

On the Tradition of Decorating Gravestones in 17th - 19th cc. Georgia

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(Presented by Academy Member Liana Melikishvili)

Memorial artefacts form an extremely important part of Georgia's material and spiritual heritage. These artefacts contain a visual historical record of the Georgian Middle Ages. Georgia is particularly distinguished by the great diversity of forms of memorial artefacts widespread in the country: boulder gravestones; obelisks; memorial statues; miniature replicas of churches; three dimensional sculptures shaped into images of the cross, sheep and horses; baldachins presented in the form of architecture; human statues, and more. It is significant that the Orthodox Church prohibited the production of three-dimensional sculptures of human beings. Therefore, the artistic tradition of Georgian medieval sculpture and its formal language developed mostly in the form of bas-relief. It is significant that most of the gravestones preserved to the present day belong to the later period (17th and 19th cc, and the beginning of the 20th c.), while earlier memorial artefacts are unfortunately subject to considerable decay and are increasingly disappearing without trace. Special attention should be drawn to the gravestone of Parthenoz, Bishop of Kharchashani, dated to 1713 in the village of Pichkhovani in Akhmeta municipality. The relief on this large tile is executed with great artistic skill and finesse. It is one of the many fine examples of the professional tradition of relief sculpture and continues the best traditions of the relief sculpture of the Middle Ages. It is a treasured example of the highly distinguished artworks of the so called "Renaissance". The later gravestones (17th to 19th cc.) are more richly decorated with images, in which the artistic approach of medieval relief sculpture is developed in certain ways, allowing room for variation. The gravestones of this period became a kind of "preserve" for the somewhat suspended tradition of medieval monumental sculpture, and at the same time opened a free "arena" for folk culture. © 2021 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Memorial artefacts, gravestone décor, The Georgian Sculpture of Middle Ages

Memorial artefacts comprise an extremely important part of Georgia's material and spiritual heritage. They combine the history of Georgia, its history of art, ethnology, and the issues of social, religious and national identity. This area covers the

basics of the spiritual identity and worldview of the centuries-old, original, artistic culture of Georgia.

Based on the collated material, it is possible to determine a kind of typology of the various memorial monuments that were widespread in

Georgia for centuries: these include boulder gravestones; obelisks; memorial statues; models of churches; three dimensional sculptures shaped into images of the cross, cradles, boxes (for valuables), coffins, and even of sheep and horses; also baldachins presented in the form of architecture, human statues, and more. The goal of our art historical research is to study the décor embellishing these stones, the iconography of their figurative images and range of their artistic content.

We must note from the beginning that the Orthodox Church prohibited the creation of three dimensional sculptures. Therefore, the artistic tradition and the metaphorical language of images are largely represented in the form of bas-relief, and yet we do have highly distinguished examples of *haut-relief* (Oshki, Khakhuli etc...). It is noteworthy that the majority of the gravestones preserved to the present day belong to the later period (17th and 19th cc, beginning of the 20th c.), while the earlier memorial artefacts are unfortunately subject to decay and more and more of them are disappearing without trace.

The artistic aesthetics of epochs, their worldviews, artistic tendencies, economic and social background and, more naturally, the elements expressing the profession and the lifestyle of the deceased, are clearly reflected in the décor of each grave's artefacts. The gravestones of the earlier periods (from the 5th to the 14th centuries) are relatively modestly and sparsely adorned with images. On most of them there are only engraved epitaphs, or the warrior's right arm with a bow and arrow and sometimes a plough. There are also three-dimensional sculptures of sheep and horses, the surfaces of which are often decorated with various lightly carved ornaments.

The later gravestones (17th to 19th cc. and the beginning of the 20th c.) are more richly decorated with images, in which the artistic approach of medieval relief sculpture is developed in certain ways, allowing room for innovation. The gravestones of this period became a kind of

“shelters” for the somewhat suspended tradition of medieval monumental sculpture and at the same time opened a free “arena” for folk culture. The relief images on them are mostly done in the manner of folk/handicraft decoration, however, there are also examples created with highly skilful mastery and artistry.

It is difficult to establish with certainty today the exact date when the tradition of depicting the deceased on the gravestone began in medieval Georgia. Yet, several paintings are well known: the tombs of the saints such as David of Gareja, Dodo of Gareja and St Nino must have been painted with their depictions [1:14, 24-27]. Z. Skhirtladze dates the earliest paintings for St Nino's tomb to the 16th-17th centuries, and expresses his opinion about the possible existence of earlier layers of painted images on the tombs of saints [2:343-344]. It should be noted that several embroidered covers for St Nino's tombstone are also preserved (18th-19th cc.).

It is noteworthy that in the 17th to 19th cc. in Georgia, as well as in the whole Orthodox Church, the tradition of creating embroidered covers for tombstones of distinguished clergymen or nobles was firmly established [3: 61-83]. The portraits of the deceased depicted on them sometimes also served as icons. Especially, if we consider the fact that the tombstone covers were for the clergy buried in the church, who, in most cases, were canonized as saints [4: 104-112].

Special attention should be drawn to the gravestone of Parthenoz bishop of Kharchashani dated to 1713 in the village of Pichkhovani in Akhmeta municipality (it is preserved today at the court chapel of King Erekle in Telavi). The relief on this large tile is executed with great artistic skill and fine mastery [5:75-88; 6:366-367] (Fig. 1). It is one of the many fine examples of the professional tradition of relief sculpture and continues the best traditions of the relief sculpture of the Middle Ages, and is treasured among the highly distinguished artworks of the so called “Renaissance” (such as Ananuri, David Gareja, the Church of Peter and

Paul in Sagarejo, and the Deesis of the eastern facade of Svetitskhoveli) [6:304-407]. In the relief sculpture of the bishop, we can obviously discern the secular tendencies characteristic of the Orthodox art of the time, which indicate an orientation towards European works of art. As noted earlier, we know of no analogous tomb from Georgia's Medieval period.



Fig. 1. The gravestone of Bishop Parthenoz.



Fig. 2. Church in Goruli, Gravestone of Darejan of Kharchashani.

The life-sized figure of the bishop's grave can also be seen as a portrait of the builder of the family mausoleum-chapel. There are many portraits of both public figures and clergymen in contemporary monumental painting, as well as portrait-like images of saints (Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, Bobnevi, Ananuri) [7: 96-111; 8: 156-170].

As already noted, there are no examples of the images of clergy among the relief gravestones dated to the 18th century. In general, prior to the 19th Century, a relatively small number of gravestones with life-sized human images are preserved, (and even those are dated by approximation). For

example, a gravestone of a female donor is preserved in the interior of the church of Goruli, on which Darejan, the courtier's daughter, is depicted in a relatively primitive manner (Fig.2). Had there not been an engraved epitaph, which according to T. Jojua's reading is dated to 1662, the relief could have been misdated to a later time due to its stylistic and artistic features. The images on the newly discovered gravestones in Poladauri gorge near Bolnisi are also peculiar; presumably, they also belong to the 17th-18th cc. Yet, these images are executed by folk artisans, and show no kinship with the highly artistic depiction of the bishop inspired by the style of medieval sculpture. Most of the gravestones of the contemporary time (17th-18th cc.) as well as the following periods (19th-20th cc.) are performed by stonemasons from among the folk artisans [9:273-280, 361-405].

As already noted, we encounter the depictions of human figures as well as zoomorphic shapes on the memorial stones in the period beginning in the 17th century and continuing up to the 1930s and 1940s [10: 3-45]. Within the repertoire of such artefacts one can see more elements conveyed laconically, and reflecting the contemporary ethnographic and social context, than one may find in the artefacts of the Middle Ages.

The gravestones of this period are mostly decorated with the shapes of crosses and angels, and also life-sized figures of deceased people dressed in the garments characteristic of their times, and carrying or wearing accessories, with objects indicating the social and political status (military or agricultural implements, textile tools, sewing machines, scissors, etc. Also jars of wine, tables, memorial meals etc. can be seen). Often, we see the depictions of astral signs (sun, moon, stars), animals (hart, deer, sheep, horse, birds etc). Since the beginning of the 20th c. imported or local statues standing on a pedestal and depicting mostly a grieving woman become more common. In the beginning of the 20th c. the grave memorials are decorated with the relief sculptures made in the

style of the Georgian Middle Ages as well as using elements of the décor of Modernism, Neoclassicism (Fig. 3).

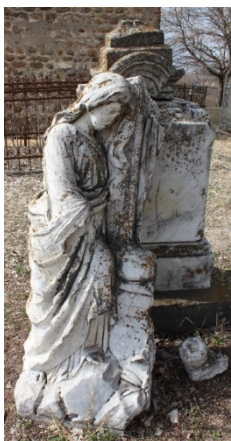


Fig. 3. Melaani, female statue on a gravestone.

Despite the general similarity of the content of grave decorations in the regions of Georgia, the specific nature of their originality, style and aesthetics are also evident (Kartli, Racha-Lechkhumi, Imereti, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Gudamakari, Khevi, Kakheti, etc.).

There are many figurative images and skillfully carved delicate and exquisite ornaments in the decoration of gravestones (obelisks, boulder-like gravestones etc.) in Racha-Lechkhumi and Imereti. The whole style of embellishment is quite decorative and diverse. Here we see the *haut-relief* heads and life-sized bodies of human figures, relief images of crosses, angels and lambs as well as small female statues in the style of Modernism.

The memorials of Gudamaqari gorge are distinguished by their colour palette, where the gravestone images painted in red-yellow, and blue-green often offer variations on a single type of composition. The sacrificial lamb is placed over a chalice and paten, there are candles, with the departed standing silently or sitting on a chair, whose farewell is expressed by a jug and a cup standing on the table. The departed also asks for “remembrance with forgiveness” in the accompanying epitaphs [11: 5-11]. It is

characteristic of the monuments of the Gudamaqari gravestones that the side walls of the stones are often decorated with relief images [11:5-11].

The memorial artefacts of Kartli (Shida Kartli, Kvemo Kartli) are especially numerous and diverse, where we find many old gravestones. The grave boulders, obelisks, or statues of sheep and horses are abundantly decorated with the bas-relief depictions of horse riders, warriors with weapons, agricultural tools and the life-sized depictions of the deceased women with their weaving and sewing accoutrements.

The grave artworks of Tianeti and Kakheti are interesting and distinct. They are presented in relatively smaller numbers yet in a greater diversity: simple architectural shapes, grave boulders, European style female three-dimensional sculptures etc. The full-fledged, relatively proportionate figures of the deceased portrayed by sharper and more expressive silhouettes fully covering the surface of stones, are rather striking.

In the artefacts of Samtskhe-Javakheti the sculptures of sheep and horses are more frequent, and they are also distinguished by their great age. There are also numerous large church models and obelisks (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Vardistsikhe, Sheep’s statue with a model of a church, gravestone.

The carved images of the gravestones dedicated as a prayer for the soul of the departed, for his/her salvation and for “commemoration with forgiveness” naturally carry a semantic content and are mostly nourished by the universal Christian

symbolic imagery established in medieval art: cross, angel, dove, lamb, fish, etc. [12:166-296].

Finally, the study and preservation of ancient gravestones is an unconditional duty in addition to the preservation of material culture and the preservation of historical memory and heritage. The epitaphs and figurative images of gravestones that are still preserved in the different regions of Georgia inform us of many significant facts and of the history and traditions of the local population. It

is a document of invaluable historical value carved in stone.

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ხელოვნების ისტორია

საფლავის ქვათა შემკობის ტრადიციისათვის XVII-XIX საუკუნეების საქართველოში

ე. კვაჭატაძე

გ. ჩუბინაშვილის სახ. ქართული ხელოვნების ისტორიისა და ძეგლთა დაცვის ეროვნული კვლევითი ცენტრი, თბილისი, საქართველო

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ლ. მელიქიშვილის მიერ)

მემორიალური ძეგლები საქართველოს მატერიალური და სულიერი მემკვიდრეობის უაღრესად მნიშვნელოვან ნაწილს წარმოადგენს. საქართველოში საუკუნეების მანძილზე გავრცელებული მემორიალური ძეგლების ტიპებია: ლოდისებური საფლავის ქვები; ობელისკები; მატურები; ეკლესიის მოძელები; ჯვრის, აკვნის, სკივრის ფორმის, აგრეთვე ცხვრის, ცხენის მრგვალი ქანდაკებები; არქიტექტურის სახით გადაწყვეტილი ბალდაქინები, ადამიანის სტატუები და სხვა. საგულისხმოა, რომ დღეისათვის შემორჩენილი საფლავის ქვების უმრავლესობა გვიან პერიოდს (XVII-XIX, XX-საუკუნის დასაწყისი) განეკუთვნება, ხოლო ადრეული ხანის მემორიალური ძეგლები, სამწუხაროდ, თანდათან ნადგურდება და სულ უფრო უკვალოდ იკარგება. ეპოქათა სახვითი ტენდენციები, ეკონომიკურ-სოციალური ფონი და, ბუნებრივია, გარდაცვლილის პროფესიული საქმიანობა და ყოფის ელემენტები ნათლად აისახება საფლავის ძეგლთა დეკორშიც. გამოსახულებებით შედარებით მოკრძალებულადაა შემკული მცირედ შემორჩენილი ადრეული ხანის საფლავის ქვები (V-XIV სს.). მათზე, უმეტესად, მხოლოდ

ეპიტაფიებია ამოკვეთილი ან მეომრის მარჯვენა მკლავი მშვილდ-ისრითა და ხმლით, ხანაც – გუთანით. გვხვდება აგრეთვე ცხვრისა და ცხენის მრგვალი ქანდაკებებიც. გამოსახულებებით უფრო მდიდარია გვიანი საფლავები (XVII-XIX, XX საუკუნის დასაწყისი), რომელთა მხატვრულ გაფორმებაში შუა საუკუნეების რელიეფური ქანდაკების სახვითი აზროვნება თავისებურ სახეცვალებად განვითარებას განაგრძობს. ამ ხანის საფლავის ძეგლები შუა საუკუნეების მონუმენტური სკულპტურის რამდენადმე შეწყვეტილი ტრადიციის „თავშესაფარი“ და, ამავედროულად, ხალხური შემოქმედების თავისუფალი „ასპარეზი“ ხდება. მათზე გამოკვეთილი რელიეფიანი გამოსახულებები უმეტესად ხალხური, სქემატურ-ლაკონიური, ზოგჯერ ხელოსნური ხასიათისაა, თუმცა გვხვდება ოსტატობითა და დახელოვნებით შესრულებული ნიმუშებიც.

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