

Olena Chernenko

Title: The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Chernihiv

Date: 11th century

Geography: Chernihiv, Ukraine

Culture: Rus'ian

Dimensions: 33 x 22 x 29 m

Monument number: 250051



Fig. 1. The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Chernihiv. © Olena Chernenko.

alt="The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Chernihiv."

Keywords: Chernihiv, Rus', Medieval architecture

Citation: Olena Chernenko, "The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Chernihiv," in "The Material Culture of the Medieval Black Sea," *Medieval Black Sea Project*, edited by Teresa Shawcross et al., <https://medievalblackseaproject.princeton.edu/chernihiv-cathedral-of-the-transfiguration-olena-chenenko/>

The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Chernihiv, Ukraine, is one of the few preserved and, according to most researchers, the oldest monument of Rus architecture, though to be

built by Prince Mstislav, according to the *Rus' Primary Chronicle*. In 1036, the prince was buried there. At that time, the building was still unfinished, but its construction was completed with a few decades.

The study of the cathedral began at the end of the 19th century and continues to the present. The most significant studies were carried out in 1966-1982 by Nikolay Kholostenko and in 2012-2014 by Olena Chernenko and Oleg Ioannisyanyan. The Chernihiv Transfiguration Cathedral is a three-nave, three-apse, five-domed church with a narthex. The plan of the cathedral displays features suggestive of basilism (e.g. columns of three-span arcades widely spaced between the domed piers) that are connected the structure of cross-domed churches. The first tier of the triple arcades is formed by two pairs of marble columns with attic-type bases and ionic capitals. The main dome of the cathedral is located in the building's geometric center. While the narthex is separated to the west from the naos by a wall, the two are connected through arched passages located to the north and south along the axes of the naves.

The walls of the cathedral are built using the "opus mixtum" technique of masonry combining courses of blocks of stone (sandstone) with brickwork. However, in the lower parts of the walls (to a height of 2.5 to 3 m), stone is preferred to brick.

A foundation pit was dug for the entire area of the building. The foundations were laid in lines at the base of the pit from blocks of stone (sandstone) on cement mortar using beams as ties. These lines transform into a solid semicircular stone platform at the base of the cathedral apses. Without exception, all the researchers have drawn attention to the building's composite form, which combines some features of a basilica with those of a cross-domed church. It can be assumed that the original intention of the builders changed. In this, the cathedral resembles the Church of the Tithes in Kyiv, which was founded as a cross-domed church but then completed as a basilica. However, in the case of the cathedral at Chernihiv, the order of development appears to have been reversed. It is likely that during the life of Mstislav the structure was initially envisaged as a basilica, but that after his death and a break in construction was converted to a inscribed cross-in-dome architectural plan.



Fig. 2. The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Chernihiv. © Olena Chernenko.

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Historically, two opinions exist on the origin of the Byzantine masters who built the cathedral. Construction has either been associated with the "Caucasian-Asia Minor school" of architecture or attributed to Constantinople's "Metropolitan school". However, the studies of 2012-2014 allow us to consider this from a new perspective. The construction of foundations and the stone platform under the apse of the cathedral is an atypical technique for Rus architecture. The only known analogy is a church in the Taman peninsular studied in 1955. This latter church may be identified with the Church of the Virgin mentioned in the *Rus' Primary Chronicle* under the year 1016 and built by Prince Mstislav during his reign in the Rus Black Sea enclave of Tmutarakan.

Overlap in the appearance of both buildings suggests that the cathedral in Chernihiv and the church in Tmutarakan were built for Prince Mstislav by the same masters. Furthermore, one may assume that these masters' origin was in the Caucasus or Asia Minor based on the construction of the lower part of the walls. These resemble the stone masonry used for walls in provincial eastern Byzantine architecture such as that of the church in Lykhny in Abkhazia, or of the churches of the Arkhyz settlement in Karachay-Cherkessia. As in the Chernihiv Cathedral, in those monuments, piers are used only in arches, vaults or on the interior of the walls. There is an additional similarity

between the Transfiguration Cathedral and these buildings. As established in the course of research in 2012, the plan of the cathedral originally included side narthexes, as was typical for Christian churches within the territory of the Abkhazian kingdom during the 10th century.

It is worth noting that, when compared to the lower sections, the masonry of the upper sections of the Chernihiv Cathedral changes significantly—being more akin to the St. Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. This suggests that the construction of cathedral in Chernihiv could have been completed by craftsmen who were also involved in building the Cathedral of St Sophia in Kyiv.



Fig. 3. The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Chernihiv and the surrounding complex of buildings from the 12th to the 17th centuries. © Olena Chernenko.

alt="The Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Chernihiv and the surrounding complex of buildings from the 12th to the 17th centuries"

Biography

Olena Chernenko is a Ukrainian archaeologist with a PhD in 2005 from the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Since 1996, she has been a staff member at the T.G. Shevchenko Chernihiv National University. Following the beginning of the war in Ukraine, she has been working from 2022 as an adjunct professor in the Department of Medieval and Modern Archaeology at the Faculty of Archaeology at the University of Warsaw. For many years, she led research on cultural heritage sites in Ukraine. She is the author of more than 200 scientific and methodological works. Her scientific interests include the archaeology of Eastern Europe during the medieval period, with a particular focus on architectural archaeology.

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