

The Sculptures on the Eastern Façade of the Holy Cross of Mtzkhet'a*

by

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III.

We must return now to a consideration of the reliefs as a whole. As we have noted above, the reliefs of the Ktitors on the eastern façade of Jvari form one homogeneous and inseparable composition. Their three plaques, though physically separated, constitute a logically composed unit in their essence and idea (see note 10).

In the center plaque (fig. 2) the broad-shouldered, strong, and majestic figure of Christ is represented, and in a gesture symbolic of Him as Protector, He is shown with one hand upon the head of the smaller figure of Stephanos, kneeling before Him.

The plaques on each side show Hypatos Demetre and Hypatos Adrnerse with his son, guided by the guardian and interceding Archangels, Michael and Gabriel who face the viewer though their bodies are depicted in profile. Each Ktitor kneels on one knee while extending the other leg forward; each reaches forward with both arms, giving an impression of urgent movement toward the figure in the centre plaque. The effect of this dynamic and resolute movement is intensified by the fact that it is reflected in the images of both angels, who move, too, toward the same point. Thus, the whole composition embodies an intimate and deep interrelationship between its three separate plaques, and reflects a classically balanced harmony, illustrative of the creative power of the artist. With regard to the iconography, both Byzantine and Sasanian elements are found in the sculpture. The central plaque depicts a familiar theme of Christ which was iconographically treated and crystallized in Early Christian art, and which could have served as a model for our sculptor. However, all kneeling figures in an attitude of worship point to Sasanian prototypes. Similar representations can be found in Sasanian rock sculptures (see n. 148)¹³². Sasanian origin is seen too in the technical treatment of Christ's thickly-curled beard¹³³, and in the

* Continuation of OrChr 44 (1960) 112–35.

¹³² F. Sarre, E. Herzfeld, *Iranische Felsenreliefs* (Berlin 1910) pl. XLIII, right, pl. XLIV, XLX; E. Sarre, *Die Kunst des alten Persien* (Berlin 1922) pl. 74, 75, 76, 77; also J. Horst, *Proskynein. Zur Anbetung im Urchristentum nach ihrer religionsgeschichtlichen Eigenart* = Neutestamentliche Forschungen 3. Reihe, 2. Heft (1932) 79ff.; As for kneeling figures also see: A. Alföldi, *Die Ausgestaltung des monarchischen Zeremoniells* = *Röm. Mitt.* 49 (1934) 46–66.

¹³³ For instance, Naksh i Rستم, Sarre, op. cit., pl. 81; very good examples of symmetrically curled beards are found much earlier in the relief of Persepolis, Sarre, op. cit., pl. 26, 27 and Susa, *ibid.*, pl. 38.

style of His hair¹³⁴ (fig. 2). Despite the fact that the reliefs are damaged, it is possible to reconstruct the long oval faces of the two Hypatoi, whose broad deeply-cut eyes and mustaches also remind one of Sasanian rock sculptures and silver dishes¹³⁵.

Of special interest is the representation of the figures' garments; richly ornamented robes and long tunics heavily embroidered toward the bottom. The straight-falling coats hang freely from the shoulders, and double thicknesses of heavy cloth form tubular scarf-like draperies extending from the shoulders almost to the hems of the coats¹³⁶. I would also like to point out Kobul's boots, (fig. 6) which seem to be richly adorned¹³⁷. The execution of the robes and faces demonstrates a care and diligence often found in Sasanian art (figs. 3, 4).

Except for the characteristics of detail mentioned above as of different origins, the eastern façade of Jvari has as a whole no direct prototype, either in Sasanian-Persian or Byzantine art. The architect did not imitate completed forms or set patterns, but performed his task using his own imagination and thus created an original composition.

The whole idea of representing such a composition on the outer walls of the eastern façade, that is to say on the most important part of the Church, is extremely interesting because as far as we know there is no similar instance in Early Christian art anywhere in Asia Minor or Byzantium. Byzantine architecture never included external decoration of churches because in Byzantium the building material was brick, which is not adaptable to such sculpture.

Even in Syria, where the churches were built of cut stone and with dry masonry technique, the outside walls of the extant monuments do not reveal panels of human representation. It is true that a few Syrian churches have sculptured decorations over the doors and window frames and along the lintels, but these are no more than simple accentuations of geometrical and stylized floral designs¹³⁸.

¹³⁴ I. Orbeli, K. Trever, *Sasanidskij Metal* (Moscow, Leningrad 1935) pl. XXXI, E. Sarre, op. cit., pl. 72.

¹³⁵ I. Orbeli, K. Trever, op. cit., pl. XXXII, 15. 16.

¹³⁶ Similar coats wear Saharuni and his wife on the eastern façade of Mren (637), (S. Der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge 1947) 80; J. Strzygowski, op. cit. I, 430 fig. 469, 470); Anahit and Ormizd flanking Khosrau II Parvez (591–628), (E. Herzfeld, *Am Tore von Asien* [Berlin 1920] 66, pl. XLII, XLIV, XIX), and foreign dignitaries on the obelisk of Theodosius I (ca. 390) in Constantinople, (G. Bruns, *Der Obelisk und seine Basis auf dem Hippodrom zu Konstantinopel* = *Istanbuler Forschungen* 7 (Istanbul 1935) 4, fig. 37, 43.) These coats which are evidently not of byzantine but Oriental (probably Persian) origin, in two cases seem to be made of fur, namely in Mren and in Constantinople.

¹³⁷ Describing the garments and insignia of the King Tsathe of Lazica we are told by Theophanes that: »Tsathē's boots were red, adorned with pearls in Persian fashion; also that his belt was golden, adorned with pearls. τὰ γὰρ τζαγγία αὐτοῦ βούσια ἦσαν ἔχοντα μαργαρίτας Περσικῶ σήματι. ὁμοίως καὶ ἡ ζώνη αὐτοῦ ἦν χρυσῇ διὰ μαργαριτῶν (*Theoph. Chronographia*, ed. de Boor, pp. 168f.)

¹³⁸ H. C. Butler, *Architecture and other Arts* (1904) 272f; S. Der Nersessian, op. cit. 84ff.

Nevertheless, the composition represented on the eastern façade of Jvari had its roots in the early Christian tradition which, even in the fifth and sixth centuries, permitted mosaic or painted decorations in church apses. Usually in these scenes saints and ecclesiastical dignitaries are presented to Christ by angels as in San Vitale in Ravenna (530–547) (fig. 9)¹³⁹, or by the apostles Peter and Paul, as in Sts Cosmas e Damiano in Rome (which dates from the pontificate of Felix IV [526–530])¹⁴⁰; and in St Teodoro, also in Rome (530 — end of sixth or beginning of seventh century)¹⁴¹. But at Jvari in contrast to these examples, the whole idea is transferred to the outside walls of the east apse and is carved in stone.

Jvari is not an isolated instance of this practice in Georgia. The same principle was applied to the cruciform domed church of Atenis Sioni, erected shortly after Jvari¹⁴², and again to the basilical church of Bolnisi Sioni (478–493)¹⁴³, though here the idea was not expressed in human figures¹⁴⁴.

In dealing with the stylistic problems of the sculptures of Jvari, it should first be understood that positively and dependably dated monuments of late sixth and seventh century Georgia are very limited.

I have already mentioned the scarcity of pre- and post-Hereklian works of art in Georgia, and have pointed out that most of these are in a very poor

¹³⁹ Regarding the date of the apsis mosaics of S. Vitale we depend more or less on hypothetical theories which vary considerably. The earliest date accepted is 530 (P. Toesca, *Storia dell'Arte Italiana*, I, Il Medio Evo, Turin, 1927, p. 198ff.; M. v. Berhem, E. Clouzot, *Mosaïques chrétiennes du IV^e au X^e siècle*, Geneva, 1924, p. 146, fig. 197; Ch. Diehl, *Ravenna. Les villes d'art célèbres*, Paris, 1928, p. 77). However, the latest date is 546–547 (C. Ricci, *Monumenti. Tavole storiche dei Mosaici di Ravenna*, VI, Rome 1935, p. 123; F. W. Deichmann, *Gründung und Datierung von S. Vitale zu Ravenna*, Atti del II Convegno per lo Studio dell'Arte dell'Alto Medio Evo tenuto presso l'Università di Pavia nel Settembre 1950, p. 116). See also K. O. Nordström, *Ravennastudien*, Upsala, 1953, p. 90).

¹⁴⁰ J. Wilpert, *Mosaiken* 3, fig. 102, pp. 1071/4; Berhem-Clouzot, *ibid.* 120/4, figs. 138, 139.

¹⁴¹ J. Wilpert, *Mosaiken*, II, p. 1074; Berhem-Clouzot, *ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁴² G. Chubinashvili, *Monuments* 116/7.

¹⁴³ G. Chubinashvili, *Bolnisi Sion* (Tbilisi 1940) 63.

¹⁴⁴ On the eastern façade of the Bolnisi Sioni over the apsidal window, a supplication of the donors directed to Christ is inscribed. In the central part of the inscription there is a representation of a patée cross with two rows of stars encircling it. (G. Chubinashvili, *op. cit.* 63/8, fig. 48, 111) If we remember, that in certain circumstances animation of the Cross was admissible in the 5th century (cf. A. Frolov, *The veneration of the Relic of the True Cross at the End of the Sixth and the Beginning of the Seventh Centuries* = St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly [1958] II, 1, p. 9ff., especially note 50; also Raabe, R., *Petrus der Iberer. Ein Charakterbild zur Kirchen- und Sittengeschichte des fünften Jahrhunderts* [Leipzig 1895] 29ff.), and if we also recollect the symbolical meaning of the mosaic on the Dome of the Chapel of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (C. O. Nordstroem, *Ravennastudien* [Upsala 1953] 27ff., pl. 3a) and the identification of the cross with the Christ (J. Kollwitz, *Oströmische Plastik* 138ff., where he gives extensive sources), then the proper meaning of the Bolnisi composition becomes apparent.



Fig. 9. Ravenna San Vitale, Apse Mosaic Christ between Angels and the Saints Vitalis and Ecclesius. After Volbach



Fig. 10. Istanbul, Hippodromo, base of the obelisc of Theodosius, (detail) the tribute offering barbarians (Sacians?), ca. 390. After Volbach



Fig. 11. Istanbul, Museum of Antiquities, "Majestas Domini".
After Kollwitz



Fig. 12. Ateni, Church of Sioni, western façade,
St. Stephen and donors (after Chubinashvili)



Fig. 13. Ateni, Church of Sioni, southern façade,
dignitaries (after Chubinashvili)



Fig. 14. Ateni, Church of Sioni, western façade,
Hunting Scene (detail) (after Chubinashvili)



Fig. 15. Thessaloniki, Hagios Dimitrios, (629—643) St. Demetrios
between the prefect Leontius and Bishop Johannes. After Volbach

state of conservation and mostly inaccessible. It appears also that Georgian art of that period displays a great variety of forms, which is an indication of a certain instability and lack of definite evolution of stylistic trends. This creates great difficulties for anyone who wishes to follow and clarify the development and character of style in early Medieval Georgian art. Furthermore, the field under consideration here has almost never been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion¹⁴⁵. For these reasons I cannot deal definitively with the problems involved in the sculptures of Jvari, but I am obliged to confine myself to a rather general description of characteristic trends in style, and by relying on the more dependable monuments, to define the relatively broad chronological limits of the Jvari sculptures. Unfortunately the picture will be incomplete and therefore, in some respects, inadequate, but it will afford a general impression of technique, designs, trends, etc., and will establish, approximately at least, the extent of the period within the Jvari reliefs can be dated.

In this part of our study we are not concerned with a precise date for the sculptures were devised and executed not after the invasion of the Arabs (643), but at the turn of the seventh century.

The characteristic feature of style is found in the formation of the surface of the sculptures, that is, in the reduction of round bodies to flat surfaces; in the special importance attached to line; and in a strong inclination toward decorative effects, often reduced to monotonous repetitious schemes. The most revealing instance of this abstract style with its characteristic elements is found in Georgian flat reliefs.

Highly instructive material is provided by the capitals and other reliefs of the dated basilical church of the Bolnisi Sioni¹⁴⁶ and by the Early Christian flat reliefs preserved in the National Museum of Tbilisi¹⁴⁷. Using the sculptures at Bolnisi as a basis for comparison, we find in those of Jvari pronounced distortion of proportions which is particularly apparent in the legs and hand of Demetre (fig. 3). Flat surfaces are very generally used at Jvari, and there, too, the composition of the plaques is confined within so small an area that the relative position of the figures is compromised; they sometimes collide with one another, occasionally even breaking through the bounds of their allotted space unto its frame¹⁴⁸ (e. g. Christ and the angels, fig. 5), and

¹⁴⁵ General development of early Georgian medieval sculpture has been outlined by G. Chubinashvili, *History of Georgian Art I* (Tbilisi 1936; in Georgian) 205–18; The same problems also occupied J. Smirnov in his study «O drevneishikh Khristianskikh reliefakh Sakavkasia», which are not published yet, and have been inaccessible for me; and recently a very constructive monography of A. Javakhishvili, *Drevnekhristsianskie memorialno — kultovie pamiatniki Grusii* (Avtoreferat) (Tbilisi 1949) accessible for me only in abbreviated form.

¹⁴⁶ G. Chubinashvili, *Bolnisski Sioni* (Tbilisi 1940) 159–93.

¹⁴⁷ G. Chubinashvili, *K'art'uli Khelovnebis istoria* (in Georgian) (Tbilisi 1936) 205–18.

¹⁴⁸ Similar cases are to be observed in Sasanian sculptures, Sarre, *Die Kunst des alten Persien* (Berlin 1922) pl. 74, 78, 79, 81, 83.

little area is left free of sculpture or inscription (Supra p.113). All of these tendencies led in the later seventh and eighth centuries to a complete deterioration of proper representation of the human body. And, as a result, purely geometric, static, and graphic designs became the most important and dominating themes in sculpture. Dramatic examples of this can be seen in the abstract sculptures of Zebelda, Gveldzesi, Tsirkholi, and later in those of Usanet'i¹⁴⁹.

As a whole, the reliefs of Jvari are flat, but when we consider the period of many years over which they were developed, we realize that they reveal, in addition to their purely Oriental conception, characteristics reminiscent of classical patterns. In illustration of this, the Jvari Christ is most important: He is represented as a stocky full-length figure with a large head resting very close upon the shoulders. He stands solidly on the ground. His extremely long feet are given in perspective. The plastic arrangement of the fingers of His left hand, with the sleeve falling softly across His wrist, the heavy panels on the lower part of the coat delineated by a subtle control of shadow by the sculptur, and finally, the depth of the frame, all are Hellenistic vestiges.

In the disproportionate figures of the Iberian Hypatoi the bodies are revealed in natural simplicity; deeply cut lines permit the figures to stand out against their backgrounds, smoothly-flowing robes are draped over the knees, and finally, loosely-hanging but narrow sleeves partially cover the lower part of the bodies. These stylistic features, though no more than poor vestiges of classical form soon to disappear altogether, enable us to fix the date of the reliefs of Jvari as prior to that of the Moses relief which originated in Constantinople¹⁵⁰, of to that (fig. 11) of 'Maiestas Domini' from the Studion Basilica¹⁵¹, now in the Otoman Museum in Istanbul, in which, apart from a free arrangement of figures within a limited space, an advanced linear style is apparent.

In Georgia the church of Sioni in Ateni (already mentioned above) is, though vaguely dated, highly instructive, for it is not only illustrative of a certain phase in the process of Orientalization, but is also reminiscent of Jvari. It has been attributed to the seventh century by Prof. Chubinashvili¹⁵².

¹⁴⁹ G. Chubinashvili, op. cit. 126-68.

¹⁵⁰ O. Wulff, *Altchristliche und Mittelalterliche Byzantinische und Italienische Bildwerke* 1, *Altchristliche Bildwerke*, Vol. 3 (Berlin 1909). 19-20, note 32. For dating (late sixth and beginning of seventh centuries) see J. Kollwitz, *Ein Altar im Museum von Kayseri* = Festgabe für Alois Fuchs (Paderborn 1950) 19ff., especially p. 20.

¹⁵¹ G. Mendel, *Catalogue des sculptures Greques, Romaines et Byzantines* 2 (Constantinople 1914) 453/6; J. Kollwitz, *Oströmische Plastik der Theodosianischen Zeit* = Studien zur Spätantiken Kunstgeschichte 12 (Berlin 1941) 144/5, pl. 56, 1; H. Pierce, R. Tyler, *L'art Byzantine* I (Paris 1932) 128a, dates it to the fifth century. As for Kollwitz (*Ein Altar im Museum von Kayseri*, p. 20) he ascribes it to the sixth to seventh century.

¹⁵² G. Chubinashvili, *Monuments* 117.

The comparison of these sculptures to those of Jvari is amazingly revealing. First, the purely conceptual representation and diminished size of the human figures of Sioni should be noted. The figures represented on the western façade of that church (fig. 12), with their debased structural elements, where the whole field is dominated by straight, rigid, parallel lines, are most striking examples of abstract linear style, carried to the extremes.

The same evaluation could be made of the solemn representation of two hieratical figures over the eastern niche of the southern façade (fig. 13), in which there is emphasis again on the use of parallel lines and symmetrical delineation of figures.

Contrasting these figures to those in the relief of Jvari proves most useful for it reveals the last phase of transformation from a Hellenistic heritage to a lifeless schematic style which developed in a relatively short time after the building of Jvari.

But the confining of certain stylistic trends within specific chronological limits is not to be so easily arrived at for there are complications and contradictions in the instances presented above. The sculptures of Georgia at this period display a mingling of different styles which can sometimes be seen on a single monument. In illustration of this Ateni Sioni again offers the most effective examples. Besides the purely schematic and linear forms of sculpture and the static human figures mentioned above, there are panels on the church that exhibit an entirely different style which was inspired possibly by Hellenistic forms.

One such panel containing a relief of a rider in a hunting scene (fig. 14) displays great vitality and at the same time a softness of form, and could be considered a continuation of early iconographical schemes¹⁵³, of Sasanian art.

The examples mentioned above, however, offer only general characteristics, which can be accommodated within a wide chronological frame.

The means of fixing the reliefs of Jvari within narrower chronological limits is found among certain Armenian monuments specifically the church of Mren whose sculptures are dated 638–641¹⁵⁴. Here we find a close relationship in style and especially in iconography with the Jvari plaques. On the western façade of the church of Mren two angels occupy the upper half of the tympanum, and below them, in the lower half, are the figures of Christ and two saints, holding books. Two personages, presumably the founders of the church, David Saharuni and his wife¹⁵⁵, advance from left and right toward the four central figures. The iconographical similarity of this scene to that of the homage of the Iberian princes in the Jvari plaques is readily discernible.

¹⁵³ Ibid. 176ff.; In regard to style and form see E. Kitzinger, *Römische Malerei vom Beginn des 7. bis zur Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts* (Diss. Munich 1934).

¹⁵⁴ J. Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* 1 (Wien 1918) 41 (638–640), p. 182, figs. 467, 469, 470.

¹⁵⁵ S. Der Nersessian, op. cit. 89; J. Strzygowski, ibid. 430.

Stylistic characteristics common to the reliefs of the two churches are also apparent, but close examination of the Mren sculptures reveals, too, certain deviations from those of Jvari: at Mren the central group — the angels, Christ and the Saints — is more schematic, flat, and linear than is that of Jvari, and the figures at Mren are placed lower in their frame and are not full-length, so that their body structures are not revealed as they are at Jvari; at Mren the clothing is delineated by deeply-cut parallel lines creating sharp contrasts, without the smooth gradations found at Jvari; at Mren the style of sculpture does not permit the play of shadows which at Jvari in some cases gives plasticity and depth to the figures; there is no gradation in the shaping of the limbs, but only a monotony of surface that evokes a schematic impression as well as a feeling of harshness. In the main then, sculpture of the central group of Mren figures reveals a lifelessness and primitiveness closely akin to that of Zebelda, Gveldzesi, Tzirkholi and Usanet'i, and this in turn, resembles the sculpture of the Studion Basilica, although it bears, too, some similarity to that of the kneeling figures of the western façade of Mren, which reveals a close iconographical and stylistic parallel with the kneeling figures of Jvari¹⁵⁶, especially with the figure of K'obul (fig. 6). In the two side panels on the eastern façade of the church of Mren the figures of the princes of Armenia are more carefully and accurately worked than are other figure in the same panels or than those on the western façade¹⁵⁷. Unlike the figures on the Iberian Hypatoi of Jvari the Armenian princes do not kneel, but are shown striding forward, wearing on their shoulders tunique-like overcoats similar in style to those of the Iberian princes, but, considering the way they are draped, apparently different in material. The founders of the church of Mren are represented with the flatness and stiffness that are characteristic attributes of the advanced Oriental style.

When we speak of plasticity, we do not necessarily think of a surface standing out in relief from its background, but of a lamination of the relief and a gradation of the surface which produces a plasticity in contrast to the background. The comparison of the Christs of Jvari and Mren — which have in common the same iconographical source — and especially of their left hands, confirms the superiority of the Jvari work. There is no doubt that in the Jvari figure we find not only with greater 'classical' value than in the Mren, but also a longer experience of applied techniques and a higher artistic development.

From the evidence presented above, it is clear that the characteristics which are most significant in evaluating the plaques are their reflections of

¹⁵⁶ J. Strzygowski, *Ibid.*, fig. 468; also his *Origin of Christian Church Art* (Oxford 1923) fig. 72, pp. 242, 245.

¹⁵⁷ This possibly could be due to the fact that an iconographical scheme of Sasanian prototypes was used by the craftsmen. Tag i Bustan (Herzfeld, *Am Tor von Asien*, pl. XLIV) offers a striking parallel to the founders of the church of Mren.

classical attributes, their precise execution and their classically stylistic sensuality.

Therefore we conclude from our analysis that the reliefs of Jvari could not have originated after, but only before those of Mren, i. e. before 638.

It is true that its degree of abstraction is not always a certain means for dating a monument. There are some instances in Georgia, where, in addition to figures of a pronounced abstract style, there are also rounded, plastic, and intensely dynamic figures, as at Ateni Sioni (Supra p 74f) or as on the fragments of the ruins of the Armenian Church Zvartnots (A. D. 641-66). But in these instances there are also repetitions of former iconographic forms (Ateni Sioni) or possibly implications of work by foreign craftsmen, as in Zvartnots¹⁵⁸.

I have pointed out before that the harmoniously balanced sculptures of Jvari demonstrate a dynamic movement, vivacity of motion, and a certain tension which could be regarded as characteristic of the post-Justinian era. On the other hand, the sculptures reveal a radically abstract and linear form, which points to a relationship with monuments of first half of the seventh century¹⁵⁹.

Future research may define more sharply the stylistic trends and physiognomy of this particular period of Georgian art, and arrive at a more accurate date for the Jvari reliefs, but in the present circumstances, a dating at the very end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh century seems reasonable to me¹⁶⁰.

And from the historical facts and accounts which I have cited, and which are borne out in part by the inscriptions of the plaques themselves, it can be determined that the persons represented on the eastern façade of Jvari, in the Iberian metropolis of Mtskheta, are Stephanos I, his brother Demetre, and Adarnase I.

¹⁵⁸ A. Jacobson, *Očerki istorii zodschestva Armenii V-XVII. Vekov* (Moscow - Leningrad 1950) 36; S. Der Nersessian, op. cit. 68; Analogical development took place in the eastern Mediterranean regions, in Rome and in Constantinople as it was convincingly demonstrated by E. Kitzinger in his excellent paper: *Byzantine art in the period between Justinian and Iconoclasm* = *Bulletin zum XI. internationalen Byzantinischen Kongress* (München 1958) note 1, pp. 18, 29-30.

¹⁵⁹ In this connection, the southern façade of Jvari, particularly the figure of St. Stephen (fig. 6) seems to me to be the most important. It finds its counterpart outside the Caucasus in the mosaics of St. Demetrius Basilica of Salonica, particularly in the group of St. Demetrius and donors (629-643). For dating these mosaics see Lazarev, op. cit. I, 56, pl. V; F. Volbach, op. cit. 86, fig. 217; E. Kitzinger, op. cit. 21.

¹⁶⁰ It is needless to note that these reliefs could under no circumstances have appeared after the Arab invasion of Iberia in A. D. 643.