

History of Art

Palestinian Tradition and Early Medieval Georgian Plastic Art

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(Presented by Academy Member Th.V. Gamkrelidze)

ABSTRACT. *This paper examines the religious and cultural relations of Georgia and Palestine, manifested in the forms and iconography of early medieval Georgian religious art. In this relation, the author discusses the origin and significance of one particular element of Georgian stone crosses dated back to 6th-7th cc. (i.e., crosses from Khandisi, Bolnisi, Ukangori, Dzveli Muskhi, Didi Gomareti etc.) – an architectural composition reproducing the Holy Sepulchre Church in Jerusalem. The conclusions of the paper highlight the role of Jerusalem Holy sites and pilgrim art in the formation of the iconography of Georgian Christian art. © 2008 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.*

Key words: *Holy Sepulchre, stone-crosses, Holy Land, iconography, Christian art, early medieval Georgian reliefs, liturgical implements.*

Numerous historical and philological studies have been dedicated to the contacts between Georgia and the religious centres of the Holy Land. Since the dawn of Christianity, the existence of such contacts has been confirmed by various written sources. Yet, the objects of art, presenting a tangible proof of these relations, are regarded no less important, as they confirm the existence of powerful artistic and ideological impulses streaming from Palestine. The cultural and religious links between the two countries have been established from the early years of Christianity, the outlines of which became evident in certain groups of works of Georgian religious art. Moreover, artistic-ideological characteristics of early medieval Georgian art and its iconography testify that the spiritual demands of Georgians of that period corresponded to the general religious developments in the East Christian world.

Georgians, like the rest of Christians, have always regarded the Holy Land as the Promised Land and it used to be an exemplary guide for spiritual life. As is known, from the 5th century Georgian monastic centres were founded in Palestine. From this period up to the 9th c. Georgia followed Jerusalem liturgical practice, the holy

myrrh, liturgical objects and church books were also brought from there. In the early Middle Ages ecclesiastical books and church objects imported from centres of Eastern Christianity were of major importance for the country. Presumably the so-called Syrian Fathers (6th c.) made their own impact in this respect. Taking into account the colophon of the “Life of Peter the Iberian”, saying that the “Syrians in Palestine are numerous” [1], it is plausible that the Syrian Fathers had brought various liturgical objects to Georgia from the Holy Land, including crosses and icons, church vestments, rhipidions, censers, and other church implements. Apart from their practical function such liturgical objects, were regarded as precious “relics” associated with the Holy Land and played the role of models for local craftsmen.

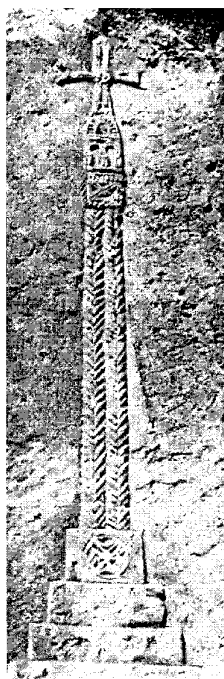
Taking into consideration the historical situation, intensive travel and pilgrimage to the Holy Land seems to have been quite possible until the end of the 7th century. According to Helen Metreveli, the pilgrimage of Georgians to Palestine had not stopped even under Arab domination [2].

Today, scholars have rich evidence proving the spiritual and literary activities of Georgians in Palestine, while

materials dealing with Georgian artists, craftsmen and builders in the Holy Land are very scarce. The only source for our investigation is a limited number of written sources, indirectly speaking about the artistic activity of Georgians there. Intensive construction of Georgian monastic foundations in the Holy Land bring Georgian artists and craftsmen to contact with sanctuaries and holy sites of Jerusalem. These contacts are clearly traceable in the original works of early medieval Georgian artists and thus the study of Georgian relationship with Palestine acquires special importance for the reconstruction of the early stage of Christianity in our country.

Close links between Georgia and the Holy Land are illustrated by various liturgical objects from Palestine, preserved in Georgia. At the same time, early medieval Georgian artefacts reflecting Palestinian tradition both in iconography and style give additional proofs of intensive cultural and artistic exchange over the centuries.

Numerous bronze censers dated back to the 6th-7th cc, originating from Syria-Palestine and surviving in Georgia are a good example of spiritual exchange. Most of these liturgical objects are preserved in Upper Svaneti [3]. Presently, the richest collection of censers is housed in Mestia Historical-Ethnographic Museum. Important examples of these objects are also kept in Tbilisi National Museum. Bronze censers, apart from being implemented in church service, were an efficient instrument for the transmission of Palestinian iconographic patterns throughout the Christian world, and Georgia was not an exception in this respect.



1. Stone Cross. Relief on the Edzani church. 6th c.

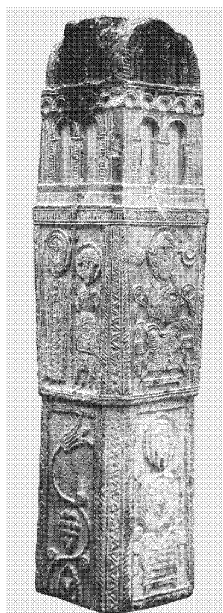
The tradition of using incense during the liturgy disseminated in Palestine and Syria from the 4th c. It should be stressed that Palestine and Syria are regarded as the original place of production of bronze censers. The earliest examples of censers are dated back to the 6th-7th centuries [4]. Major workshops producing bronze censers and located in Eastern Christian countries were the main centers supplying the entire Christian world with these liturgical objects. In the course of centuries a characteristic shape of censers had developed and an iconographic program of relief decoration was elaborated.

As is well known, the iconographic tradition of Christian art was established and strengthened throughout the 6th-7th centuries and the art of Palestine played a crucial part in this process. For centuries bronze censers, flasks, or ampullae, and metal pectoral crosses with relief or incised decoration used to be taken in abundance by pilgrims from Palestine to various countries, where they were desired objects for reproduction. Bronze censers, preserved in Georgia to our days, indicate that Georgian masters – artists, sculptors and goldsmiths – were well acquainted with Church objects of Palestinian origin, bronze censers among them, which inspired them to elaborate their own iconographic compositions.

The early Syro-Palestinian bronze censers, preserved in Georgia, are important for us not only for their high artistic value but also as precious examples of early Christian iconography. It should be particularly noted that the relief programs of Palestinian ampullae are reflected in the early works of Georgian Christian art, such as high stone crosses [5].

Stone crosses, installed on high pillars with carved relief decoration and standing in the open air, were original cult objects in early medieval Georgia (6th-7th cc). These crosses, with manifold symbolic and ideological meaning, were a manifestation of the conversion of the country to Christianity and the triumph of a new religion. Analysis of the shape, location and iconography of early medieval Georgian stone crosses reveals that they originated from Palestinian practice, more exactly they were designed after the monumental cross erected in the first centuries on the river Jordan, marking the place of Jesus' baptism. At the same time Georgian stone crosses reproduce the votive cross standing in Jerusalem between Basilica and the Holy Sepulchre.

Relief programs of carved stone pillars bearing stone crosses demonstrate the influence of Palestinian iconography. There is a certain parallelism in the selection of relief decoration of ampullae from the Holy Land and Georgian stone crosses of the same period (6th-7th cc.). Iconographic programs of ampullae represent the Christological cycle including the Annunciation, Adoration of the Virgin, Nativity, Baptism, Entry to Jerusalem, Crucifixion, Ascension of Christ, etc. Similar compositions are seen in the relief decoration of stone crosses.



2. Stone Cross from Khandisi. Fragment. 6th c.

Apart from New Testament narrative scenes on Georgian reliefs, there appear symbolic compositions which again call to mind Palestinian *eulogia*.

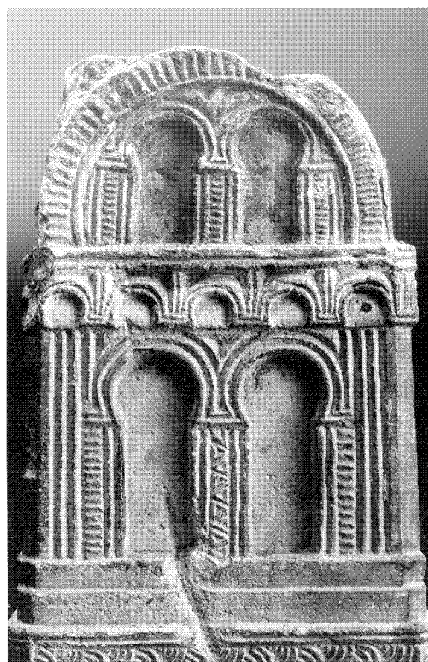
Composition with the enthroned Virgin with Child included in the stone pillars' iconographic programs (Khandisi, Bolnisi, Dmanisi) could serve as a good example of adoption of Palestinian iconographic vocabulary. These solemn, hieratic relief icons echo the artistic and symbolic interpretation of analogous images on Palestine ampullae where the Mother of God is not represented with the infant Christ in her lap, instead, she holds the head of Jesus with the cross-nimbus in front of her bosom [6].

Close links with Palestinian holy sites could also be retraced in a part of the early Georgian stone cross pillars – a clearly schemed two-story miniature architectural composition supporting a sculptural cross. This arched construction is encountered in a vast group of stone crosses (Khandisi, Old Muskhi, Bolnisi, Didi Gomareti, Ukangori, etc.). The particular importance of the crowning arched constructions of stone-cross columns is also confirmed by their artistic interpretation – despite the schematic character of the stone-cross depicted on the eastern façade of Edzani church (6th c.), the adjoining element of the sculptural cross – arched structural-plastic composition – is given accurately, as a substantial and meaningful part of the decoration program. [7]. The arched structure of the small-scale architectural composition and its shape with characteristic structure lead me to believe that the Georgian sculptor depicted a symbolic representation of the Holy Sepulchre. This specific image merits further investigation.

The crowning architectural-decorative composition is presented most completely on a fragment of stone column from Dzveli Muskhi. The stone column is preserved at its initial place, on the south-western side of the small single-aisle church of St. George. This fact enhances the importance of this fragment, as Georgian stone crosses are mostly detached from their original place of location. The Dzveli Muskhi stone column fragment has preserved the two-tier crowning composition: the lower tier represents a double arched construction, while the upper one is single arched. The northern part is specific, as both its registers depict an arch with one chord. The western and southern sides of the column, visible against the church, are adorned more extensively.

A similar arched architectural composition is incorporated in a stone column from Khandisi. Horseshoe arches, with clearly visible stepped pedestal, are placed on three sides of the column. The sides are connected with each other by the cornice – composed of a row of thin horseshoe arches. Coupled arches of the upper register are inscribed in semicircle form of the bigger one. The whole arched structure has a clear proportional system and its elements harmonize with each other.

The two stone-column fragments located in the village of Didi Gomareti of Dmanisi district bear the same characteristics. Despite the damage, two tiers of the arches, with the pilasters treated ornamentally, are clearly visible. The Didi Gomareti reliefs, similarly to the Muskhi and Khandisi stone-columns, are dated back to the late 6th-early 7th century.



3. Stone Cross from Khandisi. Detail (Holy Sepulchre)

It is interesting to know how relevant are these miniature architectural compositions to the actual architectural forms. Reconstruction of the original forms of the Holy Sepulchre becomes possible thanks to written references and excavation materials [8]. Information provided by early Christian written sources with descriptions of the holy sites of Jerusalem are of special importance for our investigation. "The Life of Constantine", written by the church historian Eusebius, who visited Jerusalem in 336 (Eusebius, 3.26 ff.), "Catechetical Lectures" of Cyril of Jerusalem (middle of the 4th c.), account of the Spanish pilgrim Egeria, 381-385, etc. [9] mention structures of the Holy Sepulchre – Martyrium and Anastasis, or Resurrection church, probably built between 348 and 381. Holy Sepulchre images are often depicted on liturgical objects (bronze censers, Palestine ampullae, ivory reliefs) and manuscript illuminations [10].

Among the churches built at holy sites associated with the earthly life of Christ by Constantine the Great and his Mother Helena after the Edict of Milan issued in 313, the church of the Holy Sepulchre, or Anastasis church was the most important shrine in Jerusalem. N. Kondakov, relying upon pilgrims' stories, reproduces the shapes of the construction built upon the Holy Tomb. It was a structure with the circle of a double colonnade in which, during feasts, space between the columns, as well as porches, used to be adorned with golden striped silk curtains (*clavi*) [11].

Excavation materials made it possible to reconstruct the original architectural appearance of the Holy Sepulchre. It was established that the 4th century structure

represented a monumental rotunda (diam. 33.5m), the central space of which – its centermost point – housed the Tomb of Christ in the rock, with the ambulatory. On the eastern side, the main façade represented a straight wall with several open exits. It could be considered that the rotunda was covered with a dome. Such constructions existed in Palestine from the beginning of the 1st - to the end of the 7th century. It is believed that the architectural type of the rotunda derives from the traditional Roman Emperors' mausoleums (such as the Mausoleum of Diocletian in Spoleto) [12].

Testimonies regarding the Holy Sepulchre provided by written sources are completed by objects of art and various types of pilgrims' tokens. Eulogia from the Holy Land reproducing pilgrimage shrines were an important component of Christian piety valued for their sacred power. Thus, it is not accidental that containers of primary and secondary relics of Palestine are decorated with compositions reproducing the Holy Sepulchre. In the Resurrection scene on the 7th century small reliquary box with Christological cycle from Vatican Museum [13] we find an inner aedicula containing the Holy Tomb, situated under the rotunda dome. The arched structure of the aedicula with semicircular dome and arched construction below it accurately reproduces the main parts of the Rotunda.

A similar correlation between the ciborium and the dome is traceable on the Palestinian ampullae with Holy Sepulchre representation (the ampullae from the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, Washington [14] and Bobbio N15) [15]. Palestinian ampullae display a different iconographic scheme – there are cases when only the aedicula is shown, while the majority of them bear the images of the large ciborium, representing the Holy Sepulchre rotunda, and include also a smaller aedicula with a grill between the columns [16]. These objects of pilgrim art follow the iconographic formula adopted for small scale representations – reduced schematic architectural structure depicted as a laconic formula.

A representation of the Holy Sepulchre can also be seen on bronze censers of Palestinian origin, the iconographic programs of which also include the scenes from "Women at the Tomb" or *Myrrhophoroi*. On these reliefs the Holy Sepulchre façade is represented as a double colonnaded composition [17]. The Holy Sepulchre is represented in the same way in the miniature of the scene of *Myrrhophoroi* in the Rabula Gospel (589). Here again we easily recognize the main parts of the shrine familiar from censers' reliefs [18].

Wooden bread stamps from Jerusalem (7th-8th cc, Cleveland Art Museum) [19] depicting a complex of buildings of the Holy Sepulchre is valuable topographic evidence for our research. This well-preserved mold depicting various structures – colonnaded street with propylaeum, basilica, Rotunda, gives an accurate picture of the architectural forms and silhouettes. The Anastasis



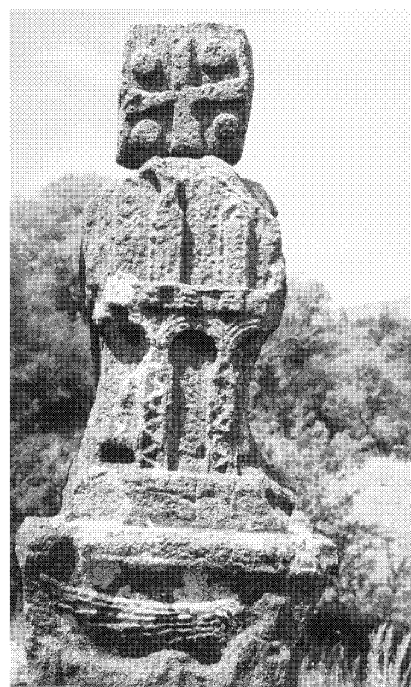
4. Stone Cross from Dzveli Muskhi. 6th-7th cc.

rotunda is presented as a double-storey arched construction covered with a dome. The first storey colonnade, and another, lower set of arches on its top, are clearly visible, the dome is indicated with several concentric semi-circles. Similar treatment of the dome (projection on flat surface) could be encountered on the reliefs of Georgian stone columns, which allows us to suppose that the craftsman was familiar with the relics from the Holy Land. It could also be presumed that the Georgian craftsman had a possibility to get acquainted with the Jerusalem relics while on their pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Such explanation throws new light on the artistic technique applied by Georgian masters in the depiction of the Holy Sepulchre on stone-cross pillars.

Another important visual testimony is a mosaic floor from Madaba, Jordan, dated back to the second half of the 6th c, with a map of Old and New Testament sites [20]. Jerusalem, occupying the central place in the layout, is a focal point of the map. Structures shown from the birds'-eye view fold out on the surface. The majority of the buildings are easily recognized. The Holy Sepulchre building with stairs, columned porch and semicircular dome is identical with the representation of the shrine on the bread stamp. These representations, together with Georgian reliefs, display common artistic approaches, aiming to commemorate in generalized and rather conventional forms (on the Madaba map the church of the Holy Sepulchre is shown upside-down) one of the main sanctuaries of Christendom.

The stone column fragments (i.e. Muskhi, Khandisi, Gomareti etc.) permit to sum up the main features of reproduction of the Holy Sepulchre on early medieval Georgian reliefs. Most vividly, the architectural composition is preserved on Old Muskhi and Khandisi stone columns. The rest of the reliefs complete the picture of the reproduction of this theme. The mentioned reliefs clearly show the church podium. The winding columns of the ciborium, shown on almost every Palestinian ampulla, on our reliefs are depicted on the pilasters of arches by incised parallel lines. The dome of the Sepulchre on Khandisi and Muskhi reliefs is shown as a conventional semicircular form, evoking depictions of domes on stamp from Jerusalem and the Madaba mosaic map. Bronze censers show only the images of the inner part of the Church – aedicula. However, on Georgian reliefs we see the attempt to reproduce the entire building of Anastasis Church with its each characteristic detail.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of the relief decoration of Georgian stone columns with a representation of the Holy Sepulchre as they reproduce the structure in the three-dimensional model of the main Jerusalem shrine. The placing of the architectural composition on the four sides of the stone column permits to create a plastic spatial image of the shrine. Thus a miniature model of the biggest holy site of Christianity



5. Stone Cross from Didi Gomareti. Fragment. 6th c.

– an embodiment of highest spiritual power and grace – crowns the architectural-plastic composition of the stone pillars. The Georgian stone column reliefs, alongside the written sources, archaeological materials and the objects of art originated from the Holy Land, bearing the image of the Holy Sepulchre, will contribute to the reconstruction of its original forms.

The symbolism of the main Christian shrine of Jerusalem is well studied and I shall not dwell on this issue, however I would like to recall the words of Eusebius said about this major Christian shrine of Jerusalem - he calls the Holy Sepulchre “New Jerusalem”, while the tomb of Christ, the Holy of Holies [20]. It is evident that Georgian masters were well aware of the symbolic content of the Holy Sepulchre. The placement of the image of particular ideological significance on top of the columns, in accordance with the “Spiritual hierarchy” in an upper “heavenly” zone of relief decoration, stresses its spiritual power as well.

The influence of ampullae iconography on the decoration programs of the 6th-7th century Georgian stone crosses has already been pointed out. They are repeated, either directly or through the *eulogia* decoration systems reproducing monumental cycles of the Holy Land churches. It is noteworthy that the creators of the Jerusalem stamp, the Madaba mosaic and the Georgian sculptors, in different parts of the Christian world and in different spheres of art almost simultaneously reproduce in the same manner the holy shrine of Jerusalem - the Holy Sepulchre, which in its turn points to the unity of



6. Bronze Censer, 7th c. National Museum. Tbilisi.

the Christian world and intensive Georgian and Palestinian interrelations.

Jerusalem topography is explicitly visible in the location of the stone crosses in Georgia. Proceeding from the location of some of the stone crosses and their fragments preserved at the original site (e.g. Kumurdo, certain fragments from the Mashavera valley, Dzveli Muskhi, and others) we can speak about the specific rules of their erection, more exactly, their correlation with church buildings. Crosses preserved in their original places stand close to the south-western sides of churches. Additional materials are required to draw categorical conclusions;

however, assumptions could be made, according to which it becomes possible to connect the practice of erection of crosses with the old Christian tradition existing at the Holy Sites of Jerusalem.

According to pilgrims' accounts in the 4th century near the Anastasis Church or Rotunda, in its south-west, there stood a cross in the open air. At this cross divine services were performed and the congregation prayed. The Life-giving Cross was worshipped during certain church feasts. Special worship took place on Good Friday, when the bishop's throne would be placed behind the Cross and a reliquary with the wood of the True Cross exposed for veneration [21]. This information gives us firm ground to suppose that Georgian stone crosses have a specific liturgical function rooted in early Christian Palestinian practice. However, I am not going to push this aspect, as we do not have reliable sources for further discussions.

Representation of the Holy Sepulchre is a manifestation of the power and significance of the holy site and commemorates an event connected with it. The architectural metaphor of the Jerusalem shrine perfectly corresponds to the iconographic programs of stone cross pillars – glorifying in stone the Incarnation and Sacrifice of Christ. The architectural crowning part of stone pillars, modeled after the form of the Anastasis Rotunda, unites general Christian symbolism and concrete *topos*, establishing various links with the Holy Sepulchre. The above discussion dealing with one element of relief decoration of early medieval Georgian stone crosses demonstrates how responsive Georgian culture was to contemporary spiritual developments. Further research of the interaction of ritual and stone crosses will give a new dimension to this issue and will add new nuances and specificity.

ხელოვნების ისტორია

პალესტინური ტრადიცია და ადრეული შუა საუკუნეების ქართული პლასტიკის ხელოვნება

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(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიკოს თ. გამყრელიძის მიერ)

წმინდა მიწასთან საქართველოს ურთიერთობებს მრავალრიცხოვანი ისტორიული და წერილობითი ცნობა ადასტურებს. არანაკლებ მნიშვნელოვანია ხელოვნების ნაწარმოებები, რომლებიც ამ კონტაქტების რეალურ

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Received November, 2007