

Grand Basilicas of Otkhta Eklesia and Parkhali Monasteries: Stages of Construction

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The monasteries of Otkhta Eklesia and Parkhali are located in historic Tao, on the very bordering points of the Kingdom of Georgians. The aim of this publication is to present the construction stages of these two monuments based on comparative analysis and historical background. Thorough examination shows that Otkhta Eklesia had at least three stages of construction and Parkhali, two. The walls of Otkhta Eklesia, built in the Opos-Mixtum technique, remain from the original church. It could be remnant of the “Triple Church Basilica”, similar to one founded by Grigol of Khantsta in Nedzvi, in 9th c. or even from an earlier establishment. At the second stage, the central nave was re-built with the new columns and the upper parts of the walls were added. This reconstruction is related to King David III and happened before 965. Soon, another grand reconstruction happened, seeing the space of the apse enlarged due to a replacement of the first pair of columns to the east. The height of the central nave and the apse was increased. We can assume that the changes to the plan came as a result of the new typicon and the liturgical order that was introduced to the Georgian Church from Mount Athos. and the third stage of reconstruction of Otkhta, seem to have happened simultaneously with the construction of Parkhali. According to the Parkhali Gospel, church was constructed by the year 973. Later the roof was redone, that must have happened simultaneously with the embellishment of the facades by Bishop Ioane (980-1001). The western narthexes to both churches were added later or, but exact date is not clear. © 2020 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Church Architecture, Medieval Georgian monasteries, Tao-Klarjeti

There are two basilica churches of similar planning, dimension and style belonging to two neighbouring monasteries in the historic Georgian region of Tao (modern north-eastern Turkey). Otkhta Eklesia (Tekkale Köy) and Parkhali (Altiparmak Köy) were located on the banks of the small mountain rivers both of which ran into the Choruhi basin in the small town of Yusufeli, Artvin province. Both monasteries boasted an important location, both

placed on the very edge of the Kingdom of Georgians. From the monastery of Otkhta Eklesia, the road led towards Speri to Byzantium. Lazica, located behind the Pontos Mountains, on the other hand, was home to the monastery of Parkhali. Other Georgian monasteries, namely Oshki [1: 1952: 45-67; 2: 1992: 92- 141] and Khakhuli [1:68-76 2:142-157], established on the very edge of the Kingdom

and bordering historic Armenian lands, shared the same importance of location.

Construction of all the above monasteries and churches was related to the name of King David III Curopalates (†1001), whose outstanding kingship of the Tao branch of the Kingdom of Georgians was achieved through his military, political, economic, spiritual and cultural projects. The role of King David was highly praised by his contemporary historians, who referred to him as “the great King, “Curopalates of the whole east”, who “in the first place was God-fearing and compassionate to the poor, humble, patient and not rancorous; he was a builder of churches, sweet and generous, philanthropic, the patron of monks the doer of good and filled with every virtue” [3:148-149; 5:349]. Among his main achievements, the peace established in the Kingdom is to be mentioned first of all. It was due to him that the United Kingdom of Georgia was created. His important role in the life of the Byzantine court supported him in securing the title of Curopalates, as well as the funds for his grand projects; David established new monastic centres and redeveloped old ones within his kingdom and beyond. The most important among them was the Iviron Monastery on Mount Athos founded in 980 [4:5-149; 2:89-91, 5:309-310, 348-352, 6:156].

Otkhta and Parkhali, belonging to the same list, played a no less important role in the monastic life of medieval Georgia. The Life of our Fathers John and Euthymius, written on Mount Athos by Giorgi the Athonite, mentioned the “magnificent“ Otkhta Eklesia Monastery as the main source providing men of education and spirit to establish the Georgian monastery on Athos [7: 8.2; 35; 6:156;]. Another important note comes from the Parkhali Gospel (A-1453), copied in Shatberdi Monastery in the year 973. It states: “(this Gospel) should be placed in the new church of Parkhali, upon its new altar for the glorification of the divinely anointed King of Kings, the divinely enthroned David Magistros... It was written from the beginning of

the year H:P:OL (973). Cronikon was the thirteenth, RKB (973).“ [2:43, 189].

Numerous publications are dedicated to the churches of Otkhta Eklesia and Parkhali, where they are mostly discussed together [1:81-88, 90-99; 2:158-176; 178-190; 8: 43-50, 163-164, 176-168, 238-240, 301-302, 304-305; 9:113-114; 10:117-161; 11:75-86; 12.]. The reason is that these are the only non-domed churches of sophisticated structural dimensions of the period, sharing one and the same donor and region. Detailed information on how scholars dated the monuments can be seen in Z. Skhirtladzes monograph [4:16-24]. The presented illustrations (Fig. 1-4) are based on the measurements and drawings prepared by the Takaishvili expedition of 1917 [1:116-117, 132-133].

The churches of the Otkhta Eklesia and Parkhali monasteries strike the visitor with their size and monumental scale (Otkhta Eklesia inside is about 27x15 m., Parkhali is 26x15 m.). They also capture attention by their space, unusual for such basilica-type churches in Georgia. Despite identical planning and almost equal dimensions, the inner space of the churches is totally different, especially from how they are perceived by visitors, apparently coming as a result of different building materials, layers of construction and states of preservation.

Plan: Both are three-naved basilicas (Fig. 2,4), with an apse (slightly horseshoe-shaped in Otkhta and semi-circular in Parkhali) and two-story side chambers on the east, with a large gallery built in the western part of the central nave. The division between the naves is made with a pair of four pillars of multi-layered cross shape. These pillars hold the arches and the cylindrical vaults of the naves, of which the central one is much taller. The uniqueness of this planning is in the distribution of columns, where the first, close to the apse, creates a very narrow space before the wall, whereas the next two columns create a large, almost double-the-width openings. The remainder of the columns stand at the same distance apart, as characteristic for basilica church planning in general. Such

distribution of pillars creates an unusual space for Georgian basilica churches, that in western architecture could be identified as a transept. In Otkhta Eklesia, on the western faces of the first columns, there are large niches for icons. In Parkhali, on the eastern faces of the second columns there are large niches for dignities to sit during the service. We can see similar ones in Oshki, Khakhuli, and Ishkani [2:98-100; 145; 196].

that are typical for other Georgian churches of the region (Oshki, Khakuli, Ishkani, Yeni Rabat, etc). In Parkhali, the distribution is similar, but here we do not see projective colonettes and blind arches: they are instead part of the wall surface. Unlike in Otkhta Eklesia, the central arches on the east and west facades reach the pitched roof.

Construction stages: It is almost universally agreed that the church of Otkhta Eklesia went

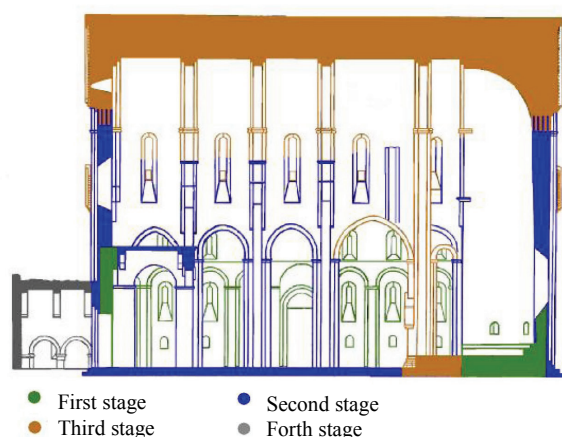


Fig. 1. Otkhta Eklesia Monastery Church, section on South; rendering of construction stages by I. Giviashvili [1:117].

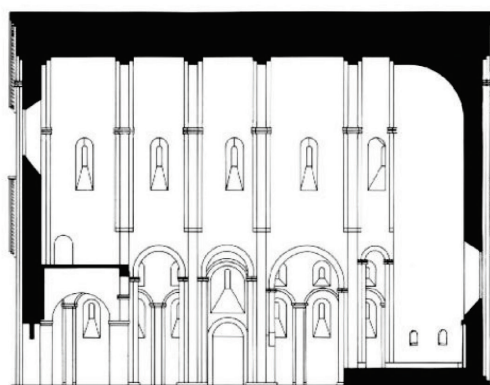


Fig. 3. Parkhali Monastery Church, section on South [1:133].

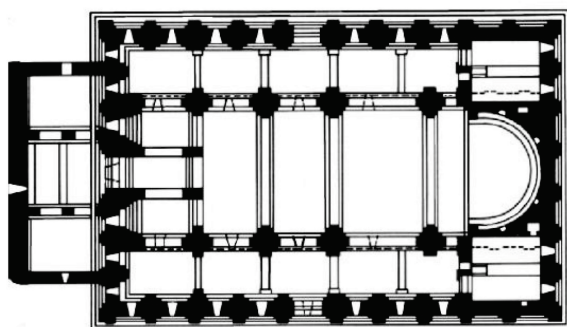


Fig. 2. Otkhta Eklesia Monastery Church, plan, ground floor [1:115].

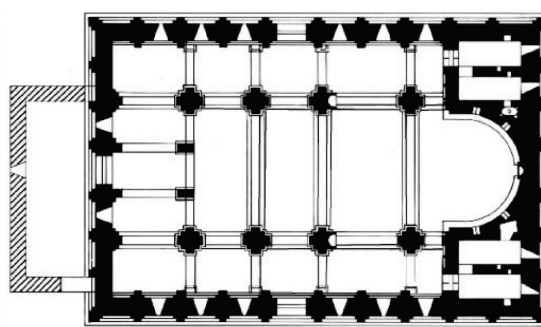
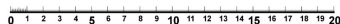


Fig. 4. Parkhali Monastery Church, plan, ground floor [1:132].



The pitched roof of the central nave projects over the side aisles. Each wall is articulated with a continuous arcade. On the east and west sides are seven arched niches, the central one being tallest. In Otkhta, these do not reach the gables of the central arm. On the upper level of the longitudinal walls here, are blind arcades, slightly projecting from the wall surface via twisted, paired colonettes

through two stages of construction, and thorough observation has shown that each monument took on at least one more alteration (On the section, I have defined first stage in green, second in blue, third in orange and the fourth in gray colors, see: Fig. 1.).

Otkhta Eklesia, the first phase: the size and the idea of the structure is defined, when the large, massive apse with side chambers and all outer

walls, were built with the *Opus-mixtum* technique. In the interior pilasters, blind arches and small niches are also created with a combination of brick and stone. These walls include window openings on the lower level and the circular window over the south entrance. Capitals here are minimal: plain stone with an almost invisible abacus. The original church must have had some kind of a gallery. All the way across the western wall, a narrow platform stands over projecting pilasters. The original gallery was presumably enlarged with a wooden balcony and may have been accessed from the western wall, as we see today. However, this entrance is from another construction period.

The second phase: In the interior, the line creating a step on the northern and southern walls indicates another layer that differs in construction quality – roughly cut stones create a dull impression on the walls, which are also thinner than the lower part. The western and eastern walls are built using the same technique, including the facing walls of the side chambers and lower half of the walls of the clerestory. The main core of the basilica belongs also to this second stage of construction. All structural parts of the building are made of smoothly cut stone: the columns, arches, gallery, capitals, window archivolt of semicircular shape, small pillars of double openings for the second-floor side chambers, and a door to the gallery. All these parts share the same form of capital, except of those from the third construction stage. The gallery on the west was considered to have been built at a later stage, but the resemblance of its capitals to those of the columns might indicate that it was also built during the second phase. During this construction period, the central apse window was widened and enlarged, and the niche for the throne was plastered over. The circular window over the doorway was filled and covered by the new facing stones of the facade. The “line” that creates a step in the interior over the blind arcade can be seen with damaged stones in the middle of the eastern part of the southern wall outside. The cladding of

the façades with stone also belongs to this second stage of construction, but with some alterations at the third phase, discussed below. The central nave of the church was entirely plastered, and the apse was covered with frescos.

The third phase: This stage of construction is the strangest and most enigmatic. The first pair of columns was demolished and rebuilt in a different location, much closer to the apse. Therefore, two pairs of new arches (smaller and larger) were formed accordingly, based on the new cornices. The columns were embellished with small and large niches made with twisted frames and gabled tops for icons. The space for the apse was enlarged and moved to the level of these new columns (Fig.1). We can assume that the alter screen was also moved, and the niches for the icons become part of it. Gold hunters removed soil around the south column in 2019 and a beautifully decorated base became visible, boasting a cornice of several moldings and rows of roundels, similar to the ones on the bases of the Oshki Church [2:ill.130]. The central nave walls over the colonnade have traces of the previous arches and of hanging pilasters, which were also replaced, as seen by the location of the new columns. During this phase, the height of the central nave was increased by up to 2.5 meters, which is easily noticeable on all sides. On the south and north walls, the color of the stone is more greyish and different in masonry. On the west wall, the semicircular shape stands for the previous stage and indicates height of the vault before the reconstruction. Circular windows were introduced on the upper section. Eastern window in the conch was filled and covered with plaster, but the western one is still in use. The windows of the clerestory were doubled in height, and its lower parts (approximately $\frac{1}{4}$) were built in, due to changes to the exterior. The capitals in the interior of this third face of construction are all the same shape, having the form of double cornices, with a circular abacus over the square one. These capitals are found under the arches of the “new” columns,

and on the upper sections, supporting the arches of the conch and of the central cylindrical vault. Similar capitals were made in Parkhali and Oshki [2: ill.124-128]. The vault was rebuilt, and the stone was presumably reused.

Evidence of reconstruction is also easily distinguishable on the facades of Otkhta Eklesia. The line over the arcade and below the circular windows is an indication of the previous height. Another indication can be seen at the clerestory level, where the blind arcade is not bonded to the wall surface, which suggests it was overdone after the first cladding of the walls. The color of the stone in this late edition is slightly darker, which can be easily observed on the south side. The style and masonry work is also different. The fact that the lower parts of the windows were covered by the roofs of the side aisles, indicates that the angle of the sloping roofs was also changed, and made steeper. The newly built parts were re-plastered, again in the central nave, and a new level of paintings was made in the upper parts of the apse wall and in the conch [13: 6-7].

The fourth stage: The small ossuary chapel was built in the west, blocking the western entrance from the outside (Fig.1-2.).

Parkhali was built according to plan (Fig. 3-4). And there is no doubt that Otkhta served as a prototype. Due to continuous repairs, Otkhta had some architectural "errors" that were all polished in Parkhali. The gallery is built within the lateral walls of the last section and had a small arched door accessed by now non-existent stairs in the northern aisle. The church was plastered and painted. The original circular window opening to the east was built inside to create a plain surface for the paintings. All capitals in the central nave of Parkhali are similar to those from the third stage of Otkhta Eklesia, but the ones on the lateral walls and also on the lower level of the gallery are similar to those from the second stage of Otkhta. I can assume that the construction of the second stage of Otkhta and the start of the construction of Parkhali were

close in time. Also, the third stage of Otkhta must have been close to the time when Parkhali was completed.

Parkhali was repaired. The original tiled roof was covered by new ones made of large stone slabs. The ending of the roof, with antefixes a recently discovered one reads: "God, have mercy upon me" is typical to the region and the period was replaced with stone slabs with pointed endings like those in Zegani-Zaki, Khantsta bell-tower, and Zarzma. The angle of the roof was also changed, and was made steeper. The south façade was "decorated" with geometric drawings, including large inscriptions in red paint mentioning the first construction of the vaults/arcade by Curopalates, and the new embellishment initiated by Bishop Ioane. The question is which Ioane was behind these works. I can assume that these two works were done simultaneously, presumably in the late 10th c by Bishop Ioane (980-1001) [14: 193-202].

A narthex was also added to the west, but the date is not clear (Fig. 4.). Recent archeological works showed that this chamber housed "qevri" clay vessels, presumably for the eucharistic wine.

The abandoned building was converted into a mosque during the late 20th c, and some repair works were made by the locals, which included filling in the damaged roof and missing stones with concrete. From 2016-2018, and under the management of the General Directorate of Cultural Heritage Preservation of the Republic of Turkey, restoration works were undertaken by the firm Gürsoy Grup Restoration. The building was cleaned of soil inside and out, the oil paint on the walls from the old mosque was removed, wall paintings under the whitewash were cleaned and conserved, and the concrete was removed and replaced by stone. Drainage channels were installed to prevent damage from coming springs. All openings were shut, but the building is not in use, leading to the noticeable problem of ventilation and increased humidity.

Results of the discussion: it is obvious that the construction of the original church of the Otkhta Eklesia Monastery stands apart. We don't know what the original plan was and what reason laid behind its reconstruction. Takaishvili supposed that the basilica was constructed sometime in the 9th c [1:83-86], dating shared only by Thierry [11:75-76] but rejected by others, the main argument being the scale of the building, which was unusually large for the period. Could it be an early basilica church typical of the late antiquities? Or of the 9th century, as Takaishvili suggested? It is difficult to argue before archeological works are conducted. The slight horseshoe-shape of the apse is an indication of its earlier origins. Regarding the scale, it can not be an exception, as we have a dated 9th c basilica of Nedzvi (30x20m) [8: 157-158, 297], founded by Grigol of Khantsta, to whom is related the establishment of a monastery in Ishkhani, Tao [1:23-44; 2:191-192]. Nedzvi is a different type of basilica, the so-called "Triple Church Basilica". In such churches, known only to be designed in Georgia, the three naves are divided by the walls. Otkhta Eklesia could be a building of this type, and the walls dividing the naves were demolished, but the lateral ones retained. The projecting pilaster with an unfinished surface, now included in the gallery pilasters, can be taken as an indication of this, but this suggestion is mere speculation until archeological works are conducted.

The second stage of construction, is presumed to have happened by the mid 10th century, before 965, when the holy fathers moved to Athos from Otkhta. By that period Otkhta was already a "magnificent" monastery. Large monumental monastic buildings (almost identical to the one in Oshki [2:129-131, 170-171] located to the west of the church indicates that the brotherhood was large

and wealthy. There is no doubt that such a brotherhood had a large church. Soon after the holy fathers move to Athos a massive reconstruction took place (after 965 and before 973 – the construction date of Parkhali). The question "why?" has never been answered. It could be connected with liturgical needs. The relationship with Mount Athos could be an indication that the Constantinopolitan Typicon was introduced to the monastery, and reorganization of the sanctuary was needed according to the new requirements. This is a subject for a different study, but I can assume that the introduction of the Typicon of Athos Monastery rites served as a preparatory stage before the establishment of the Georgian monastery Iviron. Reconstruction of Otkhta was planned, and according to the same plan Parkhali was built by 973. Otkhta must have been completed shortly after. The inscription on the facade, mentioning David as Curopalates, was traditionally taken as an indication of the final reconstruction date (977-1001). But this inscription does not include any information regarding the construction. In the year of 977 he is already named as a Curopalates (Ath.9) [15:337-339]. I assume that at the time scaffolding was still in situ, and inscription was curved to emphasize David's another achievement: his superiority among other members of the family in receiving the Byzantine title.

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მშენებლობის ეტაპები****ი. გივიაშვილი***გიორგი ჩუბინაშვილის სახელობის ქართული ხელოვნების ისტორიისა და ძეგლთა დაცვის
ეროვნული კვლევის ცენტრი**(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ლ. მელიქიშვილის მიერ)*

ოთხთა ეკლესიისა და პარხლის მონასტრები ისტორიულ ტაოში, „ქართველთა სამეფოს“ სასაზღვრო პუნქტებში მდებარეობს. წარმოდგენილ ნაშრომში განხილულია აღნიშნული მონასტრების ეკლესიების სამშენებლო პერიოდები შედარებითი ანალიზისა და ისტორიული ფონის გათვალისწინებით. მრავალწლიანი დაკვირვებებმა აჩვენა, რომ ოთხთა ეკლესიას აქვს მინიმუმ სამი სამშენებლო პერიოდი, ხოლო პარხალს ორი. ოთხთა ეკლესიის ბაზილიკის ოპოს-მიქსტუმით ნაშენი კედლები უადრესი ტაძრის ნარჩენი უნდა იყოს. შესაძლოა აქ, გრიგოლ ხანცთელის დაარსებული ნიშვის მსგავსად, IX ს-ის სამ-ეკლესიანი ბაზილიკა ან სხვა უფრო ადრეული ტაძარი იდგა. მეორე ეტაპზე არსებულ კედლებში კარგად ნათალი ქვით ნაგები ახალი სვეტნარი და პატრონიკე ჩაშენდა, ტაძარი შეიმოსა საპირე ქვით, რაც 965 წლამდე განხორციელდა. მესამე ეტაპზე მოხდა ეკლესიის კიდევ ერთი გრანდიოზული რეკონსტრუქცია, როდესაც აფსიდის სივრცე გაიზარდა პირველი წყვილი ბურჯების აღმოსავლეთისკენ გადაადგილებით. გადაკეთება სავარაუდოდ ათონის მთიდან მოტანილი ახალი ლიტურგიკული წესის დანერგვით იყო გამოწვეული. ოთხთას მესამე სამშენებლო პერიოდი და პარხლის აშენება ერთდროულად განხორციელდა. პარხლის ოთხთავის მინაწერის თანახმად, 973 წლისთვის პარხლის ეკლესია უკვე აშენებული იყო. მოგვიანებით, მას ნაწილობრივ შეუცვალეს სახურავის დაფერდების კუთხე, რაც კათალიკოს იოანეს (980-1001) მიერ ინიცირებული ფასადების გაფორმების თანადროულად უნდა მომხდარიყო. ორივე ეკლესიის დასავლეთით სათავსები მოგვიანებით მიუშენდა, აგების ზუსტი დრო უცნობია.

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