

The Dragon-Slayer Horseman from its Origins to the Seljuks: Missing Georgian Archaeological Evidence

Situated on the crossroads of the Christian and Islamic worlds, medieval Georgia was a site of intense artistic interaction resulting from the political, diplomatic and cultural contacts between the ruling families of the Kingdom of Georgia, the Byzantine Empire and the eastern regions¹. The relations between Georgia and its neighbours have always facilitated the transmission of intellectual values to Georgia, where they were creatively transformed in accordance with the local artistic tradition, reflecting political and artistic movements of the period. The chronological span of this interaction, ranging from Late Antiquity to the medieval era, is indicative of the complexity and intensity of the cultural exchange. Thus, Georgian artistic production constitutes a promising field for interdisciplinary research on the relations between Europe and Asia.

My intention in the present study is to reveal Georgian contribution in the context of the migration of visual vocabularies that took place in the Middle Ages, focusing on the possible occurrence of Georgian elements in Seljuk art.

An extremely complex cultural mixture and variety awaited the Seljuks when they arrived in Anatolia in the 11th century. The interaction between the existing Anatolian artistic heritage and Islamic culture played an important role in the formation of Seljuk art². A part of the region's artistic background was due to the Kingdom of Georgia, which by the 11th century had already traversed a rather long path in the development of Christian art. It is known that medieval Anatolia had been influenced by the earlier cultures of the Caucasus, especially in stone carving, figural reliefs and metalwork³. In the framework of the expanded artistic exchange, I would like to draw attention to a particular representation: the dragon-slayer horseman, the image that had been adopted, reproduced and reinterpreted several times from Late Antiquity to the arrival of the Seljuks in Medieval Anatolia, illustrating its wide diffusion and similar function in

Christian and Muslim contexts. This image offers an explicit example of the transfer of ideas through times and cultures and the iconographic and contextual adaptability of this representation, has already been explored by several scholars⁴. These studies have shown how the motif was used by the Seljuks of Anatolia and consequently adapted in accordance with the Turco-Islamic believes.

The hagiographic dossier and the iconography of the dragon-slayer horseman became the subject of many studies, with the most recent and comprehensive among them being those by Christopher Walter⁵. The cult of military saints originated in the territories of Asia Minor and Palestine and soon spread widely in the East and the West. The so-called Holy Rider iconography had its roots in the ancient tradition of magical/apotropaic amulets and appeared as early as the 6th century in Byzantine Syria and Palestine, from where it also reached Anatolia⁶.

From the 10th century and the Armenian church of the Holy Cross at Agh'tamar comes the oldest securely dated image of equestrian Saint Theodore killing a dragon⁷. However, a number of undated and unidentified representations might be regarded as the earliest examples of Saint Theodore engaged in dragon-slaying⁸. The corpus of these images has been recently enriched by new discoveries in Cappadocia: the dragon-slayer saint Theodore appears in the church of Saint Michael in Başköy (8th-9th centuries) and in the church of İçeridere (9th century). Catherine Jolivet-Lévy who published these monuments was also able to prove the early appearance of the representation of Theodore as a dragon-slayer in the Christian Orient already in the 6th-7th centuries⁹. Such early examples include possibly the church no. 3 of Güzelöz (Mavrucan)¹⁰ in the same region, although the dating of the latter, ranging from the 6th to the 9th century¹¹ is uncertain.

Among the images of the dragon-slayer horseman produced before the Turkish settlement of Medieval Anatolia,

1 I am grateful to Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger for drawing my attention to the significance of Seljuk art. I also offer many thanks to Pagona Papadopoulou who read and commented on this text.

2 Redford, *A Grammar* 283-310.

3 Cat. London 2005, 43.

4 Shukurov, *Christian Elements* 707-764. – Pancaroğlu, *Dragon-Slayer* 151-164. – Redford, *A Grammar* 283-310.

5 Walter, *Theodore, Archetype* 163-195. – Walter, *Saint Theodore* 95-106. – Walter, *Warrior Saints* 44-66, with complete bibliography.

6 Spier, *Gems* 83-84. – Matantseva, *Les amulettes* 110-121. – Dauterman-Maguire/Maguire/Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Power* 25-28.

7 Der Nersessian, *Agh'tamar* 19 fig. 50.

8 Walter, *Intaglio* 397-414. – Walter, *Thracian Horseman* 657-673.

9 Jolivet-Lévy, *Saint Théodore* 357-382.

10 Completely destroyed today.

11 Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises* 247-248. – Thierry, *Art byzantine* 258-263 fig. 2, proposes 6th century as date; 9th century is suggested by Hild/Restle, *Kappadokien* 232. – See also: Walter, *Saint Theodore* 99 no. 33.



Fig. 1 Small stela of Brdadzori. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

Georgian examples hold an important position since they offer significant insight as to the genesis of this representation in Byzantium and its neighbouring regions¹².

The representation of the dragon-slayer horseman – the image that delivers the essential message of the triumph of Good over Evil – was very popular in early Christian Georgia: substituting the veneration of ancient heroes, the worship of military saints perfectly fitted the ideology and military vision of a »feudal« country. However, in spite of the early spread of the cult of equestrian saints, their veneration developed particularly, in Georgia as in Byzantium, from the 9th-10th centuries, when they acquired the function of protectors of the terrestrial army, attributed by some scholars to the influence

of emperors and military aristocracy¹³. It is also from this time that the first Georgian translations of the *vitae* of the most venerated saints, George and Theodore, appear¹⁴. In the 11th-13th centuries, interest in the lives of military saints increased considerably, since they presented as examples of military force, heroism and courage¹⁵.

It is generally agreed that visual and textual representations of the dragon-slayer were in a close relationship to each other¹⁶. However, some Georgian representations of dragon-slayer equestrian saints derived from the early period confirm the precedence of the visual tradition over the textual evidence, as it has already been suggested in the case of Saint Theodore by Walter and Jolivet-Lévy on the basis of Byzantine material¹⁷.

Georgian stone-carved crosses constitute a remarkably rich and diverse corpus that despite their great spread in Georgia, since the 4th and particularly during the 6th-8th centuries, remain relatively unknown to non-Georgian specialists. The crosses were supported by stone-carved pillars – or *stela* – and were raised mostly in rural places, far away from churches, presumably in order to mark a holy site where Christian rituals took place. The absence of relevant written sources obscures the origins and purposes of that practice. However large numbers, in which these religious monuments survived, indicate the existence of a well-organized system involved in the production of stone crosses decorated with reliefs in early medieval Georgia. Most probably, sculptural workshops functioned in various regions of the country¹⁸.

The valley Xožorni (ancient Banuš-čai, K'vemo K'art'li, region in south-eastern Georgia) was populated by Georgians since ancient time. The archaeological evidence confirms the existence of an active life in this area already in the 1st century BC¹⁹. From that time onwards and until the 10th century, the valley counted seven important cities, among which there were Xožorni and Brdadzori. It was the region where a group of early Christian stone crosses, dated approximately by the 6th century, was discovered in the 1950s²⁰. Three of them bear figures on horseback impaling a large dragon or serpent. These carved fragments suggest the existence of a sculptural workshop in the valley that was apparently active already from an early period. The fact that two of the four *stelae* bear inscriptions in Georgian confirms the Georgian origin of the monuments²¹.

Much-damaged principal side of the so-called small Brdadzori cross²² shows a figure on horseback, aiming his spear at two coiled dragons (fig. 1). The scene is clearly divided into

12 The aspects of development of the cult and iconography of equestrian saints in medieval Georgia are developed in the forthcoming book N. Iamanidze, *Culte et images en Géorgie aux VI^e-XI^e siècles entre Byzance et l'Orient: le cas particulier des saints cavaliers*.
 13 Grotowski, *Arms and Armour* 63-74.
 14 Gabidzašvili, *C'minda giorgi*. – Kekelidze, *Etiudebi II*. – Chahanov, *Materialy*. – Marr, *Agiografičeskie materialy I* 47. – Jordania, *Opisanie I* 380-381.
 15 Kekelidze, *Etiudebi* 6. 80.
 16 Walter, *Warrior Saints* 44-66. – Pancaroğlu, *Dragon-Slayer* 152.

17 Walter, *Saint Theodore* 95-106. – Jolivet-Lévy, *Saint Theodore et le dragon* 357-382.
 18 For Georgian stone crosses see: Javaxišvili, *Stelabi*. – Mačabeli, *K'vajvarebi*.
 19 Ckitišvili, *C'op'i* 85.
 20 Gagošidze, *K'vasvetebi* 60-71. – Gagošidze, *C'minda giorgis* 26-27.
 21 For the inscriptions see: Gagošidze, *K'vasvetebi* 70.
 22 Čubinašvili, *Xandisi* 8. – Javaxišvili, *Stelabi* 33-34. – Gagošidze, *K'vasvetebi* 61-71.

two parts by a narrow relief border used as a ground for the horse. The horseman, in the upper register, spears two large dragons placed on the lower part, by inserting the lance into the mouth of one of them. The monsters cover almost two quarters of the relief and are bigger than the rider himself.

A comparable image is offered by the *stela* of Xožorni²³ (fig. 2) which repeats almost exactly the iconography of Brdadzori: it shows an equestrian saint moving from left to right, holding the lance in his right hand while his left hand holds the shield. The large coiled dragon fills the lower register of relief separated from the figure of a horseman on the upper part by a narrow relief border. The surviving traces of inscriptions that will be examined further below render this example particularly significant.

In both cases (Brdadzori and Xožorni), it is obvious that the Good and the Evil are clearly divided. The dragon, incarnation of the Evil, is placed at the bottom of relief, while the triumphant over the Evil dragon-slayer is raised to the highest part. This is an original iconographic system, which, to the best of my knowledge, appears only on these two monuments.

Another better-preserved example is the so-called large *stela* of Brdadzori²⁴ (fig. 3). It measures 6 m in height and is thus the largest stone-cross preserved in Georgia. The base of *stela* remains intact with only a small part on the top missing. The eastern side is divided into squares bearing figural and ornamental decoration. Only 13 squares are visible today. One of the squares shows the equestrian dragon-slaying saint in a similar attitude as in Xožorni. However, the iconography is quite different: the warrior aims his spear at the serpent whose tail rises up in front of the horse; he pierces the head of the monster lying down on the horizontal border of the frame. The rider, moving towards the serpent and holding a large round shield in his left hand with the spear in his right hand as in Xožorni, is surmounted by a cross.

Among all almost identical iconographic elements of these three compositions, the most remarkable is the large size of the dragon – or the serpent in the case of Brdadzori, which embody the evil forces and could be explained by the will to emphasize its harmful strength. We are supposed to see the triumph over the forces of evil of all forms in this image, where the rider appears as a protector and victor over the demons. This type of the dragon could possibly be connected with the real situation in Georgia; according to historical sources, during the 4th-6th centuries, the population of the eastern part of Šida K'art'li was not entirely and definitively converted to Christianity²⁵. Thus, besides its symbolic connotation, the image would also reflect political and religious state of a country.



Fig. 2 Xožorni *stela*. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

Another significant element is the cross at the end of the warrior's spear on the so-called large cross of Brdadzori. It represents a direct indication on the nature of military saints and becomes later the essential attribute in the iconography of Saint Theodore and Saint George. It could thus be considered as an indication for the identification of the saint that in the absence of inscription remains problematic. The presence of the halo in Xožorni and the cross topping the spear in Brdadzori would suggest an identification of the depicted figure at least with Saint Theodore, whose representation, according to common belief, appeared in the Christian East already in the 6th-7th centuries, well before those of Saint George²⁶.

The case of Xožorni, however, enables us to put forward another, more concrete hypothesis concerning the identification of the saint. The inscription on the *stela* is much damaged, but a readable part on the small relief border at the leg

23 Privalova, P'avnisi 2. – Gagošidze, C'minda giorgis 26.

24 Čubinašvili, Xandisi 8. – Javaxišvili, Stelabi 33-34. – Gagošidze, K'vasvetebi 67-68.

25 Janašia, Sak'art'velo 212. – Gagošidze, K'ristianoba da c'armart'oba 27.

26 Walter, Saint Theodore 95-106. – Jolivet-Lévy, Saint Theodore et le dragon 357-382.



Fig. 3 Big stela of Brdadzori. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

of the horse names the dragon: $\Gamma\Lambda\Gamma\Gamma\ \text{C} / \text{K}\Lambda\ \Gamma\text{-}\Gamma\text{Y}\text{C}\Lambda\Gamma$ »this is a dragon«. Some letters can also be discerned on both sides of the rider's head. On the left side we can read: $\text{K}\Gamma$ »rg« that could eventually be the part of »George« (*Giorgi* in Georgian). The letter Γ »i« to the right can nowadays be hardly seen. However, it was more than 30 years ago Ekaterina Privalova proposed a reading of this name, indicating with no hesitation the same *asomt'avruli* letters flanking the saint's head – »rg« to the left and »i« to the right²⁷. Obviously the inscription was in a better condition at the end of the 1970s. According to that reading, the inscription identifies the figure with Saint George; the iconographic type of the depicted saint also bears typical physical characteristics of Saint George that is his curly hair and absence of beard. This identification would make the Xožorni *stela* one of the earliest examples of Saint George as a dragon-slayer, a motif that does not occur until the 11th century in Byzantine art.

However, it leads us to consider two main problems: first, dating in the 11th century of the earliest written sources, referring to Saint George as a dragon-slayer and consequently the later origin of its image; second, the particular success that enjoyed in Georgia the image of Saint George killing a male figure instead of the dragon.

Scholars agree that early unnamed pictures of a saint killing a dragon should not be identified with Saint George first represented killing a man²⁸. Medieval Georgian art offers many examples of representations of Saint George killing Di-

ocletian. The iconographic theme of the saint combating the dragon made its appearance in the 11th century and mostly in wall-paintings (Hadiši [11th century], Boč'orma [12th century], P'avnisi [12th-13th centuries])²⁹. It forms part of the miraculous rescuing by the saint of a princess in the city of Lasia, first attested in an 11th century manuscript preserved in the Greek patriarchal library in Jerusalem cod. 2³⁰.

However, it should be noted that the oldest images of the saint killing the dragon cannot be considered as illustrations of the life of Saint George, since they do not reproduce the narrative of the *vita*. According to the latter, Saint George defeated the dragon miraculously, only with the force of his prayer, and killed it with his sword without a fight³¹. On the contrary, early Christian stone crosses depict the combat of the saint with the creature, attributing precise semantic importance to each element of the composition.

An episode of the victory over the dragon included in the life of Saint Theodore Tiron, dated as early as the 8th century³², indicates that the idea of this battle can be counted among the heroic acts of almost all popular military saints and seems to derive from older symbolic representations. Thus, the image of Saint George or any other saint as a dragon killer in Georgia must be considered as a purely symbolical representation.

Further archaeological evidence could confirm the particular popularity of Saint George in early Christian Georgia. According to Niko Čubinashvili and Kiti Mačabeli, the rep-

27 Privalova, P'avnisi 64. – Šošiašvili, *Lapidaruli c'arc'erebi* 230. – In spite of this inscription, Nicole Thierry identifies this warrior saint, as well as that of the small *stela* of Brdadzori, as Saint Theodore: Thierry, *Aux limites* 236.

28 Walter, *Origins* 320.

29 Ševjakova, *Monumental'naja živopis'* tabs 92-94. – Q'enia, *Lag'ami* 38-39. – Privalova, P'avnisi 18 figs 4-5.

30 Blake, *Catalogue* 17.

31 Blake, *Catalogue* 17. – Privalova, P'avnisi 73. – Walter, *The Origins* 320-322. – Thierry, *Compte-rendu* Walter 266.

32 Zuckerman, *The Reign of Constantine V 191-210*. – Walter, *Theodore, Archaetype* 166-168. – Auzepey, *Constantin* 324-326.



Fig. 4 Xandisi stela. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

representation of the 6th century Xandisi stela (fig. 4) could attest to his early cult. This image shows a martyr saint – not a military one – identified by those scholars with Saint George³³. However, in the absence of inscriptions, this identification remains tentative. According to Rene Šmerling, another representation of Saint George can be found on one of the pillars of the 8th century Gveldesi *templon* (fig. 5). The relief shows the saint standing, and not as a horse rider, spearing a long serpent with a lance topped by a cross, but the clearly visible beard would enable us to recognize rather Saint Theodore³⁴.

33 Čubinashvili, Xandisi 4. – Mačabeli, K'vajvarebi 51.

34 Šmerling, Malye formy 74-76.



Fig. 5 Pillar of Gveldesi *templon*. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

Instead, 7th century stela from Kataula (fig. 6) carries an interesting inscription. The representation of a woman, certainly a donor, is accompanied by an invocation in *asomtavruli* script: »Saint George, have mercy upon your slave«³⁵. This prayer confirms the particular esteem and respect that Saint George enjoyed in early Christian Georgia, while underlining the existence of his cult already in the 7th century. This issue becomes particularly interesting since the inscription of Kataula is not a unique case. Beside the well-known inscription of the 6th century monastery at Ezra (Zorava) in Syria

35 Mačabeli, K'vajvarebi 166-176.



Fig. 6 Kataula stela. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

(514-515), where Saint George is mentioned as a victorious warrior for the first time³⁶, similar examples appear in other regions of the Christian East, together with the images showing a saint in warrior costume, often with a blessing gesture, sometimes in the company of donor. The prayers to Saint George clearly suggest his identification (as on the 4th century cross of Mesembrios from *Cabinet des médailles*, on the amulet ring from Benaki museum [6th-7th centuries], on the relief from Vinica [Macedonia, 4th-6th or 8th centuries])³⁷.

This evidence leads us to suppose that the image of the dragon-slaying Saint George was created in Georgia well before the relevant written version on the basis of ancient, pre-Christian cults of the so-called Holy Rider (known as warrior God in Georgia). The old legends related to Saint

George certainly formed part of the oral tradition that circulated at Early Christian time³⁸. Therefore, together with the Hellenistic and Sassanian influences, local cults have fostered the emergence of this iconography³⁹. The synthesis of these traditions could lead to the early image of the equestrian saint killing dragon or snake in Georgia. This image of a warrior, but not a martyr, fitted perfectly in the political and spiritual ideology of the country propagating the new state religion, was also widely spread in the other parts of the early Christian world – the fact that confirms the circulation and use of a common iconographic theme as well as direct link of Georgia with the eastern Christian spiritual centres. It could have influenced the text of the saint's life, which took a more developed and narrative form⁴⁰. Consequently, we can consider that the iconography of the miracle of Saint George with the dragon in the city of Lasia, created in the 11th century according to the life of Saint George and soon spread widely in medieval Georgian painting, was inspired by this kind of representations⁴¹.

The early Georgian images of the dragon-slayer horseman allow us to incorporate Georgia in the circle of countries that contributed to the creation of this iconography. The quality and number of relevant surviving representations from the period before the 11th century confirm that the popularity of these representations increased in Georgia after the Early Christian era. This popularity went together with the creation of a different iconography: the representation of equestrian saints facing each other, with Saint Theodore impaling a serpent, and Saint George, killing a male figure.

I will draw attention to some less known monuments and to more famous representations of controversial dating.

One of the reliefs on the western façade of the Martvili church shows equestrian saints, George and Theodore, killing a double-headed dragon (fig. 7). This iconography is not common in Georgia and is related to Cappadocia, which offers a number of its examples: in Pürenli seki kilise (9th-10th centuries), Yılanlı kilise/Göreme no. 28 (11th century) Saklı kilise/Göreme no. 2a (11th century) in the Ihlara valley⁴². The triumphal character of this representation is emphasized by two flying angels glorifying the saints by holding a crown – the unusual detail for the iconography of medieval Georgia and generally characteristic for early Christian time.

36 Walter, *Origins* 314. – Walter, *Warrior Saints* 114-115.

37 Cotsonis, *Processional Crosses* 88-95. – Cat. Thessaloniki 2001-2002, 438-439. – Drandaki, *Copper Alloy Jewellery* 70. The rich Cappadocian dossier could also provide important data to confirm this hypothesis. However, the chronology of the early paintings is difficult to establish and remains controversial.

38 For the pre-Christian cults and the old legends related to Saint George, see: Javaxišvili, *K'art'veli eris istoria* 41-55. – Gagošidze, *Adrek'ristianuli xanis dzeglebi* 40-43. – Barnaveli, *K'art'uli meomari* 36. The material culture evidence discovered during archaeological excavations confirms that the tradition of the representation of a riding saint in Georgia existed in very old times. – Gagošidze, *Adrek'ristianuli xanis dzeglebi* 34-43 suggests a close link between the images of holy riders armed with the lance on the small objects found in tombs in K'ančæet'i, dated in 2nd-3rd centuries, and that of Saint George. – Gagošidze, *K'ristianoba da c'armart'oba* 27-28.

39 Javaxišvili, *K'art'veli eris istoria* I 41-55. – Gagošidze, *Adrek'ristianuli xanis dzeglebi* 40-43. – Barnaveli, *K'art'uli meomari* 36.

40 For the pre-Christian cults and the old legends related to Saint George, see: Javaxišvili, *K'art'veli eris istoria* 41-55. – Gagošidze, *Adrek'ristianuli xanis dzeglebi* 40-43. – Barnaveli, *K'art'uli meomari* 36. The material culture evidence discovered during archaeological excavations confirms that the tradition of the representation of a riding saint in Georgia existed in very old times. – Gagošidze, *Adrek'ristianuli xanis dzeglebi* 34-43 suggests a close link between the images of holy riders armed with the lance on the small objects found in tombs in K'ančæet'i, dated in 2nd-3rd centuries, and that of Saint George. – Gagošidze, *K'ristianoba da c'armart'oba* 27-28.

41 Privalova, *P'avnisi* 76-77 pointed out that in the 11th-century church of Hadiši and the 12th-century Boč'orma church, the equestrian saints Theodore and George appear together with the scene of the miracle in Lasia, a fact that, in her opinion, proves the autonomy of each composition.

42 Thierry, *Aux limites du sacré* 234-236 fig. 1. – Jolivet-Lévy, *Saint Théodore* 358-359.



Fig. 7 Martvili church. Western façade. – (After Aladašvili, Monumental'naja skul'ptura fig. 56).



Fig. 8 Martvili church. Western façade. – (After Aladašvili, Monumental'naja skul'ptura fig. 58).

The image on the right, on the same façade shows another horseman hitting with his long and massive spear a man at the feet of his horse (fig. 8). The presence of the latter – inseparable element of Saint George's iconography – allows the identification of the scene to the traditional image of Saint George killing Diocletian and follows the general scheme, well established from the 10th century.

According to Georgian scholars, these reliefs can be dated to the 7th century and the image of Georges and Theodore killing a dragon provides the earliest example of this type. This dating is based on the presence of antique sculptural forms in the style of reliefs and on the early iconography⁴³. This opinion has been contested by Russian and European scholars, who move forward the dating of the church architecture, as well as of its reliefs towards the 10th century. This later chronology derives from a different dating of the construction of the church, the style of the figures *en bloc*, the late iconography with the facing saints and of the type of the horses' harness, notably the presence of stirrups⁴⁴. The example of the church no. 3 of Güzelöz (Mavrucan) that has already been mentioned could provide an excellent parallel for the early use of this iconography, however its dating in the 7th century is not certain⁴⁵. The resemblance of the Martvili relief to the plaque from the Benaki Museum was mentioned as a supplementary argument for a late dating⁴⁶. The plaque of the church Amasia in Pontus is dated by 10th-11th centuries, although its execution may suggest a later date (13th century?). The image of equestrian saints facing each other and slaying with their spears a man placed at the feet of their horses seem to be a suitable parallel: the attitude and the costumes of riders, details of horses harness are comparable to what we see on Martvili relief. But this iconography is very unusual for Georgia where the Saints George and Theodore never kill a man together. The image from Benaki attests the use of the same prototypes but seems to have been created under the influence of different models: the »Cappadocian« dragon is replaced here by a »Georgian« man.

The absence of stirrups does not seem to be a valuable argument for a late dating: indeed, no stirrups appear on the early Christian Georgian images of equestrian saints. They also seem to be absent in the representations of horsemen in ancient Rome and the Sassanid art. However, scholars have traced the route of their arrival in Byzantium in the 6th century⁴⁷.

Regarding the argument of the construction date, the church of Martvili, which belongs to the group of the so-called Jvari type churches, was restored in the 10th century; some new compartments were then added to the principal building dated from the 7th century⁴⁸.

The program of images of the Martvili church and the abundance of »archaic« iconographic elements seem to perfectly correspond with early Christian tradition. However, these elements keep on appearing until 9th-10th centuries in the so-called archaic paintings. Instead, if we accept the 10th century date we must admit that the reliefs were executed by not very qualified artists who made use of »archaic« prototypes. The type of equestrian saints is usual of medieval iconography: the occurrence of Diocletian missing from other Georgian monuments dated before the 10th century and the similarity to the 9th-10th centuries Coptic models, as for example, manuscript *Copto 66* from Vatican Apostolic Library or those from the British Museum (OR. 6801) or the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (M. 613)⁴⁹, arguing in favour of the later date.

Another example can be found on the 10th-century plaque discovered in the basilica of Saint Step'ane in the monastery of Iq'alt'o⁵⁰ (fig. 9). The plaque's initial function is unknown. Most probably it represents the top of the altar table as it was used in the church where it was found. However, the problem of its function remains open. If it is an altar, we are dealing with an example with no direct parallels, either in Georgia, or elsewhere in the Byzantine world.

The decoration of the plaque consists of a composite program of images which, as in most religious works, expresses the Glory of Christ by underlining the theme of His Sacrifice with focusing on Incarnation and Redemption. Part of this program is also the representation of equestrian saints identified by inscriptions (fig. 10): Saint Theodore, on the left, spears the dragon, while Saint George, on the right, kills a human figure identified by the inscription as Diocletian. The idea of triumph is stressed by a medallion containing the bust of Christ blessing the warrior saints and by the important scale of the riders and their privileged location, almost in the middle of the plaque, near the Crucifixion of Christ. This arrangement certainly aims to emphasize the apotropaic function of the image, illustrating at the same time the victory of the Christian soldiers over the Evil and enjoying for its purpose the protection of the object and its users.

43 Čubinašvili, Džvari 51. – Aladašvili, Monumental'naja skul'ptura 48-56. One of the main arguments for early dating is the presence of flying angels glorifying the saints by holding a crown.

44 Chruškova, Skul'ptura 59. – Vagner, Obraz 4. – Thierry, Aux limites 240 no. 40. – Walter, Warrior Saints 129 indicates the date 912-957, with no comments.

45 Jolivet-Lévy, Les églises 247-248. – Thierry, Art byzantin 258-263. – Restle, Cappadokien 232. – Walter, Saint Theodore 99 no. 33.

46 Pancaroğlu, Dragon-Slayer 154. – For this plaque and its dating see: Delivorrias, Benaki Museum 65. 69.

47 Bivar, The stirrup 61-65. – Bivar, Cavalry equipment 274. 286-288. – Haldon, Arms and Armour 66-67 no. 4. In the Byzantine textual sources they are attest-

ed already in the 6th century – in *Strategikon* attributed to the emperor Maurice (582-602). See: Das *Strategikon*. – Haldon, Arms and Armour 68. – Dawson, Syntagma Hoplon 81. Following this path we can suppose that hypothetically they could appear in Georgia as early as in the 6th-7th centuries. – For stirrups see also: Curta, Avar-age stirrups 297-326. – Genito, Early medieval nomads 229-247.

48 Mep'isašvili, Vale 25-52.

49 For coptic manuscripts see: Leroy, Les manuscrits coptes 185-186 pl. 105, 2; 188 pl. 107, 2; 188-189 pl. 106, 1.

50 For Iq'alt'o plaque see: Iamanidzé, Les installations liturgiques 61-94.



Fig. 9 Iq'alt'o plaque. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

One more less known example comes from the eastern façade of the 10th century Joisubani church (fig. 11). The equestrian saints George and Theodore are integrated in a complex iconographic program as parts of one of the oldest representations of the Last Judgment. They are shown together with Christ the Judge, the figure of the donor and the archangels, surrounded by inscriptions and invocations, highlighting the devotional use of this image. They also appear as protectors and have in this case too an apotropaic function.

The earliest comparable examples of the equestrian dragon-slayer from Turco-Islamic Anatolia appear on coins dated by the 12th century; in this context the iconography conveys the message of authority and rulership⁵¹. The coin types follow the standard Byzantine iconography of the theme, aiming to express the ideas of victory and power. Some of them, such as the 12th-century copper coins of the Seljuk sultan Rukn al-Din Sulayman Shah (1196-1204), show a horse-rider with a halo carrying a spear. Other issues, for example

the 12th-century copper coin of the Danishmendid ruler of Malatya Nasr al-Din Muhammad (1162-1170, 1175-1178), bear the effigy of a dragon-slaying horseman⁵². This image of authority bears the same significance of the triumph over the Evil. In media other than coins, the message of victory is sometimes emphasized by the accompanying inscription. An explicit example can be found on the 13th-century bronze candlestick from southern Anatolia decorated with large medallion bearing figure of mounted hunter fighting a dragon. The text of the inscription wishes the owner luck, wealth and victory over his enemies⁵³.

The relief plaques of the C'ebelda *templon* – another Georgian monument meriting special attention, offer an interesting case-study of common motifs on the boundaries of Georgian and Islamic cultures and traditions. These sculpted panels provoked much interest and were published several times. However, the dating of the reliefs is still disputed, with the proposed dating between the 6th and the 12th-13th centuries⁵⁴.

51 Pancaroğlu, Dragon-Slayer 158-159. – For figural coinage in Anatolia and their iconography, see: Spengler/Sayles, Turkoman Figural Bronze Coins I-II.

52 Cat. Genève 1985, 388 cat. 530. – For the coins of the Seljuk sultan Sulayman Shah, see: Hennequin, Catalogue 699-705.

53 Cat. Copenhagen 1996, cat. no. 363. – Cat. Genève 1985, 276 cat. no. 285.

54 Uvarova, Christianskie pamjatniki 22. – Šervašidzé, Reznye kamni 90-105. – Ajnalov, Elinističeskie osnovy 33-242. – Čubinašvili, K'art'uli xelovnebis istoria I 208-209. – Amiranašvili, Istorija 121. 178. – Alibegašvili, Rel'efnaja plita 511-512. – Chruškova, Skul'ptura 43-85. – Saltykov, La vision 5-17. – Thierry, Le culte du cerf 80-84. – Chruškova, Abkhazie 145-153. – Iamanidzé, Les installations liturgiques 115-129.



Fig. 10 Iq'alt'o plaque. Equestrian saints. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).



Fig. 11 Joisubani church. Eastern façade. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

The complex iconography of these panels was also interpreted in different manners. All those various and contradictory testimonies leave the question of the datum open and, at the same time, raise several problems of interpretation for further research.

One of the panels bears the traditional representation of two facing equestrian saints, George and Theodore, spearing Diocletian and a dragon respectively (fig. 12). On the second panel, the hunting scene with Saint Eustathe, an episode taken from the life of a local Georgian saint, draws our attention (fig. 13). It shows a figure on horseback holding in its left hand a bow; in front of him there is a dog and a bird, followed by a stag with the image of a bearded Christ between its horns.

According to some scholars, these representations surprise with their abundance in Sassanid motifs⁵⁵: the garments and hats of the riders certainly bear a resemblance to those of Sassanid kings. The long sword and the way it is being carried, the horse with the tied tail and the harness are also of Sassanid type, as well as the bearded faces with their characteristic features. Others detect Arab and Iranian influences and move its dating towards the 11th-12th centuries⁵⁶ – a time period that coincides with the Seljuk settlement in Anatolia. Nevertheless, according to the general consensus the style of the reliefs is rustic and archaic. Again, some scholars found it typically Sassanid, others characterized it as *Sassanisant* and »Caucasian«⁵⁷ – a term which, in my opinion, is not very clear and needs further elaboration.

55 Ajnalov, *Ēlinističeskije osnovy* 33-242. – Šervašidzé, *Reznye kamni* 90-105. – Amiranašvili, *Istorija* 121. 178. – Čubinašvili, *K'art'uli xelovnebis istoria* I 208-209.

56 Chruškova, *Abkhazie* 145-152. – It seems that Nicole Thierry is also inclined to this later dating (pers. comm.).

57 Thierry, *Le culte du cerf* 80-84.



Fig. 12 C'ebelda templon. Small panel. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).



Fig. 13 C'ebelda templon. Big panel. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

Particularly significant in this context is the scene of saint Eustathe, which evokes representations of princely hunting in the presence of dogs and an eagle, widely spread motif in the 12th and 13th centuries Anatolia, as well as in Transcaucasia, Central Asia and Iran⁵⁸. It is also interesting to recall here the additional visual and conceptual absorption of the equestrian dragon-slayer into representations of princely hunting – assimilation inspired by the general theme of victory, common to both dragon-slaying and hunting. A number of candlesticks and mirrors attributed to the 12th-13th-century Anatolia reveal the association of the dragon-slayer with the notion of princely authority and prerogative⁵⁹.

However, it is difficult to assert the influence of this kind of representations on the C'ebelda reliefs, since for a number of reasons their dating in the 12th-13th centuries seems to be inaccurate. Actually, the style of the reliefs, as well as their complex iconography, does not have any exact parallels. The stylistic particularity and the complexity of the iconographic program can be explained by the use of various models, or even by the participation of several artists in the execution of the panels⁶⁰. The iconographic features and theological context of the C'ebelda program permits, in my opinion, a reduction of the chronological limits. In the current state of research, I would rather propose – with some hesitation – a

58 Ibidem 83-84.

59 Pancaroğlu, *Dragon-Slayer* 159-160.

60 Iamanidzé, *Les installations liturgiques* 128.

dating in the 9th century, during the so-called transitional period of Georgian art, a period marked by an active search for new artistic forms⁶¹.

The research on Sassanid, Seljuk and Iranian art would not suffice to conclude whether the particularities observed on the C'ebelda reliefs are due to Sassanid influence or rather to the survival of Sassanid elements in Arab and Iranian or Seljuk art. The source of inspiration for the C'ebelda artist remains obscure, since the question of »influences« remains open. The same holds true for certain ornamental elements on the panels. Some, which appear also in Seljuk art and have been called by scholars the »Seljuk chain«⁶², were in use in pre-Christian and early Christian Georgian jewellery and have probably an antique origin⁶³. Thus, it is not impossible that Seljuk art was inspired by Georgian artistic elements and adopted from the latter decorative motives. In any case, the example of C'ebelda opens the way towards future research in this direction.

The representations of equestrian dragon-slayers produced in Turko-Islamic Anatolia in close iconographic relation to earlier Byzantine examples shed light on significant aspects of artistic exchange and cultural integration. Georgian monuments complete the data provided by other regions of the Eastern Christian world and contribute to our understanding of the artistic developments of a wider Eastern world encompassing Byzantium and the Islamic Near East, and the cultural exchange that took place within it.

61 Ibidem 129.

62 Chruškova, Abkhazie 151.

63 Javakhishvili/Abramishvili, Jewellery 10-11.

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Zusammenfassung / Abstract / Résumé

Der Drachentöter-Reiter von seinen Anfängen bis zu den Seldschuken: fehlende georgische archäologische Belege

Unter den Bildern des Drachentöter-Reiters, die vor der türkischen Besiedlung des mittelalterlichen Anatoliens hergestellt worden sind, sind die georgischen Beispiele besonders zu nennen, weil sie einen bedeutenden Einblick in die Ursprünge dieser Darstellung in Byzanz und den benachbarten Regionen bietet. Das Ziel der vorliegenden Studie ist es, den georgischen Beitrag im Kontext der mittelalterlichen Wanderung visueller Vokabularien zu entdecken, indem vor allem auf die mögliche Nutzung georgischer Elemente in der seldschukischen Kunst fokussiert wird.

Die frühen Bilder des Drachentöter-Reiters in Georgien legen nahe, dass diese Ikonographie in Georgien entstanden ist, lange vor dem Entstehen der einschlägigen schriftlichen Version, die auf der Grundlage alter, vorchristlicher Kulte geschaffen worden ist. Das Problem der Herkunft des Bildnisses des berittenen Drachentöters sowie die Qualität und Zahl der relevanten erhaltenen Darstellungen vor dem 11. Jahrhundert bestätigen die Autonomie seiner Ikonographie und die Bedeutung Georgiens bei der Einführung dieses Bildnisses in die Ikonographie des mittelalterlichen Anatoliens. Die Darstellungen des berittenen Drachentöters, die im türkisch-islamischen Anatolien in enger ikonographischer Beziehung zu früheren

byzantinischen Beispielen entstanden sind, beleuchten bedeutende Aspekte künstlerischen Austauschs und kultureller Integration. Georgische Monumente ergänzen die Angaben aus anderen Regionen der östlichen Christenheit.

The Dragon-Slayer Horseman from its Origins to the Seljuks: Missing Georgian Archaeological Evidence

Among the images of the dragon-slayer horseman produced before the Turkish settlement of medieval Anatolia, Georgian examples hold an important position since they offer significant insight as to the origins of this representation in Byzantium and its neighbouring regions. The aim of this present study is to show the Georgian contribution in the context of this migration of visual vocabularies that took place in the Middle Ages, focusing especially on the possible use of Georgian elements in Seljuk art.

The early images of the dragon-slayer horseman in Georgia lead us to suppose that this iconography was created in Georgia well before the relevant written version on the basis of ancient, pre-Christian cults. The problem of the origin of the equestrian dragon-slayer's image and the quality and number of relevant surviving representations from the period before the 11th century confirm the autonomy of its iconography and the importance of the Georgian contribution in the course of the infiltration of this image into the iconography of medieval Anatolia. The representations of equestrian dragon-slayers produced in Turko-Islamic Anatolia in close iconographic relation to earlier Byzantine examples shed light on significant aspects of artistic exchanges and cultural integration. Georgian monuments usefully augment the data provided by other regions of the Eastern Christian world.

Le cavalier tueur de dragons des origines aux Seldjoukides: absence de preuve archéologique géorgienne

Parmi les images d'un cavalier combattant avec le dragon produites avant l'installation des Turcs en Anatolie médiévale, les exemples géorgiens occupent une place importante puisque ils offrent un aperçu significatif sur les origines de cette représentation à Byzance et ses régions voisines.

Les témoignages archéologiques les plus anciens attestent que le culte de saint George s'est répandu en Géorgie dès les premières années de la christianisation et amènent également à supposer qu'en Géorgie, l'image du saint cavalier, vainqueur du serpent/dragon a été formée indépendamment et bien avant la création de la version écrite de la vie du saint, dérivées de cultes préchrétiens du dieu-guerrier. Le nombre et la qualité des images créées avant 11^e siècle confirment l'autonomie de cette iconographie et l'importance de la contribution géorgienne sur la voie de pénétration de ce thème dans l'art de l'Anatolie médiévale.