
ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES OF A CHRISTIAN CAVE MONASTERY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20th CENTURY (ALTAI KRAI, RUSSIA)

Yury Aleksandrovich Kreydun^{*} and Larisa Ivanovna Nekhyadovich

Altai State University, Lenina Ave. 61, Barnaul, 656049, Russia

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Abstract

The article presents the results of the survey of Christian sketes – cave monasteries near the village of Sredne-Krasilovo (Zarinsky District, Altai Krai, Russia). The authors of the article have studied the layout and main architectural features of the underground structures and reconstructed their history. The conducted research allows the authors to conclude that there is a possible correlation between the studied objects and the cave complexes of Kiev Pechersk Lavra. Cave monasteries are unique historical sites and indispensable sources for the reconstruction of cultural and historical processes in Altai. At the beginning of the 21st century, the integrity of the underground structures was compromised. The article presents the main problems of preservation of the studied historic site. The chronological framework of the research is determined as the beginning of the 20th century. Cave monasteries in the territory of the Altai Krai were constructed exactly at this time. The geographical framework of the research is determined by the concentration of the aforementioned sites in this territory, as well as the degree of archaeological knowledge about the cave structures.

Keywords: church construction, form, interior, altar room, grotto

1. Introduction

At the end of the 1970s, the researcher V.V. Kokshenev in the process of an archaeological survey in Zarinsky District (Altai Krai, Russia) discovered two underground architectural monuments (cave sketes) near the villages of Sredne-Krasilovo and Zhulanikha. As later archival and historical research showed, until 1918, the Alexander Nevsky skete of Altai Christian mission was located near Zhulanikha, which included the Kazan wooden church, as well as monastic cells and utility buildings. The Holy spring, worshipped by the locals, was the most important shrine of this skete. Numerous pilgrims constantly flocked here [1]. Ascetics built underground cells, which have survived until today in the form of narrow, crumbled passages.

^{*}E-mail: y.a.kreydun@mail.ru

Of more interest in terms of underground church construction, is the skete near Sredne-Krasilovo. Folk tradition speaks of a monk Daniel, who appeared here at the beginning of the 20th century. It can be assumed that he came from Kiev Pechersk Lavra. This is evidenced by the interior and underground architecture, resembling the architecture of Kiev Pechersk Lavra in terms of the configuration of passages, galleries, labyrinths, and cells, as well as the technique of domed construction and ground preparation.

Until now, cave monasteries of the Altai Krai have not had their own historiography and have not been distinguished as an independent object of art history study. Among foreign authors, studying church construction, one should name G.M. Kato, H. Abe and K. Yasufuku, whose research addresses the issue of space organization principles in a mountain temple in Japan [2]. G. Michell considered the issues of form and sacral meaning of Hindu temples [3]. In the study of the issues of chronology, typology, and semantics of Christian cave monasteries, of importance are the works by I.A. Agapov [4], O.G. Kiryanova [5], Y.A. Kreydun and V.V. Kokshenev [6], L.I. Nekhvyadovich and I.V. Chernyaeva [7], O.B. Tereshina [8], Y.Y. Shevchenko [9].

The research purpose is to determine the architectural features of the Christian cave monastery at the beginning of the 20th century, based on the survey of the Christian skete, built near Sredne-Krasilovo.

2. Methods

The survey of cave monasteries near Sredne-Krasilovo included preliminary collection of local history and archaeological materials, field research of the natural environment of the cave, art history description, and analysis of the forms of Christian skete. The complex approach allowed making the transition from specific monuments to the cultural and historical phenomenon, which they represent.

3. Sacral meaning of the Christian skete

The word 'skete' means 'large plain', which comes from the name of a desert in northwest Egypt, where hermits lived in isolation. The appearance of Christian sketes in the territory of Russia is connected with the ascetic monastic tradition. An ascetic settled in a dug-out cave and then was joined by other people seeking seclusion. This is how many Russian monasteries appeared. Underground monasteries differ from other religious caves by the presence in their complex of premises for various purposes: churches, necropolises, and residential (including utility) structures [4].

In Christian tradition, the designation of a skete as a sacral space is connected with the understanding of a cave as a place of hierophany. One's stay in a cave was regulated by norms of behaviour. Cave space contributed to the formation of the individual religious experience of a person and became the place of spiritual transformations of an ascetic. In Orthodox monasticism,

seclusion in a cave was a condition for the contemplation of God [1]. Such religious objects include the Christian skete near Sredne-Krasilovo.

4. Beginning of the cave monastery construction

It can be assumed that the underground work began in 1907 as this date was engraved on one of the underground's walls. Initially, the monk Daniel laid a small underground complex, which included a central entrance, altar room, cell, and exit vent with a system of passages. The height of the passages of the original complex differed from that of further construction. On average, it was 1 m, while at the second stage of the construction, it was 1.75 m.

The second stage of the construction was connected with a more complex system of underground architecture. Its main elements are curved gallery-tunnels, which face East, labyrinths with dead ends, cross-shaped corridors, and niches for icons and candles, vents, and roof windows.

According to the memories of elders, the second stage of the construction of the underground architectural complex was associated with the arrival of a helper to the monk Daniel from the locals – Ivan. The monk Daniel and novice Ivan lived in a small dug-out shelter, located to the right of the entrance to the cave church. The clay, resulting from the unearthing of the underground church, did not go to waste. The monks used it to make high-quality brick, which, in turn, was used in the village huts and kiln construction. The monks mined the local limestone to make lime as well. The remnants of brick and lime kilns can be found near the caves [6].

According to contradictory elders' recollections, there were aboveground structures above the caves. Some believe that the entrance to the underground church was in a chapel, next to which a small dug-out shelter was located, where the monks lived. Others state that the chapel was built over a well and holy water was drawn from under the barred floor. The architecture of the chapel either is not remembered at all or is confused with the architecture of the church, located in the village [10].

A survey of the aboveground part of the cave monastery showed that the chapel was most likely located near the entrance to the underground structure, which is evidenced by a platform in front of the grotto. To the right, there was one more pit, smaller in size, marking the location of the hermits' shelter. It is possible that above the well, there was a canopy with an onion dome and a cross or a wooden structure. In Kiev Pechersk Lavra, Pskov-Caves Monastery, and Anthony Caves in Chernigov, there are always either chapels or churches above the entrances.

5. Description of the cave monastery complex

The cave monastery complex was dug out in the upper terrace of the Chumysh riverbank and had the following structure (Figure 1).

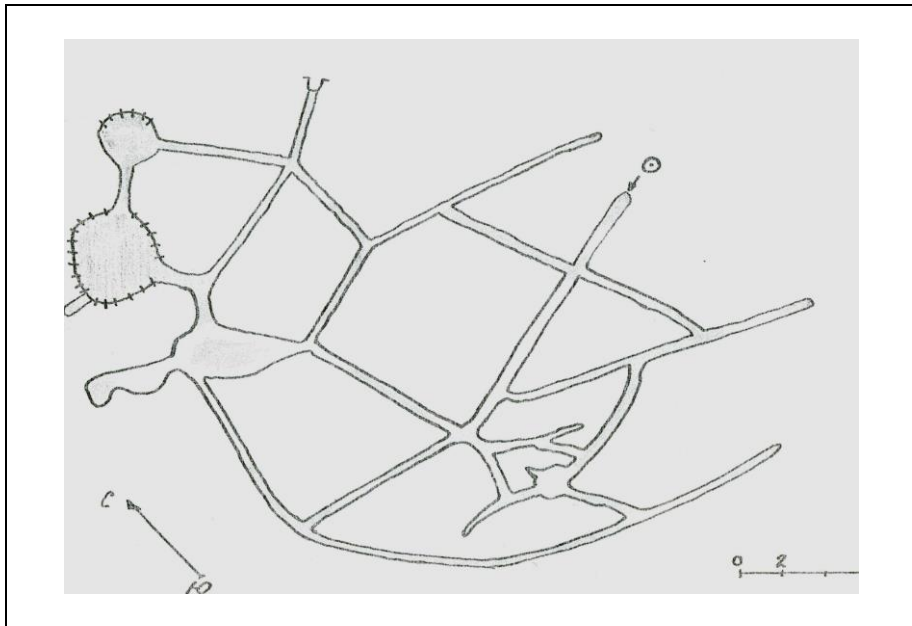


Figure 1. The layout of the man-made caves near Sredne-Krasilovo.

The central entrance to the monastery was located on a steep slope. It was a grotto – a shallow cave with a vaulted ceiling and wide corridor. The vault was low due to collapsed clay deposits. As a result of the collapses, the deposits of clay blocked the passage. From the central entrance down the slope, there was a path to a shallow well – the Holy spring.

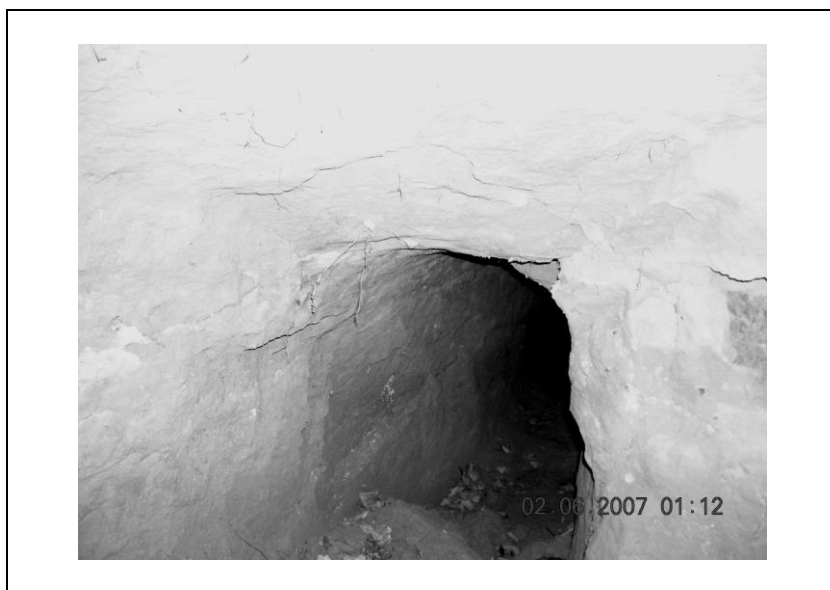


Figure 2. The view of the underground gallery near Sredne-Krasilovo.

The interior, as well as the underground architecture of the monument, is a system of passages, corridors, galleries, dead ends, labyrinths, vents, and interior spaces (Figure 2).

The church room was the largest underground space at the time. Almost rectangular in shape, it was 5x4 m and had a dome ceiling, which allowed one to stand at full height. In the center of this room, there was a rectangular earthen elevation with collapsed edges and a height of about 50-60 cm, which was, most likely, the throne.

The presence of the throne in the interior of the underground structure characterizes it as an underground church [6]. According to the memories of elders, a wooden table, serving as a credence table, was located near the wall to the left of the throne in the northeastern part of the altar. It was covered with cloth, liturgical vessels and objects. Such placement transforms the functions of the credence table during liturgy as the preparation of the Holy Gift, which precedes the functions of the throne itself – transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood [9].

In the southwest corner of the altar room, symbolizing the Kingdom of Heaven, the divine realm, and the constant presence of divine grace, there was a vent, which served as a roof window. In the south wall of the altar room, an oval niche was cut out, supposedly for an icon. Through a corridor, the altar room was connected with 'the room in front of the cell'. The room with a spherical ceiling, which was oval in shape, was the second largest among the underground structures. The height of the room was about 1.75 m, its dimensions – 3x5 m. Through a wide passage, it was connected with the two-chambered cell. This was the place for praying and reading religious literature. The arrangement and location of the cell, constructed for long-term separation from the outside world, prove that originally it had a monastic purpose.

The first chamber of the cell had the following dimensions: length – 3 m, width – 1.5 m, height – 1.4 m. The place for praying was located in the second chamber of the cell, separated from the first by a small knee wall. The size of this part of the cell was about 1.5x1 m, the height – 1.75 m. In the left wall, a niche was cut out, similar to the one in the altar room.

The central part of the underground complex was a labyrinth with a system of dead ends and connecting corridors. It was easy to get lost in the uniform tunnels, dark halls, passages, and dead ends. Among the features of this part of the church, one can name a cross-shaped intersection of corridors, long curved galleries, and a lonely 'chair' in one of the hidden corners of the underground structure.

Of particular interest are the niches, cut out in the clay walls of the underground church, at the intersections of passages and galleries, supposedly for icons. The configuration of the niches is uniform (a curved top and the following dimensions: height – 35 cm, width – 35 cm, depth – 4.5 cm).

The only exception is a rectangular niche with the following dimensions: height – 25 cm, width – 60 cm, and depth – 5 cm. The niche was surrounded by a scored frame, cut out in the clay as bas-relief. There were about twelve arched

niches in the church. Moreover, there were small niches for candles at the intersections of the tunnels. In addition to icons, there were bas-reliefs in the underground church. According to witnesses, one of them depicted the Mother of God holding the Christ Child and another – Jesus Christ the Savior.

The underground church is located at a depth of 3-5 m from the surface. The average width of the passages was 50 cm. The height of the tunnels, as well as passages, was not uniform. The total length of the passages was 250 m. The main configuration of the arched vault allowed the unique underground structure to exist until the recent past. The central entrance, five vents in the eastern part of the underground complex, as well as the roof windows in the altar room and labyrinth, provided air circulation in the underground structure, maintaining the same temperature and humidity in winter and summer. This aided in the protection of the vault, walls, and floor from natural deterioration.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of the 21st century, the integrity of the underground structures was compromised. The reason for this was the crumbling of the vents and compromised natural air circulation. The pre-entrance part of the cave is deteriorating as well. The deterioration of the vault depends on the density of the crumbling rock. Cracks form, as a rule, due to surface water penetration (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The current state of the cave gallery near Sredne-Krasilovo.

Currently, a restoration project of the unique cave monastery is under development and the beginning of the restoration works is expected in the near future.

6. Conclusions

Cave monasteries of Altai constitute a category of religious architecture, history and culture. As a specific archeological source, they require a complex approach to their study and preservation.

The development of the architectural form of the Christian cave monastery in Altai occurred under the influence of Russian traditions of church construction in the conditions of local cultural and historical processes, which affected their features: East facing curved gallery-tunnels, labyrinths with dead ends, cross-shaped corridors, and niches for icons and candles, vents and roof windows. The Christian skete in Altai is mainly represented by labyrinth complexes.

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