Christian Temple Tkhaba-Yerdy in architecture history of the North-East Caucasus

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Abstract. The article is devoted to the study of the Tkhaba-Yerdy medieval temple’s architectural features in the village of Dzheyra, Ingushetia, its comparison with other three-church basilicas. The scientific novelty of the article is due to the fact that a comprehensive study of the planning, volumetric and spatial solutions and the building material of the temple based on the results of physico-chemical analysis allows dating it to the 7th century. The activities of Kartli and, presumably, Armenia should be associated with the construction of basilicic temples in the north-eastern Caucasus. The temples of this composition in the Assin gorge of Ingushetia, Tkhaba-Yerdy and Albi-Erda can be attributed to a number of signs as variants of the three-church basilica, or the Armenian church hall with a detour. In Armenia, this type was distributed until the 7th century. In Kartli, three-church basilicas were built until the 14th century.

Introduction
Temple of Thaba-Erdy, located near the village. Khairah in the upper river. Assy, on its right bank, is the most prominent Christian church and the most ancient religious building in Ingushetia. The temple is located on a small plain in which several mountain valleys converge, formed by the Assa River and its small tributaries. On the one side of the plains, mountains covered with dense forest rise; on the other, high cliffs of a fanciful shape close it. From the hillock, on which the church and the cemetery surrounding it are located, a picturesque view opens in all directions, and you can see the towers of Hamha and Targim auls, standing by the Asse River. The temple is clearly visible from all sides and dominates the surrounding space, standing out for its shape, which is very different from the tower ensembles of the mountainous Ingushetia. According to E.I. Krupnov, who discovered that the temple is located near the territory of an ancient unexplored burial ground with a number of pagan burials, an ancient sanctuary or holy place previously existed on this site [8]. The noble Uzden Vainakh families lived in Targim [12]. On certain days, for the religious rites and the disputes resolution performance, the residents of Hamkhi, Gulgai, Chulkhoy, Tskhyora, and Fiappii flocked to the temple. Also, at the temple of Tkhaba-Yerdy there was “mehka khel” - the country court. The Tkhaba-Yerdy Temple, judging by its location and the ceremonies taking place in it in the late Middle Ages, was the main temple of the Nakhche people during Middle Ages. Probably, in this regard, it did not join the cult complex, which became widespread in this territory in the X-XII centuries.

Discussion
The Tkhaba-Yerdy Temple has been described by a number of the researchers since the 19th century. Since the opening of the Tkhaba-Yerdy to this day, the question of the exact temple’s age determination has not
been finally resolved. There are several points of view. The first of them is by D. Z. Bakradze and V. F. Miller [12]. B. A. Kaloev and A. I. Shamilev, G. N. Chubinashvili [16] - the temple was built in the 9th century. The second, proposed by L.P. Semenov [20] and E.I. Krupnov [9] - XII century, the era of the reign of the Georgian Queen Tamara. The temple’s construction date, proposed by V.F. Miller - 830 - is based on the letter from D.Z. Bakradze, who visited this monument in 1872 and allegedly saw a date plate on its central bas-relief. However, the stove was not discovered either by Engelhardt in 1811, or by V.F. Miller himself in 1886. E.I. Krupnov considered the appearance of this entry in the field diary of D. Z. Bakradze, devoted to the Tkhaba-Yerd, to be simply a misunderstanding [9]. D.Z. Bakradze in his letter to Miller, did not insist on the recording accuracy. A. G. Shanidze, on the epigraphic monuments’ analysis basis (at one time a parchment psalter was found in the church), believes that the 'Tkhaba-Erdy church should date no earlier than the 12th century. This opinion was completely shared by L. II. Semenov, E.I. Krupnov, I.P. Shcheblykin and other researchers. M.B. Muzhukhoev, on the basis of available written sources about the domestic political life of Georgia in the 9th-12th centuries, an analysis of the motifs of the ornament, preserved ancient Georgian inscriptions on the bas-reliefs of the temple, came to the conclusion that its construction dates back to the 11th - early 12th centuries - the period of active feudal Georgia actions (the reign of David the Builder) to spread its influence in the mountainous regions of the Central Caucasus [14]. V.A. Kuzmin, based on the mortar and wooden elements’ laboratory analyzes results, dates the Thaba-Erdy of the XII century [11]. The question of age determination can be clarified somewhat when analyzing the possible samples for this temple.

The Tkhaba-Erdy temple was related to the God of thunder and lightning, the rain giver, as it can be seen from the following rite, recorded by V.P. Pozhidaev. According to him, the bones of St. Vampol were laid in the river and kept there until it rains. Before lowering the bones into the water and after they were removed, a ram was cut. The red banners from the temple — the beirak (flag) — kept in the clan of clergymen were brought to the ceremony [2]. In all the early descriptions, the temple is three-apostolic, and its repeated restructuring, but for some reason most researchers are of the opinion about the initial hall character of his plan. The first most complete description of the temple was made by the quartermaster of the Russian army Shteder in 1781 [1]. Citing from the text is translated from German by A. N. Genko: “... It has already partially collapsed and has 23 steps in length and 7 in width with three fathoms of height. It consists of smooth hewn stones, but the roof fell apart. Narrow vestibules are visible from the western and eastern sides. From the first of the indicated sides was the entrance leading through the gate. However, it is now stoned; the current entrance leads through a low door on the south side. ... On the eastern side there are two narrow windows, and on the southern wall there are triangular small doors left in place of the windows ... On the eastern side there are vaulted niches with stones and supposedly underground passages where church supplies and books are stored” [6].

In 1886, Tkhaba-Yerd was examined and described by V.F. Miller. He published a detailed description of the temple with the application of the plan. E.I. Krupnov examined the temple in 1947 and gave some information clarifying the description. The semicircle above the window is decorated with poorly preserved roughly executed bas-reliefs. Of the four depicted human figures, one with a child in arms and another figure of a person fighting an animal can be noted” [9]. E.I. Krupnov notes the remains of red stucco on the inner walls of the altar part, which was first noticed by L. P. Semenov, who visited this church in 1926 [18]. In other places of the altar walls - stucco of pale pink color, which allowed him to assume that the walls of the altar were decorated with fresco painting [9]. I.P. Shcheblykin in 1926 found the temple greatly altered in comparison with the descriptions of the 19th century. “The roof vaults collapsed in three places; the walls were squinting and cracked; there was no cornice in many places; lacked the relief figures that filled the arch of the western wall. The construction was apparently subjected to repeated alterations, which is noticeable in the nature of the masonry walls and in the movement of some relief decorations”. An interesting observation by I.P. Shcheblykin is that there was a stone fence around the temple, in the western part of which there was an entrance decorated with columns, as the author notes, “in the Georgian style”. Similar columns were noted by I.P. Shcheblykin in processing the windows of the eastern wall, with an arc and a relief composition [18].

In 1966, Tkhaba-Erdy was examined by V. I. Markovin and engineer G. D. Tangiev. They counted at least four different times alterations of the temple, and in the northern wall a cache was found 57 cm wide, going inside the apse wall and littered with stones [12]. G. Chubinashvili made a conclusion about three
construction periods in the temple’s history (VIII-IX, X-XII, XIV-XV centuries) [16].

In 1970, an archaeological survey before restoration was carried out by G.G. Gambashidze. He also noted the existence of three building periods. A broken stone cross and a stone font, a lot of fragmented and whole tiles (depicting relief crosses), and antefixes (with images of relief rosettes and crosses) made in matrix forms should be noted among the archaeological finds. An inscription in the ancient Georgian script “asomtavruli” was found on flat roof tiles: “Christ, forgive (sin) of Arseni M”. Two fragments of grooved tiles with the inscription: “Mamadmtarisaisa”, (i.e. Catholicos) were also found. One of the inscriptions mentions the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia of the 1st third of the 11th century in Melkizedek I. The inscriptions on the tiles according to paleographic signs are dated by G.G. Gambashidze to the second half of the 10th century - the first half of the XI century. Along the temple’s walls, outside, five burials were excavated with the location of the deceased according to the Christian rite, but with pagan inventory. Based on the materials of this research, G.G. Gambashidze determines the dating of the II construction period of the temple back to the second half of the X century and joins the opinion of G.N. Chubinashvili that in the first two periods the temple had the appearance of a three-church basilica, and in the third (XII century) it became a “hall” church [5]. The opinion of G.G. Gambashidze and G.N. Chubinashvili seems reasonable in a number of ways: the remains of the walls around the building (taken as a fence), completed at the eastern ends with apse and arches; the presence of three entrances to the building - from the West, North, South. At the same time, the northern and southern entrances are located asymmetrically: the southern one is close to the western wall, and the northern one is to the apse. The northern wall entrance of the so-called “fence” is shifted closer to the west, which is also a characteristic of the three-church basilicas of Kartli and the churches’ bypassing Armenia. In addition, the “fence” is too close to the building - at a distance of 2.5 - 3 m. The fence is not typical for the subsequent temple architecture of Ingushetia. An important sign is the presence of pastophory in the northern aisle, which indicates a service there. In the temple’s walls, in random places eaves stones are inserted. According to G.N. Chubinashvili, who studied the Tkhaba-Yerdy temple in 1940-41, these stones served as the side churches’ supporting beams brackets [5].

The issue of dating the first construction period of the Tkhaba-Yerdy temple is interconnected with its composition, but at the same time it is not an indisputable reference point. Three-church basilica in Kartli was built before the XIV century. Hall churches with a detour in Armenia - until the 7th century. Three facts indicate the IX century: the gold Byzantine coin of Emperor Michael III (842-867) in crypt No. 3, dating of burials in crypts No. 1-3 of IX-XII centuries, four discovered, inscriptions by G.G. Gambashidze on the flat tiles with ancient Georgian font “asomtavruli” Mentioning George the Bishop: “... remember the soul of George the bishop…”, “In the name of St. George, I am George the bishop...” and others [5].

Thus, the local bishop is mentioned, in addition, there was a synthronon in the church, i.e. it was a cathedral. V.A. Kuznetsov in one of his recent works, notes that M. G. Dzhanashvili, on the basis of some Georgian sources, once wrote that in 830 the Georgians brought the Christian faith to Chechnya and founded a monastery with a bishop’s chair in the town of Tkaba-Erdy [7]. He believes that “the reference to the bishop’s chair in the above-mentioned inscriptions, in the context of the Bishop George mention, allows these sources to be trusted with great confidence” [10]. An argument of M.B. Muzuhoeva, dating the 11th century temple, is the method of decorating churches with a variety of white stone ornaments, which has been observed in Georgian architecture since the 10th century, but fades by the time of the Tamara’s reign, when fresco painting inside the temples is flourishing. The analogies to the reliefs of Tkhaba-Yerdy cited by E.I. Krupnov (in particular, Nikorotsminda, built in 1014), date back to the time of the Tamara’s reign. The presence in the decorations of Tkhaba-Yerdy the so-called “the ktitor’s group” - a phenomenon completely alien to the church buildings of the late XII - early XIII centuries (the Queen Tamara’s reign), but very common in the monuments of the 9th-11th centuries [14] At the same time, at the end of X - beginning of XI centuries indicate the following data. First of all, these are two inscriptions “asomtavruli”. The first: “Christ, exalt the patriarch of the East, Mkizek. Amen”, in which G.G. Gambashidze sees the mention of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia of the 1st third of XI Melkizedek I. Two more: “Christ, forgive (sin) of Arseni M” and “Mamadmtarisais” (Catholicos), according to G. G. Gambashidze, concern the Catholicos of Georgia Arseniy II (955-980). The ornament of a stone font and a cross is dated [5], as well as some carved details (braids, plaits) [9] refer to the first quarter of the XI century, the funerary inventory of crypts No. 4-5 is
dated to the XI-XIII centuries [5]. Thus, we see that elements pointing to the X-XI centuries could appear on an existing monument (the tile was updated, the hymnals were donated, burials appeared near the temple, a stone font and a cross could also appear during the Ingushetia Christianization intensification from the stronger in the 11th century Georgia). Most of the temple’s plot images are distinguished by the local peculiarities and are difficult to date [10]. At the same time, there is a tile with indirect dating of the 9th century with the name of Bishop George. Based on a comparison of all these data, it can be assumed that the first construction period of the Tkhaba-Yerdy temple still dates back to the 9th century, and the temple was built in the form of a hall church with a detour or a three-church basilica by the first missionaries. In the X and early XI centuries the temple was reconstructed, but remained in the same composition. It turned into a hall church with a fence in the XIII-XIV centuries.

All researchers pointed to the Georgian counterparts of the Tkhaba-Yerdy temple. G. N. Chubinashvili, G. G. Gambashidze, 3. Sh. Didebulidze [8] see analogues in three-church basilicas, V. A. Kuznetsov - in the hall temples [21]. But the scientists do not name specific samples. E. I. Krupnov, who dated the temple of the XII century, having linked the construction of Tkhaba-Yerdy to the Queen Tamar’s reign, gives analogues of the hall temples in Georgia and Abkhazia of the XII - early XIII centuries.

Other sample designs are possible for the Tkhaba-Yerdy church. For example, the plan of Tkhaba-Yerdy corresponds to the plan of the church of the VI century in the city of Dvina, at that time the capital of Armenia, and also resembles Georgian three-church basilicas. In the Dvina church, like in the temple of Tkhaba-Yerdy, the module for constructing a plan equal to 3m was used. The Armenian architecture researchers have identified a number of documents according to which Armenia used the East Byzantine system of measures based on a Byzantine foot of 30 cm, along with an Armenian foot of 26.8 cm. A three-meter module was also used in three-church basilicas of Georgia of the same period: Zegani – Kvela church Tsminda, Vachnadziani – Amidasturi church, Sabue, Obardzi. True, unlike the Armenian churches of this type, in Georgian temples there is no reception of dividing the space of the central hall with arches with protruding pilasters, and in the Tkhaba-Yerdy temple, this is precisely the reception. In addition, in Armenia, as noted by M. Asratyan, pastophories have an apse [4], they are also present in the Tkhaba-Erda church, while in Georgia an apse is rare in these rooms. At the same time, it wasn’t customary in Armenia to combine pastophories with a bypass gallery (for example, the church in the village of Kurtan, Kokhb, Gtevank) and in the city of Thaba-Erda, the pastophores simply go to the gallery, are not separated from it at all. The Thab-Erda gallery itself is not actually a detour, since it is separated by a wall from the narthex, and the practice of separating the narthex in Armenian and Georgian churches with a detour did not take place at all. Such a division appears in the three-church basilicas of Georgia in the 11th century, it is possible that it appeared in this temple as a result of the “11th century reconstruction”. In Tkhaba-Yerdy there is also another, additional, gallery on the south side, also in the east having a chapel, which is a feature of this particular temple. In Thaba Erda there are such details as a pediment with a tympanum, on which the so-called “the ktitor’s group”, and a twin window with an ornamented pillar in the middle on the eastern facade. Such elements are the characteristic of the Armenian monuments of the 5th century. In the temple, a stone cross of considerable size was discovered, which could be installed on the altar throne. The installation of stone crosses on the throne in the altar, as shown above, was the characteristic of the early Christian architecture in Armenia and Caucasian Albania.

Summary

It is possible to make an assumption about the reason for choosing the samples of a rather early composition in the form of a church with going around for this temple the North Caucasus high mountains. In the early Middle Ages, bypassed churches became widespread in Armenia and Georgia, probably because the galleries were intended for penitents preparing for baptism [3], which were quite numerous in the first centuries of the Christianity spread. According to M. Asratyan, the temples of this composition were not built in Armenia later than the 7th century, since the functional, liturgical need for such significant spaces for penitents fell away [4]. In Georgia, the hall church with a detour turned into a three-church basilica with slightly different gallery functions - they were transformed into side chapels in which they performed parallel service and occasional rites, therefore this composition existed until the fourteenth century. [16] It can be assumed that for
the Tkhaba-Yerdy construction, a sample in the form of a church with bypass galleries was chosen, since for the people of Nakhe newly attached to the Christian faith, vast spaces for penitents were needed. At the same time, some of the compositional “defects” of Tkhaba-Yerdy discussed above are noteworthy - not a single side aisle has access to the altar, the narthex is separated by the solid wall from the galleries, the apse of the southern aisle extends east, outside the eastern wall of the temple. Some clarification in this matter can give an analysis of the temples’ structures. In Tkhaba-Yerdy, the lancet arch of the cover above the main volume rests on false arched walls. They have features and a vaulted crypt in the south side of the gallery, and the presence of plaster for painting in the interior.

The Tkhaba-Yerdy Temple had several construction periods and was probably built earlier (late IX - early X century), as evidenced by the presence of a narthex and a font in it, rich decor, as well as the fact that this temple and its structural system served as a guideline for temple construction in the next period. Both the Georgian and the Armenian ones, to which the first missionaries were oriented, could serve as a model for him. They involved local craftsmen in the construction of the temple, who, while retaining the layout plan of the sample, erected the volume in the structures available to them. In the second construction period (X-beginning of XI centuries) the temple underwent some restructuring - turned into a hall church. With a very high degree of probability, we can assume the participation of Armenian masters in the construction of both churches, as well as the constant exchange of experience in temple construction throughout the North Caucasus during this period, which occurred as a result of the creation of international construction teams. V.A. Kuzmin, for example, notes the fact that whey is added to the solution (a technique common in East Christian architecture), the sameness of the Tkhaba-Yerdy tiles and the Miuseri temple in Akhazia, the processing of wooden parts with high-quality tools. At the same time, adding dried hemp cross-section as a reinforcing material is a pure local technique [11].

To the least extent in the considered churches, the following patterns are noted in terms of architectural decoration. Thrones, barriers, fonts, pilasters and capitals, although in general they corresponded to the models of confessional centers, nevertheless, in each case they were distinguished by originality and local color. For example, in the temples of Tkhaba-Yerdy and Albi-Erda there was synthonon. Synthonon is considered to belong to the Byzantine church building and is not consistent with the liturgical situation of the Armenian and Georgian churches of the X-XII centuries.

The twin window in the altar wall of Tkhaba-Yerdy is similar to the examples of Armenian temple architecture of this period, however, the peculiar tympanum above it and, especially, the plot sculpture on it, give this element its originality. The Nativity of Christ might be probably depicted here: in the center is one of the magian who carries the good news, to the right of him is the Mother of God with arms crossed, which the baby in the headdress of an Armenian or Georgian priest gives the baby. To the left of the magian is the figure of a man with an animal, apparently with a ram. It is worth noting that the figures on this bas-relief and on a number of others embedded in the walls depict people dressed in local clothes and hats, while the clothes and the appearance of people are different on the well-known “ktitor’s” group of the main facade. Men of the “ktitor’s” group have a pronounced Turkic appearance and are dressed in belted clothes of an oriental type too. All characters are lined up in one plane and turned in front. Squat figures, in the same dressing gowns, faces similar, stylized, wide-cheeked, hair, beards, weapons, details of the wings - are cut very carefully, in which this panel follows the traditions of the peoples’ art in the Caucasus and the East. The panels of the altar barrier from Tsebdela are very close in style and iconography to this panel, the work is undoubtedly by the local masters, which incorporates, as well as the “ktitor’s group” of Tkhaba-Yerdy, the multiple traditions of decorative art in the Caucasus and the East.

The most important trend of this period in the North-East Caucasus is the basilica temples’ new typological schemes formation beginning based on the samples introduced from various centers of the Transcaucasus, the introduction of regional color in their external forms, design solutions and details, which indicates the Christian architecture local architectural direction’s formation start. Thus, a comparative analysis of modular dimensions, spatial compositions and details of the Tkhaba-Yerdy temple and the three-church basilicas of Armenia and Georgia do not allow an unambiguous conclusion about the Georgian sources – the samples for these temples. Estimated dating of the first construction period Thaba-Erty - IX-X centuries. In Georgia, three-church basilicas were spread, as already mentioned, until the fourteenth century. In Armenia at that time
churches with a detour were no longer built, but the sample for some reason could be chosen there. From the historical documents it is known, for example, about the joint campaign of the Vainakhs and Alans, as part of the Armenian-Byzantine army in the city of Dvin in 1045.

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