and it was as shown, in Adarnase's lifetime.<sup>29</sup>

It is unacceptable to minimize the importance of the main inscription as a his-

25 Djobadze, "The Donor Reliefs and the Date of the Church at Oški", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 69 (1969), 57.

26 Djobadze, "The Donor Reliefs and the Date of the Church at Oški". 57. The author repeats word by word the text of Takaišvili, *Ekspedicija*, 60-61.

27 Djobadze, "The Donor Reliefs and the Date of Oški", 59, fig 8.

28 Djobadze, "The Date of Oški", 60.

29 Takaišvili, *Ekspedicija*, 60.



torical document about the donors, their origin and social state, the head of the construction, the organising of the works, the detailed annual report for the costs and, finally, the literary language at the time, in which the learned scribe expressed.

The original place of the short inscription nevertheless is unknown, the block with the text being inbuilt into the Turkish wall. The writing situated on a space 60 cm wide and 1,27 m high, is oriented vertically, which excludes its position above a door. In the medieval churches the main inscription with an exhaustive content was displayed on the tympanum above the principal entry to arrest the eye of the prayer. Unfortunately, it is not the case of the short one in Oški, which is damaged and lacking the erudite expressions reserved to the great one. Its second part concerning the death of Bagrat in 966, does not bring anything new, since it repeats in a poor version the text written on the tympanum of the south door in the open gallery.<sup>30</sup> The latter distinguishes from the former by the style of the devout prayer for the defunct king. "...yet to honour the memory of Bagrat. In this day the blessed king Bagrat yielded his soul. Chronikon was 186-780 = 966, Tuesday. Lord, endow him with eternal beatitude. Amen."<sup>31</sup>

Such repetitions of the events, sometimes with mistakes, were of use in medieval Georgia, but was it the case of the church with the date 963? The question arises which one it was, because the ruins of different buildings stand and, especially, two small churches in the limits of the Oški monastery. The word "church" was used at the time as a common notion, meaning equally a great church or a chapel. The small churches in Oški were of secondary importance and their structure was less perfect than the principal one, but it does not signify that they were erected before it.

The foundation of the monasteries was subjected to the rules strongly respected to our days in the east Orthodox countries. This solemn religious act was marked out by driving the cross into the ground and also marking the foundation of the main church, the building of which was to begin first. Further, the complementary edifices were erected and carried through in agreement with the increasing activities of the monastic establishment. All this makes it possible to infer that the men-

30 Ibidem, 64. On the tympanum similar texts were inscribed about the rulers of Tao-Klardjeti and their memorial days.

31 Besides this, the word "building" which appears in the short inscription, was regularly utilised not only for the erection of an edifice from the foundations, but also for an enlargement, construction of an annex or extension apart. Really the rebuildings were made in Oški and they are recognizable through the distinct structure of the walls and the dilatations of their joinings. The difference is clear in the connections between the walls of the north elongated body and the west nave or the common side of the latter with the narthex, without been separated much in time. Such "buildings" usually can be seen in the great medieval churches as for example, in Işhani, close to plan in Oški, where the same north corpus was added later to the main church. Concerning the "building" begun in 963, it supposedly could have been referred otherwise to an innovative part of the monastic church, if not, to the erection of one of the two small churches.





66. Drum, capital with the stone master Jesse

tioned church, begun in the year 963, if the deciphering is exact, supposedly could have been one of the two small religious houses in the monastery, since the main church must have been built in Adarnase's lifetime, by 961.

The innovative works of the main church were accomplished much later and precisely indicated in the inscription carved on the outside of the east conque under the window<sup>32</sup>: "Saint Trinity exalt the crowned by thou kings Basil and Konstantine, by whose means the roof's covering of the church was carried out for a second time, during the abbotships of Grigol and David, and remember with grace the stone-master Jesse."

As was pointed out, a human figure features among the foliated capitals on the drum of the cupola. It represents a seated figure, a man carrying two sacks attached with ropes on his shoulder (fig. 66). Only his face has suffered, but the body is preserved. His situation there suggests his connection with the stone decoration. In the Hahuli cathedral the craftsmen left their names on the plinths of the colonnettes of the cupola. In Oški the high elevated figure is easily recognizable as the stone master while the inscription gives backing to his identity with the master Jesse. The sculpture of Jesse must have been in remembrance of his grandiose stone works accomplished on the cupola, in the time of the roofing

32 Takaišvili, *Ekspedicija*, 63.



of the church for a second time, during the reign of Basil, who died in 1025 and his successor Konstantine, who was emperor only between 1025 and 1028. In other words the innovative works on the roof together with the carved decoration made by Jesse were likely extended from 1025 to 1028 at the time when Oški was part of Byzantium. However, the lands of the basin of the River Čorokh with Oški were regained by the Georgian king Bagrat IV, in 1036.

### Conclusion

The church of Oški is a brilliant example of the revival of the architecture in Tao-Klardjeti from the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is characterized with the building of large churches crowned with cupolas and often associated with the cruciform architectural type as shown in Oški and its parallels in Işhani, Pařali, Hařuli, etc. The construction was innovated, especially the supporting system of the cupola, elevated on the hollowed supports which included the free standing piers. Thus the Georgians succeeded in counteracting the thrust of the dome by their own method based on the experiments.

The open gallery and the porch were the new architectural details introduced in the layout of the faćades. However, the square supports of the porch with their nook shafts and half-colonnettes on the sides were largely spread in Islamic architecture in the ninth and tenth centuries. The columns flanking the entries of the churches, nevertheless had been known long ago in Coptic art. The pointed arches were borrowed from Islamic constructions, but they had appeared earlier in Sassanian buildings. Finally the spectacular niches hollowed in the west pillars were created under Islamic influence although they acquired quite different appearances and meanings in Oški.

Unique in shape and ornamentation is the octagonal pier, an original Georgian creation. The ornamented shafts of the columns are well known in the early-Christian epoch, but their style and composition are different from those of the columns on the drum and the porch in Oški, which, however, are comparable to the works of art from the Abbasid times. Thus the ancient architectural details with their enhancement, after having pursued their evolution in Islamic architecture split over the neighbouring countries, in Georgia, where the local tradition was permeable for such details, which the Abbasid fashion brought to the fore. On the other hand, the articulation of the faćades with blind arches, the arch-headed frames of the windows and their lintels with horizontal extensions, so characteristic of Oški and its related monuments, were well known in Syria in the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries. The cultural links between Syria and Transcaucasia, including Georgia, were maintained from the remote times. The innovated system in supporting the dome and the foregoing architectural details, treated variably and



with distinctive decorations, recur in the churches of Iškani, Bana, Hahuli, etc. which, however display, each one, a different appearance, producing the effects of monumentality and luxury. They testify like those in other regions of Georgia to the "Georgian renaissance", so-called by the local scholars.

The country was turned into an Arab Emirate from the middle of the seventh century. The residence of the emir was Tbilissi, the capital of Kartli, the third Georgian kingdom after Abkhasia and Tao-Klardjeti. But the rulers of the last two, meanwhile, were in the vassalage from the Byzantine emperor, in the 10<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Tao-Klardjeti was then playing an important role in the political scene, thanks to its military forces and economic prosperity.

The princes Bagrationi who have been ruling over these kingdoms desired to rival with the neighbouring sovereigns. In the willingness to demonstrate their wealth and political power, they undertook the building of enormous monastic complexes, as Iškani, Oški, Parhali, Hahuli, Ot'ht'a Eklesia, etc.

The carved decoration of Oški as well as the architecture is the result of the artistic renewal in Tao-Klardjeti. The ornamentation consists mainly of geometrical and foliated motifs. Very elaborated the geometric designs offer the grid for the insertion of other decorative elements: trefoils, quatrefoils, small crosses, etc. The circles in different combinations and penetrated by the ribbons throw in relief repetitive and unlimited motifs. In an orderly movement the ribbons intercross, intertwine or interlace, depicting complicated patterns subjected to geometry. Besides this, the geometry determines the organisation of the foliated motifs, which in the so-formed patterns became coherent, but loose, to a certain extent, their naturalness and freshness.

The plant ornaments are treated in two different manners. In the first, the foliated motifs intend for abstract forms. The connotation of the acanthus with the oak leaf and the palmette is evident, but parts of these denaturalised leaves became the basic elements of the patterns. They are often short stalks shaping into fleuron or something like a half-palmette. In their run, these motifs join each other and constitute together new decorative forms, which take part, at the same time, in a second pattern created in their interspace. Remarkable is the dense interpenetration of the components, which loose their entity, entirely subjected to the uninterrupted motion of the whole. The disarticulated halves of wing palmettes, taking different orientations, suggest in certain cases amazing forms as the lovely heads of birds, rabbits, etc. This treatment of the plant motifs then flourishing in Islamic art, could have easily penetrated in Georgia, especially by the ceramics, imported from Iraq and Samanid Iran in the tenth century. Thus the arrangement of the plant elements leads to a design, which translates the idea of a bird or another living being that really is not depicted after a model of nature, but its image appears in the mind's eye of the spectator by association.



The second type of foliated ornaments display patterns with luscious leaves going out of cornucopias, which revive the late Hellenistic ones from the Oriental provinces. Their renewal could admittedly have been influenced by Byzantine decorations reflecting the so-called Macedonian renaissance.

The human figure represented reveals some Sassanian motifs as the columnar shape, or the convolutions and the angular orientation of the folds on the draped garments of the holy persons, on the one hand, and, on the other, references to Byzantine models of the donor's portraits as well as the local costume worn by the people. The architectural sculpture show in Oški, in Tao-Klardjeti, its high level of achievement, making use of the local artistic repertory, late-Hellenistic motifs and Sassanian ones penetrating again through the Abbasid culture, as well as of some Islamic ones.

Summing up, the church of Oški was erected by the sons of Adarnase, Kuro-palat: Bagrat Eristav of the Eristavs and David Magistros, in the period between 950 and 961, but its roof was renovated, as well as the carved decoration of the cupola, carried out by the craftsman Jesse, with the resources of the Byzantine Emperors Basil and Konstantine, between about 1025 and 1028. With its original features, then unknown in Byzantium and its elaborate style, the church of Oški is one of the best representatives of Georgian architecture, flourishing in Tao-Klardjeti, which was to continue and develop brilliantly in the future centuries.