

Fresco-Icons on Façades of Churches in Upper Svaneti (Georgia)

Key words: fresco, icons, facade, chancel barrier, epistyle

The present article addresses fresco-icons constituting Deesis, which are depicted on the south facades of churches of Upper Svaneti (Georgia). Exterior decoration of the church of the Archangels in Iprari and St. George church in Ipkhi bring out multifaceted meaning of the involved iconography (Figs. 1-2, 4-6). The ability to speak to a range of meaningful contexts is one of the main features of the East Christian art and these images, imitating painted icons, prove this concept.

Icons executed in the fresco technique, which are integrated into monumental programs of church decorations, are one of the specific manifestations of the importance of devotional images in Christian religiosity. Predominantly, fresco-icons are incorporated in the apsidal decoration systems¹ (Fig. 8). They are also included in historical compositions,² mostly in representations of funerals or *translatio*,³ and Akathistos cycles.⁴ From the early 13th century fresco icons were integrated in medieval Georgian church interior programs. They were placed in various parts of church buildings – both interiors and exteriors. Fresco-icons are either individual images “hanging” on the walls (Khe 13th-14th cc.) (Figs. 9-10) [Velmans 2002:118], or more frequently, are incorpo-

1 See fresco-icons of the Church Fathers depicted in the apses of St. Sophia in Ochrid, ca. 1140, Bačkovo monastery ossuary church, 2nd half of 12th c., Ziča 1st half of the 13th c., St. Barbara church in village Khe, Upper Svaneti, 13th – 14th cc. [Lazarev 1986: pl. 180, p. 108, for earlier bibliography see p. 218, note 93; p. 227, note 97; Kašanin et.al.1969: 120-121, 123, 125-127; Velmans 2002: 118].

2 In Sučevica the Virgin icon is included in the composition of deposition of her girdle and robe, ca. 1600 [Velmans 1982: 20, fig.16]. See also Moldovica monastery church fresco with the Constantinople siege, 16th c. [Kartsonis 1998: 66, fig. 3-11].

3 Translatio of relics of Stephan Nemanja in Studenica is accompanied with the Virgin icon, 1235, see also fresco in St. George tower, Khilandar, 13th c. [Jurič 2000: 465, 470].

4 Icons of the Virgin of various iconographic types are integrated into Akathistos cycles in Balkans (Markov Monastir, Mateič, Dečani) [Patterson Ševčenko 1991: figs. 9-12]. For representations of icons in icons and miniature painting see Velmans 1982: 3-12, figs.1-2; Patterson Ševčenko 1991: figs. 1-8.

rated into compositions of donors depicted praying in front of icons of Christ or the Virgin and Child.⁵ Fresco-icons preserved on the mentioned church facades in Upper Svaneti – in a remote highland province in the north-west part of Georgia demonstrate interesting usage of “translation” of devotion images and adds new spiritual dimension to them. Particular character of these compositions and their meaning raise a number of issues dealing with functions of Christian images. Further I will try to offer some possible explanations of this phenomenon and will consider various sources and motivations of such pictorial *mimesis*.

Both churches with decorated south facades displaying fresco-icons are small single nave churches covered with barrel vaults and are presumably dated back to the 10th century. The exteriors of churches, built from local stone, lack articulated architectural decoration. The churches built outside the inhabited areas face the villages by their south facades. The modest size and plain exteriors of these churches are typical features of local religious architecture of the 9th-11th cc.

The church of the Archangels in Iprari is well known by its interior murals executed in 1096 by the “king’s artist Tevdore” [Aladashvili et al. 1983: 33-55] (Fig. 3). Facade murals dramatically differ from interior decoration which is one of the masterpieces of Medieval Georgian painting. The western arched doorway, narrow apsidal and western windows interrupt integrity of façade walls. On the upper part of the south facade are depicted seven fresco icons⁶ (figs. 1-2). Today the facade decoration is severely damaged and only fragments of figures, backgrounds, and frames are discernible (fig.1). The monumental Deesis “icon set” unrolls across the entire length of the south facade. Several decades ago the state of preservation of these murals was much better. A central icon depicting in half-length frontal blessing Christ was flanked by “icons” of the Virgin and Archangel on the right. Evidently the left side from Christ was occupied by “icons” of St. John the Baptist and another Archangel [Aladashvilia, Volskaja 1987: 104-105]. Other images, now lost, might have

5 See Kincvisi St. Nicholas church composition with George III, Tamar and her son George-Lasha before the image of Christ, first decade of 13th c., Sumbat and Liparit Orbeli in supplication before the image of the Virgin with Child in Betania, early 13th c., Bertubani fresco depicts Tamar and George-Lasha in an attitude of supplication before the “icon” of the Virgin *Vevea Elpis*, 1213; [Alibegashvili 1979: 23, 25, pls. 12, 14, 18, 19]; About Bertubani composition see Chichinadze 2012; There was also attempt to identify half length framed figures of saints depicted in Tsirkoli as fresco-icons, 9th-10th cc, but to my view such direct duplication of icons here is less probable [Sheviakova 1983: pls. 116-117]; Certain influence of icons could be seen in frontal half-length “iconic” saints depicted on the west and north walls of St. George of Kalaubani (the 1150s) [Privalova 1979: 139, 142].

6 About these images see: Aladashvili 1987: esp. pp. 101, 104-105, 106, 107-108, fig. 32, 1.

been Sts. Peter and Paul, Evangelists, or other saints. Each of these fresco-icons, constituting the Deesis set, has an individual, simple frame with a geometric pattern of interchanged red ochre and white oblong segments. Such frames, typical of local painted icons, clearly indicate that their “models” were familiar portable icons. An icon of the Archangel with such decorated frame is still housed in the Iprari church [Chichinadze 2011:117, pl. 31] (Fig. 11). Similarly are decorated frames of the 13th-14th cc. icons: St. Barbara icon from the Historical and Ethnographical Museum of Svaneti (further HEMS)⁷ and an icon of the Prophet Jonah from the church of Ienash, Latali [Iosebidze, Burchuladze 1987: 227, cat. N34]. In the 1970s on the lower part of the facade the outline of a large figure with traces of inscription identifying him as St. Eusthatios was barely visible [Aladashvili, Volskaja 1987:105]. The extremely fragmentary state of preservation of Deesis does not allow us today to date it with precision, but certain stylistic elements (flat and stiff figures, bold linearity, local colors, etc.) connect these murals to the 13th-14th century local school of painting.⁸

Another church, where fresco-icons were incorporated into the facade decoration program is St. George church in the village of Ipkhi (Figs. 4-6). The Interior murals are dated back to the late 10th-early 11th cc. [Aladashvili et al. 1983:27]. The south facade of this church displays Deesis with eleven figures (frescoes are obliterated and heavily damaged): half-length Christ is flanked by the virgin, St. John (Fig. 5), the Archangels, Sts. Peter and Paul, and Evangelists Mathew and Mark. The figures are inscribed in Georgian. The state of preservation of the painting does not supply us with sufficient stylistic data to attribute their execution to precise period. However, the flattened forms of disproportional figures, their simplified inner design and restricted colors lead us to suppose that these figures belong to a provincial master of the late 13th-early 14th cc.⁹ All images were painted in one frame imitating a single panel – horizontal templon beams designated for architraves of chancel barriers, which were widespread in the Byzantine world.¹⁰ The Deesis is located in the middle of the facade, between the entrance and the window. The composition does not start at the west end of the wall. Instead, it unfolds from the western edge of the doorway. On the south façade, along with the Deesis, were

7 St. Barbara icon is not published.

8 Aladashvili and Volskaja date the facade painting by 12th century, but no relevant arguments are provided for this date [Aladashvili, Volskaja 1987:106]; for local “school” of painting see Alibegashvili 1978: 171-174 and Aladashvili et al. 1983:117ff, 124.

9 N. Aladashvili and A. Volskaja has attributed the painting to a 13th century skillful master [Aladashvili, Volskaja: 1987: 108].

10 For chancel barrier beams see Weitzmann 1984: 64ff.; About Deesis epistyles see Chatzidakis 1979: 333-364; esp. pp. 335, 345; See also *Byzantine Art* 1964: N17, 26; Bettini 1984: 54-62; Evans, Wixom 1997: 43 cat. N9, 377, cat.N248.

depicted full-length frontal images of five warrior saints [ibid.: 108]. Now only an outline of a halo of the left figure represented in the east part of the south wall is visible (Fig. 6) (I avoid any discussions about these figures, as due to the lack of visual evidence my judgments will be speculative).

Insignificant remnants of painting on the south facade of Sts. Cerycos and Jullita church, Lagourka, permit the scholars to suppose that here by analogy to the mentioned church façades were also depicted fresco imitation of Deesis icons [ibid.: 106]. Thus it could be assumed, that in Upper Svaneti depiction of the fresco-icons on the exterior walls was a stable iconographic tradition. The Deesis fresco-icons of Svaneti churches are nourished by numerous sources (textual, artistic, etc.). Furthermore, their analysis enables us to perceive the logic of their appearance on the façades and to determine more precisely their “functional fields”.

Adornment of the church façades with fresco decoration was a well-known practice in the orthodox world.¹¹ In the scholarly discourse there are different explanations of the purpose and motivation of the placing of murals on exterior walls of churches – it is assumed that painting was a cheaper substitute for relief carving. The apotropaic role of facade imagery also must be taken into consideration. The belief in the protective power of Christian images is traced back to the 4th century both in the East and in the West. In the West such practice is confirmed by the extensively cited text of Theodoret referring to St. Symeon Stylite’s images placed “in the porches of all the workshops” in Rome in order “to obtain protection and security” [Mango 2000: 41]. Protective function of images (mostly symbols) going back to Judaic practice is encountered in early Christian Syria. In the 4th-6th century dwellings’ door lintels, windows and galleries have various symbols with protective connotations [Peña 1997: 169ff].¹² The small size of churches in Svaneti, restricted access to the church for women in this region, and a desire to extend the limits of sacred space could be other reasons for enhancing the façades with murals [Aladashvili, Volskaja 1987: 97]. It could also be assumed that these iconic images served as markers of adjacent extra liturgical space near the churches, which was reserved for certain religious rites. To understand the motivation of placing fresco-icons on the southern external walls in the Georgian province, we need to know what type of services (rituals) were performed at south walls in this area, or in their vicinity. Regrettably, we do not know for what kind of religious activity this area is designated for. Modern cemeteries surrounding

11 For early bibliography on façade decoration see Orlova 1978; About this tradition in the west see Leoni 2008.

12 About this subject see Maguire 1994.

both churches allow us to suppose that these places must have been a traditional funeral site for the local community. Further archeological and architectural analysis of these structures could shed some light on this issue.

In his study of church façade murals of Moldova, A. Grabar connects this particular phenomenon with open exonarthexes decorated with monumental paintings. He sees the origins of such interrelations in the 14th century Serbian churches [Grabar 1933: 370-372]. Iconographic analyses have revealed that façade murals repeat eschatological and soteriological iconography of narthexes, where Deesis is often depicted [Kalopissi-Verti 2003]. Mentioned analogies between façade frescoes and narthexes reveal much deeper and more meaningful connections between the interior and exterior decoration programs of churches. Sofia Kalopissi-Verti argues, that monumental enframed *proskynetaria* images placed in the vicinity of sanctuaries are repeated in the narthex programs of Byzantine churches of the Palaiologan period [Kalopissi-Verti 2003:131]. Such iconographic parallelism is explained by symbolic interpretation of church buildings and is determined by intention to mark different liminal zones of sacred spaces [ibid.: 129]. At the same time, eschatological and intercessory imagery of the narthexes – the Virgin Pareklesis, Christ, often accompanied by epithets directly referring to the Last Judgment, and Deesis – reflect the function of this space (Fig. 12). Moreover, narthexes often served as burial places for the founders and their family members [ibid.: 130].¹³

In addition to open galleries and exonarthexes, which influenced organization of the outer walls' decoration, other driving forces for this artistic development should be considered. First of all, we shall draw our attention to a custom of decorating church façades with figured reliefs, which is a distinctive characteristic of Medieval Georgian religious architecture. The earliest relief compositions of Georgian churches are dated back to the 5th-6th cc. Traditionally south façades of medieval Georgian churches are decorated with semantically important relief representations. Their subjects vary from individual figures to complex compositions.¹⁴ The thought-out elaborate systems of

13 For bibliography on this subject see note 111 in Kalopissi-Verti 2006. It is remarkable, that already in the 10th century the intercessory composition of the Deesis emerged as a main subject for funerary chapel (e.g. the apse of the funeral chapel of St. John church, Güllü Dere, Cappadocia, between 913-920) [Jolivet-Lévy 1997: 55].

14 The Ascension relief decorates the south doorway of Qvemo Bolnisi church, 5th c. [Aladashvili 1977: ill.11], Akaurta church south entrance is embellished with symbolic-ornamental composition, 5th-6th cc. [Machabeli 2014: 45-47; figs. 33-35] On the south façade of the church of the Holy Cross in Mtskheta, (586/7-604) above the entrance is placed the Ascension of the Cross – elucidated dedication of the church. Western part of the same façade displays the Ascension of Christ [Chubinashvili 1948:133-156].

relief decoration unfold before viewers in 9th-10th century church façades.¹⁵ From the 11th century the shift is made from figured reliefs to sophisticated architectural patterns (system of decorative arches, niches, ornamented windows and portals with floral, geometric, zoomorphic and symbolic images) in the outer decorations of Georgian churches.¹⁶

It is true that Deesis is not a characteristic subject for the repertory of Georgian medieval church façade reliefs, but this eschatological subject was extensively incorporated in their apsidal programs.¹⁷ The interrelation between interior and exterior is visually stressed in Svaneti churches – both in Iprari and in Ipkhvi apsidal conchs of sanctuary display Deesis: in Iprari there is a half-length *trimorphon*, while in Ipkhvi, a full length visionary-type Deesis is accompanied by the Archangels. Façade paintings of Ipkhvi, depicting together with Deesis Sts. Warriors go even further as in the interior on the south slop of the vault, we see two figures of Saint Warriors executed in the 10th – 11th centuries [Aladashvili et al. 1983: 24].

For our investigation a valuable material is provided by a dazzling decoration of the Oshki cathedral situated in historical Tao, the south-west region of the country. The church of St. John the Baptist located in the administrative center of Tao-Klarjeti, has an elaborated façade decoration (963-973).¹⁸ The south façade has a main functional and aesthetic significance. The church is accessible from the South and therefore, this part is particularly enhanced with architectural and sculptural decoration. The south porch, south-west open gallery, south transept windows decorated with sculptural representations of the Archangels, and the monumental Deesis composition including donors, local governors, David III *magistros* and *courapalates* (d. 1001) and his brother Bagrat Eristavt Eristavi (d. 966) are the main components completing the majestic appearance of this outstanding structure. The Deesis is represented for the second time on the western face of the octagonal column in the south-west gallery. It is significant that underneath this *pareklesion* laid a crypt, presumably with tombs of the local royal family [Takaishvili 1952:46]. Therefore, the twice depicted Deesis indicates certain links between this part of building and the deceased.¹⁹ We have other cases of using of the south spaces for burials (e.

15 E. g. Opiza, Nikortzinda, Doliskana, Oshki, Khakhuli [Winfield 1968; Jobadze 2007 :28-30, 79-81, 135-140, 171-175; Aladashvili 1977: 143-192].

16 E. g. 11th century constructions: Samtavro, Samtavisi, Sveticxoveli, Savane, etc. [Schmerling 1942; Beridze 1942: 106ff.].

17 About programs of Georgian church apses see Thierry 1974; Aladashvili 1983; Velmans 2002: 33-79

18 For bibliography see note 14.

19 In his discussion of the importance of south porches of medieval Georgian churches Antony Eastmond even suggested that their function was similar to Byzantine church

g. Khtisi, Bodbe, Khobi) [Chubinashvili 1959:84; Lortkipanidze 1978]²⁰ (Figs. 13-14).

The traditional location of elaborate decorations on the south external wall (both figurative and architectural) of medieval Georgian churches must be explained by the exceptional function of these parts of the buildings. As it is attested in numerous churches, the south doorway was a principle entrance leading to the liturgical space. These entrances for certain have an important ceremonial function. In Ipkhi the painted “epistyle” with Deesis stresses the entrance. Although the Archangels’ church of Iprari has only one door in the west end of the building, it could be assumed that the tradition of emphasizing the southern parts of churches (and their south entrances accordingly) is transmitted in the decoration system of this church.

The significance of the south façade in Georgian church architecture needs further justification, but at this point it is possible to suggest some explanation of the particular role of this part of church buildings. The marking of the south façades with murals could be linked with the early medieval practice of erecting monumental stone crosses near south façades of Georgian churches (e.g. Kumurdo, Old Muskhi, Tmogvi, St. George church in v. Ratevani, etc.) [Severov, Chubinashvili 1947: pl. XVI; Machabeli 2013: 207-208]. This custom echoes Jerusalem religious practice. According to reconstruction based on the analysis of various sources the cross marking Golgotha (together with relics) was erected to the south of Golgotha basilica *martyrion*, where according to Egeria, 4th century pilgrim, the commemoration of the Crucifixion took place [Machabeli 2014; 35; Ousterhout 2008: 48-49]. The mentioned tradition is proved in 11th century historical narration of Leonti Mroveli “Erection of the True Cross” dealing with the Christianization of East Georgia – Kingdom of Iberia, 4th century. We read that the cross “was erected at the south door of church...” [Kaukhchishvili 1955: 119-120].²¹

The specific accent made on the south façade could also be conditioned by position of Jerusalem in respect of Georgia. Jerusalem, laying in the south from Georgia, was a place connected for believers to the Sacrifice and Resurrection and accordingly to redemption of their sins and further salvation.

narthexes [Eastmond 2003: 35]. This important element of medieval Georgian religious architecture needs a special investigation and further definition.

20 Vakhtang Jobadze assumes that in Khakhuli monastery the south church, near the wall surrounding the monastery, served as ossuary. He sees the proof of this assumption in tympanum decoration representing monumental Flourishing Cross [Jobadze 2007:126]. On the south of Samtzevrisi church (6th-7th c.) is a funeral chapel dated back to the 16th century (fig. 15-16).

21 I am indebted to my colleague Ketevan Abashidze who indicated to me this source.

At this point there may be a question whether the depiction of fresco-icons on façades is a conscious attempt to stress an importance of icons and to present them in a new way, or this is a provincial version of relief sculptural decoration repeated in a cheaper material by provincial masters? The attempt to answer these questions will be made in following part of the article.

As it was already pointed out façade murals of the discussed churches deliberately refer to iconic prototypes depicting Deesis. Moreover, it seems that painters/ commissioners wanted to represent particular religious objects – elements of liturgical furnishing – *templon* icons here.²² This suggests that chancel barrier and its symbolic and visual context will help to understand the meaning of these decorations. Such visual citation sends us back to the church interior and directs us towards sanctuary. The apsidal part of the Christian church, referred to as the sanctuary and containing altar for bloodless sacrifice, is the architectural, symbolic, and ceremonial focus of building. The barrier between sacred space (Holy of Holies) and nave, decorated with holy images (both in fresco painting and icon painting), enhances and comments upon the function of the “Holy of Holies”. Chancel barriers of various types (wooden, built, carved. etc.) decorated with “holy images” acknowledge the mystical presence of “divine energies” and denote a fragile bridge between temporal and eternal, heaven and earth.²³

The Archangels’ church of Iprari is still preserved an arched chancel barrier with fresco decoration executed together with wall decoration by the master named Tevdore, who indicated his title “kings’ painter” on the chancel barrier beam [Aladashvili et al. 1983: 30] (Fig. 3). On both sides from the central “royal door” of the *templon*, in the spandrels are depicted in half-length two pairs of saints – on the right Sts. Demeter and Stephen and Sts. Cerycos and Juletta on the left [Aladashvili et al. 1983: 52, ill. 28-29]. In Ipkhi chancel barrier formed from slender columns established on elevated platform, support entablature perforated with arched openings (60 cm high) [Schmerling 1962: 227-228] (Fig. 7). It was decorated by ornamental patterns, which is now hardly discernible.

The extent Byzantine *templon* architrave icons with the Deesis demonstrate varying visual concepts. The Deesis is depicted either on one panel²⁴ or is consti-

22 On the development of Byzantine *templon* decoration with earlier bibliography see Gerstel 1999; Kalopissi-Verti 2006: 107, note 1. Decoration of *templon* with icons is discussed in Chatzidakis 1979; Weitzmann 1984; Belting 1994: 233-249; About Russian iconostasis see Florensky 1995.

23 On the symbolism of a sanctuary and a chancel barrier see Gerstel 1999, 2006.

24 See iconostasis beam with the Deesis early 13th century work of Russian icon-painting. See also 13th century crusader epistyle from Sinai and Torcello cathedral 14th century frieze, which is a copy of Byzantine work; Lazarev 1983: 167, N19; Lazarev 1986: figs. 437-

tuted from individual icons.²⁵ There are cases when the central composition of the three-figured Deesis (*trimorphon*) is accompanied with Theotokos and hagiographic cycles.²⁶ In Svaneti there are two Deesis epistyles: damaged fragment (the right part) of a horizontal beam with the half-figures of the two supplicated Apostles is a masterpiece of Palaielogan painting [Chichinadze 2011: 119, pl. 39] and Another one constituted from individual icons is preserved *in situ*, in the church of St. Barbara in village Khe. The last one is a product of a mediocre local master of 14th c (?) [Schmerling 1962: 256] (Fig. 17). One more set from separate icons constituting the Great Deesis comes from the church of St. George of Ubisa and is dated back to the 14th century [Seibt, Sanikidze 1981: 130]. Several masonry (built) chancel barriers enhanced with fresco compositions from the later period also represent the Great Deesis (St. Nicholas Chapel Udabno, Tskhrakara of Matani, Alvani St. John Baptist church, Nekresi, 16th c., 17th century two-register Deesis in the monastery church of Dirbi) [Schmerling 1962: 254; Chikhladze, Gagoshidze 2006: 86, pls. 27-30]²⁷ (Figs. 18-19). Even these accidentally survived examples allow us to assume that in medieval Georgia the Deesis was a traditional iconographic subject for chancel barriers.

In sacred spaces visual markers participate in the orchestration of the ritual performed there. They direct and redirect the attention of worshipers and facilitate the perceiving of sacred topography of the church and mysteries taking place there. The central place of the Deesis in templon decoration has an explanation – in its laconic visual formula are explicitly pronounced main concepts of Christianity. Participation in the rituals and consequent redemption through liturgical and non-liturgical prayers, as well as an advocacy for suppliants, shape the soteriological content of this composition. Together with liturgical and redemptive meaning, the Deesis has an eschatological connotation.

439; Belting 1994:239, fig. 144; 12 century icons with Sts. Philip, Theodore and Demeter from Athos (now in Hermitage) presumably were part of the Grand Deesis [Khatzidakis 1979: 345].

25 Although number of individual icons constituting Deesis (the Virgin, the Archangels, Holy Apostles in supplication) examined by Weitzmann, are considered as inter-columnar icons, it is highly possible that they decorated epistyle [Weitzmann 1984: 86ff]; On this subject see Aspra-Vardavakis 1999.

26 E. g. Two parts of a beam with scenes from the life of the Virgin and the Dodecaorton, the beam with Trimorphon and St. Eustratios hagiographic scenes, both from Sinai, 2nd half of 12th c., Sinai 1990:106, pls. 20-22, 25. Michael Attaleiates (1077) mentions “templon, which also has in the middle the Deesis and the story of the venerable and holy Forerunner (St. John) [Thomas et al. 2000: 357].

27 One of the relief slabs of chancel barrier from Sapara also depicts Deesis, a damaged fragmentary figure of a slab belonging to the chancel barrier from Khovle is identified as St. John the Baptist from the Deesis. Both panels are dated back to the 11th century [Schmerling 1962: 120-126, pls. 32, 37b].

The core of Deesis (*trimorphon*) – the incarnated God flanked by supplicants – the Theotokos and St. John Precursor – reveals the major dogmas of Chalcedonian teaching dogma. The Virgin, who gave him flesh, underlines his human nature, while St. John the Baptist acknowledged his divinity and foretold the Last Judgment and his eternal Glory (Mathew 3; 2, 11).²⁸ It is also possible to see in this iconographic formula triple *theophany* – revealing Christ's Divine nature at his birth (Nativity embodied by the Virgin), at Baptism (St. John the Baptist) and at Last Judgment, when the final Great apocalyptic theophany (foretold by John) will unfold. The inclusion of other “participants” of supplicatory prayer in Deesis compositions – Apostles, Evangelists, Prophets and/or saints, is also consistent as they witness His divinity. Thus, the Deesis (either trimorphon or the Great Deesis) on the sanctuary barriers visualizes concepts imbued in the Christian faith and emphasizes the importance of the space demarcated by the templon.

Clear references of Iprari and Ipkhi façade fresco-icons to chancel barrier recall symbolism of the Church. Church as a body of Christ, as a Heaven on Earth, could be considered as one of the basic concepts for our investigation. Chancel barrier, decorated with holy images, is a crucial point of sacred space denoting the sanctuary – a place of performance of Holy Sacraments during the Liturgy. In this ritual, aiming for the union of the faithful with God, spiritual reality is experienced through symbols (architectural, visual, sacramental, etc.). Visual aspect of service, together with liturgical vessels, furnishing and images incorporated into the liturgical space (apse murals, templon images) bear powerful religious statements. Various spatial devices mark the exclusive sacred value of the sanctuary and chancel barrier is one of them. Templon decorated with icons and dividing sanctuary from the rest of the church (naos), marks the threshold of the sacred space, where sacraments are performed. Church façades with fresco-icons similarly mark barrier between the inner – sacred and other non-sacred, or profane, realms.

The depiction of the Deesis on the southern façades in a “guise” of templon beams does not contradict our earlier assumption about funerary context of these compositions. The consistency of decoration finds theological support in mistagogical interpretations of church and its rituals. In his treatise “On the Divine Liturgy” Germanos, the patriarch of Constantinople (715-730), says that apse “corresponds to the cave in Bethlehem where Christ was born, as well as the cave in which he was buried”. About chancel barrier we read, that “The barriers, made of bronze, are like those around the Holy Sepulchre, so that no

²⁸ See also Mark: 1; 10, 15.

one might enter there by accident”²⁹ These interpretations alluding to Christ’s burial are additional arguments for linking templon imagery imitated in exterior murals, with funeral context.

St. Maximus the Confessor’ interprets the church as an icon of God. He distinguishes two facets of church, which unifies visible and invisible: sanctuary represents a heaven and nave the earth:

“The nave is the sanctuary in potency by being consecrated by the relationship of the sacrament toward its end, and in turn the sanctuary is the nave in act by possessing the principle of its own sacrament, which remains one and the same in its two parts.”³⁰

It could be assumed that such mystagogical “spatial shift” was behind the depiction of templon iconic beam in the church exteriors. Maximus’ interpretation of church as an icon of God, expresses the essence of church as a Holy space, which unites two realities, two worlds – created and uncreated, body and spirit, tangible and intangible.

Painted templon and façade fresco-icons are conceptually bound as iconography of Deesis, embodiment of intercessory prayers, alludes to the rite of Proskomidia [Kantorovicz1942].³¹ Thus Deesis is linked with the sanctuary, where bloodless sacrifice is prepared and offered, both in visual and in ritual terms.

Discussed façade murals once again address us to the complex relations between the individual parts of Christian “sacred spaces” as well as to the symbolic duplication of church elements (architectural, visual, spatial, etc.). Multiple thresholds of religious structures are marked in various manners and façade fresco-icons reproducing templon decoration is one of them. According to Christian tradition, the powers of celestial archetypes mystically spread through icons within and beyond sacred spaces and mark significant *loci* transferring special encoded information to the audience. The templon imagery, applying to those to whom the sanctuary is not approachable, is a liminal marker. Likewise, the façade fresco-icons depicting Deesis function as templon imagery, addressing to the space in front of them.

Given the considerations, the message of the discussed murals have wide religious context. They reveal a certain continuity of tradition and permit to

29 English quotation from http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0720_germanus/02_div-liturgy.htm.

30 St. Maximus Confessor, *The Church’s Mystagogy* English quotations from http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@texts/0650_max-con/02_max-txt1.htm#Theosis.

31 Although Christopher Walter, who dedicated number of his publications to the Deesis concludes that “relationship between the Great Deesis and liturgical development ...now stands in greatest need of further investigation” [Walter 1980:269].

place them within mainstream of cultural developments. First of all, the visual references of devotional images encountered on façades of the churches in Upper Svaneti stress the importance of the icon veneration and their role in religious life of the faithful. Iconographic similarities between Byzantine church narthexes and Georgian church façades with pseudo-icons, as well as mystagogical explanation of the liturgical space, lead us to suppose that the southern exterior parts of discussed churches or/and alleged spaces have been reserved for special function and services accordingly (allegedly burials and appropriate funeral and commemorative services). Considered façades reflecting centuries-long local tradition of façade relief decoration could be perceived as an intertwining of “cultural memory” with contemporary developments of religious arts in Byzantine cultural eucomene. The assumptions expressed here aim to demonstrate some new aspects of engagement of sacred potential of icons and their role in structuring of sacred (ritual) spaces. Fresco-icons depicted on the façades of Svaneti churches enrich visual and structural devices serving as a demarcation of sacred and profane realms. Such duplication of liturgical space in the outer parts of churches is one more proof of the flexibility and creativity of medieval artistic and clerical circles. Indicated practice aimed to interpret and re-interpret liturgical and more widely redemptive scenario offered by Christian faith. It is not possible to claim that this decoration program was an innovation of local masters. Rather, it could be an echo of some earlier developments modified to accommodate actual religious ceremonial needs in this remote province of medieval Georgia.

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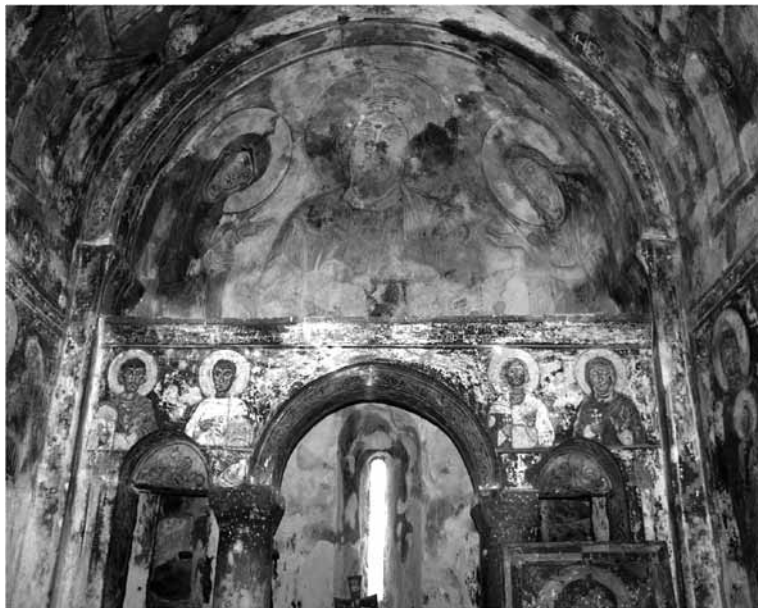
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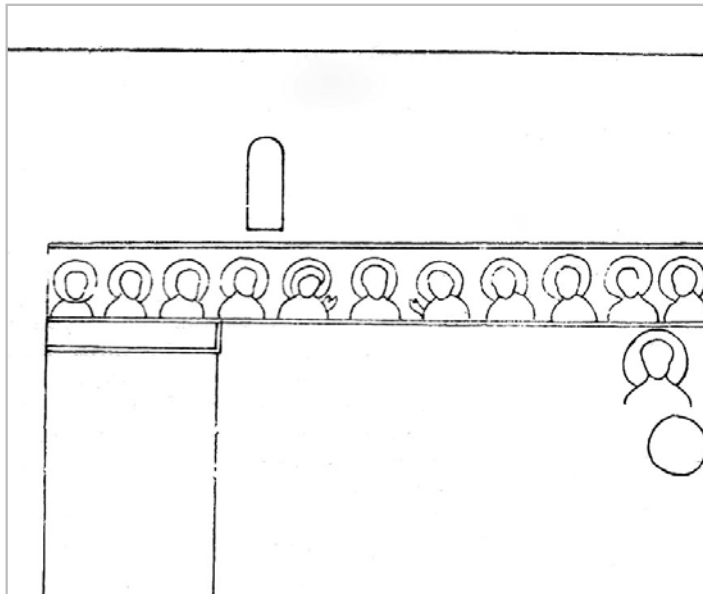
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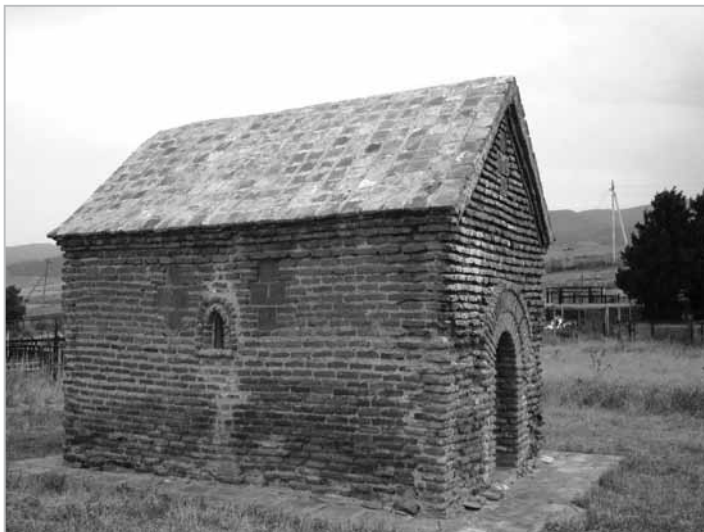
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სურ. / Pic. 16



სურ. / Pic. 17



სურ. / Pic. 18



სურ. / Pic. 19