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## THE ATTRIBUTES OF SACREDNESS OF ANIMALS ON THE RELIEFS OF ARMENIA AND GEORGIA (6<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** In Armenian and Georgian sculpture of the 6<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, there are many images of real and fantastic animals with certain attributes: ribbons, necklaces, wreaths, crowns. One of the oldest examples of such iconography is known on the 8<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> century BC Urartian statuette depicting a crowned sphinx with a ribbon tied to its torso. The use of ribbons and necklaces as attributes of animal sacredness becomes especially popular in the culture of Sasanian Iran of the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries, where they indicated the royal, benevolent symbolism of the images. Bird figures with ribbons around their necks in Armenian, Georgian, and East Christian art of the 5<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries reveal the obvious influence of Sasanian iconography. In Christian art, these attributes denoted the victorious, heavenly symbolism of images. In the 10<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, a number of fantastic animals: griffins, sirens, sphinxes are usually depicted with necklaces and crowns – as markers of their belonging to the upper world.

**Key words:** Armenian sculpture, Sasanian art, sacred animals, symbolism, ribbons, necklaces, crowns

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## АТРИБУТЫ САКРАЛЬНОСТИ ЖИВОТНЫХ НА РЕЛЬЕФАХ АРМЕНИИ И ГРУЗИИ VI–XIV ВЕКОВ

**Аннотация:** В армянской и грузинской скульптуре VI–XIV веков известно множество изображений реальных и фантастических животных с определенными атрибутами: лентами, ожерельями, венцами, коронами. Один из древнейших примеров такой иконографии известен на урартской статуэтке VIII–VI веков до н.э., изображающей коронованного сфинкса с лентой на туловище. Использование лент и ожерелий как атрибутов сакральности животных становится особенно популярным в культуре Сасанидского Ирана V–VII веков, где они указывали на царственную, благопожелательную символику образа. Изображения птиц с лентами на шеях в армянском, грузинском, а также восточнохристианском искусстве V–VII веков показывают очевидное влияние сасанидской иконографии. В христианом искусстве эти атрибуты указывали на победную, небесную

1 A paper on this topic was presented at the conference "Medieval Art and Archeology of Armenia and Georgia" in the Aix-Marseille University (November 2019).

символику образов. В X–XIV веках ряд фантастических животных: грифоны, сирены, сфинксы как правило изображались с ожерельями и коронами – маркерами их принадлежности верхнему миру.

**Ключевые слова:** Армянская скульптура, сасанидское искусство, сакральные животные, символика, ленты, ожерелья, короны

### **Practical and Artistic Traditions of Adorning Animals with Ribbons, Necklaces and Other Attributes.**

In ancient cultures, and later in medieval art, a number of artistic means were used to emphasize the supernatural, sacred symbolism of animals, such as the creation of fabulous beings or the endowment of lions, bulls, horses and so on, with wings as an indication of their heavenly nature. Along with such iconographic principles, especially in eastern medieval art, depictions of the attributes of power and holiness appear on the bodies of animals. Among them are ribbons, necklaces and rings, as well as vegetal elements. This tradition, originating in the culture of Ancient East, became more vivid in the art of Sasanian Iran, and later in the cultures widely contacted with it, particularly in Armenian and Georgian sculpture of the 6<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, as well as in the Eastern Christian art.

In general, ribbons had become widely used in classical antiquity as symbols of victory and power in the form of diadems attached to heroes and victorious athletes, and later as headbands of kings and emperors. The Sasanian so-called “ribbons of honor / nobility” (*Pativ* in Middle Persian and also in Ancient Armenian<sup>2</sup>), which continue the same tradition, were in regard to iconography strikingly different from their Greco-Roman as well as Parthian prototypes. They were longer and wider, made of silk, and were as a rule depicted as waving, with longitudinal or vertical folds, often with emphasized borders. The ribbons with exactly such iconography appear in the compositions of crosses in Armenian and South-Caucasian art and on the animals under discussion.

In Sasanian Iran ribbons ceased to be only headbands as they had been in Antique culture; they were tied to various parts of the body, the crown, the arms, as well as royal horses, and sometimes, according to written sources, to some animals belonging to the Shahanshahs’ menagerie<sup>3</sup>. Of course this royal tradition found its expression in Iranian art, especially of the 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries, when sacred or benevolent animals were very often depicted with ribbons and necklaces. The great number of these examples and their specific iconography in the art of Iran gives us the right to consider similar images of animals with attributes of sacredness in Armenian and Georgian art mainly as a manifestation of Sasanian influence. And it is only in this context that their iconographic

2 Цбшпшш 1979, IV, 43:

3 Орбели 1968, 114.

sources can be determined correctly and their symbolism in Christian culture can be interpreted more accurately.

Speaking about the traditions of depicting certain attributes on animal bodies in ancient and medieval art, it is necessary to divide them into two artistic principles. The first one: when the animal is portrayed according to its real appearance, for example: saddled and decorated horses; bulls and elephants with cloth saddles, forehead jewelries, bows, garlands, etc. And the second one: when real or fantastic animals are displayed with special attributes which have primarily a symbolic meaning. The distinction between these two artistic approaches is not clear in many cases, but in our context, this is important for a more accurate understanding of the iconographic traditions.

Thus, in Greek vase-painting there are images of sacrificial animals, mostly bulls with ribbons and garlands tied to their horns, which marked them as chosen for a ritual – an instance of attributes of sacredness, but reflecting the real, documentary details of the sacrifice. There was also a tradition of preserving the heads or skulls of already sacrificed animals, which were placed on the walls of temples or other buildings with the same garlands attached to the horns. An example of this are the images of two bull skulls hanging above the central scene of Iphigenia's sacrifice on the Greek vase-crater of 370-350 BC from the British Museum<sup>4</sup>. It was this ancient tradition that became the basis of antique *bucranium* friezes made of sculpted bull (goat) heads or skulls with garlands and ribbons, which reflected the realities of the buildings' decoration and later turned into an architectural ornament, often found at temples, mausoleums and on sarcophagi: like on the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC mausoleum of Caecilia Metella in Rome, on the so-called Caffarelli marble sarcophagus (around 40 AD) from the Old Museum in Berlin, on ossuaries of the 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> centuries from the Dresden Gallery etc<sup>5</sup>.

The second group of these attributes is found on symbolic images of animals. In Ancient Eastern culture we have an important and unique example of such an animal with ribbon in Urartian art (9<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries): the bronze statuette of a deity – a winged sphinx with a lion's body and a human forehead, kept in the Hermitage Museum<sup>6</sup> (fig. 1). Small statues of such or similar fabulous animals were parts of luxurious royal thrones. On the sphinx's torso a ribbon is tied with longitudinal lines and then transverse ones on the ends. Here the rendering of the ribbon is quite close to the future Parthian and Sasanian examples, especially to the diadem on the head of the god Baalshamin on the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD Palmyrene relief from the Louvre Museum. Surely on this Urartian statuette we are dealing with one of the earliest and prominent examples of a ribbon as an attribute of royalty and holiness.

4 Collection online, British Museum.

5 Feldbusch 1950, 81–84.

6 Пиотровский 2011, 328, fig. 77.



Fig. 1. Sphinx, Urartian bronze statuette (8<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> cc. BC), Hermitage museum © Author

Despite numerous iconographic examples of diadems as well as ribbons on wreaths and garlands, known in Greco-Roman art, there are hardly any symbolic animal pictures with ribbons. An interesting example can be seen on the onyx gem of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD depicting emperor Augustus with a Capricorn image above his head, which was the sign of his protecting constellation (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)<sup>7</sup>. A ribbon is tied to the animal's leg as a sign of victory and glory. We have pictures of patron animals of the same type on the frescoes of the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries of Sogdia, where mythological winged animals fly above the heads of heroes as well as above the hero Rostam, with long ribbons tied to their legs<sup>8</sup>.

### Early Christian Armenian and Caucasian Examples of Animals with Ribbons

A unique example of a similar principle of the iconography of ribbons waving from the animal's legs in Christian art is the eagle composition carved on the western wall-capital of the Forty Martyrs Basilica of Pashvank of the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries (modern Turkey). The bird is presented with spread wings, with its head turned to the left, from which pleated ribbons also rise (fig. 2). P. Donabédian identified the sculpture as a peacock image<sup>9</sup>, M. Compareti as a dove<sup>10</sup>, but if we compare Pashvank's sculpture to the eagles of Zvartnots cathedral's capitals and take into consideration the bird's large head, under-

<sup>7</sup> Bandinelli 1969, 196, fig. 209, 211.

<sup>8</sup> Compareti 2006, 191-192, fig. 4; Shenkar 2014, 139, fig. 132.

<sup>9</sup> Donabédian 2008, 61, fig. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Compareti 2010, 205.

lined hooked beak, and the absence of a cockscomb, it is clear that the sculpture is that of an eagle. Since it is known that in Christian art the eagle was the symbol of the Resurrection and Ascension, his image here in the Church of the Forty Martyrs, dedicated to the Saints, is quite understandable, and the presence of ribbons should be interpreted as



Fig. 2. Eagle, relief of an embedded capital or impost, Forty Martyrs basilica of Pashvank (6<sup>th</sup> c.), after P. Cuneo

a symbol of the victory of faith and heavenly glory. This does not necessarily mean that the peacock would not be appropriate here, especially if we consider that in Armenian and Georgian art peacocks were more often depicted with ribbons, but only on their necks.

In this regard, the birds with ribbons from the excavations of the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries secular building of the Aghtsk tomb complex are remarkable (Aragatzotn province). They are represented on molded clay tablets, among other animals: ram, bear, camel, deer, panther etc. These tablets were studied by Aram Kalantarian and published in 1985. The scholar noted that “seven fragments with eagle images” were preserved<sup>11</sup>. More recently, as a result of the excavations made by Hakob Simonian in 2017, a complete tablet with a bird image was found with the previously missing tail, which is distinctly that of a peacock (fig. 3). H. Simonian described it as a fabulous bird with strong eagle legs, peacock tail and crown, also mentioning the Sasanian ribbons<sup>12</sup>. The ribbons with expanding ends of the Aghtsk peacock were certainly a symbol of power, sanctity, especially when we take into account that the palace belonged to the Arsacid royal dynasty.

Remarkable examples of peacocks with attributes of interest to us appear on an early Christian monument of Caucasian Albania. This is a square capital of a pillar found in the apse of the single-nave basilica at the Sudagilan settlement of the Mingechaur reservoir, on which a cross was erected (National Museum of History of Azerbaijan, Baku). On

11 Калантарян 1985, 227–229.

12 Միմոնյան et al. 2017–18, 40–41, fig. 56:



Fig. 3. Peacock, molded clay tablet, Aghtsk complex (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cc.), after H. Simonian

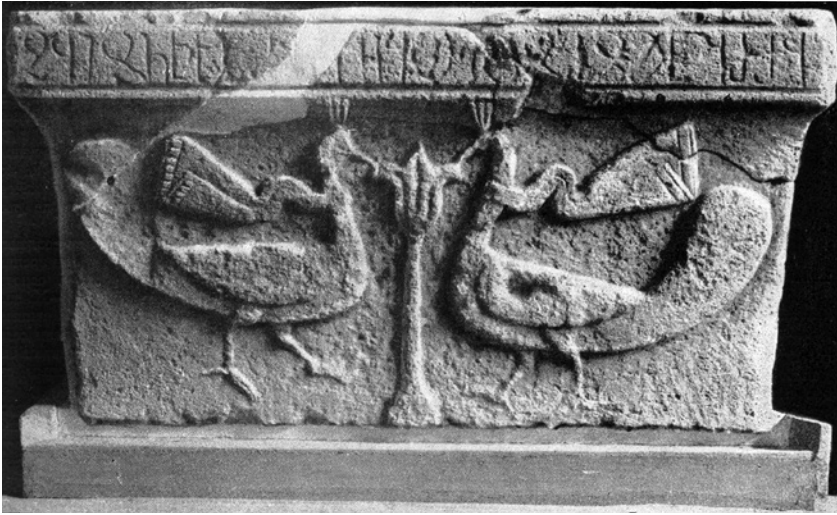
one of its sides two heraldic peacocks are depicted, whose beaks are touching a lily flower and they bear luxurious broad ribbons (fig. 4). On the four sides of the superior part of this capital an inscription in Caucasian Albanian is preserved, which has recently been read and dates back to the reign of the Sasanian king Khosrow (but uncertain if Khosrow I or II)<sup>13</sup>. In general, the existence of a date is exceptional on tetrahedral stelae, and this capital can be dated to the period from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century to 617–18<sup>14</sup>. Such a composition can be seen on a silver bowl of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, produced in the Sasanian style and found near the Ural Mountains (The State Historical Museum, Moscow), which K. Trever has compared with the composition of the Mingechar capital. There peacocks with waving ribbons are presented on both sides of the bowl, around a small altar<sup>15</sup>.

The same iconography of ribbons, very similar to the Caucasian Albanian example, appears on two reliefs of the Holy Cross Church (915–921) on Aghtamar Island (historical Vaspurakan, modern Turkey), on a monument which occupies a special place in the context of Sasanian cultural influences. Below the cornice of the southern wing of the church, two heraldic birds are depicted, most likely doves clinging to each other with their beaks (fig 5). Ribbons are attached to their necks, which expand in the form of triangles with folds and edges, similarly to the Mingechar's peacocks' ribbons. And the second example of the image of ribbons in Aghtamar's decor is the siren (harpy) below

13 Gippert et al 2009–10, § 4.3.1.

14 On the territory of Armenia and Georgia only a few stelae have inscriptions, which practically do not contain exact dates. Therefore, the inscription on the Mingechar capital is extremely important in regard to the dating of stelae, as well as to determining the most intense period of Sasanian influences in South-Caucasian countries.

15 Тревер 1959, 317–318.



*Fig. 4. Peacocks, pillar capital (impost), district of Mingechaur, former Caucasian Albania (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> cc.), National Museum of History of Azerbaijan, Baku, after K. Trever*

the western fronton of the church, which is given in a unique iconography: in a rare frontal pose, with typical Sasanian spread wings, from which two wide ribbons emerge. They have borders decorated with holes imitating pearls, which are very characteristic for the artistic manner of the Holy Cross reliefs.

Several examples of birds with ribbons are known from the southern regions of Georgia, directly bordering on Armenia (historical Gugark). On the eastern façade of the Tsiteli Eklesia (Red Church) single-nave basilica (in Javakheti, Georgia, arm. Javakhk), the 6<sup>th</sup> century pedestal of a pillar with a partially damaged relief is reused<sup>16</sup>. It depicts a cross in a medallion flanked by two peacocks. There is a wide ribbon on the bird's neck on the left and the same should be true for the peacock on the right, damaged in this part. This composition has the same schema as the previous two, with a lily flower and an altar in the middle, and as numerous examples in the 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries Christian art with peacocks on the sides of a vine-tree, vessel, spring etc. with similar symbolism. A number of such compositions are known in Armenian art: the relief above the western window of the 6<sup>th</sup> century basilica of Tziranavor in Ashtarak (Aragatzotn region), the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries floor mosaic at the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem and numerous images from manuscripts. In all these examples the peacocks symbolized eternal life and salvation, while the ribbons on their necks at the Tsiteli Eklesia church were additional semantic accents, emphasizing holiness.

A magnificent peacock sculpture is depicted on the capital of the tetrahedral stela of the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century from the village of Gantiadi (district of Dmanisi, now in the

<sup>16</sup> Machabeli 2008, 38, fig. 56-57.



Fig. 5. Birds, southern façade, Holy Cross church of Aghtamar (915-921) © Author

Georgian National Museum, Tbilisi)<sup>17</sup>, (fig. 6). On the bird's neck there is a ribbon, absolutely identical to the previous image, which allows us to speak more confidently about the presence of ribbons on the spolia of Tsiteli Sakdari, where the image is not clear and could be mistakenly identified as wings. A peacock on a stela from Dmanisi is given on the brink between the image of the Virgin on the throne and two donators holding a cross and a lily: the former is the main symbol of Christianity, while the latter is a symbol of immortality and noble origin<sup>18</sup>. In this case the peacock with a ribbon complemented this symbolism. Two birds (uncertain of which species) with neck-bands and wreaths in their beaks are depicted on the stela's base from Gulbagi<sup>19</sup>.

### **Animals with Ribbons and Necklaces in Sasanian Art and East Christian Samples**

Especially on late Sasanian precious dishes, stucco decor, fabrics and seals of the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries, birds of various species are frequently wearing ribbons and have necklaces around their necks or in their beaks, mainly peacocks, pheasants and partridges, ducks and geese<sup>20</sup>. All of these birds symbolized cleanliness, prosperity, abundance, and

17 Machabeli 2008, 31, fig. 8.

18 In Ancient Iranian culture the flower of a lily or tulip meant belonging to the upper class and symbolized purity. In Sasanian art a number of images of nobles with a lily in their hand are known as an attribute of high rank. Images of donors bearing a flower on early medieval Georgian stelae should also be considered as a manifestation of Sasanian influence. See: Iamanidze 2019, 98–100.

19 Чубинашвили 1972, fig. 40.

20 Orbeli 1964–65, 741.





Fig. 6. Peacock, stela, Gantiadi, district of Dmanisi (6<sup>th</sup> c.), Dmanisi Culture and Art Center, after Kakhiani et al, 2012, fig. 15

according to the Zoroastrian religion they were good creations of the god of wisdom and goodness – *Ohrmazd* – and killed insects and reptiles which were created by *Ahriman* – the demon, the Evil Spirit<sup>21</sup>. And the aquatic birds were probably associated with water worship as one of the sacred elements of Zoroastrianism<sup>22</sup>. For example, the pair of pheasants depicted on the 7<sup>th</sup> century silver-gilt vase from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (fig. 7) has nimbuses, besides necklaces and ribbons, as well as the peacock on the Sasanian silver plate from a private collection and so on<sup>23</sup>. It should be noted that at least from the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Iranian Shahanshahs were often depicted on precious plates with nimbuses, which reflected the highly developed cult of the royal persons and the dynastic Farn [*glory, providence*] in Iran<sup>24</sup>.

Actually, in ancient cultures jeweled necklaces, as well as ribbons, had been from the beginning the symbols of a person's nobility, the attributes of elites and also *apotropaia*. During the Sasanian period, when the cult of the king particularly deepened and, as a result, the royal life reached indescribable luxury, these attributes, related to the Shah's personality, became an important part of the official artistic iconography and were also transmitted to the images of symbolic animals<sup>25</sup>. Images of the latter were very often depicted on Sasanian silk fabrics, which were imported as expensive goods

21 Harper 1978, 63.

22 Stewart 2013, 130, fig. 83.

23 Harper 1978, fig. 21, 26, 49, 61; Pope 1964–65 Pl. 201-C.

24 Shenkar 2014, 132.

25 Ackerman 1964–65, 881.

into Eastern Christian countries and Central Asia. Due to this, the motif of ribbons and necklaces, as well as the image of the so-called *Senmurv* (*Simurgh*), entered the artistic tradition of the Christian and early Islamic cultures<sup>26</sup>.

Such animals with ribbons are found in early Christian floor mosaics: the birds in the Lions Church in Umm al-Rasas (late 4<sup>th</sup> century, Jordan); images of goats and lions from Antioch, now kept in the Louvre museum (5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries) etc<sup>27</sup>. After the fall of the Sasanid dynasty, in the art of the Abbasid Caliphate, Byzantium and even in the 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries culture of Western Europe, there are characters and motives inherited from Sasanian art, which were widely distributed throughout the Christian world due to the Iranian applied arts. For example, the illustrations of the folios preceding each Gospel of the Codex Aureus of Echternach (Hs. 156142, 1030–1050, Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum<sup>28</sup>) echoed Eastern style textile with characteristic animal paintings: lions, griffons and dragons around the Tree of Life and birds with ribbons on their necks. The latter also have leaves in their beaks<sup>29</sup>.



Fig. 7. Pheasant, Sasanian silver-gilt vase (7<sup>th</sup> c.), Boston Museum of Fine Arts, after P. Harper

### **Animals with Sacred Attributes in Armenian and Georgian Reliefs of the 10<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> Centuries.**

The theme of symbolic animals with attributes also continues to develop on Armenian and Georgian reliefs in the 10<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries. On the southern portal of the main church of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Khakhu monastery in Tayk/Tao (now North-Eastern Turkey), among the narrative scenes (Ascension of Alexander the Great, Jonah and the whale) and other images, a pheasant is carved with a bead necklace and a bow on the neck<sup>30</sup> (fig. 8).

26 Hakobyan et al. 2018.

27 Райс 2002, 30–32, fig. 23–24; Piccirillo 1993, fig. 216–217.

28 Grodecki et al. 1973, 178–179.

29 There is another interesting detail on these pages of the Echternach manuscript: there are circles on the lions' thighs, which actually reproduce the swastika marks often depicted in archaic ancient Eastern art on the same part of the body of these predators as solar symbols.

30 Акопян 2019, 348, fig. 2, 8, 9.

The iconography of these attributes is very similar to a necklace and a band on the pheasant's neck of the Sasanian vase from the Boston Museum (fig. 7). The next example is a fragment of the external decor of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Bakhtaghek church of Ani (now Eastern Turkey), which is lost and only preserved on archive photos<sup>31</sup>. On the relief two birds in profile were holding in their beaks a circular wreath in the form of a twisted ring. The right bird has the same ring on the neck, and a scarf-like ribbon is thrown around the neck of the left one. Generally, the motive of holding rings (or wreaths<sup>32</sup>), gemstones or leaves in the beaks was also widespread in Sasanian as well as in Eastern Christian art, as we see on the window lintels of the 973 c. Parkhar basilica and of the Oshk cathedral of 963–973 in Tayk<sup>33</sup>.

On the southern façade of the Holy Cross church of Aghtamar, built by King Gagik Artzruni (904/8–943), there is a heraldic image of two eagles standing on a perch, resembling a sword, and holding a ring in their beaks. J. Orbeli interpreted this composition as a princely emblem. In this context the meaning of the ring as a symbol of power is evident<sup>34</sup>, since this was a palace church, and not far from this relief was the entrance to the royal gallery. According to the sources and, in particular, to Movses Khorenatsi, eagles were the dynastic symbol of the ancient Artzruni family, which derived its name from the Armenian *արծիւ* (*artziv* – eagle)<sup>35</sup>.

On the same façade of the Holy Cross church, on both sides of the images of the saint ancestors of Artzruni dynasty, a griffon and a ram-bird (fig 9) are depicted as protectors and symbols of power of the family and, in particular, of King Gagik. The ram-bird here embodied Farn, the higher providence, and is directly associated with images of the ram in Sasanian art. In Zoroastrian beliefs rams and goats were considered the embodiment of Farn, the incarnation of divine grace and royal glory, which is also documented in literary sources, particularly in the Avesta and in “*Kar-Namag i Ardashir i Pabagan*” (Book of the Deeds of Ardeshir, Son of Papak)<sup>36</sup>. And especially the ram and the goat were depicted in Sasanian art with ribbons and necklaces, such as the rams on the stucco tablets of Tepe-Hisar, Kish (Iran) and from the territory of Iraq (the latter is now in the Pergamon Museum), on fabrics and seals<sup>37</sup>. In our case, it is noteworthy that there are also known the Iranian seals of the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> centuries with iconography of ram-birds that is

31 Микаелян 2017b, 259, tabl. 4–2.

32 In Hellenistic art birds with wreaths in their beaks were often placed above the heads of kings or rulers as a sign of the crowning with glory. Continuing the same tradition in Christian iconography, many images of doves crowning saints are known. See: Микаелян 2017b.

33 Djobadze 1986, 89, Taf. 13–1, 14–4.

34 In a number of Ancient Oriental and Sasanian scenes of Investiture, the deity gives the king the right of power in the form of a ring (wreath). See: Микаелян 2017b, 260–262.

35 Орбели 1968, 121–124, Tab. XXVIII.

36 Cereti 2011, 585–588; Shenkar 2014, 131–140.

37 Harper 1978, fig. 55, 61, 64; Pope 1964–65, 637–639, fig. 214, Pl. 202-A.



*Fig. 8. Pheasant, southern portal, cathedral of Khakhu monastery, historical Tayk/Tao (10<sup>th</sup> c.), after E. Takaishvili*

absolutely identical to the Holy Cross church's relief: one from the Hermitage Museum and the second from the British Museum<sup>38</sup>. In Aghtamar this creature has a necklace with elaborated holes which were probably filled with color paste. The rings with bells on the bird's leg are also interesting and should be considered as distinctive signs as well. Perhaps such rings with bells were worn by some animals of the royal menagerie, and here we have an example of the depiction of a similar attribute on a fantastic image – the incarnation of Farn – as a sign of possession, of its "taming".

Like the ram-bird's necklace, the wings of the Aghtamar griffon are also decorated with a belt with holes, and there are rosettes on the four legs of the animal, which should be linked to the animal's solar symbolism. A number of animals of the Holy Cross church, and especially this griffon, are decorated with half-palmettes, and this was also one of the ways to emphasize the animal's special meaning. Thus, the vegetal elements of the so-called "flourished" animals in Sasanian, Armenian and Eastern Christian art, which we have examined separately<sup>39</sup>, should also be considered as details emphasizing the supernatural origin and beneficence of the image, not merely as decorative elements, especially if we take into account the fact that the animals decorated with vegetal elements are mostly fabulous ones.

Very often griffons have necklaces or jewelled collars around their necks. On the main entrance of the Khakhu church, mentioned above, we also have a griffon image,

<sup>38</sup> Орбели 1968, 114; Compareti 2014, fig. 10.

<sup>39</sup> Микаелян 2017а.



*Fig. 9. Ram-bird, southern façade, Holy Cross church of Aghtamar (915-921) © Author*

whose neck and body are decorated with pearled bands, resembling a horse harness<sup>40</sup>. The magnificent griffon on the eastern façade of the Samtavisi church in Georgia (1030) has also a pearl necklace. On the vaults of the south portico of Nikorsminda church (1010–1014) there are paired griffons, fabulous birds with protruding bestial ears, which have expressive neck-rings with circles inside<sup>41</sup>. On the leg of one of the Nikorsminda griffons a necklace-shaped bracelet is also depicted. The griffon is very often found in Christian art as an alert guard of the holy place, as a symbol of nobility and power. In Christian culture, this ancient creature of two natures, closely associated with solar symbolism, also began to be associated with the human and divine essence of Christ<sup>42</sup>.

### **Sirens, Sphinxes and Dragons with Crowns and Collars**

However, the positive symbolism of a number of other fantastic creatures in the medieval sculpture of Armenia and Georgia is not as obvious as in the case of the griffon. We are talking about sirens, sphinxes and dragons, which are mentioned in Christian sources with negative symbolism, but obtain a positive connotation in the fine art of the 10<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The latter is evident from their location in the church architecture and in the specific compositions, from the iconographic features, as well as the presence of the same attributes, which in this case are additional factors in determining the meaning of these fantastic images.

40 Акопян 2019, 344–347, fig. 5.

41 Dadiani et al 2017, p. 194, 196; fig. 429–432, 458.

42 Biedermann 1992, 159–160; Аладашвили 1977, 229.

Thus, in medieval Armenian literature the siren was the embodiment of debauchery and heresy, luring people into the arms of the devil<sup>43</sup>. However, already in the Holy Cross church we observe a clear deviation from the official church tradition, when this image is given a positive symbolism. One of the Aghtamar's sirens is depicted in the uppercase decor of the church, as mentioned above, below the western fronton. She is depicted with ribbons clearly indicating her good nature. And her spread wings, made in typical Sasanian iconography, also emphasize the sacred symbolism of the Aghtamar siren, since in Iranian culture such paired wings were a symbol of Verethragna, the god of victory, and the attributes of many royal crowns, as well as of the crown of king Gagik Artzruni<sup>44</sup>. The second siren of the Aghtamar reliefs is depicted in the main belt of the church, in the eastern part of the northern façade, placed below the composition of a young man killing a lion<sup>45</sup>. This image is not compositionally associated with neighboring reliefs, and we cannot understand its symbolism on this basis. However, her magnificent tail and wing, similar to the rich plumage of sacred birds in the South-Caucasian and Sasanian examples, and especially the presence of an expressive collar on her neck allow us to conclude that this siren also had a positive meaning.

Since images of sirens and sphinxes become especially popular in Armenian sculpture of the 12<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries, they appear on the facades of churches, are included in the decor of altar elevations and depicted in the interior stucco decoration of opulent houses in Dvin and Ani<sup>46</sup>. At that time the iconography of these fantastic creatures has many parallels with those in the art of the Seljuk empire, in particular on the applied art objects of the entire Near East, as well as of Armenia. On the altar elevation of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Surb Astvatzatzin church in Makaravank, inside eight-pointed stars one single siren (fig. 10), two single sphinxes and one composition with paired sphinxes are depicted, all of whom are presented with crowns. The winged sphinx on the portal of the Makaravank *gavit* (narthex) is likewise adorned with a high headdress. Crowned sphinxes also appear on the eastern façade of the Surb Astvatzatzin church of Haritj (1201), in the altar elevation decor of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Vanstan church, in the rock-cut *gavit*-tomb of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Geghard etc. In the decor of the western façade of the Burtelashen church (1339) in Amaghu-Noravank, paired sirens and sphinxes with crowns are arranged on an elegant floral background. The same crowned fantastic creatures are repeatedly presented on the pages of Armenian manuscripts, and in some cases, they also have nimbus<sup>47</sup>.

Indeed, in the images of sirens and sphinxes crowns are put on the human heads of these mixed beings and to some extent they are an attribute of their human nature.

43 Հայրապետյան 1990:

44 Compareti 2010, 5, fig. 2, 13.

45 Орбели 1968, 116–117, Tabl. XXVI.

46 Պետրոսյան 2008, 227–229:

47 Chookaszian 2008; Hakobyan et al. 2018, 44–45, 52–53, fig. 8, 25–26:





Fig. 10. Siren, altar elevation, Surb Astvatzatzin church in Makaravank (13<sup>th</sup> c.) © S. Karapetian

However, in the context of our study it is important to state that the crown, as an attribute of the highest rank, power and holiness, again indicates the sacred meaning of these fantastic images in the art of Armenia, despite their being mentioned as symbols of evil and sinfulness in written sources. Thus crowns, and in some cases nimbuses, are additional markers of the symbolism of each image, like ribbons, necklaces, bracelets, collars, wreaths in the beak etc.

Another noteworthy example of a distinctive sign on the image of a mythical creature – a dragon – can be seen on the lintel relief of the church door of the Vanstan monastery (1212–1227). Unfortunately, this fragment is lost and only preserved through archival photographs<sup>48</sup> (fig. 11). On it two heraldic dragons with open mouths are depicted, whose bodies are twisted into knots, and they have hoops on their necks. The symbolism of these twin dragons, as well as a number of similar images in Armenian sculpture, is associated with the ancient functions of these creatures as guardians and protectors. At the same time, in the Christian tradition the dragon was a symbol of the devil and hell, mainly in those compositions where he is depicted alone: in the scenes of the Baptism of Christ, the Descent into Hell, the trampling of a dragon by holy warriors etc. In contrast, especially in the art of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, dragons are depicted in many cases as *apotropaia*, and the same symbolism and iconography of these creatures can be traced in Islamic art of the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>49</sup>. The rings around the necks of the Vanstan dragons, resembling collars, could mean their being reined and were most likely a symbol of their good service. This relief is iconographically close with intertwined dou-

48 Մելքոնյան և այլք 2007, 101–104, Tabl. XV.

49 Միքայելյան 2019; Kuehn 2011, 21–27, 159–168.



*Fig. 11. Dragons, lintel, Vanstan monastery (1212-1227)*

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ble-headed dragons on the Citadel Gate of Aleppo (1209–1210)<sup>50</sup>, (fig. 12), on whose necks similar collars with a protruding ball are clearly visible. The latter are very close to the bracelets on the ram-bird's legs of the Aghtamar relief (fig. 9).

## Conclusion

In the 6<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century sculpture of Armenia and Georgia, we examined a number of images of birds and fantastic animals exhibiting distinctive attributes. For the early medieval period, in the 6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries, images of birds were characteristic, most often peacocks with ribbons on their necks. The origin of ribbons dates back to Greco-Roman diadems, although rare examples of such bandages are also known in ancient Egyptian, Assyrian and Achaemenid art in the form of tapes descending from under the head-dresses of kings and nobles. It is noteworthy that one of the first examples of the ribbon's image on the body of a fantastic animal – the sphinx – is found in Urartian art. However, the artistic theme of adorning symbolic animals with ribbons or necklaces gained particular development and distribution in late Sasanian art, which was primarily due to the deepening of the Shahanshahs's worship. The Armenian and South-Caucasian reliefs of birds with ribbons show obvious parallels with Iranian examples, a fact which once again confirms the active cultural contacts between these countries in the early medieval period.

Even after the fall of the Sasanid dynasty the images of Iranian culture remain relevant on the Christian monuments of the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries, which is evidently confirmed by the Holy Cross church's reliefs, where a number of animals with ribbons and necklaces are found. Griffons, real and fantastic birds with such attributes are known from a number of outstanding monuments of South-Caucasus, built, like the Aghtamar church, by the ruling nobility of that period (Nikortsmina, Samtavisi, Oshk, Khakhu etc.), where these creatures symbolized heavenly patronage, the sacredness of power or signified a divine presence.

<sup>50</sup> Kuehn 2011, 26, fig. 3a-b.



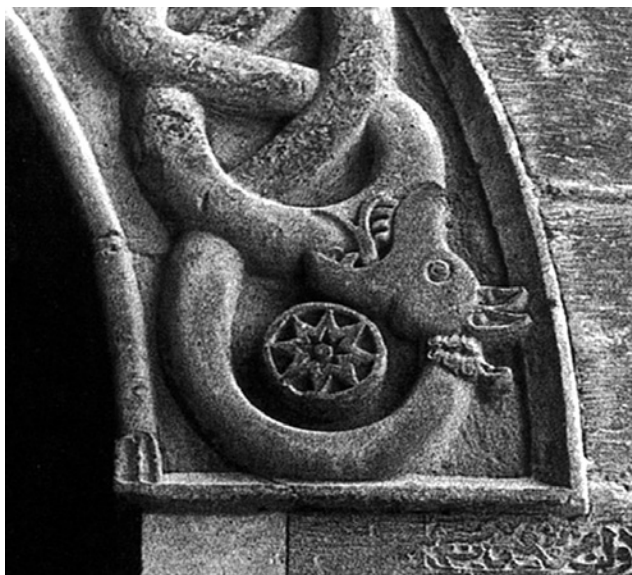


Fig. 12. Dragon, gate of Aleppo citadel (1209–1210), after S. Kuehn

In the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> centuries Armenia experienced a new heyday under the rule of the Zakharids. The most popular mythical images in the art of that period are sphinxes, sirens and dragons, showing obvious iconographic parallels with those in the Near East Islamic culture, which was due primarily to the development of trade, crafts and the migration of artisans. On Christian monuments sirens and sphinxes symbolized the heavenly sphere and were the guardians of Paradise. The human heads of the latter were usually adorned with crowns as the hallmarks of superiority and holiness. The sphinx images in Armenian and Islamic art take us back, after many centuries, to the crowned sphinxes of Urartian art, a phenomenon, which emphasizes the vitality and longevity of mythical images in art. One of such archetypes in world culture – the dragon image – also got its place on the Christian and Islamic monuments as *apotropaion*, and some of these dragons have collars as signs of their good service to humans.

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