

Some Motives of the Decoration of the Monuments of Early Medieval Armenian Architecture The Question of Relations with Early Christian Iconography

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ABSTRACT

The following article concerns the very important aspect of the early medieval art of Armenia, namely the decoration motives of the monuments of the Early Medieval architecture, and their relations with the early Christian and early Byzantine monuments. The centuries-old political and cultural ties with the Eastern Roman Empire have left their mark on the monuments of the artistic culture of Armenia. In particular, this concerns the variety of ornamental motifs that were widely used in the Hellenistic and Roman monuments, after the Christian culture inherited them and through it reached all ends of the Eastern Christian world. In Armenian early medieval architecture these ornamental motifs were the important part of the inner and outer decoration of churches, martyria, as well as *stelae*, *khachkars*, etc. In this article, several new decorative motifs that were not considered earlier are highlighted, or they were known in general, however they hadn't been explored from the point of view of their origins and artistic parallels. A new approach could be considered the compositions single out from this point of view on the early *khachkars*, on the window moldings of the Ptghni church and the acanthus band of the Aruch church, as well as the vine scroll motif on the facades of the Church of the Holy Cross of Aghtamar similar to early Christian decorative compositions of the floor mosaics and sarcophagi.

Keywords: *Sculpture, Decoration, Mosaics, Aghtamar, Vine scroll, Palmettes, Acanthus.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The important components of the artistic image of the architectural monuments of the Eastern Christian countries, especially the South Caucasus, are the elements of sculpture decoration. They provide a lot of information both about the time of foundation and the artistic environment of monuments, as well as on the iconographic origins and ways of penetrating creative ideas. It is known that the early medieval art of Armenia (5th-7th cc. and beyond), has many overlaps with early Christian and early Byzantine art. These relations are mostly traced in the church architecture, which was extensively studied in the recent decades. However, the scholars paid very little attention to the analysis of decoration, and the latter need a separate study. That is why I refer to the decorative elements of early medieval Armenian architectural monument.

2. THE TETRAHEDRAL STELAE

An obvious relations with the early Christian and early Byzantine monuments and iconography can be traced on the tetrahedral *stelae* of Armenia. These monuments erected during the early Middle Ages, dating back to the 7th C., are rich in various ornamental motives and compositional reliefs. I will focus on the group of *stelae* from northern Armenia, so-called Gugark group, taking into consideration the historical boundaries of the very province, which is now split mainly between Armenia and Georgia. This referring is not accidental, since the mentioned group of monuments is distinguished by a certain artistic tradition, certain decorative motives and this is all due to a relatively soft local stone *felsit*, a kind of tuff which is making easier the processing and carving of *stelae* [1].

The architectural composition of the Armenian *stelae*, as well as the similar memorial columns (they have decoration only on the capitals and bases), consisting of a *stylobate*, base, column, capital and crowned by cross, in many ways preserve late Roman and early Christian traditions (the columns of Constantine the Great (330) and Arcadius (402) crowned by cross). Such a columns crowned with crosses are reproduced on the early Christian floor mosaics (the mosaics of the churches of Lions (late 7th C.), St. Stephan (8th C.) in Umm al-Rasas (ancient Kastron Mefa'a) in Jordan), as well as in miniatures (Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, BnF Gr. 510, fol. 454r; Gospel Lectionary, Cod. Gr.587m, fol. 141v, 1059, Dionysiou, Athos).

The ornamental motives are on the lateral northern and southern sides of the *stelae*, as well as on the edges, and sometime they shape frames for the images. Among them the stand-out motives, such as grapevine, intersect concentric circles, relief 'lattices', palm branches and *palmettes* should be mentioned [2]. The lasting and repeated ornamental motifs are the witness of the existence of strong symbolic and iconographic traditions in the artistic program of the very group of the monuments of the minor architecture and their straight references to the monuments of Eastern Christian sculpture, miniatures, floor mosaics. They are reflecting the same Christian symbolic perceptions, although the symbolism of some motifs does not have accurate interpretation.

The edges of the tetrahedral *stelae* are often decorated with shafts, sometime they are spiral in shape and by iconography they go back to the columns of the Holy Sepulcher. Therefore, in the decorative system of Armenian *stelae* (as well as in the decorative system of the churches) such decorative shafts or half-columns acquire distinct symbolic meaning, associated with the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and through it with numerous late Antique and Eastern Christian monuments [3]. The ornamental frame of the figures and composition reliefs are consist of a rolls, beads, triangles or alternating vertical and horizontal streaks, *squama* and herringbone ornaments. Such ornaments we have on the *stelae* of Odzun, Dsegh, Brdadzor, Koghges, etc. Semi-*palmettes* or elongated palm branches, very popular in the decoration of Armenian *stelae*, are the prevalent motifs of the early Christian architectural cornices, capitals, as well as of sarcophagi and ancient *ossuaries* (Kaiafa's *ossuary*, 1st C. AD, Jerusalem). And the motif of the cross circles such

as on the Odzun *stela* ("Figure 1") can be found in the iconographic program of floor mosaics (the Church of Virgin, Madaba, 8th C.) and illuminated manuscripts (Ms. B.26, 1059, Great Lavra, Athos).



Figure 1 Stela of Odzun, cross circles, the fragment of the northern side, 7th c (author's photo).

The variations of the so-called motif of beads, which was mainly used for decorative frames for relief compositions (the big *stela* from Brdadzor, *stela* from Dsegh) are noteworthy. The decorative motif of the beads was used also for ornamentation of stone crosses (the cross from Koghb), church façade decoration (the churches of Odzun and Mastara, early 7th C.). The range of beads are a widespread decorative element on early Christian monuments and objects of applied art, especially on ivory (a *diptych* from the Hermitage museum (5th C.), the ivory cover of the Echmiadzin Gospel (6th C., Matenadaran, Armenia), a *pyxis* from the Berlin Museum (5th C.)). This motif is well known from the fragments of the ruined churches cornices in the courtyard of St. Sophia of Constantinople. It is noteworthy that a number of ornamental motifs, and especially the motif of beads, which were popular in Armenian art in the 7th century, are not known in the Armenian art of the high Middle Ages, despite the fact that the art of stone carving reaches its culmination namely in the 11th – 13th centuries (f.e. *khachkars*). This strongly confirms the idea of existence of a distinctive cultural and artistic environment in the early medieval Armenia (7th and 9th-10th cc.) when early Christian and early Byzantine monuments were a landmark and an important sources of inspiration.

Among the Byzantine monuments I would single out two churches famous for their sculptural decoration; these are the church of Panagia in Skripou (873-874) and the northern church of the monastery of Lips in Constantinople (907). While comparing the decorative motifs of the

aforementioned churches with the ornamentation of the early Armenian tetrahedral *stelae*, one could be surprised not only of the similarity of many decorative motives, but also of the artistic and compositional principles of the interpretation of the latter ("Figure 2"). Both in the church of Panagia and in the church of the monastery of Lips, built after the iconoclasm, we can see the active process of the revival of early ornamental motives and themes that bring the very monuments closer to early Christian samples [4], and at the same time it explains the closeness to the Armenian early monuments too.



Figure 2 Church of Panagia in Scripou (873-874), the decorative cornice (author's photo).

The closeness/identity of the Armenian and early Christian or early Byzantine ornamental motifs, as well as the manner of artistic interpretation, the details of processing and carving, variety of decorative elements convince that Armenian masters could have used early Byzantine prototypes. In the scholarly literature there was expressed an opinion of the 'western' roots of some monuments of Armenian sculpture of the 7th century (N and J.-M. Thierry, A. Kazaryan). Totally accepting these approaches, I would like to emphasize that in this case for the Armenian masters the applied art objects were of great importance, since they were portable, they were acquired or presented as a gift, and getting into a new artistic environment they became a models of copying and rethinking (the ivory cover of the Armenian Gospel of Echmiadzin was made in Byzantium). One more source is the pilgrimage. It is known that the patrons of many Armenian monuments (princes, bishops or ordinary people) visited Byzantium (Constantinople), especially the Holy Land (according to inscriptions, historical sources, itineraries). The fact that a dozen Armenian early Christian mosaics were discovered in Jerusalem [5] testifies the fact that the very monuments could be well known by Armenians.

From this point of view let us exam some motives of the outer decoration of the Ptghni church.

3. THE CHURCH OF PTGHNI AND THE KHACHKAR FROM KECHUT

The church of Ptghni (historical province of Ayrarat, region of Kotayk) dates back to the late 7th century. Unfortunately, the monument is badly damaged. Nevertheless, on the preserved parts of the church witness the once rich and original external and internal decoration of it. A various ornamental motifs adorn the three portals, cornices, the window moldings, capitals of the inner pylons. Among the ornamental motifs there are stylized palm trees, *palmettes* and acanthus leaves, an inhabited vine scroll, bunches of grapes that remind pine cones, volutes of the Ionic capitals, etc. But there are also the Christological compositions (Ascension) on the window moldings (southern façade).



Figure 3 Church of Ptghni, the molding with the bird images, northern façade, 7th C. (author's photo).

Another, completely original solution of the external decoration of Ptghni is the window moldings and cornice on the northern facade. The double windows moldings of the western end of the northern façade are composed of a continuous band of horseshoe arches, a part of which encloses the species of bird images ("Figure 3"). The birds are directed towards the central arch with the image of an equal-pointed cross. The various species of birds (ducks, pheasants, partridges, peacocks, doves etc.) are represented in the different poses and manners, some of them have twigs in their beaks. The inclusion of birds in an arcade molding is a unique in the sculptural composition of Armenia and South Caucasus in general, especially in such lively poses. At the same time it is usual for the floor mosaics from the Holy Land, where birds are interpreted as the symbols (souls) of the righteous, and the whole carpet mosaic as the Paradise [6]. Above the double bird-window there is a cornice composed of vessels

(more than 60) and it is even more unusual than the bird-molding. On the bulky vessels one can define such details as spouts, handles and rings at the necks. Some scholars interpreted them in the context of the Eucharist, Spring of Faith and 'Heavenly banquet' ('Abraham's banquet') [7]. It is obvious that the two above mentioned compositions on the northern façade of Ptghni represent a rather original solution of decorative elements and are rare examples in the medieval sculpture of Armenia. The images of birds and associated with them the images of vessels symbolizing the Spring of Faith, Paradise and Eucharist, are mostly known from early Christian pavement that replete with similar images, especially images of birds (the famous parallel is the Armenian "Bird mosaic" in Jerusalem, late 6th C.) [8]. It is obvious that the reliefs of the northern facade of Ptghni could go back to the early Christian pavement iconographical traditions.

One of the earliest *khachkars* (886) from the village of Kechut is unique for the depiction of species of birds (the upper part is damaged). In the composition, below the flourishing cross, there are ducks from the both sides holding a wriggling snake with their paws. Above, by the horizontal arms of the cross, there is a stork (pelican?) with a fish in its beak (the image on the right is very clear) ("Figure 4"). According to earlier descriptions, there were two doves as well at the top of the cross. Such a variety of birds is unique and no longer known on *khachkars*. If doves are still found on *khachkars* since they symbolize the Holy Spirit, it is difficult to bring another *khachkar* with the image of a duck or stork. Even in the Armenian illustrated manuscripts where different species of birds are represented, it is difficult to find out a scene with a fishing bird or water snake. The monuments where such scenes are quite frequent are floor mosaics, and we found exact iconographic parallels on the mosaics of Galilee (the church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish in El Tabgha, Israel, 5th C.).



Figure 4 Kechut khachkar, 886 (after H. Petrosyan).

4. THE CHURCHES OF ARUCH AND THE HOLY CROSS OF AGHTAMAR

The big fragment of the murals in the conch of the Aruch church dated to the second half of the 7th century. On the conch of the apse there is the mural composition of 'Christ Giving the Loaves' (the figure is 7 m high). The iconographic type of the depiction, as well as the spatial character of the figure of the Savior and the color spectrum of the frescoes attested the metropolitan roots of the Aruch painting. Below the very composition, across the entire width of the wall, there is an ornamental band (about 80 cm wide). It consists of a twisting acanthus with the enclosed images of a chalice, basket of fruits, as well as grapes and pomegranates. The Hellenistic character and iconography of the composition is undeniable. L. Durnovo compared it with the ornamental frieze of the Roman style temple of Garni (late 2nd C., Armenia), and A. Kazaryan mentioned the limestone-stucco cornice of the southern vestibule of St. Sophia of Constantinople (6th–7th cc.) as an analogue of the latter. It is obvious that the compositions similar to the Aruch's ornamental band are among the decorative elements of floor mosaics, namely they form the decorative boundaries of the latter. Thus, the mosaics from the Constantine's Palace in Antioch (4th C.) and the Great Imperial Palace in Constantinople (5th or 6th cc.) can be considered as the iconographic parallels.

Bearing in mind precisely the composition of scrolling shoots, let me focus on the exceptional Armenian monument rich in sculpture, the church of the Holy Cross of Aghtamar (915-921). In the sculptural décor of the church there are many peculiarities emerged from the iconographic program of early Christian art, especially the floor

mosaics. The so-called 'vine scroll' tier, which is engirdling all the facades of the building, overloaded with ripe bunches of grape, as well as various scenes and images shown very lively and in movement. Among them I want to highlight the scenes of vintage, where people carrying the baskets with ripe grape bunches; hunters piercing a bear (or other animal) with a spear ("Figure 5"); a deer feeding his baby; the image of a young man with a slingshot, etc. The mentioned compositions are unique and there are nearly no such images in the medieval art of Armenia and Caucasus as well. The only similar example is the fragment of a lintel unearthed in Dvin (7th C.), where on the one side of the cross one of the figures has caught the bunch of grapes, and the other one puts the harvest in the basket [9]. And the only direct parallels to the very scenes on the Aghtamar reliefs are the compositions on the floor mosaics of the Near East ("Figure 6") (these are the pavements of the burnt palace of Madaba (6th C.), the churches of the Holy Martyrs Lot and Procopius (557) and of the Lions (late 7th C.), and the chapel of the priest John (565), all in Jordan) [10].



Figure 5 Holy Church of Aghtamar, hunter piercing a bear (after H. Orbeli).



Figure 6 Burnt palace of Madaba, hunter piercing a bear, 6th C. (after M. Piccirillo)

5. CONCLUSION

The above mentioned architectural monuments, such as tetrahedral *stelae*, *khachkars* from *Kechut*,

the churches of Ptghni, Aruch and the Holy Cross of Aghtamar, as well as the character and the iconography of their decoration, confirm the important role of the early Christian culture in the making of the Armenian church architecture and memorial monuments. The ornamental motives of the early Christian sculpture, including the objects of applied art, as well as the artistic program of the Middle East floor mosaics, were an important source for Armenian masters and patrons. Undoubtedly, the appeal to the early Christian art manifested itself much stronger in the 6th–7th century, due to the political and cultural situation in Armenia (the subordination of the most part of Armenia to Byzantium, the activity of the Hellenophile school). But it had its logical continuation in the subsequent era (after the Arab rule in Armenia and South Caucasus), since this historical period was the culmination of the centuries-old Armenian-Byzantine contact zone, and at the same time the period of its destruction under the blows of the Seljuks (11th C.). The Armenian-Byzantine direct contacts in the subsequent era no longer showed the fullness and versatility of cultural relationships that we observe from the earliest time of Christianity until the end of the 11th century. The decorative motives on the number of early medieval monuments of Armenia architecture, which are observed for the first time in the article, are evidences of these active intercultural contacts and are a good precedent for further research in this scholarly field.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Zaruhi Hakobyan.

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