

The Upper Chapel of Otkhta Eklesia and The Peculiarity of Its Interior Spatial Arrangement Summary

The research conducted within the framework of the FaRiG Simon Zazadze grant aims to analyse the Upper Chapel of Otkhta Eklesia within a broad context, with particular focus on its interior space. The chapel presents a unique architectural solution that contrasts with other smaller churches of similar scale. This approach, which will be examined in detail in the full publication, is unusual for a hall-type church and is rarely seen in Georgian single-nave structures.

Specifically, the study focuses on the *patronikē*, the upper galleries arranged within the interior of the chapel, particularly in its western section. The chapel is located in the historic southwest region of Georgia, within the historic province of Tao (Tsitskhvaia, 2000, pp. 209–222) (Fig. 1). Situated in the wooded high mountains above the Great Lavra of Otkhta Eklesia, it remains isolated and difficult to access. Its striking location was one of the initial factors that inspired this research, while a second, equally significant factor was the fact that the chapel had scarcely been studied.

Until its identification by the Austrian scholar Dr Bruno Baumgartner in 1986, the chapel was virtually unknown to the academic community (Baumgartner, 1996, pp. 548–549). The Upper Chapel of Otkhta Eklesia, also referred to in academic literature as *Arseniseuli*—a name established by Dr Marsagishvili, who also published the plan of the church (Marsagishvili, 1999, p. 89), is a two-storied chapel notable for one of its most distinctive architectural features. The lower level comprises a substructure containing a crypt, accessible via an entrance on the eastern side, while the upper level forms the main church, covered by a double-pitched roof. The presence of the crypt may provide valuable insight into the central question of this study: why the builder chose to incorporate the *patronikē*, a designated standing space within this elevated and seemingly “suspended in the sky” chapel, a topic explored further in this article (Fig. 2).

In the *Arseniseuli* Chapel, the *patronikē* occupies the upper gallery as a separate compartment, integrated into the spatial fabric yet connected to the main area through two wide arches. Its scale

is considerable, almost filling the space assigned to it, and the evidence suggests that it is contemporary with the church (Fig. 3). This is indicated by the slightly greater height of the western vaulted arches of the longitudinal walls (470 cm) compared with those of the eastern section (455 cm), as well as the misalignment of their junctions with the pilasters. Such asymmetry can be explained only by the insertion of the *patronikē* in the western part of the church, supporting its contemporaneity with the original structure.

The functionality of the *patronikē* likely extended beyond the arched frontage to include its flat ceiling, which may have served as a platform accessible via a wooden ladder. This interpretation finds support in the closest parallel: the hall church of the Assumption at Saphara, where the *patronikē* is similarly located on the western wall, but at the level of the second floor. Unlike the *Arseniseuli* example, it is separated from the main space only by a wooden railing, with access provided by a staircase in the south-western section (Beridze, pp. 42–44; Fig. 4).

Upper galleries, or *patronikē*, constitute a spatial–volumetric element of the interior, most often arranged within the church itself and only rarely constructed externally. They are either fully or partially integrated into the spatial organisation of the building and serve to enhance the volumetric and artistic expressiveness of the interior. In medieval Georgian written sources, upper galleries are referred to by various terms, such as ზეითგარდა მისახედავით (‘view from above’), the *catechumeli*, and მეორე სანქცეველი (‘the second viewing’). However, the original Georgian term *patronikē* (საპატრონიკე *sapatronike*, პატრონიკენი *patronikeni*) appears most frequently. This term does not occur in foreign sources and seems to have been directly conceived by Georgian translators of medieval Greek–Byzantine texts, entering the literary language to designate the specific function of the upper stories of churches in the Georgian context: namely, spaces reserved for persons of high social standing (Chitishvili, 2024, pp. 143–144).

Byzantine Context

To assess the necessity of arranging *patronikē* within ecclesiastical sacred space and to understand their functional significance, on which diverse opinions exist, it is essential to consider the

processes involved in shaping the internal space of the Christian church (Procopius, 2006; Taft, 1998; Mathews, 1971; Wybrew, 1989; Pokrovski, 1880; see also further discussion in this article).

According to early sources, Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture from the early Christian period featured galleries on the upper level primarily designated for women, although these spaces were not exclusively used for this purpose, as men were also permitted to occupy them. From the sixth century onwards, written accounts refer to alternative spaces for women, the *gynaecium*, sometimes located on only one side of the central nave (usually the north) and in other cases on both sides (north and south). During the same period, galleries are referred to in Byzantine sources as *catechumena*, though this designation does not imply exclusive use by catechumens.

With the decline and eventual disappearance of the catechumenate in the seventh century, galleries began to serve a variety of functions. By the late Byzantine period, they were also regarded as spaces of refuge for noble women (Palmer, 1988, pp. 117–169; Taft, p. 88; Wybrew, p. 48).

Georgian Context

Building on Byzantine precedents, it is possible to examine the role of galleries in the Georgian ecclesiastical context. In medieval Georgian Christian church architecture, particularly in cross-domed structures and, to a lesser extent, in basilicas, numerous examples of *patronikē* can be observed. However, the architectural forms of these spaces in Georgian churches remain insufficiently studied (Khoshtaria, 2004, p. 144).

The purpose of the Georgian *patronikē* was diverse, and the arrangement of each space appears to have been dictated by functional requirements (Beridze, p. 69). As Giviashvili has argued, the polyfunctionality of the *patronikē* manifested not only across time and space, but also within the framework of a single church at a given moment. The fact that *patronikē* were evidently employed for multiple purposes, a point no longer disputed, demonstrates that they lacked a strictly defined function governed by fixed canonical norms. Had their role been determined solely by liturgical necessity, they could never have accommodated non-liturgical uses. Instead, the *patronikē* emerges as a flexible space, not rigidly subject to liturgical canons, but responsive to the combined

liturgical and socio-secular requirements of a particular church in a particular era (Giviashvili, 2005, p. 58).

Taking into account that Otkhta Eklesia functioned as a monastic complex, certain functions can be excluded for both the Great Basilica and the *Arseniseuli* Chapel, a women's space is highly improbable. Similarly, the function of catechumens, those preparing for baptism, can be dismissed, as the structure dates from the late tenth century, when the institution of the catechumenate had already been abolished. Considering the temporal context, it is also unlikely that the galleries in the *Arseniseuli* Chapel served the singers. The possibility of a residential function is equally doubtful, since the remains of monastic cells are abundant around the church. Consequently, the use of the upper galleries as living quarters, even for a senior priest, appears implausible.

A highly significant and compelling function that remains is their use as a space for nobles within the church. For instance, the *patronikē* arranged in the church of one of the most important monasteries of Klarjeti, Yeni-Rabat, was intended for members of the nobility, specifically the Bagrationi family, who would stand there while attending the liturgy (Giviashvili, 2005, p. 56). I fully share this interpretation and propose that the *patronikē* in the interior of the *Arseniseuli* Chapel was a specially designated space for King Davit Kuropalates, naturally modelled on the *patronikē* of the Great Basilica.

This argument is further supported by a significant Asomtavruli inscription on the northern wall of the chapel, which mentions the chapel's builder, Arseni, and the ruler of Tao, Davit Kuropalates. The inscription attests to the substantial moral and material support provided by Davit to Arseni for the construction of churches and monastic cells within the monastery complex, and for the continuation of monastic life in the vicinity of Otkhta Eklesia (Baumgartner, p. 550; Skhirtladze, 2009, pp. 32–33; Marsagishvili, p. 92) (Fig. 5).

Conclusion

The analysis of the Upper Chapel of Otkhta Eklesia, particularly its *patronikē*, demonstrates the multifunctional and socially significant role of upper galleries in medieval ecclesiastical architecture. Drawing on Byzantine precedents, galleries initially served women or catechumens but evolved to accommodate diverse liturgical and social functions. In the Georgian context, the

patronikē was adapted to reflect local architectural traditions and social hierarchies, particularly in cross-domed churches and basilicas.

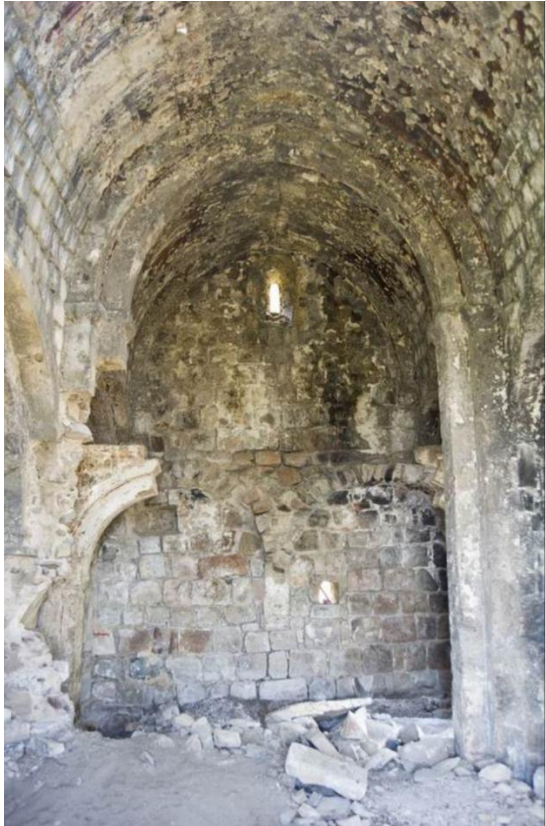
Architectural evidence and historical sources indicate that the *patronikē* in the *Arseniseuli* Chapel was unlikely to serve as a women's space, a catechumen area, a singers' gallery, or residential quarters. Instead, it functioned as a designated space for nobles, specifically King Davit Kuropalates, modelled on the *patronikē* of the Great Basilica. The Asomtavruli inscription further supports this interpretation.



1. Upper Little Chapel of Otkhta Eklesia. 984. General View to the North-East (photo by N. Bagrationi)



2. Upper Little Chapel of Otkhta Eklesia. 984. View to the South-East (photo by N. Bagrationi)



3. Upper Little Chapel of Otkhta Eklesia. 984. Interior. View to the west wall (photo by N. Bagrationi)



4. Church of the Assumption in Saphara. 10th century. Interior. View to the patronike. 2024.



5. Upper Chapel of Otkhta Eklesia. 984. The north façade. Inscription of 984 in Asomtavruli script. 1998.