

A MOTIVE OF THE BULL'S HEAD AS A DECORATION OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCHES IN SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

Ekaterina Endoltseva*

Abstract: The article deals with the examples of a syncretism of the traditional beliefs and Christianity in the Middle Ages. There is a representation of the bull's head in the architectural decoration of some of the medieval churches (f. i. Svetitskhoveli in Mtskheta, XI c., Georgia; the Holy Cross Cathedral on the Island of Akdamar, X c., Turkey; monasteries of Geghard, XIII c. and Sanain, XII c., Armenia); it is obviously connected with an ancient cult of the bull wide-spread in the Mediterranean world from the Neolithic period until modern time.

Keywords: bull's head, architectural decoration, Transcaucasia, Georgia, Armenia, syncretism.

Zoomorphic images can be found in the architectural decoration of the churches in Southern Caucasus between the 6th-14th centuries, their theological meaning remaining unclear. These are representations of real (lion, eagle, bull, deer, snake, bird etc.) as well as fantastic (gryphon, simurgh, winged lion, winged horse etc.) animals. They may be shown separately or coupled (lion and bull with the scenes of the fight etc.).

There is a chapter in the N. Aladashvili's research dedicated to the animal imagery in Georgian monumental sculpture¹. It deals with the zoomorphic images found on the territory of the nowadays Georgia. The author presumes their typological connection to the earlier archaeological cultures on the same territory. For instance, there is a certain similarity between the images of the animals in Christian sculpture and the ancient examples of toreutics from Trialeti (end of the 3rd millennium B.C.)². Some researchers (mostly the ethnographers) see a methodological possibility of comparing the archeological findings that belong to the ancient cultures to the objects of everyday life (from the regions with preserved traditional way of life) dating back to the 18th-20th centuries. A. A. Miller notices the conservatism and the stability of the material culture of different people from Caucasus (especially those from the mountain regions like the Avars, the

* Ekaterina Endoltseva, Institut of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences.

¹ Aladashvili N. Monumentalnaja skulptura Gruziji. Moscow, 1977, pp. 217–234.

² Ibid. p. 218.

Lacks, and others). He points out the amazing conservation of archaisms in everyday life³. The author illustrates it by the identity of the forms and patterns of the modern wooden dishes from Dagestan and the clay vessels of the Koban archaeological culture⁴. The latter in its turn could be compared with other contemporary archaeological cultures from more distant regions. The ideas of Miller concerning the continuity of Western Dagestan wooden dishes forms and ornaments and the clay vessels of ancient epochs are shared by Y. Y. Karpov⁵. This opinion is supported by an example of the so-called “horned” vessels. Meditating on the sacred meaning of the horn the author examines its relation with “the ancient cultures of Near and Middle East”⁶. G. Movchan expresses similar thoughts concerning archaisms in the conception of the traditional Avar house decoration⁷. Analyzing these artifacts, the author notes “the really phenomenal safety of most ancient relict features, whose origin dates back to thousands of years”⁸. The semantics, the style and technique of the petroglyphs from house walls “take us back to the centuries up to the Neolithic”⁹. V. Bardavelidze shares these ideas concerning the art and the concept of the traditional house in the mountain northwestern part of Georgia, Svaneti¹⁰. The abundance of the archaisms in the material culture of the people of Svaneti is emphasized, as it has been done with the similar regions of Dagestan. This can be illustrated by a construction of the traditional Svan house¹¹. Methodological efforts have been made to establish the connections of not only the traditional visual folk art to its ancient archaeological prototypes, but also the traditional folk art and the art of monotheistic religions, like Christianity. The question is discussed by Karpov in the article “Mountaineer-Caucasian Godly Triad”¹². The relief on the eastern façade of Thaba-Erdi church in Ingushetia is interpreted there referring to the mountaineers’ traditional concept of the Holy Trinity¹³.

³ Miller A. A. Drevniye formy v materialnoy kulture sovremennogo naselenia Dagestana // Materialy po etnografii. Vol. IV. Iss. I. Leningrad, 1927, p.18.

⁴ Ibid. pp.26-56.

⁵ Karpov Y. Y. “Rogatye” derevyannye sosudy zapadnogo Dagestana // Kunstkamera. Etnograficheskiye tetradi. Iss. 12. St. Petersburg, 1998, pp.5-13.

⁶ Ibid. p.11.

⁷ Movchan G. J. Stariy avarskiy dom v gorakh Dagestana i ego sudba: Po materialam avtorskikh obsledovaniy. (1945-1964.) Moscow, 2001.

⁸ Ibid. p. 370.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bardavelidze V. V. Drevnejshije verovanija i obrjadovoje graficheskoe iskusstvo gruzinskih plemen (Ancient beliefs and ritual graphic art of the Georgian people). Tbilisi, 1957.

¹¹ Ibid. p.262.

¹² Karpov Y. Y. Gorsko-kavkazskaya bozhestvennaya triada // Khristianstvo v regionakh mira. St. Petersburg, 2002. pp. 172-179.

¹³ Ibid. Ref. 11.

The present research deals with a motif of the bucranium (bull's head) in the architectural Christian decoration of Caucasus during the Middle Ages. Taking into account the methodologies of the authors mentioned above, we would like first of all to determine the geography of bucrania in the decoration of the churches. Afterwards, in order to comprehend the semantics of this motif, a comparison of the circumstances of its emergence in Christian art and in the traditional culture of the local tribes of the same period is to be attempted. In order to do such things, it is required to trace this motif in the ancient archaeological cultures of Caucasus and the neighboring regions. To propose a proper interpretation, one needs the ethnographical evidence derived from the most conservative (in terms of everyday culture) regions of the Mountain Caucasus.



Fig. 1

There are churches that show separate representations of the bull's head motive. One of the earliest examples is in Georgia. The bull's head with crescent shaped horns (which is a characteristic feature of this animal different from the convoluted horns of the sheep) is on the pilaster capital inside the baptistery that is attached to Sioni Bolnissi (5th century)¹⁴. Later on, this motif reappears on the eastern façade of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 207. Beridze V. Gruzinskaya arkhitektura "rannekhristsianskogo vremeni" (IV-VII vv.). Tbilisi, 1974.

Mtskheta¹⁵ (11th century) (Fig. 1, 2). For a long time, this cathedral has been a principal Christian sanctuary in Georgia¹⁶. The sculptured image of the bull's head can be seen again in the same place. There is double representation of it over the gate integrated into a massive brick wall surrounding the cathedral. This wall dates back to the same period as the cathedral. The bull is represented in a highly naturalistic way. It is with big round eyes both sides of its head, the crescent-like horns being uplifted.



Fig. 2

Other comparable representations are found on the historical territory of Armenia (presently South-Eastern Turkey).

A bull can be found among the sculptured animal heads (of sheep, lion, and deer) decorating the façade of the church of the Holy Cross on the island of Akdamar (10th century)¹⁷ (Fig. 3). Unfortunately, its horns are not preserved. The bull's head can be found on the territory of modern Armenia as well, being represented on the drum of the dome of the cathedral in the

¹⁵ Aladashvili N. *Monumentalnaya skulptura...* Fig. 208.

¹⁶ Severov N., Chubinashvili G. *Mtskheta*. Moscow, 1946.

¹⁷ Der Nersessian S. *Aghfamar. Church of the Holy Cross*. Cambridge, 1965.

monastery of Geghard (early 13th century)¹⁸ (Fig. 4). The motif in question can be seen above the arch frieze. The horns in shape of a crescent corroborate the identification of the animal. There is a receptacle represented close to, possibly alluding to the idea of sacrifice. The same combination of motifs (a bull's head and a receptacle) is carved on the capitals of the columns supporting the vault of gavit in the monastery of Sanain (late 12th century)¹⁹ (Fig. 5). The bucranium appears elsewhere in the same building. It decorates the aperture of a slit-like window (Fig. 6). As in the previous cases, the crescent-like horns help to identify the animal.



¹⁸ Durnovo L. *Ocherki izobrazitelnogo iskusstva srednevekovoy Armenii*. Moscow, 1979. P. 90 – 91.

¹⁹ Tokarskiy N. *Arkhitektura Armenii: IV-XIV vv.* Yerevan, 1961.

Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The motif of the bull's head is widespread in both religious and secular contexts. Among the archaeological findings at a catacomb burial site of the Alan culture dating back to the 8th-9th centuries A. D. (near the village Tarskoye, on the right bank of Kambileevka river, Prigorodniy district, North Ossetia)²⁰. Four bronze waist plaques shaped as a bull's head²¹, possibly used as amulets²², have been found there in a catacomb #29, among the burial implements. Images of a bull's head have been found on the buckles in the burial place from Bezta village (the Western mountains of Dagestan) as well²³. Most scholars date these buckles as belonging to the 8th-10th centuries A. D.²⁴. According to archaeologists, "the big sizes of many of these buckles, their massiveness, and heaviness make one think that they were not used as decorations in everyday life, only during some special ritual ceremonies and

²⁰ Kantemirov E. S., Dzattiati R. G. Tarskiy katakombniy mogilnik VIII-IX vv. n. e. // *Alani: istoriya i kultura*. Vladikavkaz, 1995. p. 259.

²¹ Ibid. p.267.

²² Ibid. p.271.

²³ Davudov O. M., Mammaev M. M. Tipologiya i khudozhestvenno-stilisticheskiye osobennosti srednevekovykh zoomorfnykh pryazhek iz zapadnogo Dagestana // *Drevnosti Kavkaza i Blizhnego Vostoka*. Makhachkala, 2005. p. 166.

²⁴ Ibid. p.167. For a complete bibliography see: pp. 194–195.

rites connected with significant events of religious, economic, and family kind”²⁵.



Fig. 5

Besides, the motif of the bull's head (as well as its derivative in the shape of the bull's horns) is relatively frequent among the archaeological artifacts from different regions of Caucasus of more remote epochs. In most cases, they decorate ritual objects. There are objects which are different regarding their form and function, like horned anthropomorphic figures, the finials of the standards, the ritual portable hearths, the sacred stones (the vishaps) etc. For instance, there is a group of the bronze anthropomorphic horned figures dating back to the Iron Age (6th-1st centuries B.C.). They have been found on the territory of Armenia²⁶ (village Artsevanick)²⁷, Georgia²⁸,

²⁵ Ibid. p.168.

²⁶ Brileva O. A. Drevnyaya bronzovaya antropomorfnyaya plastika Kavkaza (XV v. do n. e. – X v. n. e.) Moscow, 2012. Cat. # 521, 522.

²⁷ Esayan S. A. Skulptura drevney Armenii. Yerevan, 1980. Tab. 57. 1-7; Brileva O. A. Drevnyaya bronzovaya antropomorfnyaya plastika... Cat. # 510, 511, 512, 517.

²⁸ Brileva O. A. Drevnyaya bronzovaya antropomorfnyaya plastika... Cat. # 551, 552.

Dagestan²⁹ (Andiyskiy district³⁰, Tsuntinskiy district³¹), Kabardino-Balkaria (river Malka³², city Nalchik³³) etc. In the middle of Late Bronze Age, the bull's head appears on the vishaps (Azdaha-Yurt)³⁴, and as the top of the baton (Tolors)³⁵ or the vehicle (Lchashen)³⁶. During the Iron Age, the bull's horns decorated the heads of the cult statues (Artsvanik)³⁷. The evidences of the veneration of the bull's skulls are revealed in Caucasus (see the cult structure at the settlement Gudabertka, where the bull's skulls with the horns have been found)³⁸. The ritual portable fireplaces decorated with the heads and horns of a bull used for the private prayers at home or during travels are known as well (Shengavit, Amiranis-gora, Mohrablur, Shresh blur)³⁹. The motif's outlook may be explained by the fact that the male force was connected to some astral cults, their symbol being an image of the young moon, whose shape resembles the bull's horns⁴⁰.

It is a well-known the fact that the cult of the bull and the bull's head was quite widespread not only in Caucasus, but also in Asia Minor and all over the Mediterranean area and the Middle East. The bull was worshiped in the most advanced communities of the ancient world⁴¹. The origins of its cult can be correlated to the process of a development of the agricultural communities and of a transition to the settled mode of life, this animal being one of the principal attributes of the agriculture. The bull was the only animal commonly venerated in all European cultures, including those of the Mediterranean, the Near and Middle East, and southern Asia. These are mainly the Indo-European cultures but may also include Semites, Sumerians and Elamites, the peoples of Northern Europe, of the Western and Eastern Mediterranean – Iberian, Italian Peninsula, Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Anatolia, the Near and Middle East, and Egypt – of India as well, where the white bull Nandi, the incarnation of the supreme god Siva is a fecundating deity⁴². In

²⁹ Ibid. Cat. # 535.

³⁰ Ibid. Cat. # 503.

³¹ Ibid. Cat. # 546.

³² Ibid. Cat. # 525.

³³ Ibid. Cat. # 530.

³⁴ Esajan S. A. *Skulptura drevney Armenii..* Tab. 19, 1.

³⁵ Ibid. Tav. 28, 3.

³⁶ Ibid. Tav. 28, 7.

³⁷ Ibid. Tav. 57, 1-7.

³⁸ Kushnareva K., Chubinashvili T. *Drevnie kultury juzhnogo Kavkaza*. Leningrad, 1970. P. 165.

³⁹ Ibid. pp.164, 166. Fig. 54 (30, 31).

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp.166.

⁴¹ Rice M. *The Power of the Bull*. London, New York, 1998, pp. 62–252.

⁴² Azara P. *The Golden Calf: The Bull in the Collective Imagination of the Ancient Mediterranean // Bulls: Image and Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Barcelona, 2002, p. 29.

most of these cultures, the bull was considered an incarnation of some god or its attribute (for instance, the god of moon Sin of the Sumerians, two bulls of the god of storm in Hurrian mythology, the bull of the sky, the son of the divine cow of the Egyptians, an attribute of Thor in Scandinavian mythology, Zeus and Poseidon also embodied the divine white bulls, the bull is an attribute and incarnation of the god Baal of the Canaanites etc.).



Fig. 6

White bulls as divine animals were sacrificed for the gods⁴³, being the main participants of mystery festivals (bull-leaping in the Minoan-Mycenaean world)⁴⁴.

There are numerous evidences of the veneration of the bull's heads (skulls, bucrania) or of the bull's horns as a symbol of authority and a male force as well. At the earliest, the most ancient known sanctuary originates in

⁴³ Ibid. p.137, 241.

⁴⁴ Godart L., Tzedakis Y. The Bull in the Minoan-Mycenaean World // Bulls: Image and Cult, pp.128–142. Delgado Linacero C. The bull in Ancient Iberia // Bulls, pp. 160–176; Athanassopoulou S. The Bull in Greek mythology // Bulls, p.145.

Göbekli Tepe (the Armenian Plateau, the 11th millennium B.C.)⁴⁵. The bull in this case, as on Christian monuments, is distinguishable by the crescent-like horns that can be turned down or upwards. On the upper Euphrates, in Jerf el Ahmar or Halula on Syrian territory, it is common to find skulls that are part of the construction of benches, as it has been recorded by the villages of Mureybet or Tell Abbar III or in the foundations of the house from Tell Halula. Indeed, one of the most usual manifestations is the deposition of bucrania in the building foundations⁴⁶. The bull's head is the most frequent cult symbol in home sanctuaries of Catal Hüyük (southern Anatolia, 8 – 6 millennium B.C.)⁴⁷. These representations could take shape of the high reliefs, painted figurations or rows of bucrania modeled in clay with real horns. Intact horns also filed the pillars of benches. Later on, they decorated the walls of Halaf culture pottery in a stylized and repetitive manner (5th millennium B.C., Iraq, Northern Syria, South-Eastern Turkey)⁴⁸. The priests and gods could be represented bearing diadems made of bull's horns during the Bronze Age. They could even have bull's ears⁴⁹. During the time of the rites in honor of the "bull-gods", priests used cult objects of that were associated with the shape of bulls: zoomorphic libation vessels, pottery items with taurine motifs (mostly bull's head), horns (vessels in the shape of a horn), oil lamps (the light of which was associated with the fire of the fighting bull) or tripods decorated with bull motifs as well. The participants wore masks shaped after a bull's head⁵⁰. Beginning with the IV millennium B. C., the amulets of different bucranium forms are well-known⁵¹. Judging based on the evidences that date back to the 3rd millennium B.C., the bull's head was also conceived as a protective symbol useful in the afterlife⁵².

There are images of boats transporting souls to the other world⁵³ as well as urns (Italy, 9–7 century B.C.)⁵⁴ decorated with a bovine protome or horns. These signs may have had the same meaning when represented on tombs⁵⁵ and sarcophagi⁵⁶. The terracotta wall bracket from Famagusta district

⁴⁵ Schmidt K. Sie bauten die ersten Tempel. Das rätselhafte Heiligtum der Steinzeitjäger. Die archäologische Entdeckung am Göbekli Tepe. München, 2006. S. 121. Abb. 46, 81.

⁴⁶ Molist M. Bovines in the Neolithic Period in the Near East: Between Godhead and Food // Bulls, p. 191.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.195.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.39, # 10

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.55.

⁵¹ Ibid. # 139, 140, 142, 143, p. 59.

⁵² Ibid. p. 77.

⁵³ Ibid. # 200.

⁵⁴ Ibid. # 204, 205.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p.206.

⁵⁶ Ibid. pp.202- 203.

(Cyprus, 9th-8th century B.C.)⁵⁷ shows a goddess with the uplifted hands under two ox-heads in a high relief.

As it has been shown above, the image of the bull's head as a sacred sign, which contains different meanings (an attribute of the supreme priest power, a symbol of gods, an attribute of male force and fecundity, a protective function in transition to the other world, an amulet) has been quite popular in the pre-Christian world on the territory of Caucasus as well as all over the Mediterranean and the Near East.

Numerous ethnographic evidences witness that the traces of veneration of the bulls, bull's horns and heads have been found in the traditional culture of peoples from different regions of Caucasus up to the present day. For example, the bull was very important for the traditional religion of the Ossetians. The bull was venerated in the Mountain Ossetia, where there are even sanctuaries of the bull. There is also a special holiday dedicated to the bull⁵⁸. As well as some other peoples of Caucasus, the Ossetians venerated the bull during the course of traditional agricultural holidays (the beginning of plowing, the holiday of the first furrow and others). For instance, in order to protect the shoots they stuck the skull of the sacrificed bull in the middle of a field⁵⁹. Other magical procedures remind us of the archaic magic-totemic views of peoples as well. They took the iron twig to the field, to counter the evil forces and greased the horns and the neck of the bull with butter⁶⁰. Other peoples of the Mountain Dagestan practiced similar beliefs. "The bull was nursed as a human; it was decorated with amulets as a protection against the evil eye. The believers associated the bull with a symbol of fertility"⁶¹.

The skull of the bull was applied in Ossetia as a protection against the evil eye for the house, sowing, apiary etc. On this account, it was put on a stick and used for the rites of calling the rain⁶². These beliefs could influence the appearance of the horned skull or derivative of the bull's horn on the doors of traditional Avar houses⁶³ or in the masonry of the mosque at Gochob village (Fig. 7) (Charodinskiy district of Dagestan)⁶⁴. However, the ancient beliefs concerning the image of the bull are best preserved in the mountain

⁵⁷ Ibid. p.210.

⁵⁸ Chibirov L. A. *Traditsionnaya dukhovnaya kultura osetin*. Moscow, 2008, pp.183-184.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.211.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p.212.

⁶¹ Gadziev G. A. *Doislamskiye verovaniya i obryady narodov nagornogo Dagestana*. Moscow, 1991. p. 99.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Wooden entrance door of Umarilov, village Koroda. See Movchan G. *Stariy avarskiy dom*, p. 246. Fig. 388.

⁶⁴ I thank P. I. Takhnaeva for the information and photos.

regions of Georgia (Svaneti). This animal was quite significant regarding funeral rites. The bull was put near the coffin of the deceased, its horns being decorated with lit candles⁶⁵. The bull was associated with the Lord of sky among the tribes of Upper Svaneti⁶⁶. Besides, the Georgians as well as other peoples of Caucasus venerated the bull as a divine fertilizer⁶⁷.



Fig. 7

According to another concept, the divine bulls and cows are animals dedicated to the astral deities which are later replaced by certain saints (St. George and the Virgin) in a Christian context⁶⁸. “In Samegrelo, Imereti, Guria and Racha bull, calf or hen were led three times around the church with the words of dedication. Afterwards they were released”⁶⁹.

There are many Georgian legends in the Christian context concerning the divine bulls that miraculously appeared in the churchyards on the day of the village religious holiday. They went around the church three times and then to the immolation voluntarily. These legends are also widespread on the territory of Abkhazia. To the best-known Christian sanctuaries of Abkhazia

⁶⁵ Bardavelidze V. V. *Drevnejshije verovanija...* p.166.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p.176.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p.192.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.195.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p.195.

associated with the bull legends the church of St. George in Ilory belongs. According to a legend that is known thanks to the written sources from the 17th century, a bull miraculously appeared at the fence of the Ilory church on the eve of the religious festival. It was solemnly sacrificed after⁷⁰. The Abkhazians also practiced the ritual of the annual family prayer to St. George of Ilory with an indispensable sacrifice of a bull⁷¹. It usually happened on the first day of Easter⁷².

Besides, according to the informant from the village Dzgerda (neighboring to the Ilory village of Ochamchira district) the Abkhazians still hang the skull of the bull on the fence as an amulet⁷³.

Considering the above-mentioned ethnographic witnesses, one may suppose that many archaic traditional beliefs of some peoples from Caucasus (for example, the echoes of the bull's cult in its different variants) are practiced up to the present day. They often coexist with the Christian and Islamic religious tradition. Such situation probably existed in the Middles Ages as well.

One may further suppose that the sculptural representations of the bull's heads above the entrance to the precinct of Svetitskhoveli Cathedral or in the span of the slit-like window in Sanain, or on the wall of the church of the Holy Cross on Akdamar island could echo the traditional cult practices (setting the bull's heads above the entrance to the house and above the window to protect it from the evil forces) originating from the more ancient historical periods.

The Christian culture perceives the bull and the bull's head as a symbol of Christ and His redemptive sacrifice⁷⁴. Tertullian writes about it⁷⁵ commenting on a verse from Deuteronomy (33. 17) – It would have been nice to have here this verse... The Apostle Paul also speaks about it in his Epistle to the Hebrews⁷⁶. This idea may be emphasized if the bull's head is represented near the ritual vessel (for example, on the drum of the cathedral in Geghard, capitals of columns of gavit in the monastery of Sanain). This interpretation is however hypothetical.

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⁷⁰ Chursin G. F. *Materiali po etnografii Abkhazii*. Sukhumi, 1956. p.30.

⁷¹ Zvanba S. T. *Abkhazskie etnograficheskie etyudy*. Sukhumi, 1982. pp.24-26.

⁷² *Ibid.* p.25.

⁷³ Informant G. A. Sangulia, native of Dzgerda village in Ochamchira district.

⁷⁴ For the theological interpretations of the image of the bull in Christian context see: Azara P. *The Golden Calf... // Bulls...* pp.87-91.

⁷⁵ Tertullian. *Adversus Marcionem*. III. 18, 14–26 // *Corpus Christianorum*. Latin Series I. 1954.

⁷⁶ Heb. 9:12

List of figures:

1. Monastery of Mtskheta. (By P. Takhnaeva.)
2. Entrance gate. Monastery of Mtskheta. (By P. Takhnaeva.)
3. Holy Cross church of Akdamar. Eastern façade. (By the author.)
4. Cathedral of the Monastery of Geghard, Armenia. Drum of the dome. (By the author.)
5. Capital of a column supporting the vault of gavit in the monastery of Sanain, Armenia. (By author.)
6. Slit-like window in the Monastery of Sanain. (By the author.)
7. The minaret wall of the mosque at Gochob village in Dagestan. (By P. Takhnaeva.)

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