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## **Georgia between West and East as Seen in the Fine Arts**

### *Introduction*

*During centuries the Southern Caucasus has been at the junction of different civilizations being a bridge between Europe and Asia. Forming the original and complicated stylistic forms of self-expression, the region since the ancient times was also a permanent recipient of many external influences. For Georgia particularly Late Antiquity and Early Middle ages were marked by wide political, trade and cultural contacts with world superpowers of that time - Sassanian Iran and Byzantine Empire. These contacts determined specific multicultural development of the country. All these events and relationships formed original image of Georgia, its cultural heritage of a great importance. The article deals with some samples of the Medieval Georgian fine arts, reflecting multicultural concept in very evident visual form.*

*The issue of the cultural influences of Sassanian Iran on Antique and Early Medieval Georgia is already discussed by many scholars – both the Georgians and Europeans. We also have dedicated some articles to this problem researching samples of Early Christian architecture in Georgia. On the one hand they show the close contacts with Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture, and on the other – some analogies with the old Iranian Zoroastrian temples.<sup>1</sup> The buildings like this were spread in Georgia during the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cc.: some of them were built as new churches, others became the Christian churches after reconstruction of old pagan temples, most of them being once, before the adoption of Christianity, the fire-temple.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> N. Silagadze. Nochmals zu den ältesten georgischen Basiliken. *Georgica*, 26. Jena, 2003, pp. 170-176.

<sup>2</sup> N. Silagadze. The Early Christian Basilicas and Some Compositions of Pagan Temples. *IV. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Department of Art History and Theory, Collected Papers* 3. Tbilisi, 2002, pp. 79-85 (in Georg. with Engl. summary); G. Kipiani. The Pagan Temples of

*Group of Early Medieval Monuments with the Portraits of Donators*

In presented article we discuss some samples of the 5<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> cc. Georgian fine arts, like reliefs, toreutics etc., a particular group of objects, on which we can observe some symbols and motives, adopted in Iberia (Eastern and Southern Georgian kingdom, called also Kartli) from the Sassanian fine arts.<sup>3</sup>

Among these samples there are some steles with reliefs on them showing the religious depictions (like Jesus Christ, Saint Virgin, different Christian saints, scenes of Old and New Testaments, cross etc.). Besides, in some cases, we have also the portraits of Iberian nobles. These are the depictions of the donators, the feudal lords, thanks to whom these steles were erected. The depictions are made in very schematic way. Most important for artist were the dresses, signs of sovereignty and other details, showing the power of those lords, and not their individuality.

We are inclined to think that, beside their religious function, these steles were used as some kind of official document. With particular depictions on them, they were declaration of power and the property of noble person. As it is well known, in the Middle Ages a real estate, land, was the most important property – the base of power of feudal lords. We think that the above-mentioned steles served as the border-marks of the private property too. It seems extremely interesting that the motives taken from the Sassanian fine arts were used in the 5<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> cc. Iberia as the symbols of this sovereignty and power. To explain this issue, we are taking into consideration some moments of political history of Georgia, described in the Georgian Medieval narratives.

Iberian kingdom adopted Christianity as an official religion in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> c., and most of its rulers were inclined to maintain close contacts with Byzantine Empire. But as we can read in Medieval chronicles, in the 5<sup>th</sup> c., during the first years of the rule of famous king Vakhtang Gorgasali, the fire-worship (Zoroastrianism, an old Iranian pagan religion) was enough spread among the lower classes of Iberian society thanks to propaganda of some persons, surely bound to the court and politics of Iranian kings. So the situation seemed to be dangerous to queen Sagdokht, mother and protector of young king

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Colchis and Iberia and the Origins of Georgian Monumental Architecture. Tbilisi, 2000, pic. LVII-LVIII (in Georg.).

<sup>3</sup> N. Chubinashvili. Khandisi. Tbilisi, 1972, pp. 70-75, 94-95 (in Russ.); K. Machabeli. The Late Antique Toreutics in Georgia. Tbilisi, 1976, pp. 106-120 (in Russ.).

Vakhtang. With the help of a bishop, summoned by the queen from Byzantium, the Iberian nobility had partly resolved this problem: most of folk kept the Christian faith; only the small percent had adopted the fire-worship. But in the first decades of the 6<sup>th</sup> c. the situation was dramatically changed: the Iranians invaded southern Caucasus, abolishing the kingship in Kartli in 523. So the Iberian feudal lords paid the taxes to Iranian governor (marzpan) and as a grace they received from the Sassanian kings right to own and rule their lands, dukedoms etc.<sup>4</sup>

Exactly by this period are dated some very interesting steles with reliefs showing Iberian nobles wearing typical Iranian dresses. Below we have three different samples from various places of Kartli<sup>5</sup> (*picture 1. a) Stele from Samtsevisi. 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cc. b) Stele from Gantiadi . 6<sup>th</sup> c. c) Stele from Bashkichi. 6<sup>th</sup> c.*). The noblemen are holding a flower (lily-flower, lotus, tulip?) in raised hand. Obviously the flower has some symbolic meaning. First time in Georgia this flower appears in the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. in the hand of pitiaxes Papak, a nobleman (maybe even Iranian?) depicted on the silver cup found in the necropolis of Armaziskhevi (rich quarter of Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Iberian kingdom) (*pic. 2. The silver cup of pitiaxes Papak . 3<sup>rd</sup> c.*).

In Iran in the times of the Sassanids this flower was a symbol of power and high social position: for example, on the rock-relief from Barm e-Dilak (*pic. 3. Rock relief. Barm e-Dilak. 276.*) we can see the Sassanian queen receiving such a flower.<sup>6</sup> The same flower is holding an Iranian noble on the Sassanian period gem (*pic. 4. The Sassanian gem. 4<sup>th</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> cc.*). So we are inclined to think that this symbol both in Iranian and Georgian art had a meaning of an insignia, sign of power, received from the Sassanid king.

The Iberian feudal lords on the steles are holding the same flower and are wearing the same Iranian garment: long suite with long sleeves, which was widespread among the Georgian nobility in the 5<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> cc. The best example for such Persian-style dresses is the façade-relief of the donators of Jvari church in Mtskheta, where are shown the family members of Iberian erismtavari (prince) (*pic. 5. Relief of Jvari church, Mtskheta. 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cc.*). The very rare sample is

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<sup>4</sup> The Life of Kartli. ed. by S. Khaukhchishvili. Tbilisi, 1955, p. 217 (in Georg.).

<sup>5</sup> K. Machabeli. Early Medieval Georgian Stone Crosses. Tbilisi, 2008, pp.113, 123 ( Georg. and Engl. parallel texts).

<sup>6</sup> A. Mahmudabadi. A Reviw of Sassanian Images and Inscriptions.

[http://www.iranchamber.com/history/sassanids/sassanid\\_images\\_inscriptions3.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/sassanids/sassanid_images_inscriptions3.php). 2010.

the clothing of a nobleman, shown on the stele from Samtsevrissi (central Kartli)<sup>7</sup>. The nobleman is wearing not Iranian, but byzantine-style garment: toga fixed on one shoulder with fibula and diadem with precious stones like the members of Byzantine high society<sup>8</sup> (*pic. 6. Emperor Justinian. Mosaics of San Vitale church in Ravenna. 547.*). So in this particular occasion, also in general, from cultural point of view, the Iberian kingdom seems to be on the crossroad of the Occident and Orient, between the Byzantium and Iran.

### *Synthesis of the Christian and Zoroastrian Symbols*

Beside the dress of the nobleman, the stele from Samtsevrissi shows some other interesting traits: Christian (cross) and the Sassanian (flower) symbols appear jointly. The same situation we can see also on the Gantiadi stele, where one of the noblemen is holding a cross, another – a flower. Such kind of mixture we can observe on other monuments too,<sup>9</sup> created in this very period: metalworks, decorative carving of the church-walls etc. The synthesis of Zoroastrian and Christian symbols is shown in many ways. We present here some more samples of Early Medieval stone carving from Eastern Georgia (*pic.7. Relief from Giulbagi . 6<sup>th</sup> c.*), on which we can see the cross together with taenia – the sacred object of Zoroastrianism. This object – the ribbon – we can often see on the depictions of the Sassanian kings as an attribute of their head-dress (*pic. 8. Silver plate with hunting-scene of king Shapur II. 309-379.*). More interesting is the appearance of these symbols inside the Iberian churches, like, for example, the decorative compositions in Early Medieval churches of Akvaneba or Tsilkani (*pic. 9. Crosses with taenia. a) Tsilkani and b) Akvaneba churches. 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cc.*).

In the Tsiklani church the other symbol of Zoroastrianism is obvious too: on the pillars, once supporting the roof of the old 5<sup>th</sup> c. basilica (the building was much changed during the reconstruction in 11<sup>th</sup> c.), there is a row of decorative winged crosses (*pic. 10. The winged cross from Tsilkani church*). Such wings are used in Iranian art as an attribute of the crowns of the Sassanian

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<sup>7</sup> N. Chubinashvili. Khandisi, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> C. Rizzardi. I mosaici parietali di Ravenna da Galla Placidia a Giustiniano, in Venezia e Bisanzio. Aspetti della cultura artistica bizantina da Ravenna a Venezia (V-XIV secolo). Venezia, 2005, p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> V. Japaridze. The Early Medieval Monuments from Lower Kartli. Tbilisi, 1981, p. 75 (in Georg.).

kings, symbolizing their divine descent, their relations with Ahura-Mazda, the main god of Zoroastrianism <sup>10</sup> (*pic. 11. a) The crowns of Sassanian kings according to Robert Göbl; b) Silver plate with the hunting-scene of king Khosrow II. 590-628.*). In Tsilkani church these wings are joined by main Christian symbol, the cross.

There are some further examples of Zoroastrian motives, joined with the main Christian symbols: together with cross we can see in some occasions the fire-altar too. Let us discuss some of so called Georgian-Sassanian coins<sup>11</sup>, issued by the erismtavaris (princes, rulers of the Kartli) in the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cc. As we know, the Iranians had abolished the kingship in Iberia, the royal dynasty was overthrown in 523. In 571 Iberians revolted against Iranian rule and constituted the position of erismtavari — prince of Kartli.

The princes started to issue the coins of Iranian pattern: on one side there is a portrait of Iranian shakh, on the other – the fire-altar with burning fire on it; Georgian origin is outlined by Georgian monograms placed on them (*pic. 12. The Georgian-Sassanian coin*). It is interesting to compare these coins with some Iranian money (*pic. 13. The coin of Hormizd IV. 579-590.*).

Erismtavari Stephanos made important changes in the composition of the coin issued towards the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> c. substituting fire on altar with the cross. Cross on the altar means important changes in the political situation of Iberian kingdom – Iberia is a free country now (*pic. 14. The coin of erismtavari Stephanos.*).

So we think, that the above-mentioned samples of Early Medieval fine arts show us the wide multicultural panorama, an original mixture of different influences both of Oriental and Occidental origin.

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<sup>10</sup> R. Göbl. *Sassanidische Numismatik*. Braunschweig, 1968, pp. 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> T. Dundua. *Georgia within the European Integration as Seen in Coinage*. Catalogue of Georgian Coins. Tbilisi, 1999, p. 11.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

*pic. 1. a) Stele from Samtsevrisi. 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cc. b) Stele from Gantiadi. 6<sup>th</sup> c. c) Stele from Bashkicheti. 6<sup>th</sup> c.*



*a)*



*b)*



*c)*

*pic. 2. The silver cup of pitiaxes Papak. 3<sup>rd</sup> c.*



*pic. 3. Rock relief. Barm e-Dilak. 276.*



*pic. 4. The Sassanian gem. 4<sup>th</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> cc.*



*pic. 5. Relief of Jvari church. Mtskheta. 6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> cc.*





*pic. 6. Emperor Justinian. Mosaics of San Vitale church in Ravenna. 547.*



*pic. 7. Relief from Giulbagi. 6<sup>th</sup> c.*



*pic. 8. Silver plate with hunting-scene of king Shapur II. 309-379.*



*pic. 9. Crosses with taenia. a) Tsilkani and b) Akvaneba churches. 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cc.*



*a)*



*b)*

*pic. 10. The winged cross from Tsilkani church.*



*pic. 11. a) The crowns of Sassanian kings according to Robert Göbl; b) Silver plate with the hunting-scene of king Khosrow II. 590-628.*

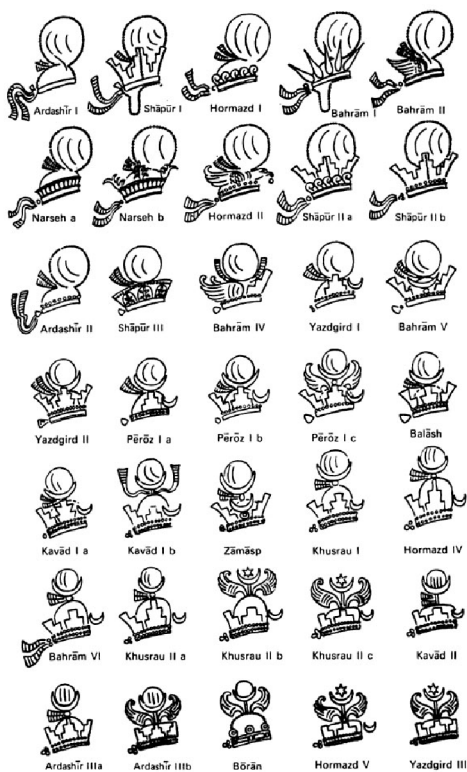


Fig. 1. The crowns of the Sasanian kings as found on coins and reliefs.



b)

a)

*pic. 12. The Georgian-Sassanian coin.*



*pic. 13. The coin of Hormizd IV. 579-590.*



*pic. 14. The coin of erismtavari Stephanos.*

