

## *Hunting Scenes and the Zodiac Signs in the Medieval Georgian Sculpture*

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### **Abstract**

Images of hunting scenes play an important role in Georgian cultural heritage. We find these themes, in various forms and interpretations, in almost every century from V to XVIII. There is an interesting aspect of medieval relief sculpture - the "hunter" involved in hunting compositions often. Reveals a connection with the zodiac Sagittarius (e.g., Oshki). In addition, in the façade decoration of cathedrals, "archers" were inserted independently (e.g., Tkhaba -Yerdy). Similar compositions can be found mainly in the X-XI centuries, when we consider the Georgian medieval manuscripts and other examples (we also find astrological signs in "The Knight in the Panther's Skin"), which confirm that the signs of the zodiac in medieval Georgia were tolerated by the Georgian Church (e.g., 1188-1210 AA-65, late painting of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral [XVII c.]). Interestingly, the signs of the zodiac appear on European churches in the XI-XII centuries (in France, Britain, Italy and Spain) depicting the corresponding works of the month; however, unlike in European art, in Georgian art they are related to hunting scenes or are expressed independently. The scientific novelty of the research is the connection of the "hunter-archer" with the zodiac. The study of which revealed completely new signs of the iconographic scheme of St. Eustatius. It is also a scientific novelty to draw parallels between Georgian reliefs and Western European compositions (e.g., St. Hubert's hunting scenes and zodiac signs). A comprehensive study of Georgian-French material will show this direction of Georgian art in the context of broader geographical and world art history.

Keywords: Medieval Art, Sculpture, Zodiac Signs, Iconography, Symbolism

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## Introduction

The research topic is relief scenes common in medieval Georgian Christian art, namely hunting scenes, which in Georgia are mainly represented by the St. Eustace's hunting, but there are also such reliefs the plot of which is not clearly defined. We observe this theme in different forms and interpretations in almost all centuries from the V to the XVIII (Fig. 1).



Fig.1. Map of Georgia and location of investigated sites.

## The Purpose

The purpose is to study the iconographic program of relief scenes of the theme under research, group similar compositions, examine their contents and symbolism, artistically and stylistically analyze iconographic schemes and identify their peculiarities, as well as search samples spread in neighboring and foreign countries and, on the ground of comparative analysis, reveal characteristics of Georgian compositions. One of the goals is to study the abovementioned scenes in relation to the Western European (namely, French) hunting scenes of St. Hubert.

The aim of the study is to create a work on relief scenes (with hunter-horseman and zoomorphic images) existing in Georgian Christian art, in which each composition will be thoroughly studied.

## Review of Literature

The research is based on the scientific works of various researchers, as well as our observations and research. Although the researchers have not set the study of images of hunter-horsemen and zoomorphic figures as a special task, the collection of materials on this question and processing of individual issues have had a long history. At different times, both Georgian and foreign scientists were interested in the relief scenes under study, among which the following specialists should be noted: Natela Aladashvili,<sup>1</sup> Kitty Machabeli,<sup>2</sup> Mariam

<sup>1</sup> N. Aladashvili, *Monumental Sculpture of Georgia, Narrative Reliefs of V-VI centuries*, M., Iskusstvo, 1977 (in Russian)

<sup>2</sup> K. Machabeli, *Georgian Stone Crosses*, Tb. 1988

Didebulidze,<sup>3</sup> Tamar Dadiani, Ekaterine Kvachatadze, Tamar Khundadze,<sup>4</sup> David Winfield,<sup>5</sup> Vakhtang Jobadze<sup>6</sup> and others. They made a significant contribution to the study of individual relief compositions. In some works, much attention is paid to specific compositions (for example, the Ateni Sioni relief, the Stele of John the Baptist, the plate of the Tsebelda iconostasis). However, the works mainly concern the hunting scenes of St. Eustace Placida, spread in early Christian monuments and monumental painting. And relief scenes that interest us are mainly used as a parallel material. Most literary materials are descriptions or brief analyses of individual images or figures in an architectural context.

## **The Research Methodology**

The research methodology comprises analysis of literary sources, stylistic and comparative analysis of compositions, analysis of iconographic schemes and paleographic analysis. Symbolic meaning of specific compositions, common in medieval Georgian relief sculpture, is examined by an integrated method.

The research required studying the history of Georgian relief sculpture, observing the features manifested at different stages of development, the Christian interpretation of zoomorphic symbols, searching for Georgian folklore, myths, ethnographic material, works of different researchers, as well as similar compositions in museum collections, manuscripts and other archive materials.

Searching and processing of literary sources, then familiarization with some theoretically studied relief scenes in place, and photographing took place at the first stage.

Taking into account the method of stylistic and comparative analysis, a synthesis of iconographic schemes of scenes with hunter-horsemen and zoomorphic images found in sculptural décor, wall paintings, book miniature and mosaics of various countries of the Christian world has been performed. We have tried to interpret the compositions using iconographic, semantic and stylistic analyses.

## **Conclusion**

In the final part, development stages, features, individual artistic and stylistic decisions, corresponding to the style of different eras, of the themes of images of hunting horsemen and zoomorphic figures of relief scenes were clearly identified.

Having studied the general features of the compositions, we once again saw the national character, imprinted in them, individual characteristics, that had been created, on the one hand, by local traditions, and, on the other, by the synthesis of Byzantine, Middle Eastern or Western European arts, which forms the unique character of Georgian relief sculpture.

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<sup>3</sup> M. Didebulidze, The Vision of Saint Eustace in Medieval Georgian Art, *Literatura da Khelovneba*, #2, 1990, 197-206;

<sup>4</sup> T. Dadiani, E. Kvachatadze, T. Khundadze, *sculpture of the Middle Ages*, Tbilisi. 2017;

<sup>5</sup> Winfield D., Some early medieval figure sculpture from North-East Turkey, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 31 (1968);

<sup>6</sup> Djobadze W., Observations on the architectural sculpture of Tao-klarjet'I churches around one thousand A. D., *Studien zur Spätantiken und byzantinischen kunst, Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum Forschungsinstitut für vor –und frühgeschichte*, 1986.

In this work, we comprehensively studied 18 relief scenes, and due to this study, saw the stages of development of images of hunter-horsemen and zoomorphic figures from the early Christian period to the late Middle Ages.

The compositions of hunting scenes of the VI-VIII centuries of the early Christian period (the Stele of John the Baptist, the reliefs of Ateni Sioni and Martvili Cathedral [fig.2], the plate of the Tsebelda iconostasis [fig.3]) mainly depict the St. Eustace Placida's hunting, and the scheme is as follows: a hunter-horseman with a stretched bow pursues a deer or a herd of deer, in the horns of which a cross or the image of the Saviour set into a locket is placed. At an early stage, a certain "breeze" of Hellenistic-antique art, on the one hand, and, of the art of Sassanian Iran, on the other, is felt in Georgian reliefs, but in general they have an individual form.



Fig.2. The relief of the Martvili Cathedral, VII c.



Fig.3. The hunting composition of the plate of the Tsebelda iconostasis, VII-VIII cc.

In the X-XI centuries (4 monuments: Oshki, Tkhaba-Yerdy, Bagrati, Tabatskhuri), two groups of hunters were isolated: unmounted and horsemen. We singled out figures of

unmounted archers of Oshki, Tkhaba-Yerdy and Bagrati. As a result of the study, it became clear that this group shows a connection with the Zodiac Archer.

A completely different composition is represented on the relief of the Tabatskhuri Church. In this case, two horsemen are depicted with animals. The identification of the horsemen of this composition was one of the goals of the dissertation. According to our assumption, the composition on the Tabatskhuri Church is an analogue of the composition of the “twin horsemen’s hunting” and, possibly, represents a festive march of high-ranking government officials, ktitors. The short-shafted crosses in the hands of the horsemen could be considered as a regal sign.

The discussion of the compositions of four monuments of the X-XI centuries, Oshki (fig.4), Tkhaba-Yerdy (fig.5), Bagrati Cathedral and Tabatskhuri Red Church showed, that there is a tendency to search, the desire for development. Unlike hunting scenes of the early Christian era, this period offers original interpretations of the compositions and rather complex iconographic schemes.



Fig.4. The hunting Scenes of the Oshki Cathedral of John the Baptist, Xc.



Fig.5. Hunting scenes of the Tkhaba-Yerdy Church, Xc.

In the Ertatsminda Church of the XIII century, we find the hunting scene with the patron saint of the church, Placida, in two places. Based on stylistic research, it becomes clear that different artistic manners of the two compositions, performed on the same theme, were presumably due to their creation in different periods. Especially since, that the composition presented on the southern façade is similar to the hunting scenes of Kheoti and Nikozi of the late period. A stone plate depicting the hunting scene coincides here with the ornamental end of the window, which is an exact copy of the four-leaved flower fit in a circle on the Nikozi relief. Its proximity to the XV century group of Kheoti and Nikozi speaks on the creation of this relief in the late period. The dating of the mentioned relief was also the aim of the study.

Hunting, as a decoration of an impost, was first attested in Ertatsminda (on the relief of the east façade).

Samples of hunting scenes of the following stage, the late Middle Ages, are found in the form of both an unmounted hunter - the Sadgeri St. George Church (XV c.), and a horseman (XV c?) - the reliefs of Kheoti Bell Tower (XV-XVI cc.) and the Nikozi Ascension Church. An archer from Sadgeri (XV c.) is represented in a different form than a group of archers of the Oshki group. One might think, that here St. Eustace's hunting is depicted. But understanding its idea is rather difficult. According to our assumption, the reliefs of Kheoti and **Nikozi** should also reproduce the vision of St. Eustace. A cross and a four-leaved ornament placed in a circle are perhaps a symbolic allusion to the deer and Christ, indicating the vision of the theophany.

We find another interesting sample on the window relief of the St. George Church of Lechkhumi Tskheta of the XIII century. The identification of the winged figure in this composition, reproduced in a strange form, and the definition of its relationship with other figures were particularly noteworthy. On the grounds of analysis of identified materials, we assume that this figure in its attributes corresponds to the "Angel of beasts" of folk beliefs.

Of metal chasing samples, we have studied two chased icons: the plate of the hinged icon of St. Eustace with a scene of his hunting (fig.6), and the chased icon with the image of unmounted Placida (fig.7), which we dated back to the XVII-XVIII centuries based on paleographic analysis and the study of artistic-stylistic peculiarities and iconographic schemes. The study of the chased icons revealed unique iconographic interpretations of St. Eustace Placida. Here we come across with completely new features: the image of the crucified Saviour between the antlers of a deer on the icon of Ertatsminda, and the semi-figure of a flying angel with a crown in his hand on the icon of Tbilisi Sioni, which is characteristic for Western European iconographic schemes.



Fig.6. The plate of the hinged icon of St. Eustace with a scene of his hunting (Q. 747), XVII-XVIIIcc.

Fig.7. The plate with the image of unmounted Placida (Tf. 60), XVII-XVIIIcc.

As a result of this research, it turned out that in Georgia of the XI-XVI centuries the theme under study was particularly popular in wall painting (for example, frescos of Koreti, Sapara, etc.). We also find scenes of the vision of St. Eustace in the miniature décor of Georgian books (H=2076, A-1454) in the Middle Ages (XVII-XVIII cc.).

On the examples of neighboring countries we saw that hunting scenes are common in medieval art of Christian countries, but St. Eustace Placida is not as popular everywhere as in Georgia. In Armenian art, hunting scenes on secular themes are spread, depicting to some extent historical persons.

There are some examples of reproducing scenes from the life of St. Eustace in wall painting on Athos, in icon-painting of the Crete school; murals of Cappadocia contain numerous samples of monumental painting. In Byzantine art, they are mostly attested in book miniatures.

Of the foreign compositions of hunting, we devoted special attention to those common in French art, as, like Georgian art, plots connected with St. Eustace Placida were popular in medieval French art. Moreover, French art, parallel to the plot of St. Eustace, worked out the scene of the vision of St. Hubert in the Middle Ages. Placida's hunting scenes are found in France in XII-XVI centuries (fig.8) and at the same time, St. Hubert's hunting becomes relevant. The scene of the vision of St. Hubert, described in literary sources, is similar to the plot of the vision of St. Eustace (fig.9). The iconographic schemes of the compositions depicted on churches are also similar, with only minor differences. It is worth of note that due to various historical conditions, as well as local traditions, different approaches were developed in the artistic-stylistic solution of the compositions of St. Eustace.



Fig.8. St. Eustace on the narthex capital of the St. Maria Magdalena Basilica in Vézelay, 1120-1140.



Fig.9. St. Hubert's relief of the portal of the St. Hubert Chapel of Amboise, XVc.

It should be noted that despite thematic proximity, iconographic versions and their compositional solutions in French and Georgian examples differ from each other. Hunting compositions of medieval France are distinguished by the multiplicity of their iconographic schemes. There are special types of compositions in French Christian art. In comparison to Georgian examples, there is much freedom in the design of a plot there, they follow the main scheme, but the interpretations are different, that must be caused by local traditions, historical and cultural conditions. Although common ideas on the theophany, characteristic for Christian religious ideology - conversion “from darkness to light,” that is, to faith in Christ, recognition of the Lord, His glory and the idea of the salvation of the soul, which, for its part, was an embodiment of the theological idea expressing the triumph of Christ - were somehow reflected in sculptural decoration.

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