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Lilit Mikayelyan

Depictions of Glory Wreaths in the Early Medieval Armenian Sculpture and Their Parallels in the Art of Byzantium and Sasanian Iran

The symbolism of the wreath offered as a sign of victory and glory is well known in the Antique culture from which it was transferred to the Christian art. In Christianity the wreath became the symbol of an award given to righteous men who had reached the Heavenly Kingdom, the symbol of martyrdom and victory on sin. Numerous pictures of wreaths are known on early Christian sarcophaguses, ivory bindings, mosaics, architectural décor and so on.

In the Armenian art of the 5th – 7th centuries they can be seen in the relief sculptures of churches and tetrahedral Stelae, mostly in the scenes of Baptism or Praising of the Holy Virgin and Christ. On Armenian monuments wreaths have several iconographic variants, a part of which goes back to late Antique and early Byzantine samples, representing stylized pictures of laurel wreaths or wreaths-crowns, as attributes of martyrdom and glory. Remaining samples are solved as simple rings, without such details as leaves, flowers, ribbons, pearls, etc. So, the latter show some commonness with the depictions the rings of power in the ancient Eastern and later also in the Sasanian art in which they symbolized the divine power and glory, and were depicted mostly in the scenes of investiture.

In the art of the 4th – 7th centuries of Sasanian Iran the representations of wreaths of glory was largely spread and it was one of the symbols of the particularly worshiped in Iran divinity Khvarno (later Farn) who was the incarnation of being chosen by God, charisma and glory. There are also three main variants in the iconography of Sasanian wreaths of glory: wreaths in the form of rings, wreaths with pearls and wreaths with laurels and flowers. If in the 3rd – 5th centuries they had mostly the form of rings going back to ancient Eastern samples, later, in the 6th – 7th centuries, when Iran underwent noticeable influence of the Byzantine culture, wreaths were pictured like crowns, more resembling Western samples. But, as a rule, either early or late samples were pictured with typical Sasanian wide ribbons which were also insignia of power.

It must be mentioned that some Armenian samples of wreaths are also represented with flying ribbons, undoubtedly tied with the influence of Sasanian art. The iconography of wreaths in form of rings on Armenian monuments has evident commonness with the same forms on Sasanian monuments. So, either in Armenian or in Sasanian art one may observe three iconographic sources in the picturing of glory wreaths:

- I - Ancient Eastern ring as symbol of power in investiture scenes;
- II - Antique laurel wreaths;
- III - Wreaths in the form of crowns as symbols as royal predestination and glory.

The similarity of symbolism in the all three varieties of wreaths led to a certain contamination of their meaning which found its brilliant expression namely in the early medieval cultures of Armenia and Sasanian Iran, based on the equally strong ancient Eastern and late Antique traditions which had also active reciprocal contacts. Adherence to one or another pictorial tradition can indicate in each case a concrete cultural influence in a determinate historical period.



Zaruhi Hakobian

Little Known Subjects and Images on Early Christian Stelae of Armenia

The free-standing monuments – tetrahedral stelae – dating back to the 7th Century are preserved on the territory of historical Armenia. Stelae were erected in open air, near churches, are covered with reliefs and crowned by stone crosses. There are images of Christ, the Holy Virgin, Apostles, saints, archangels, donators, as well as scenes from the Old and the New Testaments. Nevertheless, some of those sculptures can hardly be identified because of their bad state or uncommon composition. One of those depictions is the personification of the Holy Church (St. Zion), presented in the person of a woman having a church model in her hands (stele of Agarak). Another one is a figure with dog head; it is the image of St. Christopher Cynocephalus, the only Christian saint with bestial appearance. Nowadays, nine such images are known on Armenian stelae (stelae from Talin, Ujan and Odzun). The next image that requires an explanation is a tower like building with a ladder put against it on the stele of Odzun. According to the Eastern Christian iconography it is the symbolic image of St. Zion.

The composition of an orant between two lions, which can often be seen on tetrahedral stelae of Armenia, has two different interpretations. This composition, well known in the Eastern Christian art, is usually interpreted as the Biblical scene of ‘Daniel into the den of lions’. Nevertheless, in a series of scene we observe the orant with a female aspect, which allows seeing in such compositions ‘Saint Thecla between two lions’ (stelae from Kechror, Erzynka). It corresponds to one of the iconographic versions of the image of saint Thecla and is known on some early Byzantine monuments.

The composition depicting winged horses and a pair of wheels, known on two stelae, represents the Old Testament scene of Prophet Elias’ Ascension (stelae from Talin and Agarak) which is a rare example of that composition in the art of Transcaucasus. Even if the sculptures are partly damaged, their composition is easy to understand as it matches the canonic scheme of this composition and has its early Byzantine parallels.

The abovementioned subjects and images on tetrahedral stelae of Armenia considerably enlarge our notions about the early iconographic tradition in the Armenian medieval art and, more widely, in the art of Transcaucasus. Besides, iconographic compositions and images based on early Christian and early Byzantine prototypes partly complete early iconographic versions not preserved until our days, which makes tetrahedral stelae of Armenia important monuments in the context of Eastern Christian studies.



Seyranush Manukyan

Tatev Monastery Frescoes. Armenia, 930

The Tatev monastery was one of the spiritual and cultural centres of medieval Armenia. Evidences about it are found in History of Syunik Province by the prominent historian, theologian, archbishop and Syunik Metropolitan Stepanos Orbelian (1250s–1305). The monastery's cathedral was built as Syunik bishop church by Bishop Hovhannes in 895–906 at the order of Bagratuni dynasty king Smbat I. It is dedicated to Ss. Peter & Paul whose relics are buried at the base of two pillars symbolising them and supporting the dome. On commission of next Syunik Bishop Hakob the entire cathedral was decorated with frescoes solemnly sanctified in 930. To execute paintings Bishop “Hakob ordered to invite artists ... from the distant country of the Frank people”.

The 1968 article by N. & J.-M. Thierry specified Orbelian's record about inviting “Franks”. Researchers linked the Tatev paintings to post-Carolingian art close to Ottonian period Reichenau school. The Thierries acclaimed classicism-inspired style of Tatev paintings' creators presuming they underwent training in Rome or some other centre keeping ancient traditions. They also showed that foreign masters worked in cooperation with Armenian assistants.

The artistic language and to some extent the classical spirit of Tatev images are akin to monumental Italian paintings of IX–X centuries created in Northern Italy and Rome that were part of the Carolingian and later Ottonian empire. We believe that the “Frank” masters, who painted Tatev cathedral together with Armenian artists, came from Italy where they'd had an opportunity to familiarise themselves both with the “Classical” art of VI–VII centuries and with Carolingian art. All those iconographic and stylistic features typical of Carolingian and post-Carolingian schools including Reichenau and the Tatev frescoes are also found in works by Italian artists. The ties between Armenia and Italy historically were more ancient and stable than with any other West-European country or nation. As early as at the end of the IX century, Syunik established contacts with Italy from where relics of Ss. Peter & Paul were brought to bury them in the Tatev cathedral, so it is most probable that Bishop Hakob invited artists from no other place but Italy.

Considering their antiquity, particular artistic language and unique origin, the Tatev frescoes are of exceptional interest to the art history. However their fate was tragic. Despite the fact that in 1974 they were cleaned, fixed and partially restored, in the course of monastery restoration carried out at intervals since the end of the 1980s to this day, the paintings (already damaged in 1138 and 1931 earthquakes) were actually lost.

The paintings research that has been conducted since the end of the 1960s, the massive amount of archival and factual material (soil samples with remains of paintings etc.) that we've gathered, as well as depictions and schematic reconstructions from the 1950s created under the guidance of L. A. Durnovo help us to restore some parts of their appearance. At that time there were intact fragments of the paintings on three walls: part of the apse decoration (tiers with the figures of Prophets, Apostles and Church Fathers with the image of Christ on the semi-dome); Washing of the Infant and Annunciation to the Shepherds from the Nativity scene on the north wall; and the scene of the Second Advent and the Final Judgement on the west wall. We suggest a virtual reconstruction project to the Tatev Revival Foundation.



Ekaterina Loshkareva

The Theme of the Second Coming of Christ in the Repertory of Architectural Plastic Art of Armenian Churches of the 13th – the First Half of the 14th Century

The appearance of the large relief compositions with images of Christ, the Mother of God and the saints in the western portal of the churches or the gavits was the exceptional phenomenon in the Armenian art of the 13th – 14th centuries. The reliefs depicting the Savior give an example of complex compositions, the majority semantics of which relate to the theme of the Second Coming. Confrontation and construction of these complex compositions reveal a wide variety of interpretations of the theme of the Second Coming of Christ in the Armenian architectural plastic art.

The iconographic compositions different from the classical Byzantine existed in the few images of relief scenes of the Second Coming of Christ in the Armenian churches of early period. For example, thanks to the inclusion of additional characters (in the dome of the gavit of Horomos monastery). However, until the 13th century the relief composition of the Second Coming of Christ is not located above the major entrance of the church or in the western part of the church, as was traditional for Byzantine art and Romanesque art.

We can define several directions of the Second Coming compositions developing at the same time in the relief decoration of the Armenian churches of the 13th – 14th centuries. The first direction is reflected in compositions based on the representation of the Second Coming as set out in the well-known passages of Sacred Scripture (Ezekiel 1,4-13; Revelation 4,2-6). According to the text of Scripture, in such compositions Christ seated on a throne surrounded by four animals (in the tympanum of the “White” church of the Virgin Mary of Hovannes Karapet monastery, 1301) and also by twenty-four apocalyptic elders (in the church of St. Stephen of the Ahchots monastery, 1217).

The simplicity of design, limited by text of the allegorical and eschatological parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25, 1-13), finds expression in the tympanum of the Cathedral of Hovannavank monastery (1221). The preference of the one idea, expressed in simple form, and the character of the selected parable which subject is rare for the Eastern Christian culture of this period, refer to the archaic artistic thinking of Early Christian monuments. These ancient ideas saved in rare examples of Armenian art of later times.

Of special note is a complex relief composition in the tympanum of the gavit of Noravank monastery (1261- 1321). This composition includes the image of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity in the figure of the Ancient of days during the act of creation of the first man and the renewal of humanity by means of the suffering on the Cross and thanks to the Second Coming.

It is not impossible to note the link between the relief images of the Second Coming of Christ and the image of the Virgin Mary and Child. Both of this composition are placed on the front of each other in the façade of the several Armenian churches of this period (Hovannes Karapet monastery, Noravank monastery). This combination not only summarizes the main Christian tenets from the Incarnations to the Last Judgment, but also points to the special intercession of the Mother of God at the Last Judgment.

It's interesting, that in the churches with the single relief composition of the Virgin with Child placed over the main entrance, the relief image of Christ surrounded by the four animals moved inside the church, in the dome and sails.



Nazénie Garibian

*Le corpus Dionysien et la typologie de la cathédrale de Zwart'noc'
en Arménie (VIIe s.)*

Les écrits de Pseudo-Denys l'Aréopagite, connus dans les milieux théologiques byzantins à partir de la seconde moitié du VI^e siècle et devenus très en vogue surtout vers le milieu du VII^e, circulaient également en Arménie dès le début du VII^e s., et ceci un siècle plus tôt de la traduction officielle de ces oeuvres en arménien. Tandis que les auteurs byzantins, après avoir condamné la théologie dionysienne, l'interprétaient par la suite dans le sens christologique pour appuyer la formule de Chalcédoine, les Arméniens semblent s'étant servis de l'autorité de ces textes pour justifier l'autocéphalie de leur Église et ses origines apostoliques. De ce fait, ils essayèrent d'établir une liaison directe entre les puissances de la Hiérarchie céleste et la «multitude des puissances célestes» – les *zwart'un*k' – apparues à saint Grégoire l'Illuminateur dans sa vision théophanique.

C'est précisément cette vision que commémore la splendide église ronde, construite, entre 642-652, par les soins du catholicos Nersès III de Tayk' (641-661) surnommé Le Constructeur, et avec l'aide financière de l'empereur Constant II (641-668), pour abriter également les reliques de saint Grégoire.

Située non loin de la sainte ville et ancien siège de Vałaršapat lié à la tradition historique de la conversion du pays et à l'activité de saint Grégoire, l'église de Nersès avait la vocation de devenir le centre spirituel de toute l'Arménie et le nouveau siège du catholicos. La cathédrale de Zwart'noc', connue aussi sous le nom de Saint-Grégoire, est considérée comme une oeuvre unique dans l'histoire de l'architecture arménienne. Par la toute nouvelle typologie, les dimensions inhabituellement imposantes, les solutions constructives osées et le riche décor sans précédent, son image a non seulement laissé des empreintes constantes sur le développement ultérieur de l'architecture arménienne, mais elle a été dûment copiée en plusieurs exemplaires durant des siècles. D'ailleurs, elle occupe la première place par la quantité et éloquence des renseignements conservés dans les sources historiques arméniennes à propos de quelconque monument.

L'intention de Nersès III de bâtir son siège sur un nouveau site, en dehors des villes métropoles, peut avoir comme raison sa position dogmatique hellénisante, mal perçue par le clergé arménien anti-chalcédonien. Par ailleurs, la liturgie byzantine fut célébrée lors de la dédicace de la cathédrale en présence de Constant II qui communia à cette occasion avec Nersès de Tayk' et qui voulut emmener avec lui les maîtres-bâisseurs pour ériger une église semblable dans son palais.

Or, plusieurs arguments basés sur les recherches historiques, qu'appuie l'analyse architecturale du monument, permettent de supposer que Nersès III a conçu et réalisé un nouveau type du «Temple de Dieu», s'égalant, en qualité de «constructeur de la maisons du Seigneur», aux personnages bibliques ou historiques, dont chacun a essayé de la bâtir selon l'interprétation des instructions données dans les Livres sacrés. Dans le cas de Zwart'noc', il semblerait que Nersès eut recours à la théologie dionysienne et au «modèle sacré» de la rotonde de l'Anastasis à Jérusalem.