

Title: The Frescoes of Manuel Eugenikos of Constantinople and His Byzantino-Georgian Atelier at the Church of the Savior at Tsalenjikha
Date: Main phase late 14th-early 15th century
Geography: Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Georgia
Culture: Byzantine-Georgian
Medium: Architecture and wall painting



Fig. 1. Tsalenjikha, Exterior of the Church of the Savior, viewed from the south-east. © Public domain. Creative Commons license CC BY-SA 3.0

“alt=view of the eastern and southern sides of the church, showing the apses and funerary chapels, as well as the construction from stone masonry”

Keywords: Georgia, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Tsalenjikha, Church of the Savior, Vameq Dadiani, Byzantine Art, Palaiologoi, Constantinople, Eugenikos (Evgenikos) of Constantinople, frescoes

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The Church of the Savior, later a Cathedral and the see of an Exarchate, perches above the town of Tsalenjikha in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region of western Georgia (fig. 1). In its current iteration, the church is a domed cruciform building. It is surrounded on three sides by a deambulatory, of which the northern and western portions remain open to the elements, while the southern portion has been converted into a series of side chapels that have been

used for burials (fig. 2).¹ That a church dedicated to Christ *Soter* (the Savior) already stood on the site by the 13th century is attested by an inscription mentioning its existence found on an icon of that period.² Various dates have been suggested for the construction of the earliest extant elements of the building: 10th-11th centuries; 12th century; or 13th century. Be that as it may, the most significant phase of construction and decoration was undertaken in the late 14th century and then continued in several phases into the 15th century by the princely family of the Dadiani, who ruled the territory of Odishi (Samegrelo or Mingrelia).³ The church was probably associated one of the palaces of that family since the remains of a large and lavish residential building have been discovered in its proximity.⁴ It became the preferred place of burial for the Dadiani from the 15th until the late 17th century when it was deposed by the newly prominent Chikovani family.⁵

¹ Inga Lordkipanidze, *Ростись в Цаленджиха. Художник Кир Мануел Евгеникос и его место в грузинской средневековой монументальной живописи* [*Rospis' v Tsalendzhikha. Khudozhnik Kir Manuel Evgenikos i ego mesto v gruzinskoy srednevekovoy monumental'noy zhivopisi; Painting in Tsalenjikha. The Artist Kyr Manuel Eugenikos and his Place in Georgian Medieval Monumental Painting*] (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1992), 24.

² Inga Lordkipanidze and Mzia Janjalia, *წალენჯიხის მაცხოვრის ტაძრის მონატულობები* [*Ts'alenjikha: Makhovris T'adzris mokhat'ulobebi*] / *Tsalenjikha: Wall Painting in the Saviour's Church* (Tbilisi: Chubinashvii National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation, 2011), 16.

³ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 15.

⁴ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 16. Note that since the building has not yet been firmly dated archaeologically, the possibility it is the later episcopal palace cannot be excluded.

⁵ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 15.

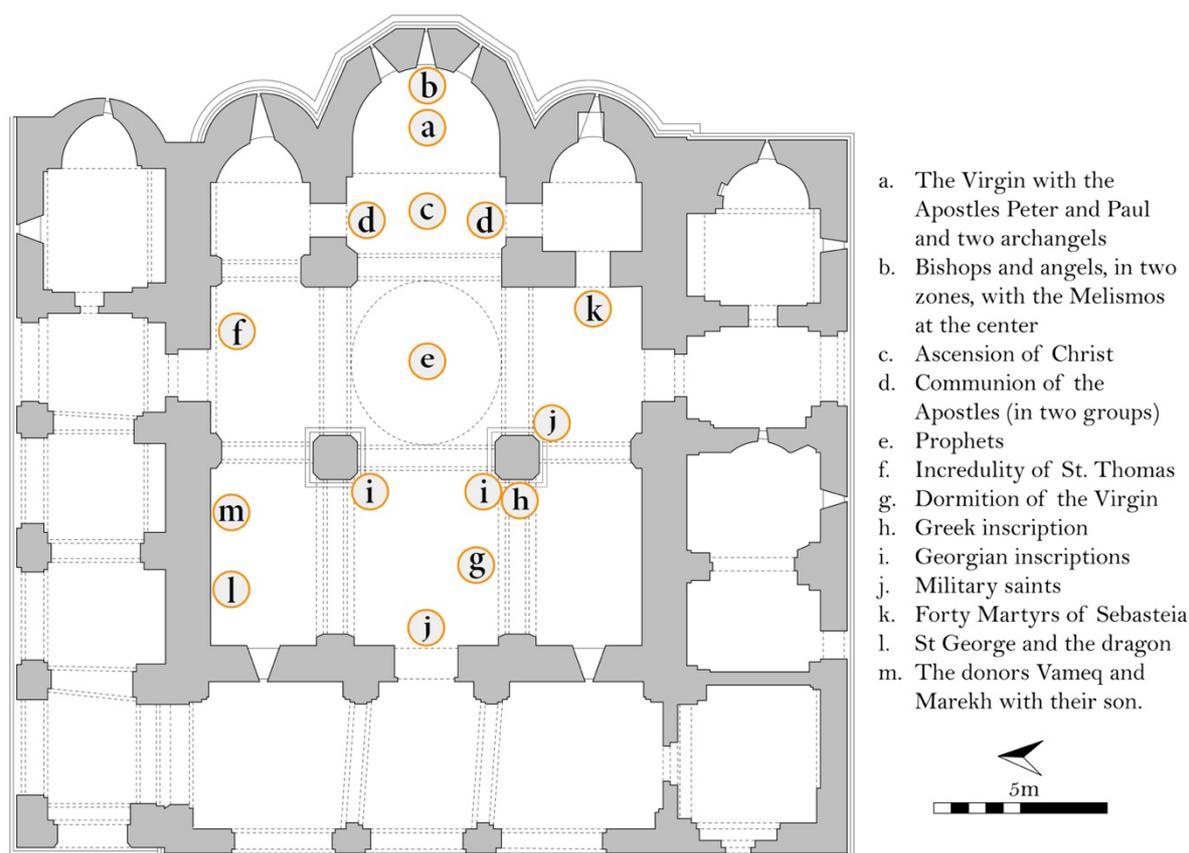


Fig. 2. Tsalenjikha, Church of the Savior, Ground plan. Adapted from Inga Lordkipanidze, *Роспись в Цаленджиха. Художник Кир Мануел Евгеникос и его место в грузинской средневековой монументальной живописи* [*Rospis' v Tsalendzhikha. Khudozhnik Kir Manuel Evgenikos i ego mesto v gruzinskoy srednevekovoy monumental'noy zhivopisi; Painting in Tsalenjikha. The Artist Kyr Manuel Eugeniokos and his Place in Georgian Medieval Monumental Painting*] (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1992), 24. Drawn from instructions by Teresa Shawcross. © Matilde Grimaldi

“alt=Ground plan of the Church of the Savior at Tsalenjikha with the location of specific frescoes discussed in the essay marked with alphabetical letters”

The main patron of the church can be identified with the *eristavteristavi* (grand duke) and *mandaturtuhutsesi* (chief of interior affairs) of the Kingdom of Georgia, Vameq I Dadiani (r.1384-1396). Vameq sought to control Sukhumi and Abkhazia (Apsny) as well as campaigned successfully against non-Christians in Sochi-Tuapse, accruing as a result status and power said by observers to have been comparable to that of the kings of Georgia.⁶ Although Vameq never assumed titles other than those bestowed upon him by his monarch, the *mepe* (king) Bagrat V (r. 1355/60-1393), he did perform actions that underscored his ability to act independently – such as that of minting coinage in his own name.⁷ It may have been the ambition to emulate and perhaps to some extent rival the Bagratuni in his own territory that led Vameq to commission artistic projects that drew upon cultural traditions

⁶ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 15. Note that the ambiguity of the toponyms found in the sources renders the identification of the exact extent of the prince’s territory difficult.

⁷ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 15.

derived from the Byzantine Empire, which had been the most influential political player within the coastal Black Sea region for much of the previous millennium. In the donor portraits Vameq commissioned at his funerary chapel at the Convent of the Dormition of the Mother of God at Nojikhevi near Khobi as well as in the narthex of the Church of the Savior at Tsalenjikha (sites just over 20 miles apart within Odishi) of himself, his father Georgi, his wife Marekh, and his son Mamia II (r.1396-1414) (m), the family was painted wearing robes that visually referenced traditional Komnenian and more recent Palaiologan regalia favored by Byzantine emperors and empresses.⁸ In addition, Vameq ordered the spoliation of relief sculpture of Proconnesian marble dating to the early Byzantine period and its transportation and incorporation into the exterior of his funerary chapel in the southern annex of Khobi. He also hired a Byzantine artist to come from Constantinople to decorate his church at Tsalenjikha with frescoes. The details of these commissions were recorded on site in a series of dedicatory inscriptions.⁹

In the case of Tsalenjikha, the inscriptions are located on the piers of the western vault of the central dome. Two texts written in Georgian (i) recount the orders given by Vameq and the actions taken by the officials he entrusted to carry them out (“By the order of the lord *eristavteristavi* and *mandaturtukhutsesi*, Vameq Dadiani, we have brought the painter lord Manuel Eugenikos from Constantinople. So I have made him paint this church with the help of God. Say thou also a prayer of repentance”; “We were sent with the aid of [Christ] the Savior to Constantinople, whence we brought back this painter, lord Manuel Eugenikos, we Kobalia Makharebeli and Andronike Gabisulava, and we ask the Savior to set us also free [...] on the great day of Judgement. Amen. Amen. Amen”).¹⁰ A third text, this time in Greek (h), takes the form of a pious invocation by the imported artist, Manuel Eugenikos (fig. 3):

† [Δέη]ση[ς τοῦ δ]οῦλου τοῦ Θ(εο)ῦ κα[ὶ]
 ἀμαρτολο[ῦ] Μανουήλ τ[οῦ] Εὐγ[ενι]
 κοῦ του ξογράφου· του στ[ορήσαν]
 τος τον ναων ἐτοῦ [τον τοῦ καὶ]
 ἐλθῶντος ἀπε τη[v Κωνσταν]
 τινόπολην η[γουν .. β’ μο]
 ναχοῦς· ἔστηλε [αὐτοῦς αὐτοῦ]
 του κοσμου ἐ[νεκα ὁ ἄρχων]
 Βάμεκ ὀνόματι· τῶ[v δὲ μοναχῶν]
 τα ὀνόματα· ταῦτα· Κο[παλιὰς]
 ὁ Μαχαρεβελις· κε Ἀν[δρόνι]
 κος ὁ Καπισουλὰς· κε [ὁ ἀναγινώσκων]
 την γραφήν ταύτην· ἄς εὐ[ξήται ὑπέρ]
 μο[υ τοῦ] ἀμαρτολοῦ [καὶ ὑπὲρ πάν]
 τω[v τ]ῶν Χρυστηαν[ῶν ἀμήν] ¹¹

† [Pra]ye[r of the s]ervant of God an[d]
 sinner, Manuel Eug[eni]
 kos, the painter who pai[nt]
 ed this sanctuary [and who]
 came from [Constan]
 tinople – th[at is ,with the two] mo
 nks [who were] sent [by him]
 who by the world i[ndeed the prince]
 Vameq is called. Of [these monks]
 the names are: Ko[palias]
 Makharevelis and An[droni]
 kos Kapisoulas. And may [the reader]
 of this inscription pr[ay for]
 m[e the] sinner [and for a]

⁸ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 15.

⁹ David Khoshtaria, *Medieval Georgian Churches: A Concise Overview of Architecture* (Tbilisi: Artanuji Publishing, 2023), 117-18; Wachtang Djobadze, “Remains of a Byzantine Ambo and Church Furnishings in Hobi,” *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 4 (1984): 627-39.

¹⁰ Hans Belting, “Le Peintre Manuel Eugenikos de Constantinople, en Géorgie,” *Cahiers archéologiques* (1979): 103 and “The Painter Manuel Eugenikos from Constantinople,” in *Georgia as a Bridge between Cultures: Dynamics of Artistic Exchanges*, ed. Manuela Studer-Karlen et al. (Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, 2021), 28.

¹¹ New edition by the present author, based on autopsy and adapted from Tinatin Kauhchishvili, *ბერძნული წარწერები საქართველოში* [*Berdznuli ts'arts'erebi*

Il Christians [Amen].¹²

The inclusion of St Euphrosynos, the patron saint of cooks, in the frescoes of the main church together with an early donor portrait in the deambulatory of the chief cook of the Dadiani, Kobalia Kveli, hint at the financing of the project at least in part by the family’s household staff and other clients.¹³ While an addendum added to the Georgian dedicatory inscriptions could point in the same direction, it is worth noting that its phrasing seems all-encompassing. The text in question commemorates all those who supervised or labored at the site (“God give grace to the masons who have built the church, the foremen, and cooks – to all. Amen. Amen. Amen.”).

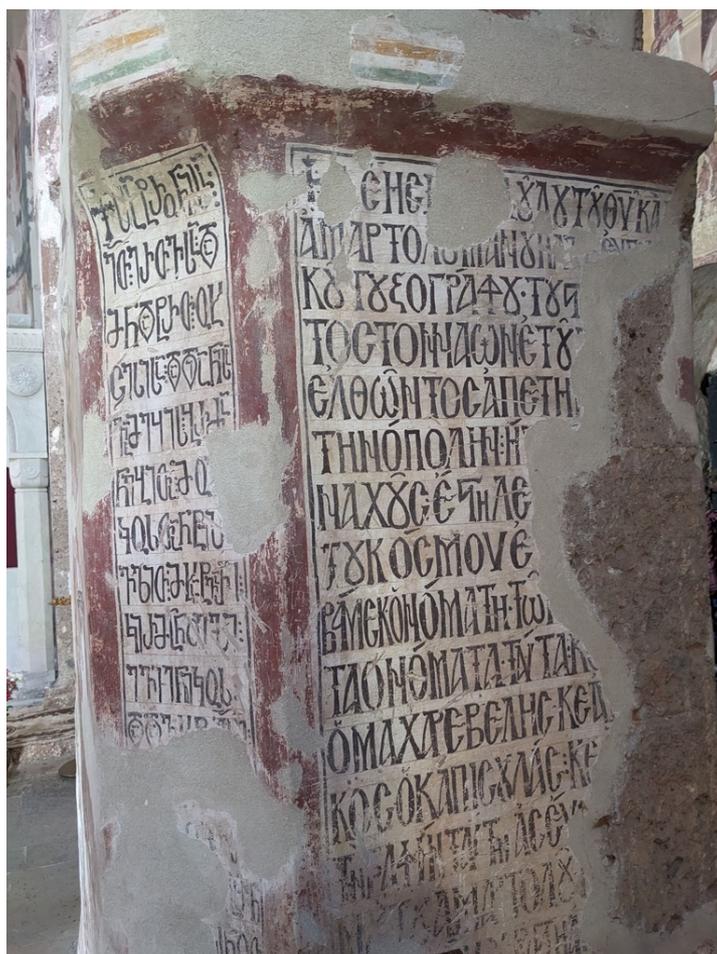


Fig. 3. Tsalenjikha, Church of the Savior, south-western pier of the central dome, Greek dedicatory inscription and prayer of Manuel Eugenikos. © Reproduced under fair use license. Photograph: Teresa Shawcross

Sakartveloshi; Greek Inscriptions in Georgia] (Tbilisi: Press of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, 1951), 51.

¹² Translated by the present author. Note the use in the Greek inscription of the velar plosive consonant /k/ (κ) for /g/ (γ) in Kopalias (attested in earlier transcriptions) as well as of the bilabial plosive consonant /p/ (π) for /b/ (β).

¹³ Belting, “Le Peintre Manuel Eugenikos,” 103 and “The Painter Manuel Eugenikos,” 28; Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 19.

“alt=Image of a masonry pier, with two damaged inscriptions (one Greek, the other Georgian) written in black majuscule letters on a cream background and framed in red”

In the apse of the sanctuary, a Virgin standing with hands upraised is flanked by the Apostles Peter and Paul and by the Archangels Michael and Gabriel (a), while the Celestial and Terrestrial Liturgies are depicted below along with the Communion of the Holy Deacons, Fathers and Bishops (b).¹⁴ Also in the apse are the Ascension of Christ (c) and the Communion of the Apostles (d). The Great Feasts unfold in two zones on the walls and vaults of the transept, with a particular emphasis on Christological and Marian scenes, while the lower zones are occupied by rows of saints. Additional frescoes with images of saints and donors were carried out on the exterior of the church shortly after the completion of the interior. While the decorative program echoes those found in mainland Greece and Asia Minor from the 12th and 13th centuries, certain iconographic choices distinguish it from Byzantine models. These include the especially prominent position accorded to saints held in particular esteem by Georgians. Among these are several military saints (j). For example, the titular saint of Georgia as well as the patron saint of the Dadiani themselves, St George (l), was painted mounted and slaying a dragon on a large scale on the north aisle alongside the main family portrait of the donors (fig. 4). Further warrior saints depicted who were the subject of well-established regional cults included the Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia (k), Roman soldiers martyred in Anatolia in the 4th century because of their conversion to Christianity, and Saints David and Constantine Argveti, Georgian generals martyred in the 8th century in the wars against the Arabs (j).¹⁵

¹⁴ For details of the iconographic programme, see Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*; also Lortkipanidze, *Цаленджиха*.

¹⁵ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 17.



Fig. 4. Tsalenjikha, Church of the Savior, northern aisle, St George slaying a dragon (left) and a portion of the donor portrait of the Dadiani family (right). © Reproduced under fair use license. Photograph: Teresa Shawcross

“alt=Image of a damaged fresco divided into several compartments. On the left, the image of a saint in military garb and with a billowing cloak mounted on a white horse and spearing a dragon coiled below him. On the right, the image of a standing woman wearing formal robes reminiscent of imperial regalia”

The frescoes have suffered extensive damage from falling plaster and overpainting. In addition, some colors appear to have faded to white, while others have darkened to black, making it difficult to appreciate the intended artistic effect.¹⁶ However, the hand of the master Eugenikos has been tentatively recognized in several figures (e.g. the Virgin and the Archangels in the sanctuary (a); St George and the Dadiani in the northern nave (m, l)) and composite scenes (e.g. the Dormition of the Virgin in the western nave (g) and the Incredulity of St Thomas in the northern transept (f)). Similarities between the Deposition of Christ from the Cross in the central aisle and a diptych now located at St Catherine’s Monastery on Sinai whose right-hand portion depicts the same subject have led to the attribution of the latter work to Eugenikos.¹⁷ Elements in the spatial disposition and pigmentation of the frescoes suggest that Eugenikos may have worked primarily as an icon painter (fig. 5). Indeed, it was

¹⁶ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 16.

¹⁷ <https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/2786#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=4&xywh=-2569%2C0%2C8118%2C3999> [last accessed 4th April 2025].

probably the export of panel paintings by artists like him to Georgia that led to the interpretation there of his compositions as the epitome of metropolitan fashion – and consequently to his recruitment as a court painter.¹⁸ During his work at Tsalenjikha (fig. 6), the Constantinopolitan artist had under his direction at least three local painters who not only introduced stylistic features typical of indigenous wall-paintings such as those surviving in the Upper Svaneti, but also identified the majority of the images with inscriptions in Georgian rather than Greek.¹⁹ The same Byzantine-Georgian atelier also appears to have contributed to the contemporary frescoes of Vameq’s funerary chapel at Khobi, as well the later frescoes of the Church of the Mother of God at Nabakhtevi in the region of Shida Kartli further to the east.²⁰

¹⁸ Belting, “Le Peintre Manuel Eugenikos,” 111-12, 114 and “The Painter Manuel Eugenikos,” 38-39, 41.

¹⁹ The only exceptions are: the dedicatory inscription of Evgenikos; the inscriptions on the scrolls of the Prophets and Holy Bishops on the dome and the donor inscription relating to Bishop Eudemon. See Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 17; T. B. Virsaladze, *Основные этапы развития грузинской средневековой монументальной живописи* [*Osnovnye etapy razvitiya gruzinskoy srednevekovoy monumental'noy zhivopisi*; *Main Stages of Development of Georgian Medieval Monumental Painting*] (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1977); Zaza Skhirtladze, “Georgia,” *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Art and Architecture*, ed. Ellen C. Schwartz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 198; Anthony Eastmond, *Art and Identity in Thirteenth-Century Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 135.

²⁰ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 16. The possibility that the atelier was temporarily transferred from Tsalenjikha to Khobi may explain an apparent hiatus in the progression of the decorative programme of the former.



Fig. 5. Sinai, Saint Catherine's Monastery, Diptych with the Virgin Hodegetria and the Descent from the Cross, right leaf. © The Michigan-Princeton-Alexandria Expeditions to Mount Sinai. Courtesy of the Sacred Autonomous Royal Monastery of Saint Catherine of the Holy and God-Trodden Mount Sinai

“alt=Image of a painted panel with a gold background that depicts the elongated body of the dead Christ being taken down from the Cross surrounded by mourning figures”

While the long-term influence of the Church of the Savior's late 14th- and early 15th-century decoration upon Georgian art has been argued for sites such as Gelati Monastery in Imereti,²¹ it not unnaturally remained strongest in the later phases at the monument itself when that complex was remodeled after the church became the cathedral of an archdiocese. In the 17th century, for instance, extensive repairs to the partially collapsed dome (e) and barrel vaults were undertaken by Bishop Eudemon Jaiani, at which time the paintings were retouched and modified – especially on and around the episcopal throne.²² It is notable that

²¹ Lordkipanidze and Janjalia, *Tsalenjikha*, 16.

²² Belting, “Le Peintre Manuel Eugenikos,” 105 and “The Painter Manuel Eugenikos,” 29.

the commemorative inscription set up for Eudemon (“Remember | the soul | of your servant | Eudemon | the Archpriest”) was written in Greek (“Μνήσθητι... | την ψυχήν... | τοῦ δούλου | σου Ευδέμωνος | ἀρχιερέως”).²³



Fig. 6. Tsalenjikha, Church of the Savior, western nave, Archangel Gabriel (detail). © Public domain. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

“alt=Image of a detail of the Archangel Gabriel who, holding a scroll upon which he inscribes with a stylus the virtues and vices of men in the Georgian language, looks outwards at the viewer”

Biography

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²³ Lordkipanidze, *Цаленджиха*, 27.

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