

Ekaterine Gedevanishvili

G. Chubinashvili National Research Centre for the History of  
Georgian Art and Monument Protection

### The Symbolic Interpretation of St Nicholas's Church at Gelati Monastery

The chronicler of the life of St David the Builder (1073-1125) gives a detailed account of the founding of the Gelati monastery written shortly after King David's death: he built the monastery "favoured by divine grace on a beautiful site on which stood the church of the Virgin like another heaven..."<sup>1</sup> The historian also gives accounts of the bringing of the relics to the monastery and of the meeting of scholars and philosophers invited from many countries throughout the Christian world. In response, David's historian refers to Gelati monastery as "the second Jerusalem and another Athens".<sup>2</sup> From that time on, the tradition of considering the Gelati monastery in the context of a second Jerusalem began to be established. With regard to this, the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem represented in the 16<sup>th</sup> century fresco in the main church of the Gelati monastery, implies the Heavenly City in the image of Gelati, appears to be typical.<sup>3</sup>

The text of the *Vita* does not make any particular reference to the "concept of Jerusalem" of the Gelati monastery. Nevertheless some precise parallels or symbolic associations can be noted. Firstly, the location of the monastery is remarkable. The royal monastery located in the vicinity of Kutaisi, Western Georgia, is set on a high hill in a remote area, overlooking the then capital of Georgia. Its topography itself seems to imply the notion of Jerusalem and the Heavenly City with which it is associated by its elevation.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Historian of David the Builder, *Vitae of King of Kings David*, Life of Kartli, v.1, Tbilisi, 1955, pp. 330-331. The main buildings which date back to the year of the foundation of the monastery are: the church of the Nativity of the Virgin, a building built of roughly cut stone, which is considered to have housed the Gelati Academy; the building sheltering the spring on the west part of the complex and the main entrance gate with the grave of King David, while the church of St George and the church of St Nicholas were built later, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p. 331.

<sup>3</sup> Gelati, *Architecture, Mosaics, Frescoes*, Tbilisi, 1982; ill. 74.

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew language reveals this symbolic significance - movement towards Jerusalem is always expressed with a verb of ascending ( see: for example Luke 19:28 (יִרְשָׁעִים יֵעָלוּ לִפְנֵי רִם וַיַּעֲבֵר הָאֱלֹהִים דְּבָרִים לְדָבָר וַיֵּכַל) "And when he had thus spoken he went before, ascending up to Jerusalem" ; see also Zacharia 14:6.

I would like to thank my colleague Emma Maayan- Fanar for this comment.

The Gelati monastery is the resting place of its founder David the Builder who said: “the monastery is my burial place and a crypt for my descendants”.<sup>5</sup> It cannot be a simple coincidence that the king consecrated the main church of the monastery to “serving the Mother of God”. There emerges an immediate parallel to Mount Zion, which was the resting place of David the Prophet.<sup>6</sup> David, King of Israel, was regarded as the symbolic prototype of every Christian sovereign,<sup>7</sup> but in Medieval Georgia he had a very remarkable significance as the members of the royal house of Bagrationis considered the Old Testament ruler their direct ancestor and were officially known as “King David’s descendants”. The relationship of David the Builder to David the Prophet is strikingly displayed in the Khakhuli triptych, the main relic of the Gelati Monastery. The inscription on this icon announces the Georgian king David and his son Demetre as equal to the prominent biblical kings - David and Solomon.<sup>8</sup> What links the Georgian king to his Biblical namesake even more closely are the “Hymns of Repentance”, which were composed by David IV as a sequence of eight free –verse psalms. In order to feel this connection, one should take into account the very special role of King David IV in the history of Georgia. He was the king who united Georgia and liberated it from Muslim occupation and turned it into the most powerful state in the Near East and the Caucasus; the king who was called “the Builder” and was proclaimed a saint by the Georgian Church.

The only oddity is, that the Gelati Catholicon is dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin and not, as would appear to be more suitable, to the Dormition of the Virgin. The reason for this could have been the existence of the great cathedral of Kutaisi built by Bagrat III in the X-XI centuries, dedicated to the Dormition.<sup>9</sup> This cathedral also had a very special importance in the history of Georgia, as King Bagrat III was the first Georgian king who began unifying the Georgian lands and built this magnificent cathedral as a symbol of the unity and power of Georgia. However, I believe, that the consecration of the main church of Gelati to the Virgin, in this case, implied its symbolic connection to the sanctity of Mount Zion. What makes this symbolic link even more obvious, is the fact that the author of the *Vita* of St David calls the Gelati Catholicon “the mother of all the Churches”, a term widely applied to the Zion Sanctuary.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> David the Builder, *The Will*, Georgian Writing, 2, Tbilisi, 214.

<sup>6</sup> The Holy Land, *Oxford Archaeological Guides*, Oxford 2005, p. 105

<sup>7</sup> With reference to this subject see: H. Maguire, *Style and Ideology in Byzantine Imperial Art*, Gesta, vol. 28, No. 2 (1989)

<sup>8</sup> For the inscription in which King David and his son Demetre are compared to David the Prophet and King Solomon, see: L. Khuskivadze, *Icon of Khakhuli Triptych*, Tbilisi, 2007, p. 8

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Prof. D. Tumanishvili for this notice.

<sup>10</sup> The Holy Land, *Oxford Archeological Guides*, Oxford, 1998, p.106.

Perhaps the St Nicholas church with its extraordinary architecture makes the symbolic link of the Gelati monastery with the Holy city even more tangible. **(fig. 1)**<sup>11</sup>. In the late 13<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>12</sup> a two-storey ‘gate-church’ based upon the open archway of St Nicholas was built within the Gelati monastic complex. I suggest that this *croix-libre* type construction, resting on an arched passage, can be interpreted as the copy of the Anastasis rotunda which was widely spread throughout the Christian world.

In the work dedicated to the copies of the Holy Sepulcher R. Krautheimer mentions that the main iconographic feature of the Golgotha sanctuary is the rotunda shape but there are some of octagonal shapes as well.<sup>13</sup> In this context R. Krautheimer remarks that a polygon was perceived by medieval believers mainly as of circular shape and illustrates his opinion by a quotation of St Gregory of Nyssa in which the Cappadocian Father describes an octagonal church as a “circle with eight angles”.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, the rather unusual niches inserted between the arms of St Nicholas’s church attract our attention. These additions, insignificant at first glance, make certain changes to the traditional *croix-libre* type as the small insertions between the arms of the cross have niche-like concavities. It seems that they rounded and visually change the real shape of the building. The strongly projected apse must be mentioned as well. Latter is elaborated with arcade giving a tangible association with the rotunda shape. By its unusual shape this tiny church which measures 6.5 metres/ 5 metres follows the description of St Gregory of Nyssa and thus the *croix-libre* type visually ‘acquires’ the shape of a rotunda.

We are also reminded of the Sanctuary of the Holy Sepulcher by another important “iconographical” element – an open arched passage, which gives the church of St Nicholas the impression of a gateway. If not this symbolic context, the existence of the gate motif in the

---

<sup>11</sup> The architecture of St Nicholas’s church has not yet been studied. In scholarly literature it is only briefly described as a part of the ensemble of the Gelati Monastery; see: V. Beridze, *The History of Georgian Architecture*, 1974, p. 150. Gelati, *Architecture, Mosaics, frescoes*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Gelati, *Architecture, Mosaics, frescoes*. p.8

<sup>13</sup>R. Krautheimer, Introduction to an “*Iconography of Medieval Architecture*”, p. 5; For the copies of the Golgotha Sanctuary see: Kenneth John Conant, *The Holy Sites at Jerusalem in the First and Fourth Centuries AD*, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 102, No.1 (Feb. 1958); B. Kuhnel, *From the Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem*, Rome, Freiburg, Vienna 1987; R. Oustenhout, *Loca Sancta and the Architectural Response to Pilgrimage in the Blessings of Pilgrimage Urbana* 1990; *The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art*. Ed. G. Kuhnel, Jerusalem 1998; A. Batalov, *Le Saint Sepulchre dans L’espace Sacre’ de la Cathedrale Russe aux XVI-XVII siecles*, Eastern Christian Relics, ed. A. Lidov; P. Piva, *Le “copie” del Santo Sepolcro nell’Occidente romanico Varianti di una Relazione Problematica, II Mediterraneo e L’Arte*, 2002; Colin Morris, *The Sepulcher of Christ and the Medieval West from the beginning to 1600*, Oxford; J. Wilkinson, *The Holy Sepulcher: Jerusalem and Mtskheta*, *Georgian Antiquities*, 1, 2002; in the same collection: N. Vacheishvili, *On an Unknown Event in Georgian Ecclesiastical Architecture*.

<sup>14</sup> R. Krautheimer, p. 5.

church which is located in the middle of the monastery is somehow unjustified from a functional point of view.

Here we should recall the motif of a gate reflected in numerous representations of the Heavenly Jerusalem, which is absolutely essential in these representations and is particularly emphasized in the copies of the Holy Sepulcher<sup>15</sup> i.e. the holy tomb depicted in the scene of the Resurrection in the Rabbula Gospel; the Anastasis church of the ivory reliquary of the 6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> cc preserved at Sancta Sanctorum in Rome; the Holy Sepulcher represented on the window frame at Shavi Sopeli; the image of Jerusalem from the composition of the Last Supper at the refectory of Udabno at David Gareja, etc. From this point of view, it is interesting to look at the representations of the Holy Sepulcher in medieval Georgian relief. K. Machabeli believes that, in accordance with the tradition common to the Christian East, it is mainly depicted exactly with a two- or three-arched entrance-gate.<sup>16</sup> In the scholarly literature the representation of the Holy Sepulcher in the form of a gate is also perceived as an iconographical expression of the symbolic link between this great Christian relic and Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. In terms of the conventional language of fine arts, an arched entrance points to the aedicule of Constantine's church confined with a colonnade, while in Solomon's Temple it suggests the symbolic image of the Holy of Holies implied in the façade and beyond.<sup>17</sup> In the representations of these relics it turns into a symbol of the junction between the earthly and heavenly worlds.

It should be noted that, the *croix - libre* type is very unusual for the architecture of Georgia of that period; the type which was very popular in the Early Christian period is perceived as an 'anachronism' for 13<sup>th</sup> century Georgian architecture. Not only the architectural type but also a two- storey structure is atypical of our country. From this point of view, the architecture of Armenia reveals interesting parallels. Two-storey buildings are widespread in neighbouring Armenia and it should be mentioned, that this type of building in Armenia is mostly connected with funerary architecture.<sup>18</sup> In some cases, the upper floor structure forms a cross-shaped figure, as in the monastery of Goshavank and this is seen in scholarly literature as a direct association with the Golgotha Sanctuary.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, we know nothing about the function of St Nicholas's church; we do not even know whether it was connected with funeral architecture, but

---

<sup>15</sup> In connection with this topic see: A. Lidov, *Heavenly Jerusalem: The Byzantine Approach, The Ideal City and Eastern Art*, in the collection *The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art*, ed. G. Kuhnel, Jerusalem 1998.

<sup>16</sup> See: K. Machabeli, *The Holy Sepulcher Reflected on Monuments of Early-Medieval Art* (in Russian), P.K.N.O. 2008

<sup>17</sup> R. Ousterhout, *The Temple, the Sepulcher and the Martyrion of the Savior*, *Gesta*, Vol. 29/No 1 (1990), pp. 47-50.

<sup>18</sup> S. Shahinian, *The Tradition of Funeral Architecture in Armenia from the Origin of Christianity to the Late Middle Ages*, *Environmental Design to the East Essays in memory of P. Cuneo*, 1-2 Firenze 1997, pp. 72-83.

<sup>19</sup> S. Shahinian, *The Tradition of Funeral Architecture in Armenia*, p.75.

this link with Armenian examples which are directly connected with the relic of the Holy Land seems to be interesting in this particular context.

Here several other similar examples can be cited, which can develop our argument even further. For instance in a Serbian painting of the Virgin Church at Pec' (14<sup>th</sup> century), representation of the Altar in the scene of the Communion is considered to be a symbolic image of the Holy Sepulcher.<sup>20</sup> What attracts our attention is that this image structurally shows a close resemblance to St Nicholas's church; it is represented as a two-storey church with a rotunda built over a gate. The particular importance of the gate is stressed by a representation of a cherub depicted in front of it. In this regard, it is also interesting to mention the chandelier of the Aachen cathedral of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, which was intended to signify the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Models of sixteen churches of various shapes make up the famous chandelier of Aachen - we have two floor structure ( the churches based on a pedestal) – showing an immediate similarity to our church. Moreover, there are samples which show the tendency of 'rounding' the cross shape. In some examples of the models the arms acquire a circular outline and are perceived more as a tetraconch type.

The so-called *Gate of Paradise* of Munster cathedral should to be mentioned too. Here the gallery of the prophets is presented. They are "crowned" by the 'chain' of the buildings denoting the Heavenly Jerusalem. A sequence of rotunda and cruciform churches are presented here. What is remarkable is that the cruciform shaped buildings reveal the same tendency of the rounding of angles, thus presenting rounded-armed buildings. The principal element of all these constructions is again the motif of an arched entrance.

In Patristic literature the Holy Sepulcher is comprehended as an indisputable symbol of the Saviour's Incarnation.<sup>21</sup> In the period of iconoclasm, when the subject of the Incarnation with respect to icons attained particular significance, the Holy Sepulcher, as an "indisputable" evidence of God's Incarnation and Resurrection, attains a remarkable importance<sup>22</sup> and is named as one of the principal arguments of God's *embodiment*.<sup>23</sup>

If we consider the very special importance of Gelati's foundation in the history of Georgia, this dogmatic connotation of the copy of the Holy Sepulchre seems to be very real. King David the Builder, "the Sword of the Messiah", as he was called in Georgian sources, established Gelati as

---

<sup>20</sup> A. Lidov, *Heavenly Jerusalem: The Byzantine Approach*, fig. 6.

<sup>21</sup> M. Evangelatou, *The Holy Sepulcher and Iconophile Arguments on Relics in Ninth-Century Byzantine Psalters*, Eastern Christian Relics, ed. A. Lidov, 2003, p. 184-185.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 182

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 155

the symbol of the authority of the Georgian kingdom. Alongside with political unity, King David managed to give an Ecclesiastic unity to Georgia. Thanks to his successful military campaigns, he succeeded in bringing most Caucasian lands under Georgia's control. In that process of unifying of the Calcedonian non-Calcedonian population the conversion of Monophysite Armenians had a crucial significance. Having lost their political independence, the Armenians tried to maintain their identity by preserving their religion. David IV held two very important councils in his life.<sup>24</sup> One was the Ruis- Urbnisi Council, which was actually devoted to church reform and another one specifically held to discuss dogmatic issues concerning the Armenian creed. The Gelati theological school with its literary activity perfectly reveals this dogmatic stream; special interest towards the Monophysite heresy is well demonstrated by the various dogmatic original or translated works created in the theological school of Gelati.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in Gelati, in the monastery regarded as the symbol of the orthodoxy of the Georgian Church, the symbolic copy of the Anastasis Sanctuary, which namely stands for the symbol of the Incarnation – the main disputable dogma among Monophysits and Diophysits must have acquired special dogmatic importance; in this monastery it might have been perceived as the 'architectural' approval of God's Incarnation.

It seems as if the dogmatic character of St Nicholas's church must also be attested by its consecration to St Nicholas, who occupies a prominent place among the Eastern saints. According to ecclesiastic tradition, his name is connected to expressing the "true faith" of the Nicaea Ecumenical Council and it is remarkable that in Georgia too, his special cult emerges exactly in the context of theological discussions. In this regard, we should point to the wall-paintings of St Nicholas's church in Kintsvisi, where the portrayal of the Bishop of Mira together with St Silvester,<sup>26</sup> turns into an expression of the orthodoxy of the Georgian Church.<sup>27</sup>

The location of St Nicholas's church within the monastic complex is also notable; it stands between the main church of the monastery and the Gelati Academy and is perceived as a kind of

---

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted, that these local councils were symbolically 'commemorated' in the narthex painting of the Gelati monastery (first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century), where the cycle of the Ecumenical Councils was designed on the pro-and anti-Chalcedonian controversy. In the arrangement of the program of the Councils one will find tangible allusion to King David's reality . see: T. Virsaladze's mentioned work; also: E. Gedevanishvili, Again on a Local Iconographic Tradition, *Georgian Antiquities*, 6, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> For the Gelati Theological school see: D.Melikishvili, "Another Athens and a Second Jerusalem", Tbilisi, 2006; L.Gigineishvili, The Platonic Theology of Ioane Petritsi, Gorgias Press, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> See: M. Didebulidze, New Data on the 13<sup>th</sup> c Murals of St. Nicholas' Church at Kintsvisi, *Georgian Antiquities* 1, 2002, pp. 85-100; M. Didebulidze, *Artistic Image of the Painting Ensemble of St Nicholas's Church at Kintsvisi*, Abstract of the thesis submitted for obtaining the Degree of Doctor in the History of Art, Tbilisi 2006.

<sup>27</sup> It should probably also be mentioned, that St. Nicholas' icon of enamel cloisonné on the Khakhuli tryptich, the main relic of the Gelati monastery, occupies the most prominent position. It is represented under the icon of the Enthroned Virgin with Child, along the central "axis"

a 'bridge' connecting these two structures. Considering this function, we can appreciate the unusual architectural form of the gate-like passage of its ground floor, which, apart from its symbolic meaning, must have had the function of a link, or a passage church, between the Catholicon and the Academy building. And this function is particularly stressed at the south gate of the main entrance to the monastery.<sup>28</sup> For the beholder approaching from this side, the arrangement of the building of the Academy, St Nicholas's and the Nativity of the Virgin churches conform to one symmetrical axis<sup>29</sup> creating a 'continuous' row of structures . (ill.2)<sup>30</sup>

The Gelati monastery, equal in its importance in the opinion of contemporaries to the Academy of Mangana in Constantinople, was the first educational institute where was laid the foundation of studies of Classical philosophy and Byzantine Neo-Platonism.<sup>31</sup> Then it became the main Georgian centre of translation and interpretation of Classical philosophy and the centre of 'Christianizing' of the ancient heritage. And it seems that the church of St Nickolas "visualize" this very special significance of the Gelati foundation. The 'bridge' connecting two main buildings of the monastery recalls the famous question of Tertullian - "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem or the Academy with the Church?" embodying the fundamental essence of that holy foundation - the concept of the enlightened Christian wisdom

---

<sup>28</sup> it served as the main entrance until the 17<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>28</sup> as the road from Kutaisi approached this side

<sup>29</sup> It also should be mentioned, that the gate to St Nicholas's church is situated opposite the Virgin's church, while it misses the Academy gate. However, this asymmetry is less conspicuous in the complex of Gelati as a whole.

<sup>30</sup> It has to be mentioned, that these structures (the Academy and St Nicholas' church) correspond in terms of scale.

<sup>31</sup> D. Melikishvili, Gelati – "Another Athens and Second Jerusalem", Tbilisi, 2006, p. 12

---