

Adaptation of Elements of Sasanian Art in Early Christian Georgian Reliefs

Kitty Machabeli

(George Chubinashvili National Research Center for Georgian Art History and Heritage Preservation)

Abstract: Throughout its history, Georgia was actively involved in the cultural life of the contemporary civilized world. Early medieval Georgian art was formed and based on ancient local artistic traditions. At the same time, close relations with Eastern Christian and Byzantine cultural-religious centers contributed to the creation of the artistic language of the medieval Georgian church art. In its initial stage Georgian Christian art was also nourished by the Sasanian artistic tradition.

This paper discusses the Sasanian artistic influence on the Georgian reliefs of the early Middle Ages. I will demonstrate how some themes and motifs originating from Iran were interpreted and assimilated on the local ground. Special attention will be paid to the symbols of power and ornamentation motives. The oriental elements are also pronounced in dresses of noblemen. The examples of early medieval Georgian reliefs will be discussed within a vast cultural-political context to understand mentioned “borrowings” from the non-Christian visual vocabulary.

Keywords: Iranian Art, Georgian Art, Medieval Reliefs, Ornaments

Introduction

Georgia, situated at the nexus of ancient civilizations, was actively engaged in the political and cultural life of the Near East and the Mediterranean kingdom of Kartli (Iberia; see Soltes 1999, 77-82; Lomouri 2000, 182-187) located in East Georgia, was a vibrant place

of cross-cultural encounters throughout the centuries. The Late Antiquity was marked by dramatic changes in the entire Mediterranean world. The introduction of a new religion and the establishment of the new Christian Empire of Byzantium resulted in the emergence of a new socio-political order. The Roman Empire and Sassanian Kingdom, as two main centers of power, influenced contemporary cultural developments far beyond their borders.¹ The East Georgian Kingdom was an integral part of the processes taking place in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Iranian presence in the Caucasus, especially between the 3rd and 7th centuries, influenced the region's political, economic, and cultural life. The interactions between Georgian and Iranian cultures have a long and complex history, which has been the subject of several studies. I shall thus avoid discussing the well-known facts regarding the relations between these two nations. Instead, I will concentrate on a less studied issue: the Iranian influences on early Christian Georgian art.²

The interactions with Eastern Christian cultural centers and the Byzantine Empire determined the main characteristic of medieval Georgian art. However, Sassanian culture was another source of inspiration for Georgian official art during the early medieval period. This neighboring kingdom played a significant role in the political and social history of Georgia. The cross-cultural artistic communication that began in the pre-Christian period became more evident by the 3rd century AD, when the Roman Empire started to decline and a powerful Sassanian Iran came to the fore.

Georgian-Iranian Cultural Contacts in the Late Antiquity

The intensive contacts between the Sassanian Kingdom and Georgia are reflected in the material culture. Artifacts uncovered in the rich tombs of Iberian (eastern Georgia) aristocracy, dating back to the 3rd century AD, include diplomatic gifts from Sassanian authorities to local elites. Striking examples of such gifts include silver vessels adorned with portraits of Sassanian rulers and aristocrats. One notable artifact is a silver bowl depicting Pitiakhsh (Middle Persian *btħšy*), which dates back to the second half of the 3rd century and was discovered in the necropolis of Armaziskhevi, near Mtskheta, the ancient capital of Georgia (Fig. 1; Amiranashvili 1950, 91-101; Henning 1961; Machabeli 1972; Machabeli 1983, pls. 22-23, 57-59).

The silver cup from Sargveshi features an image of Shahanshah Varahran/Bahram II (r. 276-293; see Tschubinaschwili 1925, Taf. 1-2; Lukonin 1969, 95-96, 191, ill. 22a, 22b; Machabeli 1983, 112-113, pls. 58-59). A silver ornamented cup excavated in Ertso, eastern Georgia, showcases a Sasanian “monogram-like” element in its central medallion (Machabeli 1976, 123-130, pls. 44-45). These precious metal vessels, which were part of the sumptuous gifts received by the Georgian elite, serve as compelling evidence of the

¹ On this topic see Daryaee 2018.

² For political and social relations between Georgia and Iran, see Janashia 1949; Javakhishvili 1951, 236-269, 348-351; Muskhelishvili 2003; Rapp 2014.

intense interchange between the aristocracy of Kartli (Iberia) and their Sasanian counterparts (Figs. 2-3).



FIGURE 1. Sasanian silver bowl with a portrait of Pitiakhsh Papak from Armaziskhevi, 3rd century³

The Sasanian “royal iconographic” element is employed in the decoration of a silver plate from Jinvali, eastern Georgia, dated to the 3rd century. In the central tondo of the vessel, an eagle is depicted holding a wreath adorned with Sasanian ribbons in the beak. This symbol of power is an inseparable element of Sasanian compositions of investiture (Machabeli 1983, pl. 72-73).⁴ It is believed that this plate is of local production and had a ceremonial function.

Several silver plates unearthed in the eastern part of Georgia, also dated to the 3rd century, share a same iconographic scheme, with a horse depicted standing before fire altars at the center. Although these vessels are attributed to local workshops, they reveal close affinities with Zoroastrian iconography.

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⁴ This wreath is also featured in many official depictions of Sasanian rulers, as evidenced by the reliefs of investiture found at Naqsh-e Rostam, Naqsh-e Rajab, and Taq-e Bostan, which date from the 3rd-7th centuries. See also a capital from Taq-e Bostan, and a silver vessel from Walters Art Gallery: Ghirshman 1962, figs. 218, 233, 339, 376; Harper and Meyers 1981, pl. 36.



FIGURE 2. Sasanian silver bowl from Sargveshi, 3rd century

Sassanian art, rooted in the longstanding cultural traditions of the East, is perceived as the final stage in the development of ancient Near Eastern culture. Through Sassanian art, the artistic achievements of the East were transmitted to Western cultures (Riemschneider 1963, 8). The strong Iranian presence in East Georgia continued to exert influence on its art even after the adoption of Christianity. These influences can be traced throughout various branches of Christian art in Georgia. This paper will examine the traces of Iranian visual vocabulary in early Christian Georgian reliefs.



Figure 3. Details of the Sasanian silver bowl from Sargveshi, 3rd century

Symbols of Power in Early Christian Georgian Reliefs

The aforementioned influences are revealed in various forms in early medieval Georgian religious reliefs. The artistic style and specific elements - including ornamental motifs, symbols, attire, and the overall character of the hieratic compositions - can be linked to

Sassanian art. A significant example that displays Sassanian elements is a stone slab from Samtsevrissi, which depicts the veneration of the cross and dates to around the turn of the 5th-6th century (Fig. 4; see Machabeli 2013, 21-27. fig. 1). This panel represents a man standing before an encircled cross installed on a pole. He is clad in Byzantine-style garments – including a mantle with *tavlion* (a rectangular, often embroidered rectangular piece of textile) and a diadem with *prependulia* (strings of pearls attached to the diadem). In his right hand, he holds a stylized flower, whose size and positioning suggest that it carries significant symbolic meaning within the overall composition. This motif recalls the Sassanian official portraits that are known from various preserved artifacts.



FIGURE 4. A stela from Samtsevrissi, 6th century

The strictly regulated ritual of the Sassanian court and official art incorporated various symbols of power, one of which was the flower. This motif has a special connotation, as Sassanian silver vessels and seals often feature rulers and noblemen holding stylized flower, thereby stressing their social status (Borisov and Lukonin 1963, 167-168, nos. 611, 613-619; Soudavar 2003, figs. 51-52).⁵ Trever, in her examination and visual materials, argues that the flower was a well-established ceremonial element within

⁵ Papak holds a similar type of flower on the mentioned silver cup from Armaziskhevi, see Machabeli 1976, 106-120.

the Sasanian royal court. During official receptions, the Shah of Iran would present nobles and officials with a flower or a blossoming branch as a symbol of their social standing (Trever 1960).



FIGURE 5. Relief of the stone cross pillar from Dmanisi, 6th century

The symbolism of the flower was also connected to religious concepts. It was associated with the worship of deities such as Anahita, Mithra (Soudavar 2003, figs. 51, 73). From this, we can infer that the figure depicted on the Samtsevisi panel exhibit a combination of Byzantine and Sassanian elements. The dress and insignia of power combine both Byzantine and Sassanian elements. This “symbiosis” of diverse traditions mirrors the political and cultural climate of the period in eastern Georgia. By incorporating familiar symbols of power, the local government aimed to enhance its public perception and legitimacy.

The flower appears as an attribute of the noblemen depicted on early medieval Georgian cult objects, particularly stone crosses dated to the 6th and 7th centuries. The tradition of erecting of free-standing stone crosses on pillars is linked to the rise of the feudal system in the country (Janashia 1949, 125-126). The stone crosses commissioned by the local aristocracy intended for the veneration also demonstrated the piety and social standing of their patrons.

The carved decorations on these crosses feature religious subjects, ornamental designs, symbolic imagery, and “portraits” of the commissioners. They are depicted in frontal, static posture, holding a flower in one hand (as seen on the stone cross pillars from Dmanisi, Brdazori, Nazgaura from the 6th-7th centuries; Machabeli 1991, 98-103, 100, 105, 108). On the relief of Dmaisi, a male figure stands on a stylized palmette, underscoring his exceptional significance. This attribute alludes to the Sasanian artistic vocabulary and is associated with gods and rulers (Figs. 5-6).⁶



FIGURE 6. Relief of the stone cross pillar from Brdazori, 6th century

The legacy of the Sasanian artistic tradition is also revealed in the Christian symbols depicted on early Georgian reliefs. The arms of carved stone crosses that crown the pillars

⁶ Compare with the figure of Mithra standing on a lotus flower in the investiture relief of Ardašir II (379-383), and the image of Anahita depicted on a capital at Taq-e Bostan (Ghirshman 1962, 190, ills. 233, 395). For the portraits emerging from a flower, see Harper and Meyers 1981, pl. 7.

are often adorned with Sassanian floral motifs. Variations of the tree-petal lily (or iris?) enhance the spiritual significance of the cross.⁷

A distinctive composition of the veneration of the cross adorns the capital of the stone cross pillar from Dmanisi (Fig. 7; Machabeli 1988, ill. 65; Machabeli 2008, ill. 3). The cross, along with the high pillar supporting it, occupies the entire height of the capital, exhibiting an accurate representation of its structure.

Next to the cross is a figure, now heavily damaged, that is inscribed in an arch. At first glance, the male figure appears to be seated cross-legged, with hands slightly bent at the elbows. However, a closer examination reveals that he is depicted sitting with his hands resting against his body. This posture aligns with a familiar visual formula present in Sassanian art, often depicting enthroned kings.⁸ The gesture of the strictly frontal figure on the Dmanisi capital echoes the imagery of Sassanian rulers, who are typically shown holding a sword between their split legs (Ghirshman 1962, ill. 225-226; Harper and Meyers



FIGURE 7. Capital of the stone cross pillar from Dmanisi, 6th century

⁷ For carved crosses from Dmanisi, 6th-7th centuries, see Machabeli 2008, ills. 62, 63.

⁸ For the images of enthroned Sassanian kings, see Harper and Meyers 1981, figs. 25, 26, 27, 33, pls. 19, 35, 36. For the relief of triumph of Shapur II in Bishapur, 6th century, see Ghirshman 1962, ills. 225-226.

1981, 99-102, figs. 25, 26, 27, 33, pls. 19, 35, 36). The arch is also a “borrowing” from the pictorial vocabulary of official Sasanian art (Harper and Meyers 1981, pls. 34, 35). The mentioned iconographic similarities with depictions of rulers of ancient Iran indicate that the artist adhered to the established formulas used for representing Sasanian kings. It is presumed that this composition depicts the commissioner of the cross, a distinctive figure who held a high administrative position. This image attests that the official portraiture of the mighty of the Sasanian Kingdom was familiar to the Iberians, both craftsmen and their audience.



FIGURE 8. The Mother of God. The capital of the stone cross pillar from Nazgaura, 6th century (© author's archive)

The theme of enthroned monarchs, connected with royal power and triumph, was adopted by Christian iconography. The depiction of the enthroned Virgin and Child is prevalent in Christian art. One of the early examples of this subject is shown on the capital of a stone cross found near the village Nazgaura, dating to the 6th century (Fig. 8). In this representation, the Mother of God is seated on a backless throne with cushion on it (Kakhiani and al. 2012, pl. 11). The throne is decorated with protomes featuring birds, a design that lacks parallels in Georgian art and resembles the royal bench thrones seen in royal Sasanian iconography.⁹

⁹ On typology of thrones in Sasanian art, see Harper and Meyers 1981, 100-123.

Sassanian royal thrones supported by figures of lions, or griffins were typical seats for Sassanian kings.¹⁰ It is evident that the thrones with zoomorphic legs of Sassanian kings inspired the Georgian artist. The creator of Nazgaura reliefs offers his own version of the Sassanian throne, modifying its traditional elements. Instead of incorporating legs, he uses zoomorphic motifs (birds or *senmurvs*?) to decorate the horizontal part of the furniture. These elements, drawn from Sassanian royal iconography, emphasize the elevated status of the rulers and have been appropriated by the artist to highlight the importance and dignity of the Virgin.

In early Christian Georgian reliefs, we also find symbols of Sasanian royal power, such as the “royal ribbons”. As noted, the “sacred ribbons” of the Sassanians, which are closely associated with royal authority, become intertwined with the Christian cult objects of early medieval Georgia. The symbolic references to Sassanian royal iconography found on stone crosses aim to stress the power and significance of the Cross installed on the pillars. This concept is also seen in the relief composition placed above the entrance of the 6th-century church in Akvaneba (Fig. 9; see also Chubinashvili 1972, pl. 42).



FIGURE 9. Relief panel from Akvaneba Church, 6th century (© author’s archive)

At the center of this distinctive composition is an equal-armed cross (or “Maltese cross”) inscribed within a medallion. The upper part of the medallion is adorned with nine

¹⁰ See a griffin throne leg in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. See also thrones in the compositions of enthroned kings; e.g. Dokhtar-i Noshirwan murals, a cup of Khosro I belonging to the 6th century, and a silver plate from Strelka (see Ghirshman 1962, 203-205, 318, figs. 244, 427).

three-petal flowers arranged radially. Symmetrically extending from the bottom of the medallion are two Sasanian royal ribbons. On either side of the cross, three bunches of grapes are depicted, with birds facing the cross, nibble at the grapes.

The inscribed cross within the medallion alludes to the Roman triumphal iconography of *imago clipeata*, reflecting the victorious vision of the cross by Constantine the Great before the battle of the Milvian Bridge.¹¹ The Akvaneba composition, which evoked the glory of the Cross and Paradise, denotes a liminal space between the sacred and the “profane”. Here we see the traditional elements from the Sassanian visual repertoire, paired with Roman triumphal iconography, effectively used to convey key Christian concepts.

The influence of Sassanian visual tradition is evident in the relief composition discovered in the village of Gulbaghi in the Marneuli district (Chubinashvili 1972, fig. 40). Here again, the artist uses familiar symbolic images to convey religious ideas. The central element of the panel is a cross inscribed within a medallion, which is surrounded by stylized flowers of various shapes.

The relief decoration of fragments of the base of a stone pillar from the 6th to 7th centuries, which was incorporated into the church of Satkhe during its 10th-century reconstruction, along with the capital from the Bolnisi Museum (Machabeli 2014, 35, pl. III.2; 2021, 292-295), demonstrate adherence to the motifs discussed above. The equal-armed crosses in a medallion are adorned with royal ribbons.

The relief compositions under discussion were created in various local workshops, where the impact of Sassanian artistic tradition is quite obvious in their decorative programs. It can be assumed that the above-mentioned patterns used in the carvings - combining Christian and Sassanian symbolic elements - were elaborated by local craftsmen.

The ribbons appear in different contexts as well. The 5th-century church of Bolnisi Sion provides an interesting example of this motif (Fig. 10). The three-nave basilica features symbolic relief representations and ornamentation throughout its separate sections (Chubinashvili 1940, 154-192). Special attention is given to the capitals of pilasters and the lintels of the doors. Notably, the capitals of the south gallery are adorned with stylized trees accompanied by ribbons (Chubinashvili 1940, fig. 98).

A different version of this motif is observed on the stone cross pillars from Gomareti, where the upright royal ribbons emerge from a lotus flower (Machabeli 2008, pl. 52). This adaptation of the motif, characterized by its vertical structure, is likely influenced by the elongated surface of the pillar.

¹¹ See the miniature composition of Constantine’s vision in the manuscript of the homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, 879-883 AD, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, BnF MS Gr 510, folio 440 recto (Brubaker 1999, 163-164, fig. 45).

Among the symbolic motifs derived from Sassanian heritage that were adopted in early medieval Georgian reliefs are the “spread wings”.¹² This motif, which carries a royal connotation, was seen as a symbol of power and success. Wings frequently appear on



FIGURE 10. A capital from Bolnisi Sioni, end of the 5th century (© author’s archive)

Sassanian seals and coins with royal portraits (Ghirshman 1962, figs. 327-329; Borisov and Lukonin 1963, nos. 16, 20, 51, 394), serving as an additional embellishment to royal crowns. It was believed that royalty depicted with wings was under special divine protection. The representation of wings varied widely; they could be illustrated realistically, resembling falcon wings, or interpreted as vegetal motifs, such as acanthus leaves. Even when transformed into floral designs, the wings retained their symbolic significance (Porada 1965, 201, fig. 110; Soudavar 2003, 19-24; Compareti 2010, 205).

One of the earliest depictions of spread wings can be found on the reliefs of the church of Tsilkani (Fig. 11).¹³ The winged crosses decorate the capitals of the southeast and southwest pilons, with crosses supported by pairs of wings and ribbons. The somewhat chaotic structure of the compositions and crude rendering indicate that these works were created during an early period when iconographic and compositional principles were still in the process of development. Notably, in this composition, the wings visually dominate the cross.

¹² On symbolism of the Sassanian spread wings, see Soudavar 2003, 19-24; Compareti 2010.

¹³ The church constructed in the 5th-6th centuries was refurbished several times over the century; however, the considered reliefs belonged to the original decoration (see Andgouladze 1977, 1-7).

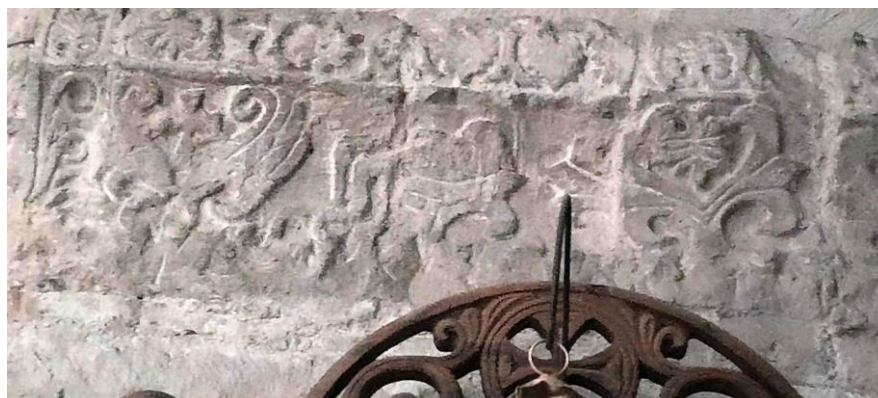


FIGURE 11. Relief composition from Tsilkani Church, 5th-6th centuries (© author's archive)

The relief of the Ascension of the Cross in the lunette of the main southern entrance of the church of Djvari in Mtskheta deserves special attention. The cross, within a medallion held by two floating angels, is known as the “Flourishing Cross” (Fig. 12; Chubinashvili 1948, 149-153, pls. 24-25, Aladashvili 1977, 36-40). This type of cross combines motifs of spread wings and acanthus leaves, serving as a visual reference to the Tree of Life. This motif is also evident in a number of relief crosses dated to the 6th and 7th centuries. Notably, the fragment used as spolia in the church of Satkhe and another fragment from the Bolnisi Museum illustrate this variation of the cross, dating back to the 5th -6th centuries (Machabeli 2014, fig. 24).



FIGURE 12. The Ascension of the Cross from Djvari Church, Mtskheta, 585/587-604/605 (© author's archive)

The influence of Sassanian visual tradition is also observed in the relief composition discovered in the village of Gulbaghi in the Marneuli district (Chubinashvili 1972, fig. 40). Here again, the artist employs familiar symbolic imagery to convey religious ideas. The cross, within a medallion and serving as the central element of the panel, is surrounded by stylized flowers of various shapes.

Zoomorphic Motifs

The capital of the Nazghaura stone pillar features images of a peacock and a lion on its northern and eastern faces. Considering the Christian concept of “vertical hierarchy”, the placement of these zoomorphic motifs on the capital carries a symbolic meaning within the broader iconographic and theological framework of the decoration (Kakhiani et al. 2012, pls. 10, 14, 15).

Peacocks, symbolizing eternal life, were often depicted in early Christian art.¹⁴ This motif is particularly seen in early medieval Georgian reliefs.¹⁵ It should be stressed that peacocks are mainly depicted on specific cult objects, such as ex-voto stone crosses. Numerous inscriptions associated with these crosses highlight their purpose for the salvation of their commissioners. Therefore, this motif, connected with resurrection and eternal life, was an appropriate element for this type of monument.¹⁶

The representation of a peacock on the Nazgaura capital is notable for its unique feature: Sassanian royal ribbons, which flow behind the bird, are attached to its neck.¹⁷ The artist skillfully blends various traditions, merging Christian and Sassanian royal iconographic elements. Nevertheless, the overall meaning of this symbolic representation

¹⁴ Peacocks, often depicted in late Antique and early Christian art, were associated with the pagan goddess Juno and were also incorporated into funerary contexts. For an examination of the symbolism of the peacock in late Antique and early Christian art see (with earlier bibliography) Anđelković et al. 2011. Additionally, these birds are a well-known motif in pre-Christian Georgian art, as evidenced by their decoration on a silver patera from Armaziskhevi dating to the 2nd century (Machabeli 1976, 33-34; on late antique glass vessel from Samtavro see Ugrelidze 1951, fig. 1).

¹⁵ On the capital of the southern pilaster of the Baptistery of Zion in Bolnisi, dating to the 5th century, two peacocks flank the cross (Chubinashvili, 1940, 160, pl. IV). Moreover, peacocks are depicted on the base of a stone cross used as spolia in the facade of the so-called “Red Church” (Kzil-Kilissa) in the Dmanisi district from the 6th century (Machabeli 2008, pl. 57). Further examples can be found in the relief embedded in the wall of the Akaurta church (Rcheulishvili 1948, 33, pl. 19.2). Fragments of stone crosses with peacock reliefs have also been utilized as spolia in the churches of Orsavrdebi, Satkhe, and Kianeti, from the 6th century (Machabeli 2014, ills. 18, 24, 29).

¹⁶ Peacocks and other zoomorphic motifs are commonly used in Sasanian textiles. On the Taq-e Bostan rock relief, which depicts a scene of royal hunting dating to the 5th-6th centuries, peacocks are features as decorative elements on the king’s attire (see Ghirshman 1962, 227, ill. 270).

¹⁷ Ribbons appear in various contexts in Sasanian art. For some examples see Ghirshman 1962, ills. 196, 214, 247, 248, 254; Harper and Meyers 1981, pls. 6, 10, 13, 15-20, 27. On the Sassanian royal ribbons see Abarquyi et al. 2018, 131-158; Bagirov 2020, 54-61.

aligns with the religious context of the cult object, particularly reflecting Christian concepts of triumph and salvation (Fig. 13).



Figure 13. A peacock on the capital of a stone cross pillar from Nazgaura, 6th century (© author's archive)

The same iconographic motif is seen on the stone cross found in the Bolnisi district, dating to the 6th century (Javakhishvili 1998, 8, pl. I.2).¹⁸ The peacock is the only figurative element of the decoration, while the other three sides of the column feature various ornamental motifs. The peacock's neck is adorned with royal ribbons that culminate in a three-petal flower bow.¹⁹ As previously mentioned, both the ribbons and the flower are Sasanian royal symbols. These attributes highlight the symbolic significance of peacocks on the pillars of crosses (Fig. 14).

Lions, included in the zoomorphic repertoire of early Georgian reliefs, are also noteworthy. The earliest representations of lions can be found in the relief decoration of the 5th-century church of Bolnisi Sion (Chubinashvili 1940, pl. I; Aladashvili 1977, fig. 3-4). On the capital of the southern pilaster of the sanctuary apse, the scene is divided horizontally into two parts. A running goat is depicted between two sitting lions, while three stylized trees in the "Sassanian style" organize the composition. The lower scene features a bear chasing a donkey. The closest parallel to the Bolnisi relief capital is found in the stucco relief panels from the Ctesiphon Palace, housed in the Metropolitan Museum,

¹⁸ A peacock with a ribbon tied around its neck is depicted on the bottom of a Sasanian silver cup from Mazandaran, dating to the 6th century (see Ghirshman 1962, 216, ill. 257).

¹⁹ A similar type of ribbon features a mountain goat on an Iranian silver cup from the Hermitage collection (see Lukonin 1977, 206).

which depict a bear on one panel and a boar on the other, both charging through reeds, dating to around the 6th century. These compositions allude to the royal hunt, a popular theme in ancient Near Eastern official art (Orbeli and Trever 1935, pls. 22, 23, 35, 48, 49; Harper and Meyers 1981, pls. 10, 11a, b, 14, 25, 30, 37). It can be inferred that Sassanian models were in circulation within the Kingdom of Kartli.



FIGURE 14. Detail of a stone cross pillar from Bolnisi, 6th century (© author's archive)

A lion is also part of the decoration on the previously discussed Nazgaura stone cross pillar capital, depicted on the north face of the capital next to the Mother of God and Child (Fig. 15). While there is no direct symbolic link between the Mother of God and lions, understanding the significance of the lion in ancient Near Eastern tradition helps clarify its presence. In this context, lions were symbols of kingship and maintained their powerful associations during the Sassanian period. Additionally, they are linked to Iranian heroes, representing power and strength. Thus, this ancient zoomorphic motif metaphorically underscores the importance of the representation of the Virgin and Child on the aforementioned stone cross from Nazgaura.

Sassanian architectural stucco ornamentation was widely utilized by early medieval Georgian craftsmen.²⁰ The previously mentioned Bolnisi church displays a diverse array of ornamental patterns that originated from the East (Chubinashvili 1940, fig. 98). These

²⁰ For ornamental repertoire in Sassanian art, see Porada 1965, 211-213; Kharazmi, Afhami and Tavosi 2012.

include stylized flowers, palmettes, half-palmettes, wing-palmettes, and geometric designs featuring a network of rhombuses, all extensively used in the decoration of the stone cross pillars.²¹ The regularly repeated motifs of Sasanian architectural ornamentation are arranged

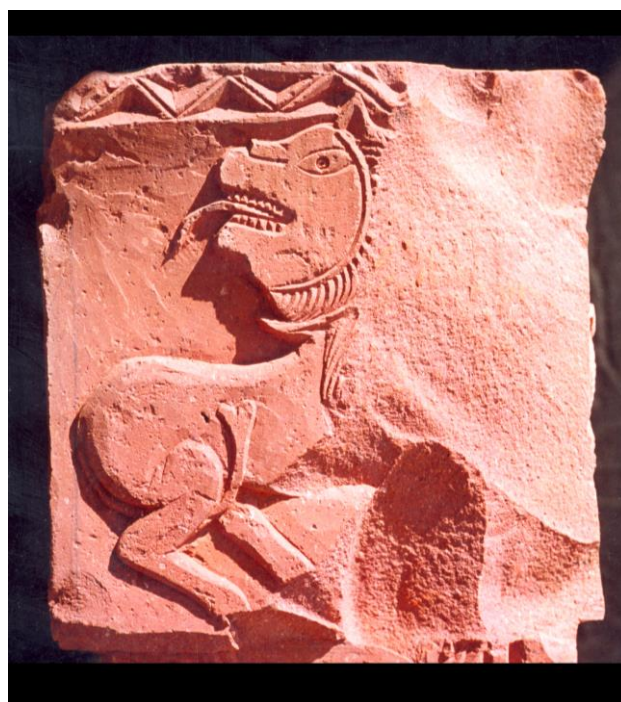


FIGURE 15. The capital of a stone cross pillar from Nazgaura, 6th century (© author's archive)

both vertically and horizontally on the walls of palaces. The principles of stucco decoration, which involve the combination of one or several motifs, allowed for the creation of various ornamental compositions (Kharazmi, Afhami and Tavoosi 2012, 230). The frieze-like Sasanian architectural ornaments, characterized by repeating patterns, were well-suited for the decoration of stone cross pillars with narrow vertical facets. The compositional structure and decorative effect of these motifs, along with their associations with royalty and power, correspond to the functions and significance of the early medieval Georgian stone crosses commissioned by the local nobility.

Conclusions

The material examined in this study presents striking examples of both explicit and implicit adaptations of Iranian artistic vocabulary, particularly in relation to royal iconography. The complex symbols and visual formulae of Sasanian art were transformed

²¹ For some examples, see Chubinashvili 1972, figs. 28, 55, 56; Javakhishvili 1998, pls. VII.3-4, XVII.4, XXV.1, XXVII.1; Machabeli 2008, pl. 36, 61. The semantic meaning of the ornaments is a complex issue and could not be addressed in this paper.

to meet the needs of the new religion. The architectural reliefs and sculptural decorations of stone cross pillars exemplify the intricate process of adapting and appropriating markers of cultural identity developed within a diverse socio-cultural context. The political and cultural dominance of the Sassanians during the 5th-6th centuries provided models for the artistic production of the elite, who commissioned these church artworks.²² However, Georgian artisans developed their own coherent system of decoration, integrating complex symbols rooted in Near Eastern civilizations.

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²² Although the existence of many Sassanian elements in European art is explained by their "possible and probable links with the West" (Porada 1965, 198), the Sasanian influence on church buildings and their decoration in the early medieval Georgian art might be addressed here as the problem, which requires a special investigation that has not been carried out.

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