

## **Image of the Snake-Dragon in the Architectural Decoration of the Christian Churches of the Medieval Period \***

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**Abstract:** *The article focuses on the evolution of the image of the snake in the architectural decoration of the Christian churches in Caucasus during the medieval period. The origins of the image in the more ancient cultures of the Mesopotamia and of the Mediterranean world are studied. An attempt is made to trace the continuity in the image and meaning of the snake from ancient times up to the present day (according to ethnography and folk art). A rare iconographic type of a snake was revealed, which appears in the Middle Byzantine period in the remote mountainous regions of the Caucasus (the upper reaches of the Ksani and Liakhvi rivers, Racha, Svaneti, Upper Kartli).*

**Keywords:** snake, dragon, architectural decoration, Caucasus, medieval period.

The image of a serpent (or dragon) is quite common in canonical Christian art throughout its history. The plot of serpent fighting has become a textbook when a holy warrior (or warrior-rider) defeats (tramples) a snake, which is the embodiment of evil forces. The serpent is also usually depicted in the plot of the expulsion from paradise. Compositions of these two types are widely used in early Christian art both in the Roman Empire and Byzantium, and in the Caucasus. As L. Mikaelyan, the author of a recent study on dragon-serpents in medieval plastic art of Armenia, notes: “In the medieval sculpture of Armenia, images of dragons (serpents) are first found on stelae of the 7th century BC in scenes with holy warriors trampling

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snakes”<sup>1</sup>. Resembling images are found in a similar situation (on steles) on the territory of Georgia<sup>2</sup>.

However, in the post-iconoclastic period (VIII - IX centuries) (and this is typical both for the territory of the Byzantine Empire and for neighboring Christian states, including those located in the Caucasus), “a fundamental change takes place in the manner of perception and understanding of the surrounding art objects. The reasons for this change should obviously be sought in the transition from the worldview inherited from classical Antiquity to the medieval way of thinking. Starting from this era, the message that these images carried began to change. Being perceived as a receptacle of protective powers, they began to attribute the value of a talisman, as evidenced by the numerous texts and treatises on magic written during this period. The presence [of various zoomorphic images] in architectural plastics such as slabs of the altar barrier or ciborium arches, doors, lintels, floors or facades of churches, as well as on seals and on ceramic dishes, well confirms this function”<sup>3</sup>. The same transformations took place, apparently, with the image of the dragon-serpent. Along with the canonical images of this creature, which are found throughout the history of Christian art (including in the Caucasus: Expulsion from Paradise (Akhtamar), Baptism (miniatures of the XIII-XV centuries))<sup>4</sup>, there appear (starting from the X century) “heraldic compositions with dragons (serpents) with human faces (Tatev, Kars) or animal heads (Ani) in the center, in which the archaic function of dragons as satellites of the luminaries, guardians of power, structures was rethought”<sup>5</sup>.

According to the observations of L. Mikaelyan (with regard to Armenian monuments, although, probably, the same trend characterizes the art of neighboring Georgia), “the apotropaic significance of dragons is most fully expressed in the sculpture of the 13th century. Such examples are found mainly above the entrances and windows of church and secular buildings (Ani, Akhtala, Arinj)”<sup>6</sup>. In her article, the researcher published a complete dossier of images of dragon-serpents (as well as paired dragons woven

<sup>1</sup> Mikaelyan L., “Image of dragon-snake in sculpture of Armenia X – XIV centuries: iconography and symbolic aspects in context of Christian culture.” in *Vishap on the frontier of fairy tale and reality*. Erevan, 2019 (in Armenian), p. 410.

<sup>2</sup> Dadiani T., Khundadze T., Kvachatadze E. *Medieval Georgian Sculpture*. Tbilisi, 2017. P. 61. Il. 83.

<sup>3</sup> Vanderheyde C. *La sculpture byzantine du IX au XV siècle. Contexte. Mise en oeuvre. Décors*. Paris, 2020. P. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Mikaelyan, L., “Image of dragon-snake... p. 410.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mikayelyan, Lilit Sh. Various Aspects of the Image of a Dragon-serpent in Armenian and South-Caucasian Sculpture of the 7th–14th Centuries. *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art: Collection of articles*. Vol. 11. Eds A. V. Zakharova, S. V. Maltseva, E. Iu. Staniukovich-Denisova. — St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Univ. Press, 2021, (in English), pp. 232 – 243.

together, animals with dragon tails, scenes of a dragon fighting or a snake with an animal (Ishkhan, Makaravank)) on medieval monuments originating from the territory of Armenia)<sup>7</sup>.



II. 1



II. 2

Let us supplement this corpus with some images from the territories of Georgia and the Republic of South Ossetia. So, two snakes, whose bodies are wrapped in a ring, are presented on both sides of a slit-like window in the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

eastern part of the vestibule in Sagamo (X century)<sup>8</sup> (Il. 1). A snake with a round object is depicted on a slab inserted into the masonry of the eastern facade in Pavnisi (X century)<sup>9</sup> (Il. 2). A snake, whose body forms a small ring in the middle of its length, is depicted next to bunches of grapes on an impost at the door of the southern pastophorium in Shangli (X century)<sup>10</sup> (Il. 3). At a later time, the snake is shown in a zigzag pattern on the capitals of the niche of the southern wall of the porch in Dmanisi Zion (XIII century)<sup>11</sup> (Il. 4).



**Il. 3**

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<sup>8</sup> Dadiani T., Khundadze T., Kvachatadze E. *Medieval Georgian Sculpture...* P. 129. Il. 208.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. P. 157. Il. 304.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 188. Il. 401.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 297. p. 619.



## II. 4

The earliest depiction of a two-headed serpent with an animal muzzle and a body curled into two rings appears on the upper casing of a window from a church in Nadarbazev (X century)<sup>12</sup> (Il. 5). A similar snake (with two heads), curled up into a ring, is shown as part of the composition “Jonah in the belly of a whale” on a fragment of a lining located nearby a church in Kvaisa (X century)<sup>13</sup> (Il. 6).

Images of dragons with animal muzzles and bodies twisted into rings are also found in the art of the Byzantine Empire. As K. Vanderheide notes, “this monster rarely adorns Middle Byzantine sculpture, but images of a dragon with an elongated tongue and a snake’s body become more frequent in the 13th century as evidenced by the sculptures at Pelion in Greece, which betray oriental influences that have become popular, perhaps through the

<sup>12</sup> Mepisashvili, R., Tsintsadze, V., “Architecture of the mountainous part of the historical province of Georgia – Shida-Kartli.” Tbilisi, 1975. (in Russian). P. 80. Il. 70.

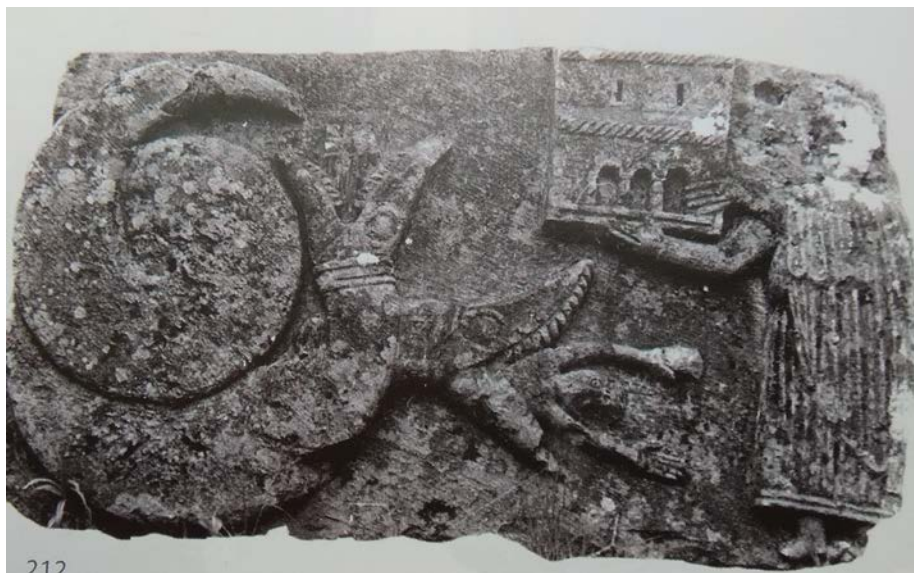
<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 84. Il. 74.



medium of textiles”<sup>14</sup>. A similar observation regarding sculptural decoration in Armenia was made by Mikaelyan, noting that the apotropaic significance of dragons is most fully expressed in the sculpture of the 13th century<sup>15</sup>.



**II. 5**



**II. 6**

<sup>14</sup> Vanderheyde C. *La sculpture byzantine...* pp. 207-208.

<sup>15</sup> Mikaelyan L., “Image of dragon-snake... p. 410.



## II. 7

Images of dragon-serpents of various types were especially popular in the Caucasus. Another evidence of this is the non-standard iconography of the prophet Jonah, who was being absorbed by a sea monster, which developed in this region. In its most complete form, an unusual interpretation of this plot is recorded on a limestone block round in cross section (perhaps it was the base of the column) from Dranda (now kept in the collection of the Church-Archaeological Museum of the Holy Metropolis of Abkhazia in New Athos) (X century)<sup>16</sup> (II. 7, 8). The quality of the execution of this scene, as well as some stylistic parallels (compared with the slabs of the altar barrier from the village of Olginskoe and two lost slabs from Dranda)<sup>17</sup> allow us to consider this relief the work of Byzantine masters, possibly related to the sculptural workshops of Greece (the circle of Osios Loukas and Thebes (X c.)).

From an iconographic point of view, the depicted scene is unusual in that in this case the whale is shown twice, as if encircling the block. The tail of one animal ends at the muzzle of its counterpart. In one case, the torso of the prophet Jonah with raised arms is visible in the whale's mouth, in the second, his legs disappear into it. In this case, the whale is presented as a hybrid creature. It resembles a fish with a scaly body and tail (the scales are

<sup>16</sup> Endoltseva E. Y., *Architectural decoration of Abkhazia in the period of the Abkhazian kingdom VIII – XI centuries*. Moskva, 2020. pp. 260-267.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 260.

depicted by large diagonal stepped lines that form an acute angle on the imaginary line denoting the middle of the fish's body along its entire length). It has a toothy mouth with fangs, sharp predatory ears, round, protruding eyes, stylized wings (shown by parallel vertical notches in the upper body near the head), clawed lion paws. Such hybrid creatures are often found in the ornamentation of Christian churches of the Middle Ages in Transcaucasia. For example, a similar creature, in which the resemblance to the Sasanian "senmurv"<sup>18</sup> is captured, is depicted in the scene of the swallowing of the prophet Jonah by a whale on the southern facade of the church of St. Cross on Akhtamar island (X century). Apparently, this kind of hybrid mythological creatures, the images of which were especially common in the decorative and applied art of the Islamic period, penetrated to neighboring Christian peoples due to the rapid development of cities and trade<sup>19</sup>. As Z. Hakobyan and Mikaelyan rightly point out, hybrid mythological creatures of this kind began to be especially common on the monuments of Transcaucasia during the High Middle Ages<sup>20</sup>.



## II. 8

<sup>18</sup> Hakobyan Z., Mikayelyan L. The Senmurv and Other Mythical Creatures with Sasanian Iconography in the Medieval Art of Armenia and Transcaucasia// *Fabulous Creations and Spirits in Ancient Iran. Proceedings of a Workshop held on May 3d 2016 at the Near Eastern Department, University of California, Berkley. Bologna, 2018. pp. 39-77.*

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 44.



It is interesting that, starting from the period of iconoclasm, hybrid mythological creatures, in particular the Senmurv, are often depicted not only in Transcaucasia, but throughout the entire Christian world – from Byzantium to Western Europe<sup>21</sup>. On the facade of the church of St. Cross on Akhtamar in the iconographically traditional scene “The Swallowing of Jonah by the Whale”, the whale is shown in the same way as on the relief from Dranda: it has a fish tail and scales, a toothy mouth, sharp ears, wings and clawed paws.

The episode from the story of the prophet Jonah is one of the rarest iconographic examples. It is interesting that on the earliest Christian monuments (the turn of the 3rd-4th centuries) a scene with the image of the prophet Jonah being swallowed by a whale already appears. From the very beginning of its history, two different iconographic versions can be recorded in art.

In one case, for example, on a Roman sarcophagus<sup>22</sup> from the end of the 3rd century, the story of the prophet Jonah is shown in two scenes (he is thrown from the ship, and he lies in the belly of a monster). This type of image of this plot on the monuments of Christian art was widespread not only in the Early, but also in the High Middle Ages (for example, numerous Roman sarcophagi of the 4th century<sup>23</sup>, the Ravenna diptych of the 6th century, the southern facade of the Church of St. Cross on the island of Akhtamar and many others).

In the second case (that is, in what we see on a fragment of the altar barrier from Dranda), the moment of the absorption of the prophet by the sea monster and his expulsion from the womb is simultaneously shown. The toothy mouth of a whale is presented twice. From one sticks out the torso of Jonah with raised arms, from the other – only his legs. The earliest depiction of this type is found, for example, in Asia Minor in the 3rd century BC: (280-290 years, pair sculpture from the Cleveland Museum of Art)<sup>24</sup>. Thus, the iconographic origins of the image of the prophet Jonah on a fragment of the altar barrier from Dranda originate in the early Christian art of Hellenistic ambience.

It is interesting that this iconography was developed in the 10th century precisely in the Caucasus. For example, a part of the composition in question (the torso of Jonah sticking out of the mouth of a whale with raised

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Bovini, G. Repertorium der christlich- antiken Sarkophage. I. Rom und Ostia. Textband und Tafelband / G. Bovini, H. Brandenburg. Wiesbaden, 1967. № 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. № 11, 44, 77, 770.

<sup>24</sup> Dudochkin, B. N., “About the image of “whale” of prophet Jonas in the frescoes of Andrej Rublev and Daniil in the cathedral of Dormition in Vladimir and in the miniatures of Evangile of Hitrovo group.” *Unknown masterpieces. New discoveries. Digest of scientific articles to jubilee of the Museum named after Andrej Rublev*. Moskva, 2017 (in Russian), p. 123.

arms) is on the southern facade of the temple in Khakhuli (X century)<sup>25</sup> and at the top of the window from Beris-sakdari (X century)<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, in both cases, the interpretation of the whale is closer to the Akhtamar sample (the head of the beast, the toothy mouth and paws). In another example, originating from the territory of modern South Ossetia, the monster is shown as a two-headed snake, curled up into a ball. On a limestone slab from Kvais Jvari (X century), in the mouth of one of his heads, the torso of the prophet Jonah with upraised arms is visible, in the mouth of the other – the legs of the prophet. Unlike the image from Dranda, in this case the snake is shown more realistically. It lacks predator fangs, wings, and clawed feet<sup>27</sup>. The same double-headed serpent is also shown on the lost lower framing of a window from the eastern facade from Joisubani (Racha, 10th century)<sup>28</sup> (Il. 9). It is interesting that the same two-headed toothed serpent, coiled in a ring in the middle of its length, is shown already without the prophet Jonah on the upper casing of the window from Nadarbazev (X century). In the latter case, the snake clearly acts as apotropaia (as evidenced by its location – above the window). This is obviously one of the earliest depictions of this type. Thus, it can be stated that the emphasis on the image of a snake (as part of a composition or separately) appears first of all on monuments from the territory of the mountainous regions of the upper reaches of the Ksani and Liakhvi, Upper Kartli, and Racha. It is on this territory (along with a group of reliefs from Abkhazia) that the appearance of zoomorphic images in the 10th century, made in a characteristic flat-graphic style with hybrid features, is recorded<sup>29</sup>. The territory of their distribution as a whole coincides with the distribution area of the ancient Koban-Colchian cultural and historical community. It is even possible that the originality of this group of reliefs “is precisely due to the influence of traditional culture in the territories that were most active in the revival of artistic life in Western and Central Transcaucasia after the devastating Arab conquests”<sup>30</sup>.

This fully applies to the images of snakes. Indeed, as noted by A.Yu. Skakov at the round table dedicated to traditional beliefs in the Caucasus (held on December 18, 2020 at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences), “the image of a snake is one of the most characteristic for the ancient art of the Caucasus and, especially, for the art of the Koban-Colchis cultural and historical community. There are two ways to

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<sup>25</sup> Aladashvili, N. A., *Monumental sculpture of Georgia. Figurative reliefs of V – XI centuries*. Moscow, 1977. (in Russian). Il. 118.

<sup>26</sup> Mepisashvili, R., Tsintsadze, V., “Architecture of mountainous part... p. 67, il. 57.

<sup>27</sup> Aladashvili, N. A., *Monumental sculpture...* p. 81 – 86. Il. 69.

<sup>28</sup> Dadiani T., Khundadze T., Kvachataдзе E. *Medieval Georgian Sculpture...* p. 149. Il. 276.

<sup>29</sup> Endoltseva, E. Y., Skakov, A. Y., “Zoomorphic images in the architectural decoration of Caucasus IX – XI centuries.” *Vestnik PSTGU. Voprosi istoriji i teoriji hristianskogo iskusstva*. Vip. V (37). Moskva, 2020, pp. 9 -28. (in Russian).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

reconstruct the mythological representations associated with it (given that the ethno-linguistic affiliation of the carriers of this community is unknown to us): to collect and generalize the entire set of mythologemes characteristic of the image of a snake on the territory of Eurasia (usually researchers go this way) or to analyze the reflection of the snake mythologeme in epic and folklore (and hence in mythology) of the three ethnic areas of the modern Caucasus, corresponding to the three main regions of the Koban-Colchis community. These are the Abkhazians, Kartvelians and Ossetians. In our opinion, the analysis of the mythologemes identified for these three areas can lead to mythological images characteristic of the ancient population of the Caucasus. The snake acts as a guardian and distributor of water, while water can be its element, or it can be hostile to it. The snake acts as a kidnapper of girls (or as a groom), or an absorber of girls, but being eaten/ swallowed by a snake is not tantamount to death. Also, characteristic are the motif of the snake's dream (symbolizing the transition from world to world), the fiery nature of the snake, its connection with the wind, the inferiority (non-integrity) associated with another world, the duality or androgyny of the snake (it can act both in a female and in a male role). The image of the snake is based on a system of binary oppositions and has the ability to bifurcate, which is the reason for the story about the struggle of two snakes. Another function of the serpent is a means of transportation, a bridge between worlds, with which the image of the celestial serpent is associated. The serpent also has the ability to provide a valuable gift, and this gift was probably originally a gift of immortality"<sup>31</sup>.

Evidence of a special veneration of snakes is also found in the South Caucasus, starting from ancient times. Suffice it to recall the snake-like ornaments of sacred significance in the Shengavit culture<sup>32</sup>, on the ceramics of the Bronze and Iron Age from the territory of Armenia<sup>33</sup>, the images of

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<sup>31</sup> Skakov, A. Y., "Obrazi zmei, ljagushki i ribi v mifologiji drevnego naselenija Kavkaza (kobano-kolhidskaja kulturno-istoricheskaja obsnost epohi rannego zeleza) [Images of the snake, frog and fish in the mythology of the ancient population of Caucasus (Cobano-Colchis cultural historical community of the Early Iron Age)]// *ALLON. K 60-letiju zasluženogo dejatelja nauki RYO professora Y. A. Dzitsojti: kolektivnaja monografija* (Moskva 2021 – Tshinval 2021). *Kollektivnaja monografija*. [Allon. To the 60 jubilee of the honored personality of science of the Republic of the Southern Ossetia professor Y. Dzitsojti: collective monograph (Moscow 2021 – Tschinval 2021). Collective monograph]/ ed. A. Skakov, I. Skakova. Moskva, 2021. (in Russian). p. 101.

<sup>32</sup> Azizjan, A., "Snake-like ornaments on the ceramics of Shengavit culture." *Vishap on the frontier of fairytale and reality*. Erevan, 2019, pp. 274-281. (in Armenian).

<sup>33</sup> Engibarjan, N., "Snake ornament on the ceramics of the Bronze and Iron Age periods in Armenia: II millennium – beginning of I millennium BC." *Vishap on the frontier of fairytale and reality*. Erevan, 2019, pp. 282-288. (in Armenian).

snakes on the ritual axes of the Bronze Age<sup>34</sup>, the sacred statues-vishaps, the images of snake-dragons in Urartian iconography<sup>35</sup>, and more.



## II. 9

<sup>34</sup> Gevorgjan, A., "Image of snake-vishap in ancient bronze". *Vishap on the frontier of fairytale and reality*. Erevan, 2019, pp. 289-293. (in Armenian).

<sup>35</sup> Engibarjan, N., "Dragon-snake in Urartu iconography." *Vishap on the frontier of fairytale and reality*. Erevan, 2019, pp. 295-303. (in Armenian).



Echoes of such ideas are also found in folklore. So, “in the folk art of Ossetians, the snake is presented as the keeper (giver) of vitality”<sup>36</sup>. Snake skin is used as an amulet in the traditional culture of Armenians<sup>37</sup>. Vishaps are depicted as amulets on homespun carpets<sup>38</sup>, snakes – in patterns of embroidery<sup>39</sup> and jewelry<sup>40</sup>. Similar ideas about the snake as a talisman are obviously reflected in the architectural decoration of later temples. For example, on the eastern facade of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Sagareio (XVII-XVIII centuries) in the heraldic composition, two snake-dragons with second heads on their tails are represented<sup>41</sup>. A serpent-dragon with wings and a body writhing in a ring in the middle of its length is also depicted on the eastern facade of the church in Kintsvisi (XVII century)<sup>42</sup>.

Thus, the spread of images of dragon-serpents in the architectural decoration of Christian churches in the Caucasus (with the exception of snake-fighting motifs), starting from the Middle Ages, is probably associated with a special veneration of these creatures in traditional culture, the origins of which can be traced back to the most ancient local archaeological cultures. These images clearly had an apotropaic significance. It is important to note that single images of snakes already had a certain established iconography, which is closest to the images of dragons. In this capacity, they appear in the Southern Caucasus not earlier than the 13th century (framing the window of the southern facade of the church in Akhtala, for example)<sup>43</sup>. “In these compositions, the animals follow contemporary Seljuk patterns. Paired dragons, as a rule, are given intertwined, often with twisted, knotted bodies, with an animal head and open mouth (Vanstan, Tigran Onents, Nor Varagavank). Such animal iconography, especially in the case of Islamic winged dragons with paws, definitely echoes the images of ancient sea monsters and the Sasanian senmurv”<sup>44</sup>.

However, in more remote mountainous regions (the upper reaches of the Ksani and Liakhvi rivers, Racha, Svaneti, Upper Kartli), on the territory that approximately coincides with the area of distribution of the Koban-

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<sup>36</sup>Chibirov, L. A., *Traditsionnaja duhovnaja kultura osetin* [Traditional spiritual culture of Ossetians]. Moskva, 2008. (in Russian). p. 175.

<sup>37</sup>Davidova, G., “Snake in Armenian traditional medicine.” *Vishap on the frontier of fairytale and reality*. Erevan, 2019, pp. 206-214. (in Armenian).

<sup>38</sup>Pogosjan., A., “About questions of origins and typology of classical vashapagorgov.” *Vishap on the frontier of fairytale and reality*. Erevan, 2019, p. 323. (in Armenian).

<sup>39</sup>Bazejan, K., “Snake-dragon in Armenian broidery of XVIII – XIX centuries.” *Vishap on the frontier of fairytale and reality*. Erevan, 2019, pp. 333-334. (in Armenian).

<sup>40</sup>Pogosjan, A., “Snake-like ornaments in Armenian national costume and jewelry.” *Vishap on the frontier of fairytale and reality*. Erevan, 2019, pp. 343-344. (in Armenian).

<sup>41</sup>Dadiani T., Khundadze T., Kvachatadze E. *Medieval Georgian Sculpture...* p. 336. Il. 689.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid. p. 338. Il. 693.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. p. 287. Il. 577.

<sup>44</sup>Mikaelyan, L., “Image of dragon-snake... p. 410.

Colchis cultural and historical community, images of dragons as apotropaean in the outer facing of temples appear already in X century (Nadarbazev). A special attitude towards the image of the serpent is also manifested in the fact that in the scenes depicting Jonah in the belly of a whale, the sea monster is shown not as a hybrid of a senmurv and a dragon (following the Sasanian tradition), but as a two-headed serpent (without paws). It is possible that this feature is due to the influence of an older tradition, which is associated with the sacralization of the snake on the territory of the Koban-Colchis cultural and historical community.

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