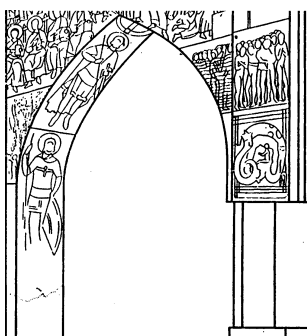
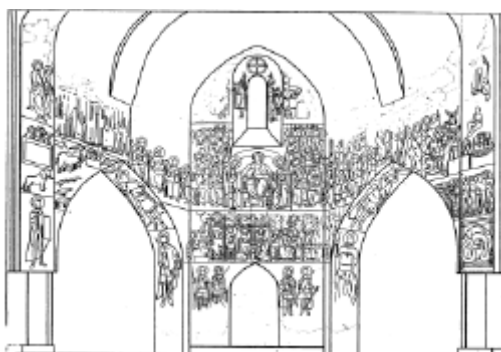


Holy Face in the Wall Paintings of Timotesubani

The present article deals with a Georgian icon of the Holy Face, namely, the *mandylion* in the wall paintings of Timotesubani. The reader may find the selection of this very *mandylion* surprising owing to its poor state of preservation. "Why this almost lost figure of the Holy Face when, fortunately, we have other better preserved samples of the Holy Face?" - is a question which may naturally come to the mind of the reader.

The reason of choosing the Holy Face of Timotesubani is an unusual place and context of its representation: the Holy Face depicted against the background of the scenes of the hell from "The Last Judgment" certainly requires particular insight and reflection (drawings 1-2).



The icon of the Holy Face in Timotesubani is located on the south pilaster of the north pillar dome supporting. In E. Privalova's monograph, the paintings in Timotesubani are dated to the early 13th century, while the image of the Holy Face is thought to have been painted in the late 13th century¹. This is the only repainted composition in the church: it replaces the original "icon" of hell, which portrayed a dragon over the image of a naked figure, embraced by flames and of horrible faces of chattering teeth².

¹ E. Privalova, Wall Paintings in Timotesubani, Tb., 1980.

² Ibid, p.95

The partial splitting-up of this painting, possibly the result of lack of plastering, revealed an earlier painting underneath. At present, two overlaying compositions can be observed, but a keen eye will be able to see portions of a *mandylion* (drawing 3).



It is a white, unwrinkled, open canvas adorned with vermilion stars, that is most visible. The canvas is framed by three parallel contours (outer- vermilion, middle - black) thus forming a rectangle divided into four parts, in which stars are inscribed. The frame itself is provided with a thick, vermilion belt, which makes the representation whole and gives it the image of an icon. Such a contrast between the figure and its background becomes more vivid because the compositions of the "Last Judgment" in the west crossarms are articulated only by a horizontal line. The scenes of the other world on the west crossarm can to be perceived as a carpet laid over the wall and understood as one whole (as though the painter did not want to draw attention to it).³

The image of the Holy Face is quite large, almost the size of the figures represented in full shape on its top. The face of the Savior is depicted against the background of a large, vermilion halo. The halo is framed by a double, black contour. It "intersects" the inner framing of the "canvas", owing to which the itself large figure of the Saviour looks even bigger in scale. The shape of the head of the Savior can hardly be discerned - only light chestnut hue of the hair has preserved. The hair, similar to that in the Vardzia *mandylion*, used to have a wavy shape, but the haircut, as opposed again to that of the Vardzia *mandylion*, is lower. Low is the forehead as well, which is indicated by presently hardly discernible brown-reddish curved contour marking the eyebrows. Unfortunately, it is impossible to provide a more detailed description of the features of the face - it is even hard to say whether it was only a head or a face with a neck that had been depicted. At present, a body of a dragon can be seen in its place. However, the compositional structure, a large halo which, judging by its size, extended to the lower border of the composition in a form of an open circle, allows to assume that it had been painted without a neck.

It is almost impossible to discuss iconographical and stylistic characteristics of the *mandylion*. However, it can be freely ascertained that abundance of decoration as reflected in the most accurate treatment of the canvas, peculiarities of framing including the segmental division of a rectangle, its colours (black, vermilion contours), and vermilion stars bearing symbolic significance, all typical of that period, transform the image of the Incarnation into that of the Salvation.

It is my opinion that, while analyzing the Holy Face of Timotesubani, major focus should be made on the fact of its appearance in place of the scenes of hell. An unusual location adds a totally new content and value to the image of the Incarnation.

The church has two entrances, one in its west and another, in the south. Upon entering the church from the west, the image is almost "hidden" to the observer; it is a large figure of the Virgin with

³ E. Privalova, Wall Paintings in Timotesubani, Tb., 1980, p.92.

a Child, painted on the conch, that first springs to the eye, and then, while directing the view towards the centre, the observer will pay attention to the dome terminating ornate, elevated architectural forms, provided with a magnificent composition of the Glorification of Cross. The *mandylion* becomes “visible” only to a prayer standing in the central bay. As has been noted above, it is easily discernible owing to its framing and scale. But yet, it seems to be lost in the space fully covered with paintings. Totally different is the impression it makes on the visitor entering the church from the south. The doorway in the south-west part of the church leads to the west part and upon entering, it is architectural forms that draw the prayer’s attention, such as the north-west pointed arch with a cross inscribed in a coloured segment of its polygonal curve, which, despite being small, is easily discernible for its location and intensive colours adding “sharpness” to the shape of the arch; a large window on the north wall, which is perceived to be located under the curve of the arch, along the vertical axis (while actually it slopes towards east) and lastly, besides these dominant features of the “axis”, the icon of the Holy Face represented on the pilaster connected to the arch “leading” an eye towards the *mandylion*. Owing to this, the feeling of the visitor entering the church from the south can be described as “nearing the image of the Holy Face”. For this reason, the presence of the Lord, standing face to face with Him, creates particularly strong impression ⁴ (cf. Where could I go to escape from you? Where could I get away from your presence? If I went up to heaven, you would be there; if I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there. Psalm 138.7-8).

It is noteworthy that the church had its main entrance in the south, which is attested by a later, 14th century addition of a porch ⁵.

In this connection should also be mentioned that the road to the church leads from the south: creation of the image of the Holy Face may be related to the “accentuation” of the entrance. At this stage, it is just an assumption. What is obvious is that the Holy Face was the first image to “meet” the prayer entering the church from the south. It is from the south were it can be fully appreciated. It is most probable that the image was designed for being observed from the south.

And what is unusual in representing the Savior in the “Last Judgment” hell surprising? The icon is probably one of the most interesting examples of the manifestation of unlimited creative freedom in medieval art - one of those, which present supporters of rigidity of canonic rules in the ecclesiastical art would find difficult to explain. This composition, “unjustified” or “unclear” at first sight, provides an answer through the impression it makes on a prayer upon entering the church. The Holy Face represented in the Hell becomes transformed into an image of the incarnated God, harrower of the hell and the Saviour of the world (cf. Ioane Minckhi's " On Holy Easter - დასდებულნი წმიდისა აგდგომისანაი").

“When you came from the heaven to earth, our Saviour...
went down to the hell and dispersed the rule of darkness
and restored the promised nature of man...”⁶

Inscriptions such as "the thirst-მღიდარი უწყლოი", "Blazing Gehenna", "sleepess worm მატლი უძილო", "eightless outer darkness – ბნელი გარესკნელი განუნათლებელი"

⁴ Though now, when the image is hardly discernable, this impression of such “facing” is naturally less felt.

⁵ D. Tumanishvili, To the Understanding of the Architecture of Kintsvisi St Nicholas’ Church, in: Letters, Essays, Tb., 2001, p. 135.

⁶ Reading-book of Georgian Literature, 1, Tb., 1946, p. 329

⁷make the hell scenes very concrete thus sharpening the contrast between the hell and the image of the Salvation; the image of the Incarnation becomes to represent the "enlightener", and "light undarkened (ღაუღამებელი ნათელი)". The same is referred to by a vermilion halo, extending over the border thus symbolizing the light undefeated, and a *mandylion* dotted with vermilion stars, which is understood as a symbol of the Resurrection. Owing to the abundance of vermilion, the icon of the Holy Face appears to be associated with the composition of the Harrowing of Hell in terms of its colourits - as it is known, the Savior is often represented in red clothes, not just as light but as fire as well. ⁸

(cf. „შენ ცეცხლად საცნაურად ღმრთისა სიტყუაო შეგიწყნარა ქუესკნელმან ჯოჯოხეთისამან შანთი უსხეულოი)⁹

“ Thou, Word of the hard, Couscion Fire, wast received by Precipice of the hell, hou, bodiless Rod”

It is also noteworthy that the Harrowing of Hell, a scene represented in many Georgian paintings and regarded as the image of Resurrection in Orthodox Christendom, has never been represented in Timotesubani. The theme of the Resurrection is presented by the composition depicting the Holy Women at the Tomb and other compositions related to the Resurrection (vision of the Saviour by the holy women, possibly the vision of the Lord by the Apostles at the Sepulchre or the vision of the Lord in Emmaus). ¹⁰

The compositions of the Resurrection and Ascension, represented in the east and north arms, are so incorporated into the dynamic-narrative plot of the painting that can hardly be sorted out. This becomes more evident against the background of Betania and Kintsvisi churches where the theme of the Resurrection is accentuated by the composition depicting the holy Women at the Tomb. Moreover, in Kintsvisi, the angel announcing the Resurrection dominates not only the south arm, but the whole space.

On the contrary, in Timotesubani, the composition of the Resurrection holds a very modest place. Considering the absence of the scene of the Harrowing of Hell this seems strange. E. Privalova explains such solution by a special content the composition conveys. ¹¹

The dominant scene in Timotesubani is certainly the Last Judgment - "the upcoming Age", More precisely, the eternal life gained through the passion and crucifixion of the Saviour (the image of Heaven in the west arm and "verbose" compositions of passions in the west arm). By representing the icon of the Holy Face "in response" to the Heaven depicted on the west wall the image of "small" heaven is created - the Lord "greet" those who enter the church with the light, as the Saviour of the world. This composition, painted in a later period, is dictated by the overall attitude of the whole painting, as if it had been given life by the internal composition of the original painting: the feeling of festivity so strongly felt in Timotesubani - azure, vermilion, green, white and light yellow-reddish halos and the images of crosses decorated by precious stones and themselves imitated to precious stones, inscribed in coloured segments... This is the attitude regarded as characteristic of the Georgian art of the 12th-13th centuries and understood

⁷ See E. Privalova, *ibid*, p. 94

⁸ A. Okropiridze, *Several Aspects of Symbolic Reflections of Red Colour in Medieval Georgian Paintings*, "Rtsmena da Tsodna", 3, 2000 (September-November), p. 30.

⁹ Ioane Minchkhi, cited from the above-referred article by A. Okropiridze

¹⁰ E. Privalova, *ibid*. p. 86

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 219

as "optimism" by E. Privalova. It was this feeling that dictated an artist to create a magnificent composition of the Last Judgment "opening" as a huge image of Heaven. This composition, spreading over 20 square metres of white-greyish surface, is represented against the background of pink apples and pomegranates uniting it in one curtain-like frieze. It is easy to guess the impression it made on the prayer upon leaving the church - instead of the reminiscences of the Last Judgment, the prayer would be filled with the feeling of the Resurrection. In this connection should be mentioned one characteristic of the Deesis represented on the west arm: the *mandorla* of the Savior is unusually big allowing space for the Virgin and John the Baptist in its curve. The Holy light presented by the sequence of vermilion and white-pinkish curves, in unity with the Lord's open, slightly descended hands, creates the image of the descent of light and the enlightenment of the world – the feeling is created by the illuminated small crosses scattered around the jambs of arches and windows similar to the composition of the Glorification of the dome cross.

It must be most probable that it was the images of the Salvation that were regarded to be most adequate for creating this kind of attitude in the prayer entering the church from the main doorway. And undoubtedly, present observer of the Heaven becomes utterly grievous upon catching the sight of a collective image of the Hell.