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Image of Afterlife in Medieval Plastic Art of Abkhazia

The medieval plastic art of Abkhazia is not studied as intensively as that of antiquity. The images of the death and the afterlife are not frequent. Two images can be related to the conceptions of the afterlife. One of them is a stone relief from Abkhazian State museum in Sukhum which dating of the production, function, and identification of the represented scene remain unanswered. The closest stylistic parallel is the lost relief with an inscription from Anacopia fortress which informs of the construction of the church under the Byzantine emperor Constantine X Monomachos (1042-1055). The presence of the same animals and of the cross in a compositional centre leads to a supposition that in both cases the same subject was represented. It could be an illustration of one fragment of Isaiah's prophecy (11. 6-9). To sum up the analysis of Christian images that illustrate Isaiah's prophecy (11. 6-9) in the pre-iconoclastic period one can mention several. Firstly, all the known images are made in the mosaic technique and placed on the floor. Secondly, a bull and a lion are represented in front of one another along with the other animals mentioned by the prophet or alone. Thirdly, a bull and a lion are normally separated by the pomegranate tree or by the vine; both plants being the symbols of a paradise. In this context the plants apparently represent the Tree of life.

As such they have already been confronted with a cross since the end of the IVth century. An elaboration of the theological concept of ζύλον ξω ποιόν (Ignatius Trall., II) promotes emergence of an iconographic type of *crux florida* approx. from the beginning of the Vth century. It is worth noting that in the pre-iconoclastic period the scenes depicting a peace of paradise among animals and plants sometimes include the Tree of life shown as a cross, but always in blossom, that is *crux florida*. In the iconoclastic and post-iconoclastic period the cross turns into one of the main subjects of the theological meditation and exegesis. It is reflected in the general arrangement of the ecclesiastic decoration, with a cross depiction usually occupying the centre-piece. Certain iconographic formulas, which had been quite popular in the paleochristian period, evolved and changed their traditional occurrence. For instance different types of the cross, as well as the images of the garden of paradise with the Tree of life depicted as a vine among the animals emerge in the façade decoration. It is in this period that in the scenes that may be considered a development of a peace of paradise theme according to prophet Isaiah (11. 6-9), in place of the vine, the pomegranate tree and *crux florida*, a cross of the Latin or Maltese type sometimes appears.

The other examples deal with the stone plastic of the Armenian churches. There is a relief with the image of *crux florida* over the slit-like window in the western façade of the St. Cross church in Akdamar island (915-921). In a vestibule of the Sanahin monastery (1181) a capital of column is decorated with the heads of a lion and a bull.

Another relief decorates the burial place. There is a monumental cross atop of a window in the western façade of a two-storey burial church Astvatsatsin in the ancient city of Yeghvard, with figures of a lion and a bull being quite visible at its bottom.

Summing up the presented survey of the images of Isaiah's prophecy (11. 6 – 9), one should pay attention to the relief from the Abkhazian State museum in the city of Sukhum. The identification of its subject as well as of one from Anacopia with Isaiah's prophecy has already been proposed by L.G. Khrushkova, albeit with no sufficient proof. As for their date, the researcher referring to the "typically paleochristian symbolic" places both reliefs in the VIth century. Considering all the above-stated observations as well as the stylistic analogies and archaeological context, both reliefs should be dated back to the first half of the XIth century. The scene represented in the plate may echo the iconographic formula that emerged in Palestine in the initial stages of the forming of the figurative symbolic of the Christian art.

To conclude, the iconographic, archaeological and epigraphic contexts permit dating two stone reliefs from the territory of Abkhazia by the XIth century. The image of a bull and a lion with a cross can be regarded as an evolution of the ancient Syro-Palestinian iconographic theme representing the

afterlife in paradise. In medieval period it was used in decoration of the sepulchral monuments being associated with death and resurrection.