

# Georgian Reception of Sasanian Art

Early medieval Georgian art attracts significant attention with its adaptability to different cultural contexts. Created mainly upon local ground<sup>1</sup> and being part of the Eastern Christian world, it freely interprets the classical heritage on the basis of popular traditions and modifies subjects, pictures and forms coming from outside. We can thus observe an original mixture of the ancient pagan symbols with the new Christian artistic expression and a process of cultural assimilation of external elements, Roman-Hellenistic and Persian<sup>2</sup>. Sasanian culture seems to be one of the elements which have affected the perception of Christian art by Georgians since its beginnings and has contributed to the formation of its iconography and ornamental repertoire. Indeed, elements borrowed from Sasanian art appear to be one of the sources of inspiration of early Christian Georgian artists. The process of their reception was complex and had different extents.

The problems of these influences have already been discussed in recent studies, principally on the basis of textual and ethnographic sources<sup>3</sup>. Visual art was rarely considered when attempting to deal with this issue<sup>4</sup>. However, a closer look at the archaeological data shows that the link between Sasanian and Georgian art is not straightforward. The aspects of these cultural transfers and interactions should deserve deeper studying. This paper will introduce evidence that illustrates the artistic relations between the two cultural communities in order to shed light on the ways symbols, motifs and themes from the Sasanian world were perceived, assimilated and mixed with Georgian traditions and integrated in the Christian repertoire.

The renewal of Georgian artistic production, which coincided with the arrival of the Sasanians, is, at least partly, explained by the political context. Sasanian invasions were perceived as a vector for the expansion of Persian culture and Georgia was situated within the area of its immediate expansion. It is well known that at the end of antiquity, especially in the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Sasanian Empire caused the weaken-

ing of Roman rule over Georgia and resulted in the conquest of K'art'li (eastern Georgia), while Lazica (western Georgia) remained under the influence of Byzantium and became an arena of Byzantine-Sasanian wars<sup>5</sup>. The Georgian Chronicles reveal that during his eastern campaign, Yazdgird II (438/457), imposed on Aršušay, the *pitiaxš* (*bidaxš*) of K'vemo K'art'li, along with the rest of the Georgian elite, the conversion to Zoroastrianism. *Mok'cevay k'art'lisay* (The conversion of K'art'li) meant the abolition of kingship at K'art'li in 523 and the end of the kingdom<sup>6</sup>. The events of 523 entailed the increase of Persian populations freely performing Zoroastrian rituals and the diffusion of Iranian customs and practices<sup>7</sup>. However, the historical sources testify to the large number of Zoroastrians in Christian K'art'li already before the advent of Vaxtang Gorgasali in the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>.

The existence of a general persecution of Christians in the Sasanian Empire has often been asserted and linked to the context of the Byzantine-Persian wars of the Justinianic era. The resumption of these wars certainly led to an increase of the population of Persian origin in the military sector and the strengthening of Zoroastrianism. But it is also known that the »great persecution« carried out by the Sasanian kings against the Christians dissipated towards the 5<sup>th</sup> century. A period of relative tolerance of Christianity followed, especially in the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>.

As can be concluded from the 6<sup>th</sup>-century text of the Martyrdom of Saint Evstat'i of Mxet'a, during this period the Christian community of K'art'li was not threatened and prospered to the point of making conversions. The relations between Persians and Georgians were good, as evidenced by intermarriages<sup>10</sup>. The status of K'art'li within the Sasanian Empire was rather particular. The Sasanians certainly were the supreme authority, controlling the political and military life of K'art'li, with a *marzban* settled in Tbilisi<sup>11</sup>. In the years following the revolt in 523 of King Gurgen against the Persians, the royal institution was abolished in K'art'li as

1 Čubinašvili, K'art'uli 1, 12. – Mačabeli, Adrek'ristianui 153-155.

2 Iamanidze, Saints cavaliers 19-21.

3 Rapp, The Iranian Heritage 645-692. – Rapp, The Sasanian world. – Song'ulašvili, Iranši 22-51.

4 Mačabeli, Pozdeantičnaja. – Mačabeli, Adrek'ristianuli 153-165. – Thierry, Iconographie 963-1013.

5 Žanašia, Šromebi 1, 79. – Jvaxišvili, K'art'veli 164-185.

6 Mok'cevay 81-163. – Martin-Hisard, Le »Martyre« 499. Around 580 following Rapp, The Sasanian world 328.

7 Song'ulašvili, Iranši 42-44.

8 Despite the efforts of Vaxtang Gorgasali, who strongly opposed Zoroastrianism, in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the number of Zoroastrians in K'art'li was still large mainly in the three cities of Tbilisi, Mxet'a and Ujarma and Emperor Heraclius deployed his armed forces for their liquidation, see Mok'cevay 81-163. – Juanšer Juanšeriani, Vaxtang 139-244.

9 Labourt, Christianisme 176. – Christensen, Iran 426. – Guillaumont, Justinien 48-49. – Rapp, The Sasanian world 45.

10 Evstat'i 30-45. – Martin-Hisard, Le »Martyre« 498.

11 Rapp, The Sasanian world 261-329.



Fig. 1 Mxet'a. Church of Jvari. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

was also the title of *King of Kings*. However, the Sasanians did not put an end to the royal dynasty or to the existence of a local authority, which was called the *erismt'avari* (ruler of the nation), while the Georgian Church continued to be headed by the Catholicos<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, even under Sasanian rule, the kingdom of K'art'li preserved its local political and religious authorities and worship was freely rendered in the churches<sup>13</sup>.

From the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Christianity appears as a vector of resistance. Gathered around this essential idea, the elite of K'art'li became aware of its principal historical mission of restoring its own identity, revived by the new religion. This spiritual uprising was, in fact, the reaction of the native population, oriented towards independence and enjoying, since pagan times, its own language and culture, against the expansion of the external elements. In the literary sources of that era, such as Iakob Curtaveli's *C'amebay c'midisa Šušanikisi dedop'lisay* (The martyrdom of Queen Šušanik), the

Georgian pilgrimage to Jerusalem is cited several times<sup>14</sup> and Georgian monasteries were founded in Syria and Palestine. In this context could also be mentioned the return of the Georgian monks, »the thirteen Syrian fathers«, to their native land in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century, where they founded monasteries and propagated asceticism<sup>15</sup>. We can also observe stability of the construction of other monuments of Christian worship<sup>16</sup>. The most cited example is the church of Jvari (Holy Cross) in Mxet'a (586/587-604/605) (fig. 1) which clearly affirms the spiritual choice of the Georgians<sup>17</sup>.

In K'art'li, Christian Georgians remained a majority. Except for some Persian vocabulary, the local language dominates and K'art'li's elite writes in Georgian<sup>18</sup>. Also, they receive from the Byzantine emperors their titles<sup>19</sup>. Thus, according to Juanšer Juanšeriani's chronicles<sup>20</sup>, King Guaram I (572-588/590) appears (in 523? 584/585) to be the first *erismt'avari* of K'art'li holding the title of *couropalat*, that was offered to him by Justinian I<sup>21</sup>, while Jvari church inscriptions identify

12 Around 541, Catholicos Samuel retains his position as titular »head of the Church«, see Martin-Hisard, Le »Martyre« 499.

13 On these religious aspects, see the general study of Martin-Hisard, Christianisme 549-596.

14 Iakob Curtaveli, *C'amebay* 11-29.

15 Čubinašvili, *Pešernye* 23. – Čubinašvili, *K'art'uli* 1, 11. – Martin-Hisard, *Les Treize saints pères syriens* 75-111. – As early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Georgian monks were found to be present in and around Jerusalem. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century onward, several Georgian monasteries were established in Syria and Palestine, including one of the most famous ones founded by Peter the Iberian in Jerusalem in the 440s: Javaxišvili, *K'art'veli* 339. – Horn, *Asceticism* XX-509. The archaeological and textual sources also seem to confirm the foundation of monasteries in Georgia in 5<sup>th</sup> century, a time before arrival of Syrian fathers (in C'ilkani, Ateni,

probably in Opiza, founded by Vaxtang Gorgasali), see Khoshtaria, *Udzvelesi monastrebi*, 49-56, with related bibliography.

16 Small churches (Nekresi, Bolnisi, Ančisxati) and early Christian stone crosses.

17 Čubinašvili/Severov, *Pamjatniki*. – Iamanidze, *From Byzantium* 230-232.

18 Numerous epigraphic examples of the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries confirm this point, Šošiašvili, *Lapidaruli* 1. The linguistic elements adopted from the Persian world are of different times and types. It includes words assimilated as a result of direct oral or written linguistic exchange or through other languages, for example Armenian or Greek, see Andronikašvili, *Narkvevebi* 6. 11. 12. – Song'ulašvili, *Iranši* 22-23.

19 Oikonomides, *Les listes* 294-296. 325. – Iamanidze, *From Byzantium* 230-235.

20 *C'xovreba Davit'isi* 318-364.

21 Juanšer Juanšeriani, *Vaxtang* 39-244. – Sumbat' Davit'is dze, *Bagrationt'a* 372-386.



**Fig. 2** Silver plate from the Armazixevi necropolis. – (After Javakhishvili/Abramishvili, Jewellery 57).



**Fig. 3** Legs of sarcophagus from the Bagineti necropolis. – (After Javakhishvili/Abramishvili, Jewellery 60).

his successors, *Patrikios* Step'anos, *hypatos* Demetre and *hypatos* Adarnese, whose titles might have been given to them during the first years of the reign of Maurice's reign (in the 590's), when Georgia was under the influence of Byzantium<sup>22</sup>. The multiplication of these titles and other Byzantine elements is usually associated with the treaty signed by Khusraw II Parwiz (590/591-628) enabling the territories of the Byzantine Empire to be temporarily enlarged by several regions, including the K'artli together with its capital Tbilisi<sup>23</sup>. But at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century K'art'li again became a province of the Sasanian Empire. Despite this fact, the inscription accompanying the portrait of a local governor on the northern part of the Kataula stela dating from this period still identified him as *hypatos* Grigol<sup>24</sup>.

These examples prove that the relations of the members of the royal family and the high-ranking Georgian officials with Byzantium had not been interrupted; the recognition and reception of Byzantine titles can be interpreted as a sign of their allegiance. At the same time, by bestowing their titles, the Byzantines considered the governors of K'art'li as being under their influence. Consequently, despite efforts to strengthen their power, the *erismt'avar*s were forced to maintain formal subordination to Persia on the one hand and to Byzantium on the other hand, so they cannot dare to call themselves kings,

»for fear of Persians and Greeks«, as Juanšer explains in his *Cxovreba Vaxtang Gorgaslisa* (The life of Vaxtang Gogasali)<sup>25</sup>. This fact is also illustrated by Georgian-Sasanian drachms at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century<sup>26</sup>, which demonstrated a tendency towards political independence. The rulers of K'art'li seem to claim their rights, first with the addition, on the obverse, of the Georgian *erismt'avar*'s monograms of Guram (572-586) and Step'anoz (590/591-604/605), and then with the substitution of the sacred flame upon the fire-altar by the Christian cross on the reverse<sup>27</sup>. They do not dare, however, to add their royal title on the coinage.

It appears that local governors remained within the limits imposed to them by the Sasanian authorities, but these limits were sufficiently loose, allowing them to take some liberties. We can therefore suggest that within the Sasanian kingdom, K'art'li managed to revive and maintain its own traditions. Be that as it may, Georgian art of the 4<sup>th</sup>-early 7<sup>th</sup> centuries remained the expression of a society under Sasanian domination, a fact that certainly led to the circulation of models, the exchange of knowledge, skills and techniques, and the emergence of a shared visual culture.

It seems that at the beginnings of Christian art, the context and the artistic environment for the reception and assimilation of the Sasanian elements were already well prepared

22 According to historical sources, Step'anos might have received the title *Patrikios* by 591, see Djobadze, *The Sculptures* 121.

23 Javakhishvili, *K'art'veli* 262. – Iamanidze, *From Byzantium* 232.

24 Iamanidze, *From Byzantium*, 233. – Iamanidze, *Saints cavaliers* 65.

25 და დაჯდა მე მისი სტეფანოზი. მეფობისა სახელი ვერ იკადრა სპარსთა და ზერძენთა შიშისაგან, არამედ ერის-თავთა-მთავრად ხადოდეს, Juanšer Juanšeriani, *Vaxtang* 222.

26 From the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Sasanian silver drachms flowed into Georgia and filled the monetary market of K'art'li, while Byzantine coins were predominated in Western Georgia (Lazica), clearly reflecting the political situation in the country, see Tsotselia, *Recent Sasanian Coin Findings* 143-153.

27 Tsotselia, *History* 12. – Tsotselia, *A New Specimen* 431-436. – Rapp, *The Sasanian world* 328-329. 339.



Fig. 4 Nikor'minda Church. Southern doorway. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).



Fig. 5 Samt'avis Church. Eastern facade. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

by a previous epoch<sup>28</sup>. Actually, the Persian world<sup>29</sup> appears to have influenced K'art'li before the arrival of Sasanians in all spheres: in the economic system, in social hierarchy, in law and religion<sup>30</sup>. From this period also dates the appropriation of certain linguistic elements and forenames, borrowed from the Persian vocabulary, as well as of the administrative terminology and of social and military titles<sup>31</sup>. According to *C'xovreba k'art'velt'a mep'et'a* (The Life of the Kings) of Leonti Mroveli, the particular spread of Zoroastrianism can be

attributed to the fourth king of K'art'li, P'arnajom nebrot'iani, who in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC founded a fire temple at Mxet'a, making therefore the first attempt to officially establish the religion of Persia in K'art'li<sup>32</sup>. From this time onwards, other Zoroastrian temples were also built in K'art'li (in the Dedoplis Valley, in Up'liscixe)<sup>33</sup>. According to Leonti Mroveli, it was the same king P'arnajom, who founded, around the 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> centuries BC, the historic town of Nekresi in Kaxet'i with its important Zoroastrian temple, which seems to have functioned

28 Gagošidze, The Achaemenid 125-136. – Knauss, Ancient Persia 80-96. 109-114. – Rapp, The Iranian Heritage 659.

29 The term »Persian« appears in many Georgian ancient historical sources, see Andronikašvili, Narkvevebi 22. It should be noted that the ethnic and geographical name of Persia/Persians, which is used in Georgian, was adopted from the Achaemenid period. The Georgians called »Persian« almost all the tribes of the Iranian world and »Persians« in the ancient Georgian historical tradition was used to express the geographical concept of Iran, see Song'ulašvili, Iranši 23.

30 Malazonia, K'art'uli 285. – Song'ilašvili, Iranši 39.

31 Andronikašvili, Nakvevebi 6.

32 This attempt was followed by a revolt against P'arnajom who was killed in one of the battles, see Leonti Mroveli, Mep'et'a 3-71.

33 Gagošidze, The Temples 27-48. – Q'ip'iani, Kolxet'isa 7-18. – Sanikidze, Elinisturi. – Sanikidze, Up'liscixe. – For a more nuanced approach to Sasanian architectural influences, see: Khimshiashvili, Iberis satadzro ark'itek'turis, 1-40. – Khimshiashvili, Sasanuri sasaxlis, 47-48.

until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when it was destroyed due to the growth of the Christian community<sup>34</sup>.

The material culture of late 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century K'art'li was already strongly marked by Sasanian influence, attesting *inter alia* to the tradition of diplomatic gift exchange between the two kingdoms. A 3<sup>rd</sup>-century silver plate with the portrait of a dignitary identified by a Persian inscription as *bidaxš* (fig. 2), that was found in the Armazixevi necropolis<sup>35</sup>, certainly arrived in Georgia by this route. A big part of the of 3<sup>rd</sup>- and 4<sup>th</sup>-century objects produced in local workshops also clearly refer to Sasanian models, as for example a silver bowl from the Aragvispiri necropolis or the legs of a sarcophagus from the Bagineti burial treasures<sup>36</sup> (fig. 3).

Thus, the Persian-Sasanian imagery widely used in pre-Christian times was known to Georgians converted to Christianity and it took an important place in their minds without difficulty. This assimilation, encouraged by the amplification of Georgian relations with the Persian world, became one of the major factors in Georgian perception of art.

The emergence and longevity of images of animals, birds and imaginary creatures are perceived as the result of a complex process of integration of the ancient elements. Their use in Georgian Christian art can, of course, be viewed as a continuation of the local tradition, referring to popular art and pre-Christian beliefs<sup>37</sup>. Being widely spread in Georgia well before the arrival of the Sasanians, the pagan substrate and Hellenistic heritage certainly played an important role in their adoption by the new religion<sup>38</sup>. However, some examples are, by their themes, style and technique, obviously related to Sasanian Persia.

Among them the one that explicitly reveals the link with Sasanian iconography is the *p'askunji*, which is sometimes identified by an inscription. This term, known from traditional Georgian tales, also appears in a late Georgian manuscript, the so-called Mxet'a Bible A-51<sup>39</sup>. In Georgian translations of the Shah-Nameh of Ferdowsi it often defines the *senmurv*, the fantastic bird of the Iranian epic, while in other cases its Persian name is conserved<sup>40</sup>. In Georgia it also identifies a creature whose type is close to the griffin, as it appears for example at the southern facade of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Nikorc'minda Church showing two griffins, named by the inscription as *p'askunji* (fig. 4) or in the eastern facade of the Samt'avis Church, where the sculptor modifies and reinterprets the well-known and well preserved Sasanian iconography (fig. 5). It seems that *p'askunji*, which corresponds to the Iranian *senmurv*, was a term defining in Georgian vision



Fig. 6 Ateni Church. Northern facade. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

a collective image of fantastic creature and probably meant both a griffin and a *senmurv*. This Sasanian inspiration is particularly apparent in chronologically closer examples: in the western facade of the 7<sup>th</sup>-century Ateni Church (fig. 6), the master seems to be transferring to stone the Sasanian model without any alteration.

The symbolic importance of these images for Georgians is confirmed by their multiplication and by their privileged location: perceived as the guardians and protectors, they usually appear at the entrances of churches. Therefore, Christian Georgians accepted the positive symbolism of the *senmurv*, adopting its apotropaic power and function.

In this context can also be reminded the well-known Sasanian subject of an animal hunting another animal, which survived and spread in early Christian K'art'li (on the eastern capital of the Bolnisi Church, 478/493<sup>41</sup>) but also in more distant Georgian regions, such as Tao-Klatjet'i, where it appears in the Oški and Xaxuli churches' decoration (10<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>42</sup>.

Other examples indicate the existence of a shared visual vocabulary between the Sasanians and the Georgians. The motif of the wings, a Sasanian symbol *par excellence* of royal power and of divinity, and an essential element of almost all crowns of the kings on Sasanian coins<sup>43</sup>, in Georgian art is also associated with authority and holiness. This function

34 Č'ilašvili, Nekresis 10.

35 Most of these objects are found in the late 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries necropolis of a K'art'lian aristocratic family: Armazixevi (near Mxet'a), Zguderi, Aragvispiri or Baginet'i, see Javakhisvili/Abramishvili, Jewellery 8-23. – Čubinašvili/Mač'abeli, Armazis 146-153.

36 Javakhisvili/Abramishvili, Jewellery 8-23. – Čubinašvili/Mač'abeli, Armazis 146-153.

37 Aladašvili, Monumental'naja 218-219. – Mač'abeli, Posdneantičnaja torevtika.

38 Mač'abeli, Dzveli. – Aladašvili, Monumental'naja 218.

39 The so-called Mxet'a Bible kept at the National Centre of Georgian Manuscripts (A-51), is the most complete manuscript of the Georgian Bible text dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Cat. Tbilisi 2012 (1).

40 Trever, Senmurv-Paskudž 20-21. 167-180. According to Trever, the term *p'askunji* corresponds to the Iranian *senmurv*. See also Aladašvili, Monumental'naja 225.

41 Aladašvili, Monumental'naja 10-13.

42 Djobadze, Monasteries 207-208. – Rapp, The Sasanian world 252, n 153.

43 For symbolic meaning of wings see Comparetti, The Spread 205-208. – Rapp, The Sasanian world 252.



Fig. 7 Antefixe of Axizi Church. – (Photo Z. Sxirtladze).



Fig. 8 Antefixe of Urbnisi Church.– (Photo N. Iamanidze).



Fig. 9 Bolnisi Church relief. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).



Fig. 10 Akvaneba Church. Relief on southeast architrave.– (Photo N. Iamanidze).



Fig. 11 The Samc'evrisi gravestone. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

becomes clear when it appears together with the cross, the main symbol of Christianity, to reinforce and stress its significance. The earliest examples can be found on the 5<sup>th</sup>-century antefixes of the Axizi and Urbnisi churches<sup>44</sup> (figs. 7-8), on the reliefs of Bolnisi and C'ilkani, in the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Akvaneba churches (figs. 9-10)<sup>45</sup>.

These motifs and symbols borrowed from Sasanian art were reinterpreted and harmoniously integrated into Georgian ornamental decoration. They were not simply imitated or copied, but selected according to their symbolic connotation. Thus, even in their new context, these elements preserved the semantic value they carried in their culture of origin.

This issue becomes particularly important in the case of *realia* originating from the Sasanian visual vocabulary. The combination of artistic traditions becomes more complex when it comes to representations of human figures.

The 5<sup>th</sup>- to 6<sup>th</sup>-century Samc'evrisi gravestone (fig. 11) shows a female donor, identified by the inscription as Dzalanduxt, standing beside a medallion with a cross raised on

44 Dig'melašvili, Sak'art'velos 225-241. – Z. Sxirtladze suggests the dating of 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries, see Sxirtladze, Axizis 154-160.

45 Thierry, Iconographie 964-969. – Rapp, The Sasanian world 182. 251-252.



Fig. 12 The Dmanisi (1) stela. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

a column<sup>46</sup>. To underline her high social position, the donor is dressed in Byzantine costume and wears a female crown with *pendilia*, a type of headdress that occurs frequently in Byzantine art as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century in imperial contexts. Her attire could confirm the reception of clothing as diplomatic gifts by the aristocracy of K'art'li, from Byzantium, as a sign of authority, submission and protection<sup>47</sup>. At the same time, the donor holds in her hand a three-petalled flower, certainly a tulip. This element derives from Sasanian iconography, where the tulip is used as a symbol of power and authority, indicating the high social status of the person carrying it and associating it with the most respected divinities<sup>48</sup>. Considerably increased in size, this flower becomes a ubiquitous *insignium* of the Georgian elite, becoming larger as the rank of the bearer increases. It appears systematically on the Early Christian Georgian monumental stone-carved crosses, created to express the idea of the triumph of the Christian religion through clear and explicit signs<sup>49</sup>. A comparable image is offered by the 6<sup>th</sup>-century Dmanisi (1) stela (fig. 12) with two men flanking a cross, the left one holding a tulip in his

46 Šošiašvili, *Lapidaruli* 1 150-151. – Cat. Tbilisi 2012 (2) 29.

47 As a close example for the *pendilia* of the Samc'evrisi headdress we can name the ones on the crown worn by the Empress Theodora in the famous mosaic panel of San Vitale Church (547) in Ravenna. The Byzantine chronicle of John Malalas confirms the existence of this tradition in the kingdom of Lazika (western Georgia), when describing the investiture of C'at'e, king of the Lazes, see Rollason, *Gifts* 1-3. 76-80.



Fig. 13 The Dmanisi (2) stela. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

hand. Another stela from Dmanisi (2) dating from the same period (fig. 13) shows a high-ranking official, probably the *erismt'avar*, in a luxurious Sasanian dress holding a big tulip in his hand, while standing on another huge flower; the double representation of the symbol emphasizes the high social status of the local governor. From the same context derives its meaning another example of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Nagzauri stela (fig. 14). It depicts two men with different garments and attributes: the one on the right is dressed in a Byzantine-style costume and holds a cross in his hand, the one on the left wears a secular attire of Persian origin, well known from the

48 The tulip is often associated with human motifs in Sasanian stamp seals, textile and stucco representations. The gesture with a tulip must also imply good will and friendship, see Brunner, *Sasanian Stamp* 116-117. – Brunner, *Sasanian Seals* 33-50, especially 41.

49 The large number of these monuments points to a well-organized system of production and a wide geographical distribution of workshops spread in various regions of early Christian Georgia, see Iamanidze, *Saints cavaliers* 30-39.



**Fig. 14** The Nagzauri stela. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).



**Fig. 15** Capital of the Dmanisi (3) stela. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

royal scenes and official ceremonies on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century Sasanian relief metalwork, while holding the »Sasanian« flower<sup>50</sup>. Both kinds of clothing, the Sasanian and the Byzantine, were probably very common in K'art'li. The representation of the stela clearly reflects the dress behaviour of the Georgian elite.

From Dmanisi (3) comes also the capital of a 6<sup>th</sup>-century stela with the image of a donor standing under an arch in front of a monument that he probably commissioned himself (fig. 15). His attitude can be interpreted as an act of cross veneration. It is noteworthy, however, that this iconography refers to the prestigious image of the King of Kings under an arch, in the same posture as the Georgian donor, which appears on a large number of 6<sup>th</sup>-century Sasanian monuments, thus confirming the Sasanians' predilection for this particular type of royal representation<sup>51</sup>. We can refer, for example, to the famous cup of the Shah Khusraw II (?) from Tehran, whose image offers an excellent parallel<sup>52</sup>.

The principal function of these images was not only to prove the generosity of donors and to express the force of their faith, but also to affirm their political power and their privileged position within society. They offer a perfect illustration of the influences that converged in K'art'li at that time. The small, easily portable pieces of Sasanian metalwork

50 Ghirshman, Iran figs 242. 244. 245.

51 Ghirshman, Iran 206 figs 401-402.

52 Ghirshman, Iran 206.



Fig. 16 The C'ebelda panel. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).



with royal imagery, produced as objects of royal propaganda, enabled the circulation and transmission of ideas, models and ornamental style to the artistic schools that came into direct contact with them<sup>53</sup>. Similar objects spread widely in Georgia from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards and could inspire Georgian artists who adopted not only their form but also their sense.

Another important subject in the princely context is certainly that of hunting and combat of Sasanian sovereigns, proving that victory over the enemy, animal or human, was a royal privilege<sup>54</sup>. The adoption of this imagery by the Georgian elite is illustrated by a number of examples, such as the 7<sup>th</sup>-century Ateni Church relief depicting an archer mounted on a galloping horse, hunting three deer or the C'ebelda sculpted panels (9<sup>th</sup> century?), showing saint Evsat'i, hunting in the presence of dogs and an eagle<sup>55</sup>.

But the most famous and better studied motif is the representation of the mounted saint slaying an enemy, a very popular subject in the eastern Christian world<sup>56</sup>. At the emergence of the Christian cult of the holy riders in Georgia, there already existed a system of beliefs and well-developed religious symbols. These were partially absorbed by the heroes of the new religion, who substituted the veneration of ancient idols<sup>57</sup>. From the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the image of equestrian saints, George and Theodore facing each other,

had a spectacular spread. In this well-established iconography, the most specific is certainly the image of Saint George killing a male figure instead of the dragon, a theme that enjoyed particular success in Georgia. »Georgian« equestrian saints were killing different enemies: Saint Theodore slayed a dragon, while Saint George hit a man identified as his persecutor, the Emperor Diocletian, often without his name being mentioned<sup>58</sup>. Although the theme of the victory of a hero over a man is well-known from ancient times, the Georgian images seem particularly close to relevant prototypes developed in Sasanian art.

There is no doubt today that the origin of this perfectly symmetrical iconography is linked to the Sasanian »Investiture Reliefs«, mostly dated from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries; they depict two mounted kings receiving the crown from a God, often with a human figure lying underneath their horses<sup>59</sup>. These images were conceived as symbolic representations exulting the triumph over the enemies and the power and greatness of the sovereign. This concept of the ancient hero and the idea of victory over a man have been maintained, reinterpreted and mixed with the Georgian versions of the *Vita* of St. George<sup>60</sup>, taking a different symbolic meaning in Georgian iconography, where the equestrian saint defeats not a personal enemy but the en-

53 Ghirshman, Iran 298-301.

54 Rapp, The Sasanian world 157. – Iamanidze, The Dragon-Slayer 87-89. – Iamanidze, Saints cavaliers 80-81.

55 Aladašvili, Monumental'naja 41-49. – Iamanidze, Les installations 107-108. 115-116.

56 See the most recent publications: Walter, Saint Theodore 95-106. – Walter, Warrior saints. – Pancaroğlu, The Itinerant 151-164. – Jolivet-Lévy, Saint Théodore 357-382. – Kuehn, The Dragon 102-110. – Iamanidze, The Dragon-Slayer 97-110. – Iamanidze, Saints cavaliers.

57 Iamanidze, Saints cavaliers 25-28. For the controversial dating of this panels see Iamanidze, Installations 107-108.

58 The choice of the saint and the presence of Diocletian, as a symbol of incredulity, is a local tradition which possibly follows the Georgian text, see Iamanidze, Saints cavaliers 141-144. The iconographic theme of the saint combating the dragon appears much later, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, mostly in wall-paintings, forming part of the miraculous rescuing by the saint of a princess in the city of Lasia, see Iamanidze, Saints cavaliers. – Privalova, P'avnisi 18 fig. 4-5.

59 Kuehn, The Dragon 107-110. – Iamanidze, Saints cavaliers 80. – Cat. Bruxelles 1993, 71-94. – Cat. Paris 2006, 38 fig. 3; 187 fig. 3; 89. 94.

60 Iamanidze, Saints cavaliers 142-144.



Fig. 17 Nikorc'minda Church. Eastern facade. – (Photo N. Iamanidze).

enemy of Christians. Also in this context, the Roman emperors, persecutors of the Christians, become symbols of paganism and Satan/Hell<sup>61</sup>.

The C'ebelda panel (9<sup>th</sup> century?)<sup>62</sup> (fig. 16) bears the traditional representation of two equestrian saints, George and Theodore, facing one another and spearing Diocletian and a dragon respectively. This image is the most explicit example of a faithful reproduction of the so-called »investiture scene« of the Sasanian kings. St. George, on the right, still preserves the crown-giving gesture, but without the crown, making it a meaningless; the gesture of the left warrior is also out of context – he is bending a bow, the attitude of Sasanian rulers in hunting or combat scenes. His dress, his horse with the tied tail and harnessing as well as the human victim under the horse of Saint George clearly refer to Sasanian royal imagery<sup>63</sup>. These »Sasanian type« heroes appear as divine protectors and victorious guards of the monument of Christian worship.

The persistence of these influences demonstrates the particular fascination with this type of image. Some details continue to appear in later monuments depicting riding saints. The systematic representation of horses with the tail tied à *la Sassanide* in Georgian architectural decoration of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (in the Joisubani, Valé and Nikorc'minda churches) (fig. 17) constitutes a survival of Sasanian visual

tradition, where it was perceived as a sign of power or sovereignty, deriving from a particular symbol related to warrior rituals<sup>64</sup>.

Much remains to be done to fully measure and understand the Georgian-Sasanian artistic interactions. However, we can already make some initial observations. The reception and cultural assimilation of Sasanian elements was not just a replica or mechanical reproduction of imposed forms. It was an intentional and purposeful selection of the ideas in knowledge and perfect awareness of their sense and symbolic connotations, which were in accordance with the artistic, aesthetic and, in some cases, ideological visions of Georgian society. The Georgians deliberately drew inspiration from the achievements of advanced civilizations, such as the neighbouring Sasanian Persia, with whose culture they were familiar. The facility of Georgian artists in integrating and interpreting these motives suggests that they formed an organic part of their creative process. Sasanian art did not intrude as a distinct force, but was shared as the oldest and the most stable of experiences<sup>65</sup>. The association of Georgian traditions and Sasanian motifs created a particular artistic language, but these borrowings did not fundamentally affect Georgian religious art. The pictorial themes and ideas were received and transformed in order to respond to the aesthetic notions and spiritual needs of Georgian society.

61 Walter, *The Warrior saints* 53.

62 Iamanidze, *Les installations* 115-116. 128.

63 Iamanidze, *Saints cavaliers* 84. – *Cat. Bruxelles 1993*, 75 fig. 59; 77 fig. 62.

64 *Cat. Bruxelles 1993*, 193. 199. For the occurrence of horses with tails tied in 13<sup>th</sup> century Cappadocian paintings and the interpretation of this iconographic element see Uyar, *Art* 648.

65 Ghirshman, *Iran* 302.

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## Zusammenfassung / Summary / Résumé

### Die georgische Rezeption sasanidischer Kunst

Die sasanidische Kultur scheint eines der Elemente zu sein, die die Wahrnehmung der christlichen Kunst durch Georgier beeinflusst und zur Entstehung ihrer Ikonographie und ihres ornamentalen Repertoires beigetragen haben. Der Prozess der Rezeption der Elemente aus der sasanidischen Kunst war komplex und hatte unterschiedliche Ausmaße. In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, wie die aus der sasanidischen Welt stammenden Symbole, Motive und Themen wahrgenommen, assimiliert und mit lokalen georgischen Traditionen vermischt wurden.

### Georgian reception of Sasanian art

The Sasanian culture seems to be one of the elements which affected the perception of Christian art by Georgians and contributed to the formation of its iconography and ornamental repertoire. The process of reception of the elements borrowed from Sasanian art was complex and had different extents. This paper attempts to explore how the symbols, motifs and themes coming from the Sasanian world were perceived, assimilated and mixed with local Georgian traditions.

### La réception de l'art sassanide en Géorgie

La culture sassanide forme apparemment un des éléments ayant influencé la conception géorgienne de l'art chrétien et participé à la genèse de son iconographie et de son répertoire ornemental. Le processus de réception des éléments artistiques sassanides fut complexe et d'une ampleur variable. On examine dans cet article la manière dont les symboles, motifs et thèmes originaires du monde sassanide furent perçus, assimilés et mêlés à des traditions géorgiennes locales.

Traduction: Y. Gautier