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FEMALE MONASTIC PATRONAGE IN MEDIEVAL GEORGIA: QUEEN TAMAR AND HER MONASTERY IN TIGHVA *

Abstract. Tighva Monastery was founded by Queen Consort Tamar, the daughter of David the Builder, a famous Georgian king who succeeded in uniting the country and making it a dominant regional power. According to the written sources, Tamar was married to Shah Manuchehr III, the Muslim ruler of Shirvan (modern Azerbaijan) around 1111, in order to “rule over Shirvan”. Tamar lived and reigned in the Muslim court for more than twenty years. Resulting from a need to secure a retirement home and final resting place, she initiated the construction of Tighva Monastery soon after her return to Georgia in the 1140s. As her husband Manuchehr died in 1160, it seems that Tamar left Shirvan still a married woman, for unknown reasons. Tamar cut ties with her family and spent the remainder of her life as a nun in Tighva.

The Church of the Crucifixion in Tighva Monastery, which represents the main focus of this paper, gives a good example of how the place occupied by women during the Divine Liturgy not only indicated their social status, but also determined their visibility, demonstrating how architecture could be used to establish the limits of physical appearance of royal women in the twelfth century Georgian monastic space.

Keywords: female monastic patronage, medieval Georgia, queen Tamar, monastery in Tighva

“Queen of Queens and Truly Queen of the Heavens”

The history of the united Georgian kingdom began around 1000, when King Bagrat III from the Georgian royal family of Bagratids consolidated the majority of the country under his crown. The process was completed by his great-great-grandson King David IV the Builder (r. 1089–1125) in 1122, through his capturing of the historic centre of east Georgia, Tbilisi, the last enclave remaining from the Arab occupation. In the 35 years of his reign, David IV succeeded

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in making Georgia a dominant regional power with a strong army, centralized authority, and a flourishing economy.

We know little about the family of David IV. According to the information provided by the various chronicles, he was married twice. His first wife was an anonymous Armenian princess and the second was Gurandukht, the daughter of the khan of the Qipchaks. The majority of researchers concur that he had one son and two daughters from his first marriage and two (?) sons and two daughters from the second¹.

Tamar, the eldest daughter of King David IV and subsequently the wife of Shah Manuchehr III of Shirvan (r. 1120–1160) is among the few medieval Georgian women whose name appears more than once in historical sources. This special attention derives both from her close connections to the ruling houses of the South Caucasus, as well as her personal contribution to the religious life of twelfth-century Georgia through establishing a monastery in Tighva. Thus, she is mentioned in the chronicles not only as a daughter, sister, mother, or aunt, as one would expect, but also as a founder. Despite her being mentioned several times, none of the sources is precise or detailed enough to reveal a full picture of her long life.

The exact date of Tamar's birth is unknown. *Life of David, King of Kings*, included in the Georgian Royal Annals (*Kartlis Tskhovreba*), informs us that she was the eldest child (*pirmsho*) of King David IV the Builder with his first wife. The date of their marriage is also unknown, but can be roughly calculated. In 1089, when David ascended to the throne, he was sixteen years old². Most likely, he was

¹ Aside from Tamar, King David and his first wife shared several children, including successor to the throne Demetre I. Georgian Medieval sources are silent over the queen's name or origin. Twelfth century chronicler Mathew of Edessa merely emphasizes that Demetre had an Armenian mother (*Armenia and the Crusades. Tenth to Twelfth Centuries. The Chronicle of Mathew of Edessa*, trans., comm. A.E. DOSTOURIAN, praef. K.H. MAKSOUDIAN, New York–London 1993, p. 231, 237). Neither does his contemporary Ancellus, Precentor of the Holy Sepulchre, bother to mention the queen's name in his letter addressed to the Archbishop of Paris announcing the arrival of a fragment of the True Cross from Jerusalem to Paris. According to the letter, the precious gift was donated by a nun, who appears to be a widow or ex-wife of King David the Builder (Z. AVALISHVILI, *The Cross from Overseas*, Geo 1.2–3, 1936, p. 10–11; G. BRESCH-BAUTIER, *L'enovi de la relique de la Vraie Croix à Notre-Dame de Paris en 1120*, BEC 129.2, 1971, p. 386–397). Tedo Jhordania and Cyril Toumanoff propose that the first wife of David the Builder was Rusudan, Armenian princess to whom he divorced circa 1107 in order to arrange his second marriage with Gurandukht, daughter of Atraka, chief of the Kivchagh tribe (თ. ჯორდანიას [T. JHORDANIA], *ქრონიკები* [Chronicles], vol. I, ტფილისი [Tbilisi] 1892 [repr. 2004], p. 240; C. TOUMANOFF, *Manuel de généalogie et de chronologie pour l'histoire de la Caucasic chrétien (Arménie – Géorgie – Albanie)*, Rome 1976, p. 122). Their identification is shared by Donald Rayfield. D. RAYFIELD, *Edge of Empires. A History of Georgia*, London 2012 [repr. 2013], p. 91–92).

² R.W. THOMSON, *Rewriting Caucasus History. The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles. The Original Georgian Texts and the Armenian Adaptation*, Oxford 1996 [repr. 2002], p. 315; *The Georgian Chronicles of Kartlis Tskhovreba. (A History of Georgia). The Life of David, King of Kings Translated and with Commentary*, trans. D. GAMQ'RELIDZE, ed. S. JONES, Tbilisi 2014, p. 173.

newlywed by that time or married soon after, which places Tamar's birth in the first years of the 1090s. In any case, Tamar reached marriageable age before 1112, since in that year she arrived from Shirvan to attend the funeral of her grandfather George II³, which means that she was already married there. This fact, recorded in the Georgian chronicles, is also confirmed by another historical source referring to her sister Kata's marriage to Isaac Komnenos, the son of Emperor Alexios I, in 1116:

he [King David] sent his daughter Kata to Greece to marry (the son of) the Greek emperor. For he had previously sent his first-born daughter Tamar to be queen of Šarvan, so that the two luminaries – one in the east, the other in the west – might be stars in the vault of heaven, taking from their father sunlike rays⁴.

Taking into account that the Church Council of Ruis-Urbnisi initiated and convened by King David IV in 1105 set twelve as the minimum age for women to marry⁵, Tamar's wedding should be placed between 1105 and 1111⁶.

The daughter of the famous Georgian king, who managed to transform his country into a dominant regional power, shared the fate of many other princesses, played as a diplomatic pawn in the political games of the medieval world⁷. Through marrying off his daughters to Greece and Shirvan, David the Builder not only sought allies against the Seljuks, but also aimed to broaden the sphere of influence of his kingdom⁸. When Tamar arrived at the court of Shirvan (part of modern

³ თ. ჟორდანია [T. JHORDANIA], *ქრონიკები...*, p. 239–241.

⁴ R.W. THOMSON, *Rewriting Caucasus History...*, p. 325; *The Georgian Chronicles...*, p. 177; R.T. PRINKE, *Kata of Georgia, Daughter of King David IV the Builder, as Wife of Sebastokrator Isaac Komnenos*, *Fou* 3(6), 2011, p. 489–502.

⁵ ე. გაბიძაშვილი [E. GABIDZASHVILI], *რუის-ურბნისის კრების ძეგლისწერა* [The Code of Ruis-Urbnisi Council], თბილისი [Tbilisi] 1978, p. 90.

⁶ The date of her marriage varies from author to author and is placed between 1105 and 1116. See: H. HASAN, *Falaki-i-Shirwani. His Time, Life, and Works*, London 1929, p. 13; ნ. ბერძენიშვილი [N. BERDZENISHVILI], *აღმოსავლეთ კახეთის წარსულიდან (მოკლე პოლიტიკური ცნობა)* [From the History of East Kakheti (A Brief Political Note)], მიმ 3, 1953, p. 69; V. MINORSKY, *A History of Sharvān and Darband in the 10th–11th Centuries*, Cambridge 1958, p. 136; ნ. ასათიანი [N. ASATIANI], *საქართველო-შირვანის პოლიტიკური ურთიერთობა XII საუკუნეში* [Political relations of Georgia and Shirvan in Twelfth Century], *ოსუმ* 125.6, 1968, p. 29; З. БУНИЯТОВ, *Государство Атабеков Азербайджана (1136–1125 годы)*, Баку 1978, p. 148; С. АШУРБЕЙЛИ, *Государство Ширванишахов (VI–XVII вв)*, Баку 1983, p. 101–102.

⁷ On the phenomenon of diplomatic marriages between Christian and Muslim courts see Antony EASTMOND, *Tamta's World. The Life and Encounters of a Medieval Noblewoman from the Middle East to Mongolia*, Cambridge 2017, p. 84–100. Focusing on the thirteenth century, Eastmond's comprehensive study on the subject is also relevant for the earlier period.

⁸ Indeed, he achieved the title “King of Apkhazians, Georgians, Heretians, Kakhეთians, Armenians, Shirvanshah and Sharvanshah” at some point during his reign. D. RAYFIELD, *Edge of Empires...*, p. 85–97.

Azerbaijan) as the wife of Manuchehr III, the state was ruled by her father-in-law Faridun I ibn Fariburz. He died in 1120, leaving the throne to Manuchehr, who enjoyed power until 1160⁹. We know almost nothing about Tamar's life as a queen of the Muslim court. As Hadi Hasan points out, none of her contemporaneous Persian court poets, *neither Falaki ... nor Khaqani ... mention Tamar anywhere in their poems*¹⁰. Of Manuchehr's seven children, only the eldest son and his successor Akhistan I (Aghsartan in Georgian sources) can be identified as Tamar's child with certainty¹¹. In one of his odes, Khaqani says that Akhistan had Christian roots¹². *Life of Kartli* attests that he was the cousin of Georgian King George III (r. 1156–1184), offspring of his aunt from his father's side¹³. Khaqani's reference to his Christian origin may also indicate that Tamar was allowed to remain Christian. Her case would not be exceptional, as some royal women not only retained their Christian faith after interreligious marriages, but also freely practiced their religion at Ayyubid and Seljuk courts, both much more powerful than that of Shirvan¹⁴.

Another issue raised about Tamar is the length of her marriage. It has been a widespread opinion among scholars that she returned to Georgia as a widow¹⁵. Levan Rcheulishvili, the author of the only monograph on Tighva Monastery, shared 1150 as the date of Manuchehr's death, proposed by Evgeny Pakhomov¹⁶.

⁹ С. АШУРБЕЙЛИ, *Государство Ширванишахов...*, p. 101–108; C.E. BOSWORTH, *The New Islamic Dynasties. A Chronological and Genealogical Manual*, Edinburgh 1996, p. 140.

¹⁰ H. HASAN, *Falaki-i-Shirwani...*, p. 13.

¹¹ For the genealogy see: З. БУНИЯТОВ, *Грузия и Ширван в первой половине XII века*, [in:] *საქართველო რუსთაველის ხანაში* [Georgia in the Age of Rustaveli], თბილისი [Tbilisi] 1966, p. 286; H. HASAN, *Falaki-i-Shirwani...*, p. 15–17; С. АШУРБЕЙЛИ, *Государство Ширванишахов...*, p. 107.

¹² H. HASAN, *Falaki-i-Shirwani...*, p. 14; Konstantin Chaykin mentions that among many Odes there is one dedicated to Queen Tamar, however he does not bring any reference. ვ. ზაიკობი [K. CHAYKIN], *ქართულ-ირანული ურთიერთობიდან* [From Georgian-Iranian Relationships], *Moambe* 3, 1938, p. 18; Z. Bunyadov identifies a female character with Queen Tamar in Hakani's Ode dedicated to the death of King Demetre I. З. БУНИЯТОВ, *Грузия и Ширван...*, p. 291.

¹³ *The Georgian Chronicles...*, p. 234.

¹⁴ R. SHUKUROV, *Harem Christianity: The Byzantine Identity of Seljuk Princes*, [in:] *The Seljuk of Anatolia. Court and Society in the Medieval Middle East*, ed. A.C.S. PEACOCK, S.N. YILDIZ, London 2012 [= LMEH, 38], p. 120–124; A. EASTMOND, *Tamta's World...*, p. 206–210.

¹⁵ The opinion that Queen Tamar lived in Shirvan until her husband passed away has been shared by all authors who studied the history of the Georgian-Shirvan relationship. See: V. MINORSKY, *A History of Sharvān...*, p. 14; З. БУНИЯТОВ, *Государство Атабеков...*, p. 156; O. Vilchevsky argues that Tamar had conspired with her younger son against her eldest son Akhistan in order to unite Shirvan with the Georgian kingdom. О. ВИЛЬЧЕВСКИЙ, *Хакани*, СВос 4, 1957, p. 6; Sara Ashurbeyli generally agrees to this idea, but she also suggests another interpretation of the event, proposing that the plot was headed by Manūchih'r's other wife. С. АШУРБЕЙЛИ, *Государство Ширванишахов...*, p. 107–108.

¹⁶ Е. ПАХОМОВ, *Краткий курс истории Азербайджана*, Баку 1923, p. 30–34. The year of Manūchehr's death is securely redated due to new numismatic evidence. С. АШУРБЕЙЛИ, *Государство Ширванишахов...*, p. 104.

This date fits well in the reconstruction of the chronology of events, according to which Tamar became a widow in 1150, returned to Georgia, established a monastery, and took the veil in 1152. Moreover, on the basis of her being the wife of a Muslim ruler, the scholar excluded the possibility that the queen could have initiated the construction of the monastery from Shirvan¹⁷. Therefore, according to these dates, upon returning to her homeland, Tamar would have needed to have built the monastery within two years in order to have spent the rest of her life as a nun there.

In light of new research, the above story has obvious flaws and should be challenged. According to written evidence, the consecration of the church in Tighva and Tamar's taking of monastic vows happened simultaneously in 1152¹⁸. Yet, at present, it is commonly accepted that Manuchehr died in 1160¹⁹. Thus, it appears that Tamar became a nun during her husband's lifetime. Even assuming that the Georgian source contains an error and the church was consecrated not in 1152 but in 1162, its construction could hardly be started after 1160 as it would have been impossible to complete in two years a building of such a size (outer dimensions 14.5 × 24 m; height 22 m). In Medieval Georgia, the average construction period for churches of this size was around 10 years²⁰. Therefore, there can be no doubt that the monastery in Tighva was founded no later than the beginning of the 1150s, which suggests that Tamar would have already left Shirvan and moved back to Georgia by that time.

The fact that Tamar was in Georgia in the 1150s is further evidenced by a now lost mural inscription once placed on the north wall of Ishkhani Cathedral. According to the inscription, Egnate, the Archbishop of Ishkhani, established *agape* for the royal household: [...] *Glorify, God the greatest among Kings, the most powerful King Demetre, his sister, Queen of Queens and truly Queen of the Heavens Tamar and his sons powerful Kings David and [George]*²¹. On the bases that King Deme-

¹⁷ ლ. რჩეულიშვილი [L. RCHEULISHVILI], თიღვა, შირვანის დედოფლის თამარის აღმშენებლობა (ნარკვევი XII ს. ქართული ხუროთმოძღვრებიდან) [Tighva, Construction of Queen of Shirvan (Study from the twelfth Century Georgian Architecture)], თბილისი [Tbilisi] 1960, p. 95.

¹⁸ თ. ჟორდანია [T. JHORDANIA], ქრონიკები..., p. 254–255.

¹⁹ ნ. ასათიანი [N. ASATIANI], საქართველო-შირვანის..., p. 45–46; С. АШУРБЕЙЛИ, Государство Ширванишахов..., p. 101–108; C.E. BOSWORTH, *The New Islamic Dynasties...*, p. 140.

²⁰ For example, a slightly large church at Mokvi (outer size: 27.2 X 18.8; height: 23.3) was built and consecrated in ten years by King Leon III of Apxhazia (957–967). ვ. ბერიძე [V. BERIDZE], ქართული ხუროთმოძღვრების ისტორია [History of Georgian Architecture], vol. II, თბილისი [Tbilisi] 2010, p. 87–88; დ. ხოშტარია [D. KHOSHCHARIA], ნ. ნაცვლიშვილი [N. NATSVLISHVILI], დ. თუმანიშვილი [D. TUMANISHVILI], მშენებელი ოსტატები შუა საუკუნეების საქართველოში [Master Builders in Medieval Georgia], თბილისი [Tbilisi] 2012, p. 151.

²¹ Translation by the author. M. Brosset, *Inscriptions géorgiennes et autres recueillies par le Père Nersès SARGISIAN, MAISSP, VII série, vol. VIII, N10, St.-Petersbourg 1864, p. 14–17, pl. III; ე. თაყაიშვილი [E. TAQAISHVILI], 1917 წლის არქეოლოგიური ექსპედიცია სამხრეთ საქართველოში [Archaeological Expedition of 1917 in the South Georgia], თბილისი [Tbilisi] 1960, p. 25–27; ვ. სილოგავა [V. SILOGAVA], კ. შენგელია [K. SHENGELIA], ტაო-კლარჯეთი [Tao-Klardjeti], თბილისი [Tbilisi] 2007, p. 197–198.*

tre was still alive and both David and George held the king's title, the inscription is dated back to 1155²². Epithet “Queen of the Heavens”, usually alluding the Mother of God, may indicate that Tamar had already taken monastic vows by that time. Being the only female member of the court mentioned next to the kings confirms her special status and equality to them. In addition to her strong personality, this fact can be explained by her prominent role in the upbringing of her nephew, the future King George III (r. 1156–1184). The thirteenth century chronicle *The History and Eulogy of Monarchs*, tells that in 1161, when King George captured Ani, *he on his part, fair faced appeared before his tutor, the Queen of Queens Tamar, who, washing her face with tears, was overwhelmed with joy; after this, triumphant and manly, he met his spouse*²³. As Temo Jojua suggests, Tamar returned from Shirvan to Georgia in the 1130s and was actively involved in George's education²⁴. Actually, Tamar's return coincides with important political shifts between the Georgian and Shirvan courts. At the end of the 1120s, Manuchehr III, supported by the Seljuks, sought for independence of his state from the Georgian kingdom. Finally, Shirvan was split into two parts across the Aksu River. Its northwest territories, with a significant Christian population, became a subject of Georgia, while the eastern part of the state was left to Manuchehr to rule over with minimal obligations towards Georgia²⁵. Though it is unclear whether this turbulent period worked as a trigger for divorce. In any case, Queen Tamar had left Shirvan well before her husband died.

The Establishment of Tighva Monastery

Tamar established her monastery wanting to secure herself a secluded abode and final resting place. She is said to have launched its construction in the 1140s. The village of Tighva, apparently royal land, was chosen for the new religious foundation.

Tighva is an old village in Shida (Inner) Kartli province. It is mentioned in the Georgian Chronicles in the context of tenth-century events²⁶. Located 130 km from Tbilisi, the village is currently inaccessible to Georgian and international scholars because of the Russian occupation of the region. Therefore, the main source for the discussion of the setting and architecture of the monastery is the

²² ე. თაყაიშვილი [E. TAQAISHVILI], 1917 წლის..., p. 27; ვ. სილოგავა [V. SILOGAVA], კ. შენგელია [K. SHENGELIA], ტაო-კლარჯეთი..., p. 198.

²³ *The Georgian Chronicles*..., p. 231.

²⁴ T. JOJUA, *A Juridical Epigraphical Deed of Archbishop Egnate from Ishkhani Cathedral, the sixth international conference Archival Studies, Source Studies – Trends and Challenges*, held online on September 23–24, 2021, abstract is available on <https://archive.gov.ge/storage/files/doc/temo.pdf> [18 IX 2023].

²⁵ D. RAYFIELD, *Edge of Empires*..., p. 98.

²⁶ *The Georgian Chronicles*..., p. 149.

above-mentioned monograph by Levan Rcheulishvili. Most of the visual material presented here to illustrate this paper is also from his book.

The eighteenth-century *Description of the Kingdom of Georgia* by Prince Vakhushti Bagrationi is the earliest source praising Queen Tamar for building Tighva Monastery: *There is the Holy Cross Monastery in Tighva, which was built by the daughter of [David] the Builder; the domed church is very beautiful and well-constructed; there are plenty of buildings around it and only one priest to look after them*²⁷. Thus, at that time, the monastery had already been abolished, yet most of its buildings were still standing. In the late nineteenth century, when the Russian archaeologist Praskovya Uvarova visited the site, the architectural structures, aside from the church itself, were in ruins²⁸ (Fig. 1). A century later, they were gone without a trace, leaving the church as the only material evidence of the once affluent monastery²⁹.

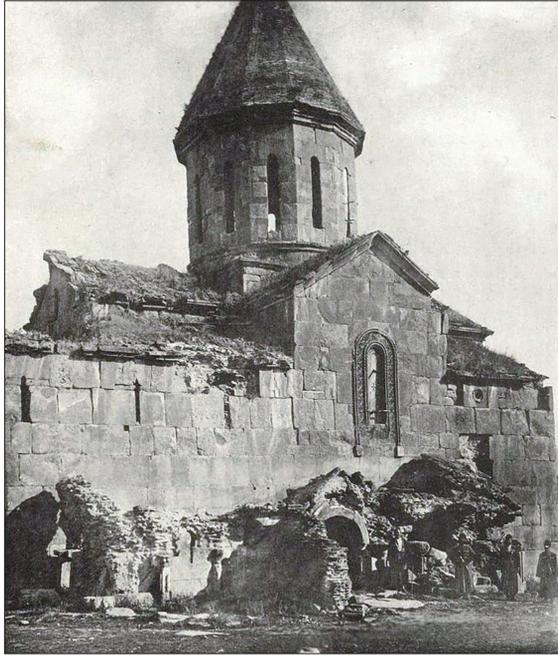


Fig. 1. Tighva Monastery. The Church of the Crucifixion. South façade. Photo by P. Uvarova, 1894.

²⁷ Translation by author. ვახუშტი ბატონიშვილი [VAKHUSHTI BATONISHVILI], *აღწერა სამეფოს საქართველოს* [Description of Kingdom of Kartli], *ქართლის ცხოვრება* [Life of Kartli], IV, ed. S. QAUKHCHISHVILI, თბილისი [Tbilisi] 1973, p. 376.

²⁸ According to P. Uvarova by that time, the church had reconsecrated on the name of Dormition of Mother of God and it was under repair. *Материалы по Археологии Кавказа*, ed. P. UVAROVA, Москва 1894, p. 166–167.

²⁹ ლ. რჩეულიშვილი [L. RCHEULISHVILI], *თიღვა...*, p. 7–8.

Originally enclosed within massive walls, the monastery housed the main church, cells and Queen Tamar's own residence. These isolated buildings were arranged to the north of the church, while agricultural structures stood outside and were attached to the eastern wall of the enclosure³⁰ (Fig. 2).

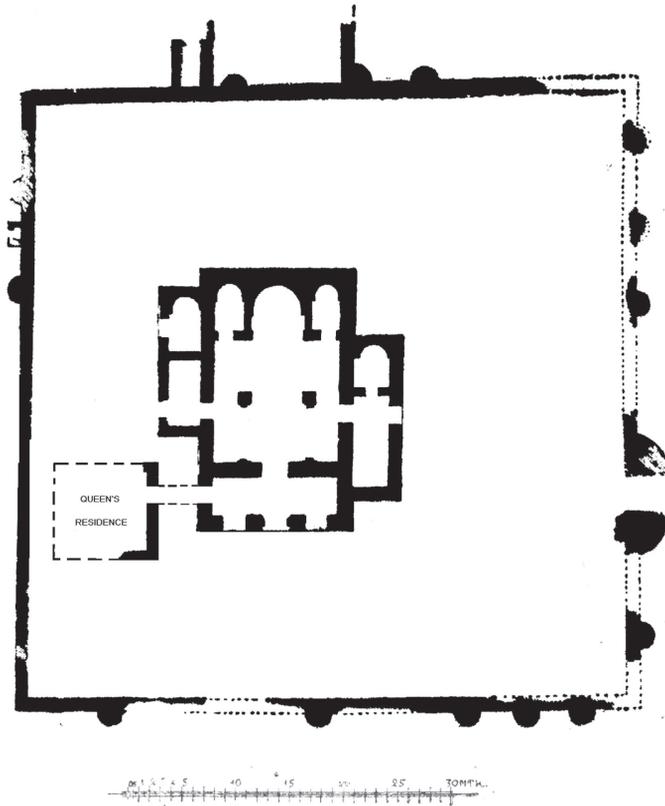


Fig. 2. Plan of Tighva Monastery after L. Rcheulishvili.

The church is cross-in-square in plan (Fig. 3). The crossarms are rectangular, except for the eastern one, terminating in apse flanked with pastophoria. A spherical dome rises on a drum, broken by twelve windows. It rests on two freestanding piers in the west and projections of the bema in the east. Pendentives serve to transition from the central square bay to the circular base of the dome³¹.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9–10.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 13; ვ. ბერიძე [V. BERIDZE], *ქართული...*, p. 308–309.

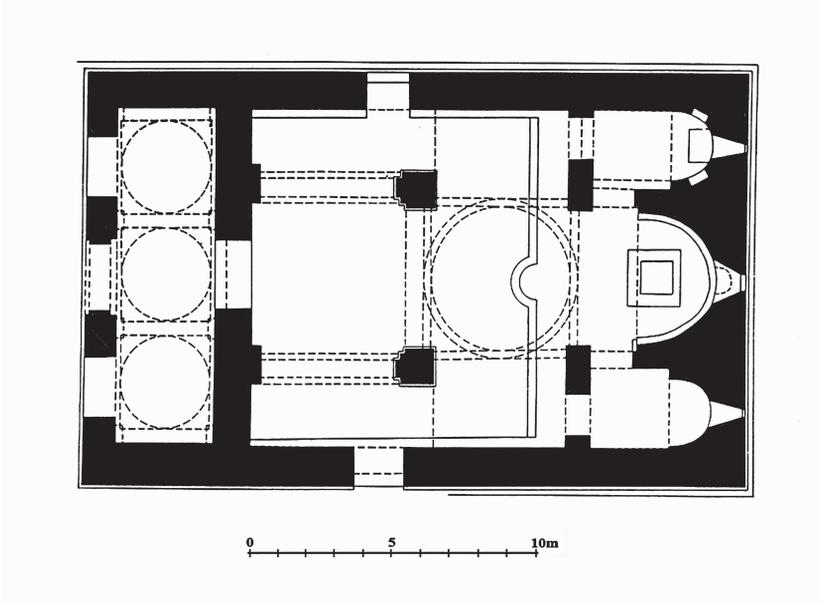


Fig. 3. Tighva Monastery. The Church of the Crucifixion. Ground plan after L. Rcheulishvili.

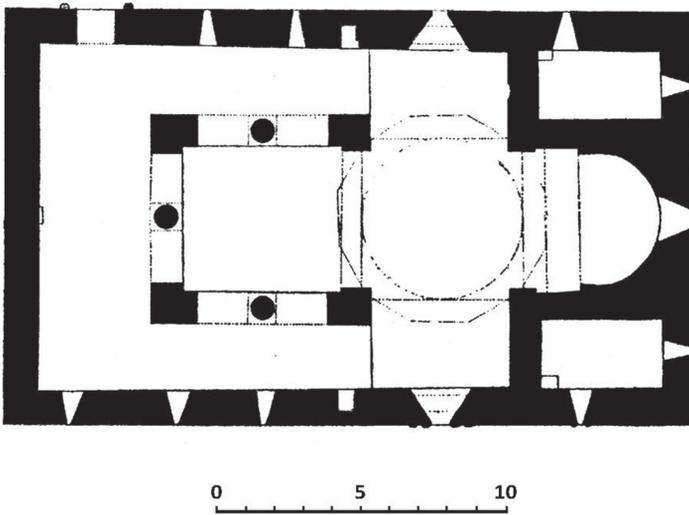


Fig. 4. Tighva Monastery. The Church of the Crucifixion. Upper floor plan after L. Rcheulishvili.

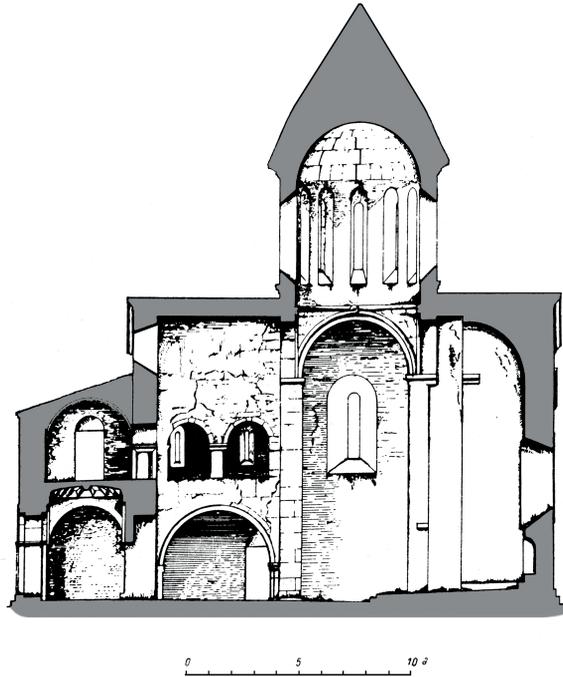


Fig. 5. Tighva Monastery. The Church of the Crucifixion. Longitudinal section looking north after L. Rcheulishvili.

The church is accessible through three entrances made in the south, north, and west walls. In front of the western one, 2.40 meters wide, there is a narthex, composed of three identical bays, each covered with individual low domical vaulting decorated with crosses³². The pendentives of the middle bay are additionally ornamented with shell-like insets. Three arched doorways, corresponding to each bay, once led to the narthex. At present, they are completely walled up³³.

An upper gallery arranged above the narthex and the north-western and south-western corner compartments surrounds the western arm of the church (Fig. 4). Each section of the gallery is open through semicircular arches supported by round columns. The gallery could only be accessed only through the queen's residence (now in ruins) standing 3.5 m northwest of the church. A stone bridge leading from the two-storey residence led to a door in the north wall of the church. Thus, the gallery was exclusively reserved for the queen; any other person would have needed Tamar's permission to pass through her apartment (Fig. 5).

³² For the vaulting type see: T. KAFFENBERGER, *Liminal Spaces of Memory, Devotion and Feasting? Porch-Chapels in Eleventh-Century Georgia*, CSup 1, 2021, p. 120, reference 5.

³³ ლ. რჩეულიშვილი [L. RCHEULISHVILI], *თიღვა...*, p. 17–18.

Chapels to the north and south enveloped the main body of the building. They were destroyed during repair works conducted between 1889 and 1892 under the direct supervision of the Russian Exarchate of Georgia³⁴.

The walls of the church are faced with finely hewn ashlar blocks, but lack carved decoration. Unlike other twelfth-century Georgian churches (Church of the Dormition in Gelati – 1106–1130, the Church of the Archangels in Ikorta – 1172) (Fig. 6), Tighva is distinguished for its unusually “severe” style: the façades are not articulated with blind arches, and, especially striking, there is a complete absence of decoration on the drum of the dome. Limited architectural ornamentation is concentrated on the northern façade. Here, the door, which once led Queen Tamar to the upper gallery, stands out for its carved decoration. The entrance is framed with interlaced geometrical ornamentation composed of alternating circles and rhombuses. There is a richly embellished ringed cross placed in the centre of the tympanum. A dedicatory inscription (discussed below) fills the areas between the frame and the cross (Fig. 7).

The window cut in the cross arm of the northern façade is adorned with S-shape floral ornamentation. The same motif is repeated on the entrance frame of the northern porch. Taking into consideration that this façade looked towards cells and was seen almost exclusively by nuns, limited decoration was intended for them, while other façades of the church impressed the secular audience with fine masonry of yellowish stones³⁵.

These and other peculiarities, including the extraordinary planning of the monastery, raise a number of questions regarding the involvement of the donor in the planning and building process, the connection between the church building and dwelling in a monastic setting, the place of a female donor in the monastic church space, her visibility, and segregation among women according to their social status.

³⁴ *Материалы...*, p. 167, note 1; ლ. რჩეულიშვილი [L. RCHULISHVILI], *თიღვა...*, p. 39; The approach of the Russian Church Administration was more or less similar to all ancient religious monuments: the interior was usually whitewashed or plastered, thus ruining Medieval murals; traditional chancel barriers were replaced with high iconostasis typical of Russian churches; and a widely used method was to “clean” a church from damaged or partially ruined additional buildings such as porches, galleries, chapels, etc. Like in Tighva, the goal of repairs was to make a tidy setting for a building, which resulted in the loss of valuable architectural elements of the sites. ი. ელიზბარაშვილი [I. ELIZBARASHVILI], მ. სურამელაშვილი [M. SURAMELASHVILI], ც. ჩახუნაშვილი [T. CHACHKHUNASHVILI], ხ. ჭურგულია [Kh. TCHURGHULIA], *არქიტექტურის რესტავრაცია საქართველოში* [Architectural Restoration in Georgia], თბილისი [Tbilisi] 2012, p. 19.

³⁵ ლ. რჩეულიშვილი [L. RCHULISHVILI], *თიღვა...*, p. 7; P. Меписашвили, В. Цинцадзе, *Архитектура нагорной части исторической провинции Грузии-შიდა-картли* [Architecture of the Mountainous Part of the Historic Province of Georgia – Inner Kartli], Тбилиси [Tbilisi] 1975, p. 109.



Fig. 6. Ikorta. The Church of the Archangels. View from the south-west. The George Chubinashvili National Research Centre, 1978.



Fig. 7. Tighva Monastery. The Church of the Crucifixion. North façade. Photo by P. Uvarova, 1894.

Queen Tamar had a clear vision of not only the overall concept of her religious foundation, with the focus not only on seclusion, but also on the architectural appearance of the church³⁶. The planning of the monastery and design of the church were dictated by the Queen, and served to represent the ascetic nature of the donor, who sought a place for the redemption of her sins rather than the staging of power through her establishment.

Very few medieval monastic cells and residences have survived to the present day in Georgia. While most of them stood at a distance from a church, one can also find living spaces incorporated into its body. St Nicholas Church at Kardanakhi Monastery (Kakheti region) is a hybrid building of the kind erected presumably in the seventh century. It is a barrel-vaulted single-nave church, with an apsed sanctuary on its eastern side. Three sides of the church, except for the east, are enveloped with ambulatory that also terminate in apses to the east. Its two-storey western and northern sections house an upper gallery and a dwelling respectively. These interconnected spaces open to the main church, although are only accessible from the outside³⁷.

The Church of the Mother of God in Zegaani Monastery (again in Kakheti) resembles that of Kardanakhi in many ways. It is also a seventh-century church of similar planning, with three-sided ambulatory and auxiliary rooms flanking the sanctuary. A rectangular hall placed above the narthex, and opening through two arches to the church space, served as an accommodation for distinguished members of the monastic congregation. However, it is not clear whether they entered this room from the church space by means of a ladder, or whether there was a staircase attached to the church from the outside³⁸.

Another religious building, which also incorporates a dwelling above the narthex is the ninth-century Church of Transfiguration in Iqalto Monastery (Kakheti). Heavily restored in the subsequent centuries, it is a structure of the cross-in-square plan, with a dome resting on four free-standing piers. A staircase arranged in the north corner of the narthex leads to the upper floor, where a rectangular room composed of two compartments, each covered with groin vaults, is located. Unlike the above-discussed churches, in Iqalto, the room communicates with the main space of the church only through one small arched window³⁹. All three sites are identified as male monasteries, leading to the conclusion that abbots or former noble laymen who adopted the monastic life used to live in these rooms⁴⁰. Different

³⁶ ლ. რჩეულიშვილი [L. RCHULISHVILI], *თიღვა...*, p. 53; დ. ხოშტარია [D. KHOSHCHARIA], ნ. ნაცვლიშვილი [N. NATSVLISHVILI], დ. თუმანიშვილი [D. TUMANISHVILI], *მშენებელი ოსტატები...*, p. 93–94.

³⁷ Г. Чубинашвили, *Архитектура Кахетий* [Architecture of Kakheti], Тбилиси [Tbilisi] 1959, p. 143–147.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 164–173.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 339–349.

⁴⁰ The same practice can be seen in Saint Nicolas Church at Khintvisi Monastery (thirteenth century) and a single-nave church near the village of Pichkhovani (seventeenth century), which

approaches towards the openness of these spaces clearly depended on the desire of the donor and his conception of self-representation in the church.

Nuns were not so daring when planning their establishments. None of the female monastic churches included living spaces directly incorporated into their bodies. In the twelfth century, the noblewoman Febronia founded a small monastery in Lisa (Shida Kartli). The tiny Church of the Holy Cross is a single-nave building terminating in an apse to the east. A sole window is cut in the same wall. The church is accessed through a door arranged in the south wall. The inscription placed above the entrance informs that Febronia erected the church in order to pray for the safety of her brother captured by the Turks⁴¹. The tower, which served as a cell for Febronia, adjoins the church from the west. These two structures are separated by a blank wall, therefore every time the nun wanted to visit the church, she had to leave her room and enter the church through the outside door. The small size and simple architecture of Lisa Monastery correspond to the modest lifestyle and limited financial resources of Febronia.

As mentioned above, in Tighva, Tamar's residence stood 3.5 meters away from the church and was connected to the upper gallery by means of a stone bridge, which enabled her to enter the church, bypassing the naos. The only inscription made above the abundantly decorated door and written in iamb says: "When a creature of this world starts another life by the will of God Christ Crucified, assist your maidservant Tamar before Him during the Last Judgment"⁴². This inscription was intended solely for the former Queen, to remind her of her humble position every time she entered the church. By restricting herself to the gallery, Tamar found a proper shelter for herself – for a person who wanted to stay undisturbed while at her devotions, and less visible not only to the nuns, but also to monastery guests. The upper-storey gallery in Tighva church became an ascetic refuge as much as a place underlining the social status of the donor.

Georgian church building tradition attests to segregation based on social rank. It was common in cathedrals and parish churches where religious events were attended by members of the royal household or nobility⁴³. Upper galleries developed from the seventh century in Georgian church architecture were used for

included a three-storey dwelling to the west to house former Bishop Partenoz. See: დ. ხომტარია [D. KHOSH[TARIA], ნ. ნაცვლიშვილი [N. NATSVLISHVILI], დ. თუმანიშვილი [D. TUMANISHVILI], *მშენებელი ოსტატები...*, p. 84–85.

⁴¹ P. МЕПИСАШВИЛИ, В. ЦИЦАДЗЕ, *Архитектура нагорной части...*, p. 103–104; Z. ALEKSIDZÉ, *Le Nouveau Manuscrit Géorgien Sinaïtique N Sin 50*, Louvain 2001 [= CSCO, v. 586, t. 108], p. 56.

⁴² Translation by the author. P. Uvarova is completely right when saying that the church was dedicated to the Crucifixion rather than the Holy Cross. For the reading of inscription see: M. BROSET, *Rapports sur un voyage archéologique dans Géorgie et dans l'Arménie*, St.-Petersbourg 1851, p. 106–107; *Материалы...*, p. 170; ლ. რჩეულიშვილი [L. RCHEULISHVILI], *თიღვა...*, p. 35–38; თ. ჟორდანია [T. JHORDANIA], *ქრონიკები...*, p. 255.

⁴³ *Материалы...*, p. 170; ლ. რჩეულიშვილი [L. RCHEULISHVILI], *თიღვა...*, p. 35–38.

staging the power of the attendees. The galleries usually consisted of spaces above the south and north aisles, connected to each other by a platform to the west. This platform, completely open to and merging with the main space of the church, like that in Tsromi Church (626–634), Alaverdi Cathedral (early eleventh century), and the Church of the Dormition in Gelati Monastery (1106–1130), was used by members of the ruling class and served to emphasize their superior social status. It had a particular role in the construction of visual communication between the nobility and their subjects during church services. Even when the platform was too narrow to serve as a place to stand, and functioned just as a corridor connecting adjacent arched spaces, it still played the role of a stage, as everybody could see the movement of the nobility before and after the service. In other churches, the upper gallery was more isolated from the nave, aiming to restrict the physical appearance and visibility of the person who stood there from below⁴⁴. In the church of the female monastery in Kalauri, built in 855 by Hilarion the Iberian for his mother and sister, the upper gallery located above the narthex and open towards the nave, through three arches arranged in two tiers, gives a limited opportunity for visual communication⁴⁵.

In Tighva, the main western section of the arched gallery is wide (3.5 m) and is poorly illuminated, thus giving a perfect setting for less visibility due to a dark background. On the other hand, its central position, like a private lodge in a theatre, would enable the queen to follow the Divine Liturgy from the best place in the church. The place she occupied in the architectural space of the church separated her from the rest of the praying community. Moreover, she had the sacrament brought to her there, as many other royal and noble families did in other churches. So, when planning her own religious foundation, the former queen followed a tradition where noble persons occupied the galleries during the liturgy. Even if Tamar was hardly seen by the congregation, they would know that she was present there. Tamar's choice to sequester herself physically also corresponds to the view of twelfth-century Byzantine society on virtuous women being expected to stay out of sight⁴⁶. In Tamar's case, the architecture participated in the con-

⁴⁴ ნ. ჩიტიშვილი [N. CHITISHVILI], *მეფე-დედოფლის სამყოფელი ქართული ეკლესიის სივრცეში* [Place of the King and Queen in the Space of Georgian Church], სს 17, 2014, p. 193–208.

⁴⁵ თ. დვალი [T. DVALI], *სოფ. კალაურის ნათლისმცემლის მონასტერი – ქართული ხუროთმოძღვრების საყურადღებო ძეგლი* [Kalauri Monastery of the Baptist – a Remarkable Monument of the Georgian Architecture], სს 20, 2017, p. 117–118, fig. 4, 6; This type of partition of space was first used in the church of All Saints in Gurjaani (eighth century). Here, five arches are arranged in three tiers, however, for public appearance of the nobility, the church also had a wooden balcony arranged on the south wall. E. BADSTÜBNER, *Die Kirche Kwela Zminda in Gurdshani und die Muttergotteskirche des Klosters Kwela Zminda in Watschnadsiani. Ihre Beziehungen zu Byzanz und zum Westen*, BB 2006, p. 41–49.

⁴⁶ L. NEVILLE, *Byzantine Gender*, Leeds 2019, p. 40–43.

struction of passive visibility of the female patron who founded the monastery, as a celebration of piety and expression of philanthropy.

The chronicles did not give the date of Tamar's death⁴⁷. The last years of her life are uncertain, just as other important periods of her long life are. Most likely, her church served her also as a burial place. Her grave is expected to be found in the main nave in front of the sanctuary⁴⁸. Yet, this new evidence awaits discovery.

Conclusion

The history of nunneries in Medieval Georgia has yet to be studied sufficiently. Tighva Monastery, as a royal establishment of a very ascetic female donor, speaks clearly of the role of women in funding religious buildings of that period. Moreover, it attests that Queen Tamar was not only financially independent in architectural patronage, but was also actively involved in the process of planning and designing her establishment. It attests to how architecture can underline the ascetic nature of the donor on the one hand, and create a perfect setting for social subordination on the other. The limited written sources and scarce physical evidence about the female monasteries of Medieval Georgia make it difficult to say whether other queens or noblewomen also used the same approaches to show their elevated status by means of segregated areas in the church space of their religious foundations. On the examples of Kalauri (855) and Tighva (1152), one can conclude that it was at least not uncommon. Further research will hopefully shed more light not only on the history of female monasticism in Medieval Georgia, but also on the female touch in the architectural arrangements of those establishments.

⁴⁷ As T. Jojua convincingly showed Tamar was still alive in the end of 1160s and twice donated money to the Georgian Monastery on Mount Athos. See: T. JOJUA, *An Agape record of Queen Tamar from the Agape Register of the Georgian Monastery on Mount Athos, the seventh international conference Archival Studies, Source Studies – Trends and Challenges*, held online on September 8–10, 2022, abstract is available on chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://archive.gov.ge/storage/files/doc/4_teimuraz_jojua.pdf [18 IX 2023].

⁴⁸ Levan Rcheulishvili supposed that she was buried in a small building attached to the north porch. ლ. რჭეულიშვილი [L. RCHEULISHVILI], *თიღვა...*, p. 44.

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