

Zoomorphic Images and Ornaments with Rosettes in Christian Art of the Caucasus: Formation Paths of the Traditional Schemes*

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Abstract: The article deals with the paths of the formation of the traditional schemes in Christian art of Caucasus. On the example of several motifs, some zoomorphic images and ornaments with rosettes, one can notice that their origins, which are found both in the Christian context and in everyday culture, could be associated with the stable influence of religious beliefs and cults dating back to the Neolithic era. Other images may have been inherited from an earlier local archaeological culture (Koban-Colchis).

Keywords: zoomorphic images, traditional art, rosette ornaments, Christianity, stone reliefs

Extensive studies of architectural plastics of the medieval Caucasus (4th–14th centuries) allow a number of interesting observations regarding the formation paths and the possible origins of certain images in the Christian art of this region. The images in question, although found on the façades of Christian churches, are hard to put in the context of the canons of this religion.

Below, there are several types of images as an example, the zoomorphic ones occupying an important place therein. Thus, the bull's head motif is found in the architectural decoration of the exteriors of some Christian churches¹. N. A. Aladashvili has written that some images of animals in Georgian sculpture could be influenced by many ancient archaeological cultures². The ethnographers have methodologically discussed the possibility of comparing archaeological artifacts of the ancient cultures

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¹ Endoltseva E. Yu. Syncretic Images: the Image of a Bull's Head in the Architectural Plastics of Christian Churches in the South Caucasus during the Middle Ages // Problems of History, Philology, Culture. No. 2. 2017. p. 323–338. (Sinkreticheskiye obrazy: izobrazheniye bych'yey golovy v arkhitekturnoy plastike khristianskikh khramov na yuzhnom Kavkaze v period Srednevekov'ya // Problemy istorii, filologii, kul'tury.)

² Aladashvili N.A. Monumental Sculpture of Georgia. Moscow, 1977. P. 217–234. (Monumental'naya skul'ptura Gruzii.)

with household items of the 18th–20th centuries, originating from areas with a well-preserved traditional way of life. A. A. Miller has noted the conservatism and stability of the material culture of many Caucasian peoples, especially those who inhabited the mountainous regions (Avars, Laks). He has pointed to the amazing preservation of “archaisms in everyday use <...> at least in terms of material culture”³. A. A. Miller's idea of the continuity of the forms and the ornaments of wooden dishes in western Dagestan from clay vessels of distant eras has been developed by Yu. Yu. Karpov⁴. It can be illustrated by the example of the so-called “horned” vessels. Discussing the sacred meaning of this symbol (horn), the author examines its connection “with the ancient cults of the Near and Middle East”⁵. Similar considerations regarding archaisms in the concept of decorating a traditional Avar house are made by G. Ya. Movchan⁶. Similarly V. V. Bardavelidze argues, analyzing the graphic art and the concept of dwelling in the northwestern mountainous part of Georgia, Svaneti⁷. As in the case of the mountainous regions of Dagestan, the author draws attention to the abundance of archaisms in the material culture of people living in this territory.



Fig. 1

³ Miller A. A. *Ancient Forms in the Material Culture of the Modern Population of Dagestan // Materials on Ethnography*. Leningrad, 1927. P. 18. (Drevniye formy v material'noy kul'ture sovremennogo naseleniya Dagestana // Materialy po etnografii.)

⁴ Karpov Yu. Yu. “Horned” Wooden Vessels of Western Dagestan // *Ethnographic Papers*. No. 12. 1998, p. 5–13. («Rogatyye» derevyannyye sosudy zapadnogo Dagestana // Etnograficheskiye tetradi.)

⁵ Ibid. P. 11.

⁶ Movchan G. Ya. *An old Avar House in the Mountains of Dagestan and its Fate*. (Based on the Materials of the Author's Surveys 1945–1964.) Moscow, 2001. (Staryy avarskiy dom v gorakh Dagestana i yego sud'ba. Po materialam avtorskikh obsledovaniy 1945–1964 gg.)

⁷ Bardavelidze V. V. *The Oldest Religious Beliefs and Ceremonial Graphic Art of the Georgian Tribes*. Tbilisi, 1957. (Drevneyshiye religioznyye verovaniya i obryadovoye graficheskoye iskusstvo gruzinskikh plemen.)

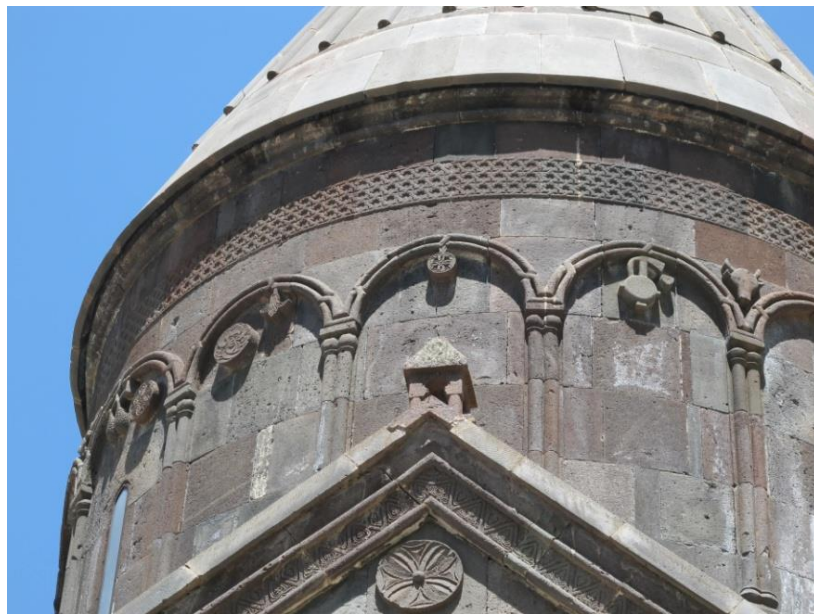


Fig. 2

As for the architectural plastics of Christian churches of the Middle Ages in the Caucasus, images of a bull's head (recognizable by the horns in the shape of a crescent, unlike the curling horns of a ram) appear on the territory of Georgia (on the capitals of the pilasters of the baptismal chamber of the Bolnisi Zion (5th century), on the eastern facade of the Svetitskhoveli temple in Mtskheta (11th century), above the entrance gate in the brick wall surrounding this cathedral (dates back to the same time) (**Fig. 1**), historical Armenia (now South-Eastern Turkey) (Church of the Holy Cross on Akhtamar Island, 10th century), present-day Armenia (tambour of the cathedral of Geghard monastery, beginning of 13th century) (**Fig. 2**), capitals of gavit columns in Sanahin monastery (late 12th century), span of a slit window (**Fig. 3**) in the same building). Around the same time (8th-10th centuries), the motif of the bull's head is recorded in the traditional culture of some partly Christianized tribes that inhabited the Caucasus. For example, among the archaeological monuments of the Alan culture there is a catacomb burial ground discovered in 1977 near the village of Tarskoye (on the right bank of the Kambileevka River, Prigorodny District, North Ossetia), dating back to the 8th-9th centuries⁸. Here, among the grave goods, four bronze belt plaques in the shape of bull's heads have been found, which may have served

⁸ Kantemirov E. S., Dzattiaty R. G. Tara Catacomb Burial Ground of the 8th-9th centuries AD // *Alans: History and Culture*. Vladikavkaz, 1995. P. 259. (Tarskiy katakombnyy mogil'nik VIII-IX vv. n.e. // *Alany: istoriya i kul'tura*.)

as amulets. Images of bull's heads are also found on some belt buckles found near the village of Bezhta (8th–10th centuries) in the western high-mountainous Dagestan (Bezhtinsky site, Western Dagestan) during the study of the burial ground of the same name⁹.



Fig. 2

When interpreting this motive, one has to recall the cult of the bull, which was extremely popular on the territory of the entire Mediterranean and the Middle East in pre-Christian times. The origin of this cult is explained by the development of agriculture and the transition to a sedentary lifestyle. In most of these cultures, the bull was perceived as an earthly incarnation of God or as an attribute of him. There is also numerous evidence of the veneration of bull heads (skulls, bucrania), or horns as a symbol of supremacy and male power. Images of a bull's head as a sacred sign, containing various shades of meaning (attributes of the supreme priestly power and a symbol of gods, masculine strength and fertility, protective function during the transition to the other world, amulet), was widespread in

⁹ Davudov O. M., Mammaev M. M. Typology and Artistic and Stylistic Features of Medieval Zoomorphic Buckles from Western Dagestan // *Antiquities of the Caucasus and the Middle East*. Makhachkala, 2005. P. 166. (Tipologiya i khudozhestvenno-stilisticheskiye osobennosti srednevekovykh zoomorfnykh pryazhek iz Zapadnogo Dagestana // *Drevnosti Kavkaza i Blizhnego Vostoka*.)

the Caucasus, in general in the Mediterranean world and in the Middle East. This sign appears in a Christian context, possibly thanks to a pre-Christian ritual tradition.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

To understand the meaning of this sign, the ethnographic data should be also applied. It is known that until recently, bull skulls were fixed over the entrance to a traditional Avar house as a talisman. Sculptural images of bull's heads above the entrance to the territory of the Svetitskhoveli temple or in the

span of a slit-like window in Sanahin could be an echo of this practice. In the Christian context, the bull and bull's head were perceived as a symbol of Christ's atoning sacrifice. This idea is accentuated when the bull's head is depicted next to a ritual vessel (tambour of the Geghard cathedral). Thus, the appearance of the bull's head motif in medieval Christian art (and in traditional everyday culture up to now) is probably associated with the influence of the ancient cult, once widespread in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, dating back to the Neolithic era.



Fig. 6

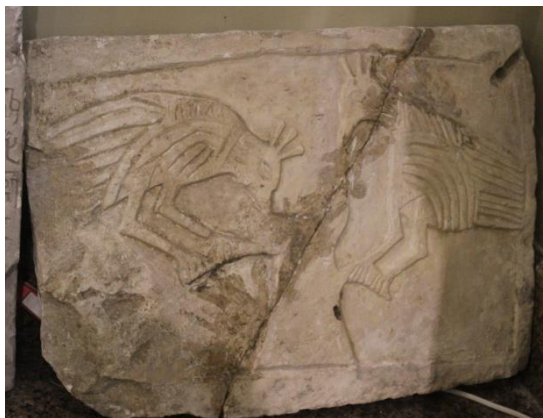


Fig. 7

The emergence of another type of images unusual for Christian art, is possibly connected with the influence of the more ancient archaeological cultures that are spread over a territory in question. Hence zoomorphic images found on a group of reliefs adorning the façades of some Christian churches in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and, in part, Georgia (three reliefs from Mount Anakopia (**Fig. 4**, **5**), a relief depicting a bull and a lion from the Sukhum mountain (**Fig. 6**), a relief depicting two birds from Mramba (**Fig. 7**) (the last two from the AGM collection), a bird on a slab with a cross and a slab with a fish from Mramba, lions in the scene of “Daniel in the lion's den” from the village of Veseloye (**Fig. 8**), animals from Kasagin, Nadarbazevi, Kvaisis-Jvari, a sea monster consuming Iona on the top of the window from Beris-Sakdari in Eredvi, lions from the scene of “Daniel in the lion's den” on the top of the window from Azavreti, lions on the top from Gumbati, Kekhvi, zoomorphic images in the architectural decoration of the Church of St. George in Bza, etc.) have a number of common stylistic characteristics¹⁰; all

¹⁰ Endoltseva E. Yu., Skakov A. Yu. Zoomorphic Images in the Architectural Plastics of the Caucasus in the 9th - 11th centuries. (Abkhazia and South Ossetia): traditional culture in the formation of Christian images // Bulletin of the Orthodox St. Tikhon Humanitarian University. V (37). 2020. P. 9-28. (Zoomorfnyye obrazy v arkhitekturnoy plastike Kavkaza IX – XI vv.

images having a rough, linear-planar drawing, simple stylistic features in the depiction of animal skin, plumage of birds and fish scales. To convey the texture of the hair of animals, short, shallow parallel diagonal notches are usually used. The plumage of birds is shown in a similar way, that is, multidirectional (depending on the part of the body: wings, tail, body proper) parallel strokes-notches of different length. The fish scales in this case are indicated by frequent dots-holes covering the entire surface area of their body, that is, from the gill cover to the beginning of the tail. Separate, most significant fragments of the muzzles of all the animals in question are shown the same way. Thus, their eyes in all cases are indicated succinctly, as two semicircular arcs with a small hole in the middle. All animals are shown in a generalized way (in a flat graphic style) so that their biological identification is at times quite problematic. The stylistic analysis of these images, as well as certain iconographic parallels, the architectural and archaeological context allow placing these images in a period between the middle of the 10th and the first half of the 11th centuries.



Fig. 8

Concerning possible origins of this style, it is of note that the originality of the culture of the upper reaches of the Ksani and Liakhvi rivers (South Ossetia) at the turn of the 9th and the 10th centuries owes to “frequent changes of power in this territory (Tao Bagratids – Abkhazian tsars – Ani – Abkhazian tsars), which brought new architectural trends”¹¹. These images “could reflect some of the local artistic traditions that contributed to the spiritual and cultural upsurge in the northern part of Western Kartli as the

(Abkhaziya i Yuzhnaya Osetiya): Traditsionnaya kul'tura v formirovanii khristianskikh obrazov// Vestnik Pravoslavnogo Svyato-Tikhonovskogo gumanitarnogo universiteta.)

¹¹ Vinogradov A. Yu., Beletsky D. V. Church Architecture of Abkhazia in the Era of the Abkhaz Kingdom: End of 8th-10th century. Moscow, 2015. P. 295. (Tserkovnaya arkhitektura Abkhazii v epokhu Abkhazskogo tsarstva. Konets VIII–X v.)

region least affected by Arab raids at the turn of the 9th and the 10th centuries”¹². The appearance of such images may be associated with the influence of traditional culture, the reflections of which are found on the monuments of this region from the Bronze Age on.

As the studies of A. Yu. Skakov and a number of other authors show, the “Koban-Colchian bestiary” has survived this community in a significant part of its area, and, albeit with some innovations and transformations, has continued to exist in the Sarmatian, Alanian and Tsebeldian time (the latter being a culture of historical Apsils in the territory of Abkhazia and the adjacent regions of Georgia). Of particular interest is the persistence of syncretic zoomorphic images (feline-dog/wolf, horse-dog/wolf, etc.). To the contrary, the influence on the part of the Scythian-Alanian mythology and the art of Iranian origin, although significant, has neither determined, nor affected the far-reaching foundations of the worldview, at least those formed in the Koban-Colchian period (11th–5th centuries BC)¹³.

The repertoire of zoomorphic images of medieval art, as described above, goes well with the bestiary typical of earlier periods in the Central Caucasus, the Western Transcaucasia and the adjacent regions. The above-mentioned “syncretic” images should be mentioned here, namely those, which are difficult to confidently determine as for the species of the animal depicted. Once, it a kind of animal depicted on the obverse of the blade of a significant part of the Koban-Colchis ornamented axes has been disputed: is it a horse or a dog. B. A. Kuftin though has been closer to the truth, when calling this animal “a fantastic predator”¹⁴, “a wingless dragon, a wolf ‘gver’”¹⁵, a creature of “draconian character”¹⁶. The analysis of all available images on the Koban-Colchis ornamented axes has permitted, upon accentuation and detailed consideration of the particularities, to determine that “it is about a syncretic image comprising the features of both a horse and a dog. Obviously, the ancient masters in this case did not need to accurately display the specific characteristics of the depicted animal”¹⁷. It is significant that this syncretic image of a “horse-dog” finds parallel in the mythological image of the peoples of the Central Caucasus (the mythology of the Abkhaz,

¹² Ibid. P. 296.

¹³ Endoltseva E. Yu., Skakov A. Yu. *Zoomorphic Images...* P. 18.

¹⁴ Kuftin B. A. *Materials for the Archeology of Colchis. Vol. 2: Archaeological Research in the Rion Lowland and on the Black Sea Coast in 1935 and 1936.* Tbilisi, 1950. P. 9. (Materialy k arkheologii Kolkhidy. T. II: Arkheologicheskiye izyskaniya v Rionskoy nizmennosti i na Chernomorskom poberezh'i 1935 i 1936 godov.)

¹⁵ Ibid. Vol. 1. Tbilisi, 1949. P. 140.

¹⁶ Ibid. P. 194.

¹⁷ Skakov A. Yu. *On One of the Groups of Koban-Colchis Ornamented Axes // Historical and Archaeological Almanac. No. 4. Armavir; Moscow, 1998. P. 19. (Obodnoy iz grupp kobano-kolkhidskikh ornamentirovannykh toporov // Istoriko-arkheologicheskiy al'manakh.)*

Ossetians and Georgians has been reconstructed by their folklore and epic)¹⁸. Similar syncretic images of animals appear on the Caucasian etched belts of the Bronze Age.

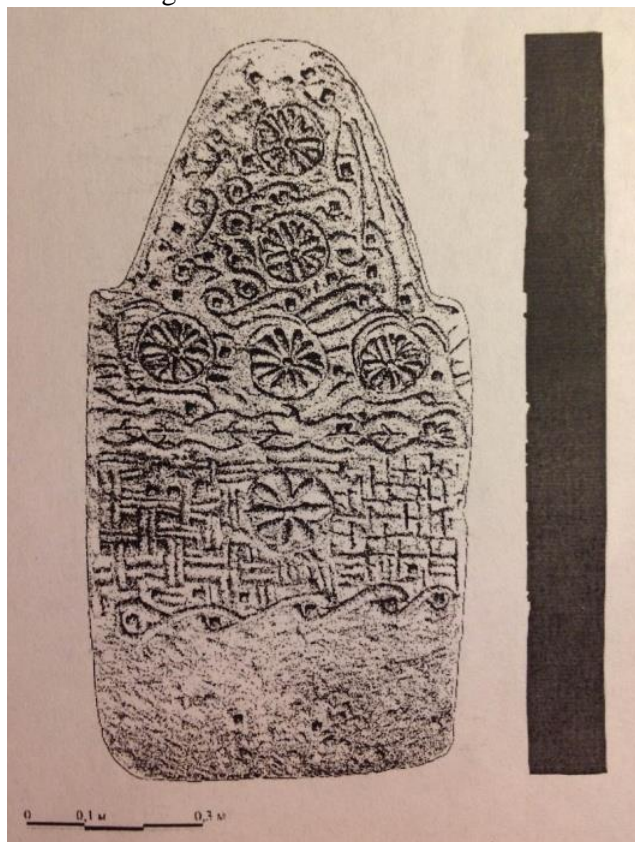


Fig. 9

The flat graphic style, typical for the above-quoted group of Christian reliefs, also quite agrees with the artistic traditions of this territory in the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age. It should be noted, in particular, that for zoomorphic plastics, which, as a rule, has an emphasized volumetric character, it is in the regions of the Central, Western, and Eastern Caucasus, in the mountainous and foothill zones, that the accentuated flatness, the desire to avoid relief wherever possible, rendering almost exclusively the outline of the animal is characteristic. As a result, the figurines have been replaced by curly and openwork plaques or buckles. As a rule, there buckles

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 19–21.

date back to the 3rd century BC – 2nd century AD¹⁹. Perhaps the originality of the group of reliefs discussed above is precisely due to the influence of traditional culture in the territories that were most active in the revival of artistic life in the Western and the Central Transcaucasia following the devastating Arab conquests.

Yet another example of the possible influence of traditional culture on the visual repertoire of Christian art in the Caucasus from the Middle Ages to the present day is two ornamented steles found in course of the protective excavations in the flood zone of the hydroelectric power station under construction in 2013. Both steles are made of limestone, having an anthropomorphic shape. One has been found in structure No. 12 of the Gotsatlinsky (Ortokolinsky) 1st settlement of the 10th–12th centuries²⁰ (Dagestan) (**Fig. 9**). The decoration system of this stele may be tentatively divided in two parts. The top shows five rosettes in the form of lines radiating from the middle, against a background of S-shaped patterns with drilled grooves at the ends. In the lower part there is a rosette of the above type in the middle of two stripes intersecting at right angles that form a simple “lattice”-type ornament. The upper and the lower parts are separated by a strip of “bird's footprint” ornament, bordered on both sides by wavy lines. S-shaped patterns with drilled grooves at the ends complete the composition. The second stele comes from building No. 13 of the same settlement (**Fig. 10**). A ribbon ornament is carved on its obverse. In the middle of the upper part there is a four-petal rosette framed by oblique notches of the “braid” type²¹. This pattern is inscribed in a circle of intertwining loops made of a ribbon in three and four stripes. The same chain surrounds the left (preserved) edge of the lower part of the stele. Its main field is occupied by intersecting diagonal lines made up of ribbons braided in two stripes, which form a “lattice”.

¹⁹ Tekhov B. *Archeology of the South Ossetia*. Vladikavkaz, 2006. P. 463. (Arkheologiya yuzhnoy chasti Osetii.)

²⁰ Albegova Z. Kh., Magomedov R. G., Taymazov A. I. Steles of the Gotsatlinsky (Ortokolinsky) 1st Settlement of the 10th–12th centuries // E. I. Krupnov and the Development of Archeology of the North Caucasus. 28th Krupnov Readings. (Materials of the International Research Conference. Moscow, April 21-25, 2014.) Moscow, 2014. P. 309–311. (Stely Gotsatlinskogo (Ortokolinskogo) 1-go poseleniya X – XII vv. // Ye. I. Krupnov i razvitiye arkheologii Severnogo Kavkaza. XXVIII Krupnovskiye chteniya. Materialy Mezhdunarodnoy nauchnoy konferentsii Moskva, 21-25 aprelya 2014.)

²¹ Endoltseva E. Yu. Steles from the 1st Gotsatlinsky Settlement: Iconographic Context // Ibid. P. 345–347. (Stely s 1-go Gotsatlinskogo poseleniya: ikonograficheskiy kontekst.)

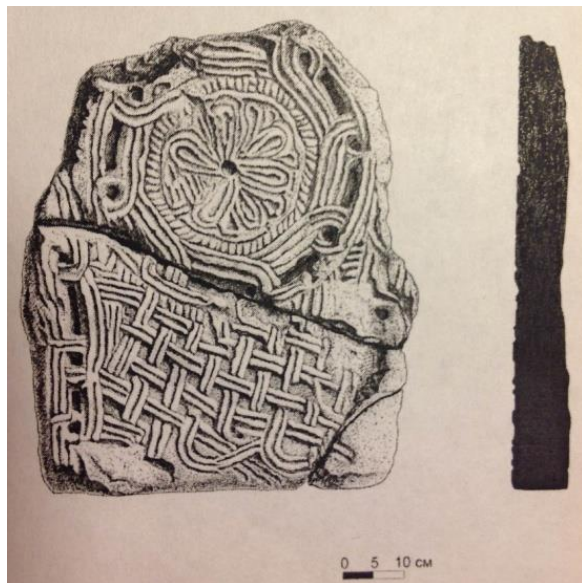


Fig. 10

The closest geographical, typological, and, probably, functional analogies²² allow identifying these steles as memorial plates that have been erected in “sacred places” (similar artifacts having existed in Georgia in the 10th–11th centuries), previously occupied by the pagan sanctuaries. They have also been used as border markers²³. The circumstances of finding these two plates (in situ) permit to clarify their function. They have been found in the basement (utility) floors of buildings, often next to the food stores. These steles clearly have had a sacred meaning; they can be associated with a so far unknown complex of traditions and beliefs²⁴. Thus, the signs shown on these plates (rosettes and braided ribbon ornament) must have also had a sacred meaning in the traditional everyday culture of the non-Christian population of the identified settlement. It is however interesting that the same signs have been widespread in the Christian art of Armenia, Georgia, and the Byzantine Empire of the time in question (10th–11th centuries)²⁵. These same signs, especially various kinds of rosettes and braided ornaments, have been widely used, at least until the 1960s, in the decoration of a traditional Avar house (in

²² Debirov P. M. *Stone Carving in Dagestan*. Moscow, 1966. P. 31. Figs. 54–61. (Rez'ba po kamnyu v Dagestane.)

²³ *Ibid.* P. 32.

²⁴ Albegova Z. Kh., Magomedov R. G., Taymazov A. I. *Steles of the Gotsatlinsky...* P. 309.

²⁵ Endoltseva E. Yu. *Steles from the 1st Gotsatlinsky...* P. 309.

the mountain villages of Dagestan)²⁶. In such a system of decoration they obviously have had the meaning of apotropes.

Thus, the origins of certain traditional images in the Caucasus, which are found both in the Christian context and in everyday culture, could be associated with the stable influence of religious beliefs and cults dating back to the Neolithic era. Other images may have been inherited from an earlier local archaeological culture (Koban-Colchis).

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²⁶ Movchan G. Ya. An old Avar House...

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