

The Wall Painting of the Chapel-martyrium Motsameta in the Rock-cut Monastery Complex of Udabno David-Gareji.

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Georgian monument painting spans more than fifteen centuries. At different stages of its development throughout the centuries various art schools have emerged in different Georgian regions. Despite the fact that all of these schools had much in common, each bore its own individual stamp. One such school was set up in Kakheti, in the eastern province of Georgia. The David-Gareji Desert served as a centre for this school. A distinctive feature of this school was compositional simplicity and bright colors. Here severe asceticism was blended with humanism¹. Icons of national saints like St. David, as well as the miraculous Holy deeds accomplished by this Saint, dominate David-Gareji painting.

The monastery complex of Gareji is situated in a desert area, 60–70 kilometres east from Tbilisi, along the mountain ridges of the rock system, which divides the basins of the rivers Mtkvari and Yori. The first monastery of Gareji was established in the sixth century by St. David, one of the so-called “Thirteen Syrian Fathers”, founders of monastic life in eastern Georgia. The Monasteries of Gareji had a large religious, cultural and educational value in the life of medieval Georgia. Small vaulted and domed churches were cut into the rock in the Gareji monasteries in the ninth to tenth centuries. These Churches were adorned with murals. The numerous frescoes at Gareji are characterized by their originality and depict episodes from the hagiography of Orthodox-Christian Georgia.

Among the numerous churches of the monasteries of Gareji, there is situated at the top of a mountain in west of the mine complex, the little church of the Forty Martyrs, or Motsameta. The paintings of this chapel-martyrium, Motsameta, have special significance in the study of the Garejian painting school. In the Gareji desert there were other martyrums, in Sabereebi, Bertubani and Tsamebuli for example, but paintings are rarely found in these edifices. Martyrums were painted more commonly in Byzantium than in Georgia. Thus the church of Motsameta is a rare example of a Georgian painted martyrism. Its further study, particularly with the aim of establishing parallels with similar medieval European monuments, is very important.

The Historiography of the Monument

Information exists about the church of the Forty Martyrs from the 1780s. The Kathalicos-patriarch of Kakheti, Anton the 1st (Bagrationi), wrote in his work, *The Book of Martirika*², about the six thousand Georgian martyrs who were executed by Shakh-Abas on Easter night, 1615. According to Anton's information, the monks were laid to rest in the ‘Easter church’, and afterwards their bones were buried in the martyrism Motsameta, which was built by King Alexander the 3rd (17th c.) of Kakheti. The bones were placed in a *satsnakheli* [a crusher for grapes], which symbolizes the suppression of passions.

The Russian pilgrim Andrey Muraviov described the church during his travel in Gareji. His book, *Georgia and Armenia*, was published in 1848 and in it he talked about the Church of the Forty Martyrs.³ According to his information, the bones of the monks were laid there by King Archil (1661-1675), who built the small church into the cave. So we have two different opinions; was the martyrium built by King Archil or King Alexander 3rd? The art historian George Chubinashvili supposed that it was King Archil, who was responsible for much reconstruction work in the monasteries of David-Gareji, and dates this building to the 1670s.⁴ The cave, however, with its alter table and *satsnakheli* were there much earlier. There is also a reference to the Forty Garejian Martyrs in the collection of Georgian religious writings by the nineteenth century monk Mikhail Sabinin.⁵

Dimitry Gordeev described the monument in an unpublished manuscript of 1920-1921.⁶ He compared the mural paintings of Motsameta to other Georgian monuments such as those at Timotesubani, Kintsvisi, Chule and Safara, and accordingly dated them to between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Gordeev considered the Ascension depicted on a ceiling and tried to distinguish whether it was of Christ or the Cross. The mural of the ceiling painting was difficult to distinguish, due to damage. On the basis of the general tendency in Gareji of ceilings commonly depicting the Ascension of the Cross, he decided that it is a Cross in Motsameta also. This opinion is also held by Chubinashvili.

Chubinashvili published his book *The Rock-cut Monasteries of Gareji* in 1948.⁷ The book is the basic scientific work for anyone interested in the history of Gareji to this day. On the basis of a pilgrim inscription of the sixteenth century he named the church "The Church of the Forty Sebastian Martyrs". He also uses the names Motsameta and Martyrium. He connected the paintings of this church to those of the main church of the eleventh century Gareji complex and attributes them to the hand of a single artist. According to this reasoning, the martyrium was created no later than the eleventh century. The *satsnakheli*, stone box for the bones of the martyrs, means that before the painting of the north wall, the painting compositions existed. The location of the *satsnakheli* indicates that the north wall was painted after the stone box was cut out there.

Guram Abramishvili in his book, *The Cycle of David-Garejeli in Georgian Mural Painting*, studied and described the frescoes of Motsameta.⁸ He considered that there are, in fact, two layers of paintings, eleventh and thirteenth century. In his opinion the western wall probably belongs to the eleventh century, whilst the north wall and ceiling belong to the thirteenth century. Shalva Amiranashvili dates the mural paintings of Motsameta to the eleventh century.⁹ My opinion about the date of the mural painting of Motsameta is different. It is likely that the cave was made in the eleventh century, here I am in agreement with Chubinashvili and Abramishvili, and the mural paintings were created by 1240. The reasons for this identification will be outlined below.

Historical Review of the Monument

The Martyrium stands on the site where St. David used to pray, and where he worked numerous miracles. It is not surprising therefore that the walls of this rock-cut martyrium carry representations of the miracles of St. David. The church consists of two parts. The first is the cave, which is decorated with mural paintings. In this part, at the northern wall is a rectangular stone basin for bones. The second part is the building, executed in stone and brick, which was constructed by Archil, King of Kakheti. It is the opinion of Chubinashvili that the cave section was made no later than the eleventh century, so the paintings on the walls are dated to this time. In a later period the cave took the function of a sanctuary and was separated from the extension by a chapel-barrier. The cave has a roughly rectangular form, with the dimensions 3.14m x 3.35m. At the east wall was situated the table and an altar table. Due to atmospheric influence and the action of enemies the mural paint is badly damaged. However, close examination does reveal the following compositions, which are without framing, and function as a continuous pictorial work. On the basis of analysis of the painting, it is possible to distinguish two distinct manners of execution. The first is more academic, whilst the second is less so. The Ascension of the Cross, on the ceiling, is executed with more artistic plasticity than the painting on the northern and western walls, which exhibit rough proportions, flatness and a sharpness of silhouette and lines. In my opinion there were two different artists. The Ascension of the Cross on the ceiling was painted by the first artist, and all the rest by the second artist.

Description and Analysis of the Mural Paintings

On east wall, above the altar table, are representations of the Holy Brothers. On the left is St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Basil the Great, on the right is St. John Chrysostomus. The north wall shows the martyrdom of the sacred fathers at the hands of the military, who beat the sacred fathers with hammers.

On the western wall the events of St. David's life, including his meeting with the feudal lord Bubakar, are depicted. This story was recorded by a writer of the tenth century in the life of St. David.¹⁰ The legend depicted is that of the occasion when the retinue of Rustavi Bubakar were hunting a hawk, which took refuge with St David. The feudal lord went up to St David and asked who he was, and what he was doing there. St David answered, that he was the slave of God, and asked Him to renounce his sins. The feudal lord ordered him to return the bird, and when he was refused he took out a sword intending to strike St David, but his hand was withered. Bubakar understood his mistake, and repented, then David prayed for him and God cured his hand. Thus the pagan Bubakar was converted to Christianity. In the second half of the eleventh century the monasteries of Gareji were hit hard as the result of the Turkish campaigns. The pagan Bubakar is depicted in the dress of a Seljuq Turk, who had recently devastated Gareji.¹¹ On the western wall there are two single compositions represented these miracles. The first is the Ossification of Bubakar's hand and the second is the Conversion Bubakar to Christianity.

In the middle of the ceiling is the Ascension of the Cross and in the corners there are Angels and busts of the four evangelists in medallions. The Ascension and the Glorification were very popular subjects in feudal Georgia. This is traditional throughout the Eastern Christian world, and can be found in churches in many areas, such as Egypt, Syria and Palestine. The Ascension was a dominant theme in Georgia in the sixth-eighth centuries. It remained popular in the monumental painting of the late middle ages.¹² Analogous compositions in round frames, can be found in the paintings of various churches including in the diaconicon of the Main church of the monastery complex of Udabno, David-Gareji, of the thirteenth century. The wall paintings are badly damaged and faded and are therefore difficult to analyse. However it is possible to note the graceful combination of colours. These are predominantly green, yellow and brown colours. The cross-rhythmic distribution of colours is an interesting arrangement. This use of colour in the chapel-martyrium is similar to the murals of the main eleventh century church in Udabno. This colour scale characterizes the monastery of Garejian School, which repeats the colours seen in the landscape of the Garejian desert.

The beginning of the thirteenth century was marked by profound transformations in Georgian monument painting. The severe, classical, tectonic style of the eleventh century was replaced by the antitectonic dynamic style that characterised the thirteenth century. An increase in decorativeness was also clearly discernable. Kintsvisi, Bertubani and Timotesubani are the key monuments belonging to this period. Despite the high mastership of the thirteenth century, the forms are less plastic and the proportions infringed. Examples can be found in the Zenobani church of the Saviour, the Kisoreti church of St. George and the south-west chapel of the Gelati church of St. George. The Motsameta painting is in accordance with this style and can therefore be considered to have been executed in the thirteenth century.

The Iconographic Program of the Murals

The program of the murals of the chapel differs strongly from the programs of the other churches. Generally cave churches were decorated with reduced editions of the iconography of dome churches. In Motsameta, instead of the usual Christian-historical legends, events from the life of St. David were depicted. This choice of St. David and the miracles accomplished by him is due to the location on the actual site of these events. The paintings of Motsameta thus deviate from traditional iconography. They have an eschatological message, and with a small number of images convey a significant idea. The composition of the paintings are defined by the idea of salvation during the Last Judgement. The selection of images in the martyrium is consistently determined by this function. In its pursuit of this goal it ignores or infringes on the historical sequence of events. In the martyrium of Bertubani of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, in another Monastery in the Garejia Desert, are depicted compositions which carry the same symbolical character and programme, reflecting the idea of salvation during the Last Judgement.¹³ The compositions of Bertubani and Motsameta are different, but the selection of

their iconography program is similar, which is important. As we have already noted, around the altar on the east wall of Motsameta are the figures of the Holy Bishops, the pillars of the Christian faith. The martyrdom of the monks is represented on the northern wall. On the ceiling of the church is depicted the Ascension of the Cross and on the western wall there are St David's miracles. In martyrdoms, both in Georgia and in Byzantium, the Holy Fathers and martyrs are frequently represented. This is because they have a sufficient grace to rescue souls and can aid entry into Paradise without facing the Last Judgement. They carry double worth, both earthly greatness and Heavenly virtue. Their representation is intended to aid in the rescue of souls. It has not been possible to find direct iconographic parallels to other Georgian monuments of the Middle Ages, but the selection of compositions and the free choice of the composite programs, which is so unusual in Georgian martyrdoms, all convey the idea of the Last Judgment and the hope of salvation. The Motsameta mural painting of the miracles of St. David makes it unique. Usually martyrdoms contain cycles of Martyrdoms, not the life of Saints. The unusual content of the Motsameta chapel is due to its location on the site where St. David used to pray.

Final mention should be made of Chubinashvili's opinion, that the martyrdom depicted is that of the Forty Sebastien martyrs. The Forty Sebastien martyrs are usually depicted either on the frozen lake or in the cold water. Near the lake there is commonly the hot bath house, with the less devoted martyrs running into its entrance, whilst, on the other hand, one soldier jumps into the water and joins the martyrs.¹⁴ There is a completely different scene in the chapel of Motsameta. There is no lake, no bath, the martyrs are dressed as the clergymen and the method of execution depicted is different. Therefore it is likely that the martyrs depicted on the wall are Garejien monks, not Sebastiens. The mural painting describing the life of St. David, which is represented in the martyrdom of Motsameta, is very important for the study of Georgian painting. Urgent study of martyrdoms is required and the results of such research will allow the monument to take an appropriate place in the genesis of painting of this type.

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