

Theological Meaning of the Paintings of Matskhvarishi Archangel's Church

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Abstract: This article discusses the fresco paintings of Zemo Svaneti Latali Matskvarishi Church of the Archangels and their ideological-theological designation. In these paintings the iconography of the scenes of the Christological cycle, their compositional structure are noticeably complicated. The subjects are not arranged in either historical or chronological order and various iconographic schemes are employed. Concepts of the Resurrection and Sacrifice, which are presented in the sanctuary and the western wall decor, are further developed on the walls of the church. The scenes placed in different registers echo each other ideologically and make up the image of Christ's glory in the arch. Specific sections present the scenes that are unified within a theological concept, related to each other in a semantic way that clearly shows deep theological thoughts distinguished by including different scenarios: annunciation, revelation, victim, resurrection and salvation of conceptual accents are distributed on the wall- arch. Announcement concerning the embodiment of the Lord, his wordly eminence ("Annunciation," "Nativity"), manifestation of the divine nature of Christ Redeemer ("Candlemas," "Transfiguration," "The raising of Lazarus", "Descent of the Holy Spirit," "Dormition of the Mother of God"), sacrifice offered by him

(“The crucifixion”), resurrection – arrival with glory, (“Resurrection”, “Christ of Old Days”) The above-mentioned ensemble of paintings is associated with the salvation of the soul and the concept of the resurrection.

Keywords: *Zemo Svaneti, Church, Mural painting, Iconography, Theological thought.*

Paintings in Matskvarshi Taringzeli church, Zemo Svaneti, follow the artistic trends of painting and iconographic schemes developed during the Paleolog period. At the same time, the principles of building the composition practised in the Christian period are also evident. In general, archaic motifs can be considered as a specific feature of Zemo Svaneti painting. At various stages of development, an active and constant interaction between “old” and “new” resulted in apparent individual character of paintings in Svaneti [2, pp. 25-39]. Despite following the artistic views and movements existing in the Orthodox world, the characteristic trends are perceived in a unique way, typical of the Georgian arts and, especially, of the art of Zemo Svaneti; Specifically, they are adjusted to and synthesized with the traditional artistic thinking and taste. It is clear that, the paintings of Taringzeli church do not belong to so called professional painting and stand closer to the Medieval art, known as “Provincial” style existing simultaneously with the professional art, which implies inspiration and imitation of professional painting patterns, but lacks sophistication and refined skills typical of the former. The so called “provincial” style was created on the basis of the local art schools, where the artists worked on painting churches and illustrating manuscripts. Although they tried to replicate the iconographic or stylistic principles developed in high-profile artistic schools, they still could not reach the corresponding artistic level due to a lesser degree of scholarly skills and knowledge.

The Archangels Church is situated in Zemo Svaneti, in the village of Matskvarishi of Latali community. The church is erected on the hill, near the Saviour church referred to as Matskhvar (pic. 1; 2). The church is built with fine, trimmed quadrangle travertine. The entrances are from the south and

west. The windows are opened in the east, south and western walls. On the south and east side of the church there is a small stone substruction and the walls are surrounded by an ornamental shaft pedestal. The cornice with a modest profile, which goes around the building, is still well preserved [1]. The ledge of the semicircular apse is decorated with five arches made of an ornamental shaft. On the western facade, above the door, the relief cross is depicted (pic. 3; 4).

In the central arch of the eastern facade of the church, above the window, the Virgin with the child is portrayed. The painting is heavily damaged and only the contours and color fragments are readable. Here, in the arch of the southern part there is a head and semi-figure of a saint visible. The inscription that would identify him is not readable. N. Aladashvili and A. Volskaya consider that the facade art should have been created by the same master craftsmen, who painted the interior of the church [7, pp. 118-119].

In the interior of the church, like other hall churches, the arch relies on pilasters. There are two niches in the altar - on the North and South, and at the bottom of the window there is a communion altar. The altar and a hall are separated from each other by the altar wall (pic. 3). In the hall, the south, west and north walls are surrounded below by a single level step. The Archangels Church [1] is believed to be built in the 13th-14th centuries.

The interior of the church is wholly covered with murals (the approximate date of their creation is the 16th century) and includes a Christological cycle from "Annunciation" to "Dormition of the Mother of God". There are four compositions on the southern wall: "Nativity", "Epiphany", "The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple" and "Dormition of the Mother of God". On the northern wall there are the following compositions: "Annunciation", "Transfiguration", "Pentecost", "Crucifixion". On the western wall, there are three scenes: "Resurrection of Lazarus" (in the lunette and in the middle of the register), "Resurrection" and "Entry into Jerusalem". The lower registers of the walls are covered by frescoes of St. Warriors and St. Mothers. On the pilasters, on the full-size figures of the prophets David and Solomon, Peter

and Paul Apostles and the figures of charitable healers, Kosmas and Damian, are placed. The following scenes are represented on the arch: "Ascension", holy Mandylion and "Christ of Old Days".

Narrow stripes in sanguine divide the registers and scenes of various sizes. Architectural forms (window openings, pilasters, wall angles) also play the role of the border. All scenes and separate images are interpreted in the inscriptions in Asomtavruli.

The iconographic program presented in Matskvarishi Taringzeli church paintings is drawn in the way to foreground a deep theological significance of the décor. The iconography of the presented scenes and their compositional structure are noticeably complicated. The plots are not arranged in either a historical or a chronological order. This less traditional division of the scenes became the established rule in the samples following the "folk" directions only later, in the 16th-17th centuries [4, p. 375]. While setting up the general iconographic program of painting, the Master does not avoid employing of various iconographic schemes and fully represents the general theological idea of the paintings – eternal salvation through sacrifice.

The iconographic schemes of the Taringzeli painting are based on the art of the Palaeologue era, generally, widely spread in the 13th-14th centuries: plurality of figures, architectural backgrounds united by velum, original representation of landscape elements ("Nativity", "Epiphany," "Entry into Jerusalem," "Resurrection"). "Christ of Old Days" represented in Taringzeli church in the arch, appear in the Georgian art from the 14th century. This peculiarity, which may be connected to the local art school, is presented through a simple, specific, laconic opening of separate scenes ("Presentation of Jesus at the Temple", "Resurrection of Lazarus", "Ascension"). In addition, there is a rare iconographic detail in the "Epiphany" – a box with a violet lid under the feet of John the Baptist, that indicates the future sacrifice to be made by the martyr [5, p. 101].

A well thought-over theological program will only be perceived if separate compositions and images are not read in a traditional way, but through interconnected separate

scenes. In the Christian Eastern art of the high Middle Ages, the complication of the contents of theological programs and images is especially noticeable. If we read the scenes grouped in the Taringzeli décor in this way, starting from the “Annunciation”, the way implemented through the mission of the Holy Spirit can easily be observed [4, p. 239].

The typical arrangement of uneven compositions opposite, above and below each other, characteristic for the Georgian wall painting decore patterns of the end of the 15th and 16th century are united by one idea. Specific sections present the scenes connected to each other semantically, through the theological conceptualization, by which deep theological thinking is clearly visible in different scenes: annunciation, revelation, sacrifice, resurrection, and salvation. Distribution of ideological accents is explicitly felt on the walls and arch.

The altar composition “Glory of Christ” is thought to be a semantic and compositional dominant of the ensemble of paintings. Here it is changed and reveals the signs of the later period: archangels clad in Imperial garments, turned to Christ in three – quarter view, with hands posed in a gesture of a prayer or worship, must have been presented under the influence of the Paleologic art, which, was established in later monuments. On apse walls St. Fathers are depicted with open liturgy texts rolls, worshipping Christ’s crucifixion the Golgotha cross, which is the symbol of the Eucharistic sacrifice and which is painted in the niches and communion altar. The whole register is perceived as a specific manifestation of worship, in which the cross, as the symbol of crucifixion, refers to the implementation of the Christian mission [8, p. 51].

The image of the Savior, glorified by the angels, was almost the only theme from the first half of the 7th century to the end of the 10th century. It is found in different forms in early monuments. The most frequently presented is a two-register scene similar to the “Ascension” scheme. This topic was particularly close to the Syrian, Palestine, Cappadocian, Egyptian Coptic churches. In this theme, mostly separate elements of prophetic vision are involved. In Georgia, this

tradition originates from the mosaic décor of Tsromi church [2, p. 25].¹

From Svaneti paintings, Christ among the archangels is first attested in Atsi Savior's Church (X c.), where Christ's semi-figure is presented between standing archangels, as well as between Tetramorphs and the Seraph. In the painting of Nesgun (10th c.), Christ is seated on the throne, among the archangels. The Savior is presented as the ruler of the universe, the Archbishop, with the Archangels clad in Imperial garments, similar to his heavenly guardians [6, p. 3]. Christ between the Archangels, the Cherub and Seraph is the only composition presented in Matskhvarishi Taringzeli church from the paintings in Zemo Svaneti of the later time [6, p. 15]. From the 16th century, this composition appears in in the conch of the Gelati St. Elijah Church [4, pp. 121-123].

The ideas of the theophany, resurrection, and sacred tribute revealed in the altar decor echo the "Resurrection of Lazarus", "Entry into Jerusalem", "Resurrection" as well as the ideas of Christ's resurrection and Triumph are presented on the western wall (pic. 4). The resurrection of Lazarus is the annunciation of the resurrection of Christ and the universal resurrection, the overthrow of hell and the last judgement day. The entry into Jerusalem is the overthrowing of ancient Jerusalem, the creation of the new, the glorification of the Lord's life on earth, the revelation of the divine kingdom.

"Resurrection" and Victims, which are presented in the altar and the western wall decor, are developed on the walls of the church. The scenes placed in different registers echo each other and make up the image of Christ's glory, in the arch.

¹ The type similar to the arch composition of the Lord's Glory is transferred in Gareji cells IX-XX centuries three paintings from four (#5, #6, #8). We find this theme in different forms in the painting of the church with the dome of Gareji multi mountainous St. Dodo Monastery (IX c.), in the paintings of the churches of Chvabiani (Xc.), Otkhta Church (last quarter of X c.), Kumurdo (20's of XI c.), Ishkhani (beginning of XI c.), Khakhuli (beginning of XI c.), Oshki (1036 y.), Tbeti (XI c.), Bochorma (first 20's of XII c.) [4, pp. 26-27].

By means of the ideological grouping of the Christological scenes the symbolic meaning of the scenes is further enhanced. Arrangement of "Annunciation" and "Nativity" scenes opposite to each other is the annunciation of the Lord's glory and salvation. The idea of Eucharistic Victim in the "Annunciation" refers to the Virgin Mary's purple throne, which, in the opinion of Byzantine theologians, is integral part of the altar table.

"Nativity" and "Presentation of Jesus at the Temple" are connected to each other by the embodiment of God's arrival and the concept of sacrifice. However, in Taringzeli, when Svimeon holds Jesus in his hands, the emphasis is placed on the divine nature of Christ.

Arrangement of compositions depicting "Epiphany" and "Transfiguration" opposing to each other is conditioned by one factor: the appearance of God, revealing of the Trinity as the embodiment of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. During the "Transfiguration" Christ appeared to his disciples in the divine form; three wide beams pouring out of Christ - Tabor's light - gives people the divine grace. Christ's divine origin is indicated in the "Epiphany" through his appearance to the Apostles in the divine form in "Transfiguration". The divine nature of Christ is fully demonstrated by the composition of "Ascension" placed on the arch between "Epiphany" and "Transfiguration".

The idea of God's appearance and sacrifice is manifested through the "face to face" arrangement of the scenes "Presentation of Jesus at the Temple" and "Crucifixion" that is stated in Svimeon's words to Mary: "... And in your soul will be passed the sword to disclose the beating of many hearts" (Luca, 2, 35). The crucifixion is the redemption of Adam's sin by God, who was embodied and thus suppressed the death by death. "Crucifixion" by its nature declared victory over Hell; The real sacrifice is manifested in "Crucifixion" whereas salvation is shown in "Resurrection."

The painting on the triumph arch is considered as the unity with the altar decor and indicates the resurrection of the Savior, his messianic nature. By placing the holy Mandylion in the center of the arch, between prophets David and

Solomon, the following is announced: the Messiah's arrival, embodiment, his sacrifice, resurrection, feast of the ascension (pic. 5).

Arrangement of the composition of "Pentecost" opposite the scene depicting "Dormition of the Mother of God", their interrelation to each other is conditioned by a certain theological conceptualisation. "Dormition of the Mother of God" is reviewed not only as the praise to the Mother of God, but as one of the images of resurrection. Semantically, these two scenes are connected to the Lord's second coming, representation of his divine nature and to the Day of Judgment, and "Pentecost" is the beginning of a new nation, establishment of a new church.

The theme of sacrifice repeatedly appears in the scenes of paintings in Taringzeli; it can also be seen in separate images. The martyrdoms of St. Warriors and St. Mothers, appearing in the lower registers as well as the images of martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, appearing on the pilasters of the church, and the images of charitable healers - Kosmas and Damian are considered as holy sacrifice as well.

According to the remaining materials from the early paintings of Svaneti, the tradition of presentation of St. Warriors as the horsemen seems to be more widespread. It is worth mentioning that St. Warriors were depicted in a standing position, from the later period [3, pp. 7-8].

In the Upper Church of the Savior of Laghami (XIV c.) a program similar to Matskvarshi Taringzeli is presented. In the altar niche Golgotha crosses, built on step pedestal are depicted whereas a flourished cross is represented on the communion altar. In Laghami, unlike Taringzeli, under the triumphal arch capital semi-figures of Apostles - St. Peter and St. Paul are portrayed. There are the scenes of "Ascension" and "Christ of Old Days" on the central axis of the arch, similar to Taringzeli. Moreover, as well as in Taringzeli, in Laghami the images of saints can be observed on the third register. In the center of the arch there is the cross inscribed in the medallion, on the lateral sides of which there are the figures of prophets, David and Solomon. In Taringzeli, instead of the Cross, the Holy Mandylion can be seen.

Therefore, the painting program of Matskhvarishi Taringzeli Church is based on a deep theological theoretical conceptualization. Through the images depicting religious festivals and through separate images, general dogmas of Christian religion are manifested. “Annunciation” is understood as one of the main scenes expressing the embodiment dogma. “Nativity” and “Epiphany” are directed to the idea of the Lord’s appearance. “Epiphany” symbolises the spiritual revival. The images of martyrs implies their martyrdom, during which they were baptised through blood, together with the baptism with water and soul, as it is explained in the writings of the Holy Fathers. “Annunciation” is the statement of embodiment, “Nativity” is understood as the implementation of embodiment, “Crucifixion” is seen as the result of embodiment [3, pp. 8-17].

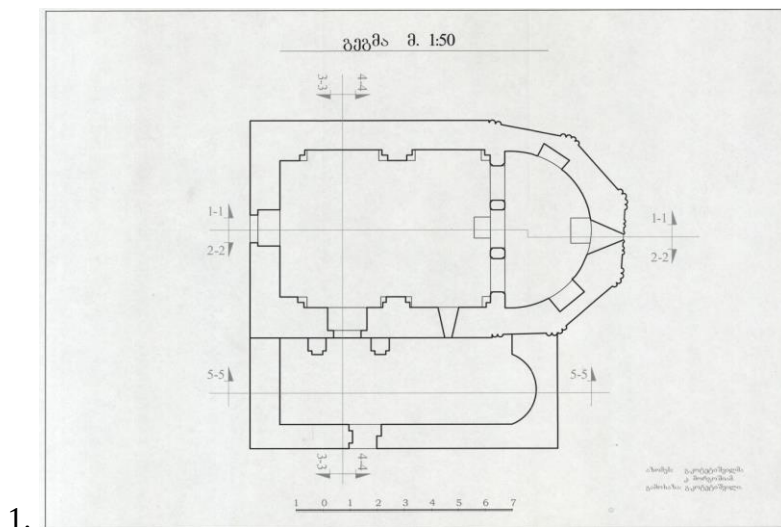
Prediction of the Lord’s incarnation, his earthly glory, praise (“Annunciation”, “Nativity”), manifestation of the Savior’s divine nature (“Presentation of Jesus at the Temple”, “Transfiguration”, “Resurrection of Lazarus”, “Descent of the Holy Spirit”, “Dormition of the Mother of God”), of his sacrifice (“The Crucifixion”), resurrection (entry with Glory, “Resurrection,” “Old Days”), the whole ensemble of paintings is associated with the salvation of the soul and the concept of resurrection (pic. 6).

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Illustrations:



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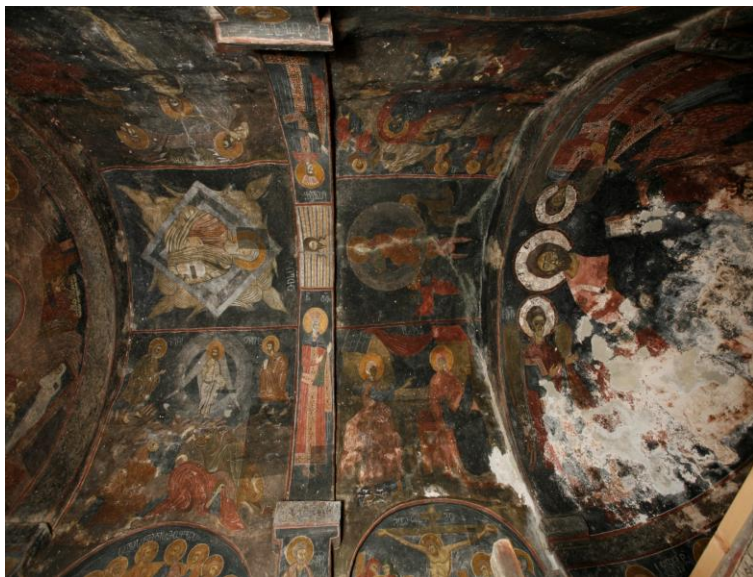
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