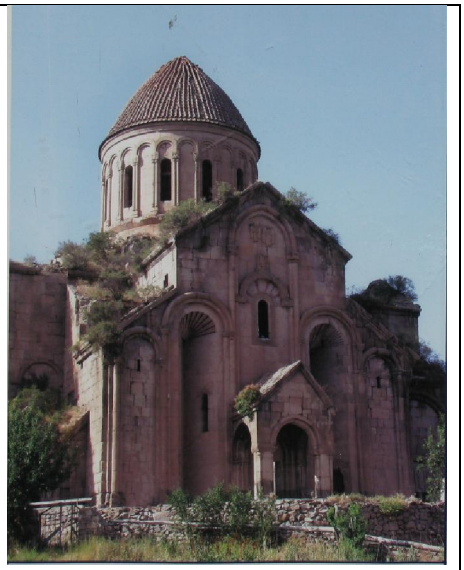
Sacred Space: Parochet and Hierotopy on Georgian church façades

Poster presented at the International Conference University of Haifa – Israel 16-17 May 2012, "Cultural Exchanges between Byzantium, East and West in the Late Byzantine World (12th-16th centuries)".

Erga Shneurson, Tel Aviv University.

While any discussion of Georgian art immediately brings to mind its interrelations with both the Byzantine and Sassenaid traditions, from its very beginnings Georgian art also developed a distinct visual vocabulary. Among its most salient characteristics is the architectural church ornamentation displaying a system of blind arches spread across the entire edifice and interlaced with figurative reliefs. This ornamental system endows the church with metaphoric curtains and veils of stone – a Parochet – which defines the ecclesiastic space as sacred.

Samtavisi cathedral, 1030



Oshki church, 959-964

A multitude of blind arches and niches revealing specific forms and iconography

adorned church facades in Georgia from the 6th to the 12th century. Blind niches and arches developed as a unique architectural ornament over a long period of time. As already argued by Aladashvili and Djobadze, this approach in design constituted part of Georgia's ongoing striving for self-identity and differentiation from its surrounding cultures, and an attempt to construct a unified architecture and an artistic system reflecting these ideas.

In this work, I set out to demonstrate how these elements comprised an integral component of the Georgian ecclesiastic architectural tradition.

The nature of blind niches and arches

Blind niches appeared as early as the second half of the 6th century, dividing the exterior in accordance with the interior divisions of the church, of which Djvary Church (586) offers an example,. The niches served as a platform for the reliefs that endowed the church with its beauty and sanctity. Over the course of the following centuries the niches gradually developed into blind arches, reaching their peak in regard to proportions, symmetry, rhythm, and visual ornamentation in the 10th and 11th centuries. They covered every side of the church, including the dome, framing everything into one unified artistic system. Sculptures were set into the overall system of arches and niches like "lace inserts" on "church clothing" (Baltrusaitis, 1929), indeed much like the lace inserts in the ecclesiastic or royal attire.

Blind Arches as the Image Paradigm of the Parochet

The system of arches and niches developed into a kind of symbolic curtain, covering, as noted, the churches and their domes from all sides, from top to bottom, comparable to the 'parochet' covering the entrance to the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. It is my

contention that these Georgian architectural ornaments were meant to bestow upon the façades a sense of sacredness, defining a holy space: in other words, hierotopy.

Hierotopy, namely, a cultural concept focusing on the creation of sacred spaces, is perceived as a particular form of human creativity. As explored by Lidov, hierotopy offers an interpretative tool in the service of art, by which to overcome the distance between the image and its viewer. The most characteristic feature of heirotopic phenomena is the participation of the viewer in the sacred spatial by turning it into spatial imagery. One of the tools within the hierotopic approach is that of the 'image paradigm': a flexible image not anchored in any fixed pictorial scheme but, rather, revealing dynamism of forms and multivalent interwoven exegeses. As Lidov noted: "[It] is not connected with an illustration to any specific text, although it does belong to a continuum of literary symbolic meanings. Image paradigm is not formalized in any fixed state, either in the form of a pictorial scheme or in a mental construction". Such an image reflects the 'veil' or 'parochet' motif, whose deep meanings have played an important role in Jewish, Christian (Byzantine, Latin, Coptic) and Islamic cultures.

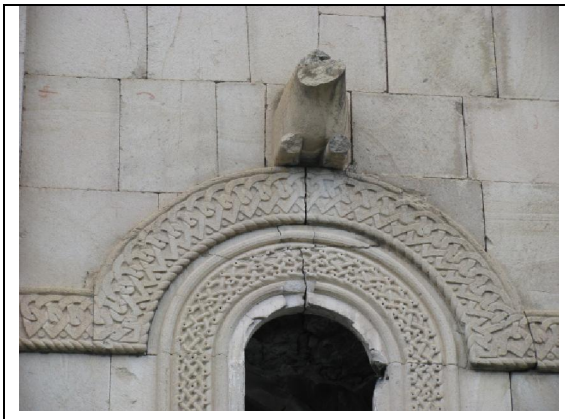
Philosophical Theological Discourse

the architectural ornamentation on the facades is interpreted as a metaphorical curtain or parochet that defines the church facades as a sacred and secluded space. This argument is supported by various textual sources. the bible mention of a separation between places and groups of people found in Exodus 19, 12-13, when God ordered Moses to separate Mount Sinai from the Hebrews, in order to prevent them from touching it. From here on the Mosaic Law would incorporate this "separation" as a means of physical and social divisions, as for example the divisions operated in the Holy of Holies.

The Christian church acted in a similar way, defining spatial separations within the church, between the clergy and the secular viewers. However, in contrast to the Jewish Holy of Holies, this consideration of these facades as veils does not intend that they should function as barriers; on the contrary: the ornamented facades are intended to manifest merit, beauty, and sanctity, inviting the beholder to cross the threshold and enter the House of God.

The function of the veiled arches can be traced particularly in the neo-Platonic discourse on concealing and revealing truth that became rooted in Christian Georgian philosophy. Discussing the nature of images in light of the neo-Platonic philosophy, it is argued that the blind niches and arches decorating the facades of medieval Georgian churches may be interpreted as metaphoric curtains/veils whose function is manifold: emphasize the dialectic tension between interior and exterior, create spatial divisions between areas and human groups, dematerialize the church walls; abolishing physical and mental thresholds, and establishing a new landscape-church building relationship.

Oshki reliefs, as lace on south facade



Samtavisi reliefs, as lace on eastern façade

Short Bibliography

N. A. Aladashvili, (1977), Sculpture monumental de Géorgie (Reliefs figures des v^e-xi^e siècles), Moscow, (Russian, French resumé).

J. Baltrušaitis, Études sur L'Art Médiéval en Géorgie et en Arménie, Paris, 1929.

W. Djobadze, Early Medieval Georgian Monasteries, Stuttgart, 1992

A. Lidov, "Eastern Christian "Image-Paradigms" A Hierotopic Dimension of Medieval Art History", in Georgian Art in the Context of European and Asian Cultures, V. Beridze 1st International Symposium of Georgian Culture. Tbilisi,2009.