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Ekaterine Gedevanishvili

Some Elements of Antiquity in Representation of Mountains in Georgian Painting of the 12th and 13th Centuries

From the beginning of the 12th century onwards the landscape was assigned a conspicuous role in the Byzantine painting [14, p. 227, 264; 21, p. 174]. The same tendency can be traced in the contemporaneous murals of Georgian churches. In the academic literature the tendency was primarily explained in the context of the stylistic change and was linked to the so-called “dynamic-decorative” style of the period [20, p. 34–35; 22, p. 188].

One of the main elements of the mediaeval landscape is representation of mountains. The medieval Georgian art presents particularly elaborate examples. According to E. Privolova’s observation, two main tendencies can be traced. The first comprises images, which are characterized as ‘ornamental’ [20, p. 34–35]. In most cases the main feature of this group is helical configuration of mountains, showing the wave-like slopes. In some cases the spiral outline is substituted by a triangle shape. This group presents a variety of design and becomes especially widespread in the period under consideration (Pavnisi, Ikvi, Shio Mgvime). The second group is less elaborate and more generalized (the frescoes of Ateni Sioni, The Gospel of Gelati). The first group of highly stylized images certainly can be related to the change of style — linear configuration seems to reflect the inner ‘logic’ of the ‘dynamic’ style. Still, it is obvious that all peculiarities of these images cannot be explained only by the influence of the style. There are some examples that can be interpreted in a broader way. The present paper focuses on two different types of images — two dissimilar representations of mountains, which, as I suggest, differently reflect the influence of the Antique culture — the mountain with wave-like slopes from the murals of the Ikvi church (12th century), and the mountain shaped as a human profile depicted in St. George’s church at the Gelati Monastery (13th century).

The principal images in the naos of St. George’s church at Ikvi were painted in the first half of the 12th century [20, p. 75; 1, p. 25] (Fig. 1). The Nativity scene contains rather unusual representation of a mountain. It is constructed from the spiral-shaped slopes, the design which gives traditional pattern of the so-called wave-like mountains, but what makes it unusual is the depiction of exceptionally big roots. The branched roots at the lower corners of the mountain attract immediate attention and make it look like a tree rather than a mountain. The representation of the root, which is primarily associated with plants, is striking here. How can the oddity of this image be explained?

Firstly, we should take a closer look at the circular slopes of the mountain. As was stated above, this iconographic peculiarity is especially emphasized and outlined in Georgian exam-

ples. It should be noted that the representation of some mountains in Georgian painting of the 12th and 13th centuries gives highly stylized images of this kind with no parallels in the Byzantine art. For example, the mountains of Pavnisi or Shiomgvime murals and those of Mackhvarishi present mountains, which give a tangible association with the sea or river rather than of mountains [6, p. 107–109; 13, p. 126–129]. T. Virsaladze compares the latter with the frozen waves and considers them to be reminiscent of the ancient illusionism. Georgian scholar explains the special elaboration of Georgian examples with the linear-ornamental character of Georgian mediaeval painting in general [22, p. 188].

At the same time understanding of these examples may also lie in artists' special interest towards natural science — the wave-like shape of the mountains can be interpreted as the direct influence of the knowledge gained from some cosmological treatises. It is well known that the interest towards Natural philosophy in Byzantium was particularly strong in the 11th–12th centuries [12, p. 182–202].

The special contribution in the development of this sphere was made by the famous Byzantine Empress Martha Mariam, daughter of Bagrat IV king of Georgia (she is better known as Maria/Marta of Alania) [10, p. 129]. She ordered Eustathius of Nicea to create the Meteorology treatise [2, p. 312; 18, p. 285–292]. The famous philosopher rewrote his course of lectures, which was part of the academic curriculum, into the treatise and dedicated it to the Georgian queen [8, p. 145–156].

It is instructive how Eustathius of Nicea begins his treatise: “My admired Lady, you wish to know the nature and the reason of the thunderstorm...” the words that perfectly reflect the interest of the epoch towards the nature of the world [2, p. 312]. Indeed, the treatise is aimed at explaining the rain and snow, earthquake and hail... It gives a description of the Earth's shape, its size etc.

It is generally known that in the epoch under consideration a strong influence of the ancient culture is evident [12, p. 121–166]. The cosmological study was the very part of this heritage. It cannot be a mere coincidence that Michael Psellos illustrates the attitude of his students towards the studying process precisely through their approach to his cosmological lessons [9, p. 32]. I even suggest that the iconographical specificity of these images can give a reference to certain texts.

First of all, we can cite the *Meteorology*, the most popular work by Aristotle, which was regarded as one of the basic works in studying the Natural philosophy in Byzantium [3]. The latter became one of the most influential works in that sphere. Aristotle's description of the mountains seems to be very instructive: the main ‘function’ of a mountain, according to the Greek philosopher, is to give birth to a river. He compares it with an aqueduct system. «*When men construct an aqueduct they collect the water in pipes and trenches, as if the earth in the higher ground were sweating the water. Hence, too the head — waters of rivers are found to flow from mountains, and from the greatest mountains there flow the most numerous and greatest rivers*» [3]. Moreover, even small springs, according to Aristotle's observation, should be in the neighborhood of mountains and on high ground. The mountain is compared in Aristotle's work with a «*saturated sponge*» which makes the water ooze [Ibid.]. In fact, the mountain and the water are inseparable. Such an approach, which can be found in the Scripture as well, became principal in the Christian cosmology. In the Exact Exposition of the Orthodox faith

John of Damascus says: «*In the beginning, indeed, the water lay all over the surface of the earth... And out of it God bade the firmament arise, and it arose*» [11, B. II, ch. 9]. Discussing the nature of water, the Holy Father declares that there are «*certain veins of the Earth*» through which the water is coming out from the firmament.

This knowledge became the basis for the studies of Eustratos of Nicea as well. He goes even further and writes that the whole body of Earth consists of veins of fire and veins of water and describes in detail the physical

functioning of the latter [15, p. 314]. I suggest that it is this knowledge which might be reflected in the oddity of the images of the wave-like mountains and the spiral shape of the slopes, which primarily gives a tangible association of a wave, might illustrate the inseparability of the water and firmament in the Christian Cosmology.

In all likelihood the representation of the root at Ikvi murals can be considered in that context as well. The root, the major function of which is plants' nutrition, seems to be employed by the designer of the painting to demonstrate the 'functioning' of the mountain vividly described in the above mentioned texts. It turns the mountain into a living organism, passing the water through and out of it. We can cite only one similar example of the rooted mountain in Georgian painting, namely the frescoes of the Zenobani church where it appears in the scene of Transfiguration. But the Zenobani example differs from that of Ikvi. The representation of roots is enclosed in the general contour of the mountain and thus is less visible. These frescoes of the 13th century demonstrate different examples of the mountains. Here we can also see the mountains rendered with snake-like contours compared with fire flames by M. Didebulidze [6, p. 108]. It is obvious that these varied images alongside with those from Ikvi, carry a connotation of the knowledge about the material world; they aim to show not just a mountain, not just the topography of the event, or not just the space filling element of the composition, but the nature, or rather the 'physiology' of the mountains.

The mountain image from the Gelati frescoes differs from those cited above. The frescoes of St. George's church of the Gelati monastery date back to the first half of the 13th century¹. As was stated above, we have here the personified mountain in the scene of the Ascension (Fig. 2). The anthropomorphic image of the mountain is not new [19, p. 64; 3, p. 142], but

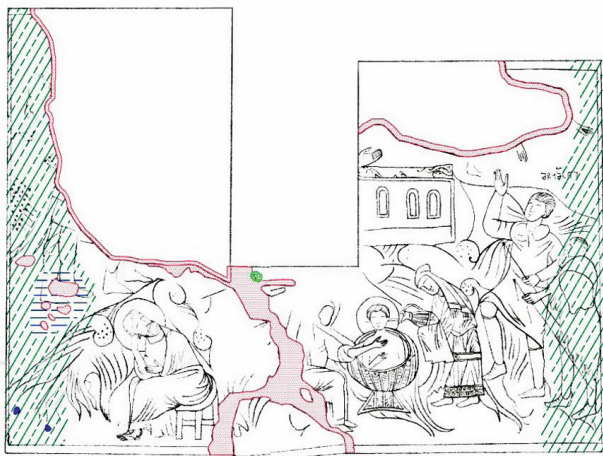


Fig. 2. Ikvi, Church of St. George, the Nativity, 12th century, scheme

¹ The murals of the Gelati church had been studied by Jilda Iosebidze, but her unpublished work, unfortunately, was lost during the civil war in the 90s, when our Institute of Art was burned down.

personification of the mountain with face is rarely found in Byzantine painting². In the Gelati image the whole mountain turns into an enormous representation of a man's profile. The features are outlined in details. We can see sharply outlined eyes, nose, mouth and specially accentuated forehead and cheek-bones. In fact, the Gelati painter presents not a mere mountain, but its 'portrait'. What attracts special attention is that the mountain is not a passive compositional element of the scene, but its active 'participant'. The impression of involvement is mostly rendered through the facial expression of surprise. Moreover, the gaze is directed upward towards the Ascended Christ. In this way, the mountain is perceived to be sharing the experience with the Apostles, joining the agitated figures that witness the Ascension.

At first glance, representation of the Gelati example carries a connotation of the cosmic liturgy — the All-ruler's Praise of creature. There are many passages in the Scripture that can be understood as having directly inspired the image. *'Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth break forth into singing, O mountains...'* or *'Jordan was driven back. The mountains skipped like rams and the little hills like lambs...'* (Psalms 114. 3–4).

It seems symbolic that the painter of the Gelati frescoes animated the Mount of Olives proper. The personification of the object always reflects its special significance³. According to the Ecclesiastic tradition, Christ left his foot prints when he ascended to heav-



Fig. 2. Gelati, church of St. George, the Ascension, 13th century, scheme

² For the personification of mountains with face see: H. Ladendorf, *Das zweite Gesicht der Melodia*, in *Kunst als Bedeutungsträger*, Berlin 1978. I would like to thank my colleagues Leonela Funduc and Dejan Gorgievski who kindly gave me the unique examples of such images. In one case, we have isomorphic image from the 13th century Epire murals (the scene of the Ascension), and in the second, the representation of a mountain with human profile from St. George's church at Kurbinovo. For the latter see: D. Gorgievski, *The Mysterious Mountain from Kurbinovo*, forthcoming.

³ In case of the personification of mountains we mostly have the examples representing Mount Bethlehem, Mount Sinai, or Mount of Olives, see [23, p. 63–64].

en on the Mount of Olives. In a sense this *locus sanctus* became the centre of the world from which the apostles went out to convert it to Christianity [23, p. 282]. It seems to be the very place where the history of the Terrestrial church begins. The same context is described by Andrew of Crete in the comments on the famous event of the Apparition of Cross above Jerusalem. According to the tradition, the large cross encompassed the Holy City from Calvary to Mount of Olives, which is described by the Church father as the “fullness of the church” [7, p. 102].

Still, it is only one aspect of the image. The fact that the animated mountain appears in the Gelati monastery seems quite eloquent. The Gelati monastery was the first educational foundation in Georgia, where Classical Philosophy and Byzantine Neo-Platonism was systematically studied [16, p. 12]. It became the main Georgian centre of translation and interpretation of classical philosophy. In the chronicles the Gelati Academy is called the “Second Athens and Another Jerusalem” [5, p. 331]. If we take into account the outstanding importance of the Gelati monastery, we might suggest that this iconographic solution of the Gelati scene can be somehow connected, if not directly then at least remotely, to the teaching of the famous philosopher Ioanne Petritsi, who was one of the most prominent philosophers of the Gelati monastery. His translation of Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* is a comprehensive presentation of the entire neo-platonic ontological system. The latter was the manual widely used in the curriculum of Gelati Academy in the 12th–13th centuries [17, p. LXVI]⁴.

In this work one can find neo-platonic studies of the ‘live’ *Materia*. According to Petritsi, the matter is not a dead substance but is marked with an inner dynamism towards its Creator. Love and devotion make it move towards the ruler of the Universe [17, p. 32, 80]⁵. If we take into account the specificity of the Gelati composition, this philosophical background seems quite acceptable. As was stated above, we have here not a traditionally personified image of the mountain, but its portrait-like representation. Here one iconographic detail catches the eye — in the left corner of the composition there appears a representation of a tree. Its long trunk with branches also looks anthropomorphic — it resembles a hand and is perceived as a prayer gesture of the mountain. It is responding to the movement of the outstretched hands of the Apostles, once more emphasizing the impression of the mountain joining in the event. Thus, the mountain appears not to be a static but rather a ‘dynamic’ participant of the scene of the Ascension⁶.

The same attitude can be found in the contemporary Georgian literature, in the famous poem by Shota Rustaveli — *The Knight in the Panther’s Skin*, where the poet makes his character Avtandil sing, giving a direct allusion to Orpheus’ myth. Avtandil’s song is so charming that all living creatures and even stones are impressed.

*The beasts drew near to listen, such was the charm of his singing,
Even the stones of the river came from the water to listen.*

⁴ For Ioanne Petritsi see: L. Gigineishvili, *The Platonic Theology of Ioanne Petritsi*, Gorgias Press, 2007.

⁵ I would like to express my gratitude to Levan Gigineishvili for pointing me at this possible connection.

⁶ This impression of engagement is especially evident in comparison with the Kurbinovo image presenting the personified mountain which is turned off towards Christ’s figure in the Anastasis scene. Moreover, in that case we have a representation of the sleeping face with closed eyes [see fn. 3].

*They listened, enraptured, and marveled; wept at the sight of his weeping,
Flowing profusely in fountains as song upon song rose in paeans.*

In general, personification is regarded as the classicizing iconographic element. The appearance of such kind of personifications in art, first of all, is explained by the remarkable interest in the classical heritage [12, p. 63]. The epoch, which is characterized as “encyclopedic”, in its turn stimulates the creation of such images that can be interpreted in a broader way. Thus, the “living art”, as Psellos put it [4, p. 261] by iconographic innovations reflect the intellectual search of the epoch opening the new perspectives for its understanding.

Title. Some Elements of Antiquity in Representation of Mountains in Georgian Painting of the 12th and 13th Centuries.

Author. Ekaterine Gedevanishvili — Ph. D., researcher. G. Chubinashvili National Research Centre for Georgian Art History and Preservation, Georgi Atoneli Str., 9, 0105 Tbilisi, Georgia. guguchli@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract. From the beginning of the 12th century onwards representation of mountains in Byzantine painting became particularly elaborate. The same tendency can be traced in contemporaneous murals of Georgian churches. An attempt has been previously made to consider the latter in the contexts of stylistic change. However, some images can be interpreted wider. The paper focuses on two different types of images: mountain with huge roots as shown in the murals of Ikvi (12th century), and mountain shaped as a human profile as presented in the St. George church at Gelati Monastery (13th century).

The clue to understanding of the first image is provided by the mediaeval cosmological concept: the roots are primary perceived as a cosmological element showing the ‘nature’ of the mountain. Alongside with this example the paper discusses the mountains with wave-like slopes (Pavnisi, Matskvarishi), which are interpreted in the cosmological context as well.

Though the anthropomorphism of the mountain in the scene of the “Ascension of Christ” in the murals of Gelati should be explained by special significance of the Mount Olive itself, it might be also linked to the Neo-Platonic studies of the famous Gelatian philosopher Ioanne Petritsi.

Keywords: mountain; personification; cosmology; georgian medieval fresco painting

Название статьи. Античная первооснова изображения гор в грузинской живописи XII–XIII веков.

Сведения об авторе. Гедеванишвили Екатерина Александровна — кандидат искусствоведения, научный сотрудник. Национальный научно-исследовательский и реставрационный центр истории грузинского искусства имени Г. Чубинашвили, ул. Георгия Атонели, 9, Тбилиси, Грузия, 0105. guguchli@yahoo.co.uk

Аннотация. С начала XII в. изображение гор в византийской живописи стало особенно тщательно продуманным. Та же тенденция в это время прослеживается и в храмовых стеновых росписях Грузии. Ранее предпринимались попытки объяснить такое явление, рассматривая его в контексте стилевых изменений. Однако некоторые росписи дают основания для более широкой трактовки. Автор статьи сосредотачивает внимание на двух типах изображений: гора с огромными корнями, как в стеновых росписях храма в Икви (XII в.), и гора с очертаниями в виде человеческого профиля, как в Георгиевской церкви Гелатского монастыря (XIII в.).

Ключ к пониманию первого типа изображений дают средневековые космологические представления: корни следует прежде всего понимать как восходящий к аристотелевской «Метеорологии» космологический аспект образа, олицетворяющий «природу» горы в натурфилософском смысле. Второй тип изображений, рассмотренный в статье, представляет горы со склонами волнообразных очертаний (Павниси, Мацквариши), что также имеет свое космологическое толкование.

С одной стороны, антропоморфизм горы в сцене Вознесения Христа, входящей в состав росписи храма в Гелати, объясняется особым значением самой Масличной горы, с другой же стороны, это обстоятельство может быть связано и с неоплатонизмом известного гелатского философа Иоанэ Петрици.

Ключевые слова: гора; персонификация; космология; грузинская средневековая фресковая живопись.

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