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**Early Images of the Mother of God in Georgian Art
(5th-10th centuries)**

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The aim of the article is to present sculptural images of the Virgin Mary created from the 5th to the 10th century in Georgia. The study reveals Eastern and Western influences as well as individual characteristics and at the same time, the local iconographic features are distinguished from the Byzantine. The surviving images in stone relief - mainly on stone slabs - present unique examples in terms of Early Christian and early medieval iconography.

Keywords: 6th-century art, early medieval, Georgian art, Kartli, Byzantine, stela, iconography, Virgin, East and West, Theotokos, Maria Lactans, Mary Orans, Platytera, icon, Our Lady of the Sign

After the proclamation of Christianity as the official religion in the Iberian Kingdom (East Georgia) in the 4th century AD (326), the formation of the country's cultural environment was significantly decided by emerging processes (ecclesiastical construction, monastic life, translation work, etc.). Linked to each other via foreign and domestic politics, religious art and writing, complex research is required when examining works of Georgian art. Apart from the situation in the country, external factors also play an important role, including the relationships of large or small neighboring states and tribes. The historical sources conveying a detailed account of the country's extant issues are important, including the introduction and spread of Christianity (Moqtsevai kartlisai- The conversion of Kartli).¹ During the aforementioned period, many Georgian monastic centers in the country and abroad were founded. The country's spiritual culture was created in these centers, with spiritual literature being written and translated. At the first stage of the introduction of Christianity, these monastic centers were primarily connected to countries in eastern Christendom: the Old Lavra of St Chariton (4th c.), the Lavra of St Sabbas (5th c), and the monastery of St Theodore Stratelates in Bethlehem (6th-7th c.) in the Holy Land.² Later on, however, an active movement spread towards western Christendom, particularly on the territories of the Byzantine Empire. Such centers were Bithynian Olympus (860s), Hromanas (876), and the Iveron Monastery on Athos (10th c.).³ The activities in the monastic centers had direct or indirect influence on the country's inhabitants at that time and accordingly, testify of the active artistic production. When observing the earliest preserved works, it is possible to discuss the Christian worldview that defined religiosity in everyday life and was frequently reflected for a certain length of time through the language of formed symbols. It was not rare that this functioned as the first source of a unique iconographic and visual language. In this context, the images of the Mother of God developed as an important iconographic field at an early stage, covering stone-carved reliefs on stone slabs and church facades, chancel panels, as well as material represented by repousse and tile. Material preserved from around 500 to the 10th century will be examined in this paper.

This period was constantly changing in Georgia in political as well as religious terms. The Kingdom of Lazica (West Georgia) was subordinated first to the Romans and then to the Byzantines,⁴ while the Kingdom of Iberia was



1 Relief on the architrave, Church of Edzani, 6th c. (photo: D. Khoshtaria)



2 Relief on the architrave, Church of Kvemo Bolnisi, 6th c. (photo: D. Khoshtaria)



3 Fragment from the stele of Khandisi, 6th c., Georgian National Museum (from K. Machabeli, 2008, ill. 9)



4 Fragment from the stele of Bolnisi 6th c. (from N. Chubinashvili, 1972, p. 76, tab. 45)

strongly influenced by Persia. Since the 650s, both parts of the country came under Arab rule.⁵ Thus, the diverse cultural production of such a small country and works created through different influences in various regions of the country is expected. In the neighboring countries the situation differed as well; conquered by Persia, Armenia officially recognized Monophysite Christianity, whereas Kartli, being suffragane to the Patriarchate of Antioch until the 5th century (the Georgian Church received autocephaly in the 460-70s), was faithful to Diophysite Christianity. Various heresies such as Arianism, Manichaeism, Nestorianism, etc. spread parallel with "Persian" Christianity (St Janashia) i.e. Monophysitism, yet despite these circumstances, it can be said that such works bearing common national tendencies are being created in a different ethno-cultural environment and are thought of as works that clearly expressed Georgian art. Stylistic depictions however follow a line of general development throughout the entire country.

Georgian architecture, in contrast to early Byzantine monuments, is rich with relief sculpture. After Mary was pronounced the Mother of God (at the Ecclesiastical Council of Ephesus in 431) some canonical indicators helped shape the iconographic models following from the art of the catacombs (until the late period),⁶ and the iconography of Mary gradually takes on a form presenting her as a queen and at the same time, the Mother of God. We can follow the path of the development from ancient art to Early Christian art of the specific iconographic types, mostly with the royal art extant in the central regions of Byzantium. Late Antique art is the starting point for this, in the case when it is comparatively complex to understand the artistic development, especially in the peripheries with, for example, the identification of the origin of an iconographic type used as an example by a local master artisan. The characteristic of a local workshop and the ethnic affiliation resulting from a national quality become clearer when compared during this period. Accordingly, due to a strong ethno-cultural factor, it becomes difficult to establish whether a specific thematic composition, form, or iconographic type is connected to that "great" art and is adopted, or if it has emerged on national soil and has the pretense of being unique.

The image of Mary turned out to be so familiar for this cultural space that later on the tradition developed defining Georgia as an appendage to the Mother of God, the country under her particular protection and patronage. There are several early churches in Georgia the initial dedication of which is known and the majority of them was dedicated to the Mother of God, such as Bolnisi Sioni (5th c.), Edzani Sioni (6th c.), and Ateni Sioni (7th c.). The Mother of God turned out to be an image giving the means for a multi-sided interpretation semantically or syntactically, and a continual object of veneration over the centuries.⁷

Earlier works basically present Mary as Mother of God. Mary represented above the entrance to Edzani Sioni (fig. 1) and the church of Kvemo Bolnisi (fig. 2) is raised up by angels,⁸ whereas the censer depicted in the angels' hands and a crown probably express her glorification. This composition belongs to Christological program, since the Mother of God is also presented in a similar composition with Christ on the facade of Edzani Sioni, which is a reference to her special importance.⁹ This type of Marian iconography is still a symbol of the victory of Christianity and Christ's rule upon the earth as the Logos incarnate (Mother of God enthroned like the terrestrial church).¹⁰ An analogy to the Edzani relief is the relief on the architrave at Kvemo Bolnisi, which has survived to the present day in a damaged form. The composition of the Khandisi stele (fig. 3) with an image of Mother of God is a direct parallel to the aforementioned. Here Mary is also raised up by angels, yet due to the specifics of the slab, the angel figures have been distributed to the lateral panels of the stele. Both compositions share stylistic elements, not to mention the iconography and might be the work of the same workshop or master artisan.¹¹ It is possible to combine the reliefs of the architraves of Edzani and Kvemo Bolnisi and the iconographic type of Mother of God of the Khandisi and Bolnisi stele (fig. 4) in the coherent group following the common source for the motif. It is notable that the Mother of God in the Edzani and Khandisi is presented with a halo, as the enthroned Mary, a symbol of the Church, who brings the throne of Christ to earth, to life (due to some damage, the halo cannot be discerned on the Bolnisi Relief¹²).

In the next group, a more widespread and pertinent iconographic image of the Virgin in the 6th c. was added – that of the Theotokos following the model of Panagia Nikopoia the most influential type in the Eastern Christian world, in which Mary is represented seated on the throne holding the Christ Child as if enthroned on



5 Fragment from the stele of Gora, Dmanisi region
(photo: T. Khundadze)



6 Stele From Dmanisi
(photo: T. Khundadze)

her knees. A unique interpretation of this type is encountered on the reliefs from Gora (fig. 5), Dmanisi (fig. 6), and Brdaz'ori (fig. 7) representing Christ holding the Gospel in one hand, whereas the other hand is raised high in a gesture of blessing. In contrast to the Dmanisi stele, Christ has been shown on the Brdaz'ori stele with his entire body and his feet in the side view which we can also find on the slabs of Gantiadi (fig. 8) and Edi-Kilisa (fig. 9). It seems as if all three reliefs belong to the same iconographic type despite the slight differences among them; however these discrepancies in the form as well as the content are fundamental. The Mother of God inscribed within a long rectangle on the Dmanisi relief, against the background with a curtain and the compositional layout brings to mind western examples on ivory panels, the iconography mostly originating from imperial iconography.¹³ Thus, western in form and eastern in theological background and content, this relief can be perceived as an image of the community living between two worlds. The Brdaz'ori stele differs from these examples since historic figures are included flanking the enthroned Virgin with the Child, most probable representing the donors. The strangely seated figure of Mary with her body in a frontal pose and feet in profile, accentuates the Virgin's throne that was shaped after examples of Syrian (or Roman) *sella curulis*.¹⁴ Christ is also represented in the same manner and the whole composition combines the types of Hodegetria and Nicopoia, with the Virgin's arms encircling the lower part of Christ's body forming a mandorla like shape that can be seen also on the Khandisi, Edzani, Bolnisi, and Davati stele (fig. 10). The Brdaz'ori Virgin differs from the other group of reliefs stylistically as well as with some iconographic peculiarities that can be observed in another motive depicted that supposedly represents the ascension of the Virgin's soul (fig. 11).¹⁵ This is a unique scene within the corpus of early medieval sculpture.

For the Gantiadi relief K. Machabeli offered a different interpretation, considering it to be the Galactrophousa type, one of the earliest such representations.¹⁶ This idea is sustained in the Christ's head and feet given displayed in a side view although the Virgin, presented in a frontal pose, is marked by a stern and authoritarian facial expression in contrast to the traditional iconographic type. An interesting detail are the handles of the royal throne in the form of peacock heads. A similar example (the enthroned Virgin with Child, an almost identical throne) can be seen on a fragment of the stele from the village of Edi-Kilise, although here, despite the poor state of the relief, the form of Christ's head carved next to the Virgin's breast clearly refers to the *Maria Lactans* type.¹⁷

On the 6th-century Davati stele (fig. 10), in contrast to the images discussed above, Mary is depicted standing, in full figure, with the Christ's bust inscribed in her bosom. The folds of Mary's robe spreading like rays, form a man-



7 Fragment from the small stele of Brdadzori, 6th c., Georgian National Museum (photo: T. Khundadze)



8 Fragment from the stele from Gantiadi, 6th c., Dmanisi Cultural Centre (photo: T. Khundadze)



9 Fragment from the stele of Edi-Kilisa, 6th c., Georgian National Museum (photo: T. Khundadze)



10 Stele of Davati (photo: D. Khoshtaria)



11 Fragment from the small stele of Brdadzori, 6th c. (photo: D. Khoshtaria)



12 Relief of the Virgin in the eastern niche of the south facade from Jvari monastery, 6th c. (photo: N. Chakvetaz'e)



13 Relief from cornice of the church of Korogho, 10th c. (photo: K. Sabashvili)



14 Fragment of the chancel barrier from Ts'ebelda, 7th-8th c. (photo: T. Khundadze)



15-16 Fragments of the chancel barrier from Gveldesi, 7th-8th c., Georgian National Museum (photos: T. Khundadze; T. Dadiani)

dorla “of light” around Christ. The Virgin is without a halo, with loose hair falling down to her shoulders and with an inscription by her head reading Saint Mary - Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Christ is depicted with long hair flowing uninterrupted to his arms, framing his face and chest, with a halo with inscribed cross and an open Gospel in his hand. This representation does not belong to any familiar iconographic type of the early examples of the stone sculpture, so probably the bronze reliquary crosses can figure as a source of influence, based on the affinity for the accentuated linearism.

The relief of Virgin Mary on the south facade of the Church of the Holy Cross at Mtskheta (fig. 12) depicts her as *orans*. The relief is quite damaged, and the fragments at the Virgin’s chest testify to the existence of a medallion with Christ inscribed in it. An inscription in majuscule - Holy Mother of God accompanies the image. There are many parallel early examples that refer to the spreading of the type of Mary Orans or, better put, a particular type of Mary with hands raised in orans position, with the image of Christ in a medallion upon her breast - the *Platytera* type.¹⁹ A Virgin of this type is represented at the central part of the frieze in the 10th-century Korogho Church (fig. 13). Here, the master has chosen quite an unusual layout shaping Mary’s hand stretched horizontally alluding to the crucified Christ, and the Virgin being a participant in his Passion.

Images dedicated to the Virgin are also present on the chancel barriers in Saphara, Shio-Mghvime, and other churches. The earliest example is a chancel enclosure from Ts’ebelda (fig. 14).²⁰ The slab is divided into compartments decorated with scenes of Christ’s life and other Christian themes similar to Byzantine ivory panels. The Virgin with Child presented in one of the fragments probably relate to the *Eleusa* type. Mary has one arm wrapped around Christ’s shoulder, whereas the other rests upon her chest. The Child has crossed legs and he wraps one arm around the Virgin’s neck. The composition is too frontal and representative for the *Eleusa* type, but the arrangement is a product of both the local material and workshop. Stylistically, the Ts’ebelda slab differs from the examples examined so far in many elements such as the miniature figures and scenes divided by ornamental lines of the registers, with the most obvious influence of the ivory reliefs, which does not necessarily point to western influences, since other elements indicate this peculiar and typical amalgam of both traditions.

Images of the Virgin of the 8th-9th centuries represented on the slab of the Gveldeski chancel barrier and the stone pillar (figs. 15, 16) refer to the type of Our Lady of the Sign. The relief is carved very linearly and is distinguished by strong expressiveness and crudity, which is supposedly the original creation of a local master. Because of the iconoclasm in Byzantium the influx of iconographic schemes was greatly reduced or ceased completely. The works created during this period can be attributed to local workshops which were not dependent on the prevailing schemes, but instead were relied on a “word”, mostly on the Holy Scriptures and canonical sources.

Early medieval monuments in Georgia offer abundant and interesting material in reference to Orthodox Christian art as well as through the diverse traditions of portraying the Mother of God, whether as a separate image or a part of the composition. This material provides an interesting contribution to the general corpus of Marian iconography and to the general knowledge of its development and spreading in the Christian lands of Georgia and Armenia that share common stylistic and iconographic elements in early sculpture. This is demonstrated in the slabs of Gogarene province²¹ that was part of historic Kvemo Kartli, so that some Georgian tendencies reflected in art works can be easily traced over the wider territory.

- 1 *Rewriting Caucasian History: The Medieval Armenian Adaptation of the Georgian Chronicles*, translated with introduction and commentary by R.W. THOMSON, Oxford and New York, 2002.
- 2 D. RAYFIELD, *Edge of Empires. A History of Georgia*, London, 2012, p. 40.
- 3 L. MENABDE, *Z'veli kartuli mts'erlobis kerebi*, Tbilisi, vol. 2, 1980, pp. 185-247.
- 4 Some information preserved in the *Life of Kartli* attest to the close connection with Greece in the 6th century. It appears from the same source that the coronation of kings in Kartli was arranged by the Greek king (emperor – as in the case of the Curopalates later on in the 10th c.). In the information preserved in *The Life of Kartli* we read: “...then all the erist'avis of Kart'li, those of Upper and Lower, conferred. They send an envoy to the king of the Greeks, and asked that he choose a king from among the descendants of the kings of Kart'li... Then the emperor carried out their request. He gave them as king the nephew of Mirdat, son of Vaxt'and from his Greek wife...who ruled over Klarjeti and Javakheti” See: *Rewriting Caucasian History, op. cit.*, 2002, p. 229.
- 5 I. JAVAKHISHVILI, *Kartveli eris istoria*, vol. 2, Tbilisi, 1979.
- 6 N. KONDAKOV, *Ikongrafia Bogomateri*, Sankt Petersburg, 1914, p. 21.
- 7 Resulting from the fact that iconoclasm did not reach Georgia.
- 8 N. CHUBINASHVILI, *Khandisi*, Tbilisi, 1972, p. 78; N. ALADASHVILI, “Ez'anis eklesiis reliephi”, in: *Z'eglis megobari*, 1972, pp. 17-24.
- 9 The composition of the Erection of the Cross flanked by angels was quite popular in relief sculpture as well as monumental painting until the late Middle Ages (cf. Church of the Cross in Mtskheta, the Kachagani Cross, Church of the Dormition in Sapara, Martvili church, Nikortsminda, dome at Ishkhani, etc.). Some parallels can be found in Coptic works - the Baut church relief, the architrave relief at El-Moalak church in Cairo. Cfr. N. ALADASHVILI, “Kartuli monumenturi kandakeba: Jvris amagh'lebis tema kartul khelovnebashii”, in: *Z'eglis megobari*, 1969, pp. 7-13.
- 10 A work directed against the Nestorian heresy was translated in the 8th c. “How our Lord Jesus Christ became man and why the Virgin is the Holy Virgin Mary who gave birth to God as a man” (Greek “Regarding the Incarnation of the Logos”). The existence of such a text in early manuscripts has not been ruled out.
- 11 N. ALADASHVILI, *op. cit.*, 1972, pp. 18-24.
- 12 The halo does not figure on all the reliefs - this is in regard to works up to the 8th century.
- 13 Cfr. examples: ivory plaque with the image of Queen Ariadne (5th c.), the image of Empress Theodora from San Clemente's monumental painting, on which the Infant Christ is painted later (a transformation of the empress as an image of Mary, the Mother of God, the Heavenly Queen and at the same time as the mother of Christ, the Logos Incarnate).
- 14 Such a chair (*sella curulis*) in antique Rome was a symbol of political and military power designated for Roman dictators and consuls; the Greek *diphros* is the same thing.
- 15 K. MACHABELI, *Early medieval Georgian stone crosses*, 2008, p. 31.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 17 A body of a small size compared to the Christ's head can be faintly made out, but it is impossible to prove this resolutely due to the heavy damage of the relief. Kondakov ascribes a similar iconographic type (also with the lines of an indistinct body) to a Christ inscribed within a medallion on one of the ampullae at Monza or the picturesque iconography of the Shield of Emmanuel (N. Kondakov, *op. cit.*, 1914, p. 206). Also cf. G. JAVAKHISHVILI, *Adreuli shua saukuneebis qartuli mtsire qandakeba*, Tbilisi, 2014, pp. 24-25.
- 18 From this standpoint and in general, Davati is a exemplary monument. Cfr. K. MACHABELI, *op. cit.*, 2008, p. 31.
- 19 N.B. DRANDAKIS, *Panagia Drosiani*, see: <http://crafts-art.com/panagia-drosiani/>.
- 20 The tile has been broken into a few pieces. One piece of the tile is kept at the Georgian Museum of Art. The piece on which the Virgin was pictured is lost today. There are some fragments of the tile kept at Sokhumi Museum as well.
- 21 N. THIERRY, “Essai de Définition d'un Atelier de sculpture du Haut Moyen-Age en Gogarène”, in: *Revue des Etudes Géorgiennes et Caucasiennes*, n. 1, 1985; Z. AKOPIAN, *Rannesrednevekovaia skulptura Gugarka i Kartli. Voprosi khudojestvennogo stilia i masterskikh*, Sankt Petersburg, 2013.

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**Rani prikazi Majke Božje u gruzijskoj umjetnosti
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Cilj ovog članka je prikazati reljefne prikaze Djevice Marije nastale od 5. do 10. stoljeća u Gruziji. Studija upućuje na istočne i zapadne utjecaje, kao i na specifične karakteristike koje u to vrijeme nastaju kao rezultat lokalnih ikonografskih posebnosti, koje se razlikuju od Bizanta. Sačuvani prikazi u reljefu – uglavnom na kamenim pločama – jedinstveni su primjeri u korpusu cjelokupne ranokršćanske i ranosrednjovjekovne ikonografije.

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